

Julian Hensold · Jordan Kynes  
Philipp Öhlmann · Vanessa Rau  
Rosa Coco Schinagl · Adela Taleb *Editors*

# Religion in Motion

Rethinking Religion, Knowledge and  
Discourse in a Globalizing World

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This volume emerged out of the conference “Religion—Bridging Gaps and Breaking Paths. Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, Knowledge and Discourse”. The conference was organised as an explorative laboratory, cherishing encounter and exchange over competing disciplinary truth claims.

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Berlin, Germany  
May 2020

Julian Hensold  
Jordan Kynes  
Philipp Öhlmann  
Vanessa Rau  
Rosa Coco Schinagl  
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# Introduction



**Julian Hensold, Jordan Kynes, Philipp Öhlmann, Vanessa Rau,  
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**Abstract** This first chapter serves as the reader's initial orientation to the general layout of the present work. It begins by thematizing the ineffable dynamism and complexity of the term religion as signifier. Contrary to the long-reigning secularization thesis, this single term remains deeply entrenched in a broad spectrum of discursive frameworks, traversing both popular social imaginaries as well as academic disciplinary divides. Amid this constant state of flux, one can only say with certainty that religion is here to stay. In spite of this complexity, the present edition proposes a way forward, offering a cross-section of some of these fascinating developments via an introductory interview and four thematically-organized sections; Part I: Religion, Gender, Body and Aesthetics – Stagnation or Change in the Authority over Religious Knowledge Production, Part II: Religion, Economics and Development – Interaction of Discursive Spheres; Part III: Theological and Religious Knowledge Production: Overcoming the Dichotomy between Inside and Outside Perspective(s) on Religion; and IV: Religion, Politics, Power – Decentered Analyses.

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We live in a time, we teach at a time, when religions are in center stage of history, have marched into the center stage and, in the center of the stage, enact and speak.

(Laurie Zoloth, 2014)

Undeniably, Religion is in motion: in the light of contemporary political climates marked by motion and change, neo-nationalist agitation, populism and demarcated identity constructions, religion plays a vibrant role. Its multifaceted and versatile character is present in the academic landscapes in the Global North and South. Its discursive signature can be traced in a variety of fields such as politics,<sup>1</sup> economics,<sup>2</sup> sociology<sup>3</sup> and anthropology.<sup>4</sup> In terms of key words prominently permeating and stimulating today's academic discourses about human affairs worldwide, religion is certainly among the most ubiquitous.<sup>5</sup>

Seen against the backdrop of a changing global world order—entanglements of inequalities and asymmetries, financial and economic crises, ethnic and religio-cultural conflicts, vicious wars and war zones, terrorism, forced flight and migration, anti-democratic and populist tendencies and an apparent shift to nationalist conservatism—religion asserts itself as one of the most frequently used buzzwords in contemporary (not only academic) discussions. Prominent examples are the Muslim ban initiated and passed by US President Trump, the seemingly insatiable will to discuss headscarves across Western European nation-states, the prominence of Islam in debates over refugees' presence and "integration" into Western European societies or the way in which gender and religion intersect in debates on religious belonging. The latter was most present in debates over the "Muslim man" emerging after incidents on New Year's Eve 2015/2016 in Cologne. Despite the often fiercely levelled attacks on religion's supposed backwardness and the necessity for a secular society, contemporary societies have also witnessed a vibrancy of emergent religious pluralisms and its contributions to a diverse and exuberant cultural life, especially in global cities.<sup>6</sup>

Remarkably, it is precisely in correlation with this charged and crisis-laden context that religion attracts attention from scholars across the academic spectrum.<sup>7</sup> Almost notoriously, religion is strategically used in numerous different and seemingly unrelated academic discussions.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the current prominence of religion in academic and intellectual knowledge production certainly did not come overnight. Attempts to explain away this discursive phenomenon in its distinct and long-term relevance as merely momentous and transient—e.g. as an epiphenomenon of

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<sup>1</sup> Arnason and Karolewski (2014), Vlas and Boari (2013), Rowe (2012), Haynes (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Iyer (2016), Barro and McCleary (2003), Guiso et al. (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Bender et al. (2013), Berger (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Obadia and Wood (2011), Nussbaum (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel et al. (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Sassen (2001).

<sup>7</sup> Omer et al. (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Haynes (2014).

Europe's ongoing refugee and migrant 'crisis'—are short-sighted to say the least. Trading under the name of a "*Return of Religion*", the signifier religion, after decades of its seeming and claimed disappearance from the public intellectual sphere, already started to announce its renaissance in the early 1990s shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain. With increasing intensity, it has spread its discursive signature ever since.<sup>9</sup> This historical perspective demonstrates that the correlation—which by no means should be mistaken for a one-sided causal dependence—of a re-emerging academic interest in religion on the one hand and epochal *caesura* and transformation(s) on the other is long-standing and persistent with nothing pointing to its foreseeable end.

However, just below the surface of the discursive relevance of the term religion across disciplinary divides also lies a rich polyvalence of its meaning, often polarizing and rarely undisputed. Not least, these disputes and discrepancies in content and intent have tended to crystalize along inter- and intra-disciplinary divides to such an extent that the question of what religion signifies becomes largely a function of who invokes it and towards what end. Moreover, religion is not only a prominent discursive category, but as a phenomenon undergirds institutional, communal, political, social and economic realities.<sup>10</sup> Precisely because of its general significance for a myriad of discourses in all their thematic, theoretical, methodical and intentional diversity, an adequate understanding of religion has proven to be a practically inexhaustible point of contention.

Taking into account both its timeliness and relevance correlative to a drastically changing or actually crumbling world order as well as its complexity and controversiality, religion calls for a transcultural as well as transdisciplinary synergy of perspectives.<sup>11</sup> A useful tool guiding such collective efforts of mediation can be the basic idea that the signifier religion, beyond all given contextual differences, stands for an institutionally and/or habitually stabilized dealing with the inevitability of human creation of meaning specifically in its ultimate radicality.<sup>12</sup> In that sense religious discourses and knowledge production are asking and answering ultimately radical questions such as: "What *is*?", "what *should be*?" and "what *will come*?" etc. Against this conceptual backdrop, the correlation of the discursive reappearance of religion with historical shifts of epochal significance is not contingent on religion but rather an irreducible part of its constitution.

To create and catalyse synergies of perspectives concerning the study of religion, the "*Religion, Knowledge, Discourse*" (RKD) doctoral programme of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin organized a conference entitled "*Religion – Bridging Gaps and Breaking Paths; Contemporary Approaches towards Discourses of Religion*". The conference was designed as a transdisciplinary research laboratory; a space for junior and senior scholars from the Global North and South to bring their contextual

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<sup>9</sup>Casanova et al. (1994), Beyer and Beaman (2007), Bhabra (2007), Butler et al. (2011).

<sup>10</sup>McCutcheon (2003).

<sup>11</sup>Juergensmeyer (2003).

<sup>12</sup>Geertz (1973), Taylor (2007), Bergunder (2011), Gerhardt (2014).

and disciplinary diversity into constructive dialogue. In February 2017, over the course of three days, voices from a great variety of cultural and academic backgrounds explored contemporary approaches towards religion(s), the “situatedness”<sup>13</sup> and contextual formation of religion and (religious) knowledge production.

The present volume is the collective result of this engagement, covering a broad variety of material, which reflects a timely cross section of academic discourses on religion and beyond. The aim is to trace the discursive threads evolving around the concept of religion—which is “in motion” itself—in different contexts and from transdisciplinary perspectives. By bringing together manifold empirical and theoretical contributions the volume allows us to follow these threads and to increase our understanding of contemporary discourses of religion and knowledge production in various fields and the contemporary context they are embedded in. As such, the work can be a valuable resource to scholars engaged with the study of religion, regardless of disciplinary affiliation.

The individual contributions to this work echo the aforementioned basic idea of religion: instead of simply restating the complexity and controversiality of religion in an aporetic fashion, each chapter embraces and implements the particular potential of religion to evoke fundamental questions of human life and affairs. In the interest of accessibility, these contributions are organized according to four central themes, to which the reader may refer in accordance with his/her primary thematic interest:

*(1) Religion, Gender, Body and Aesthetics: Stagnation or Change in the Authority over Religious Knowledge Production; (2) Religion, Economics and Development: Interaction of Discursive Spheres; (3) Theological and Religious Knowledge Production: Overcoming the Dichotomy between Inside and Outside Perspective(s) on Religion; and (4) Religion, Politics, Power: Decentred Analyses.* The editors trust that the reader will venture beyond their initial point of entry to gain an appreciation of the mutual entanglements which the contributions collectively entail.

## **“New and Old Gods”: In Conversation with Arjun Appadurai and Michael Lambek**

This volume opens with a conversation between the editors and anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Michael Lambek. In the quiet seclusion of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, Appadurai and Lambek reflected not only on the content and experience of the conference, but on the space—the cityscape, in Appadurai’s terms—itself within which it took place. The city of Berlin, no stranger to the changing fortunes of time, finds itself once again—or still?—in a phase of considerable cultural, intellectual and economic flux. As such, one can hardly imagine a more suitable space to consider the existential concerns of the researchers in a rapidly changing world. During the conversation, Appadurai and Lambek not only

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Haraway (1988).

expanded on the specific and changing spaces of doing research, but also on the trajectory of the researchers themselves. Trained in US-American departments of anthropology, both senior researchers reflected upon the changing conditions at universities, in the light of globalizing and neo-liberalizing forces. Together with the three junior researchers, they reflected upon the impacts of this new globalized world order and its implications for doing academic work as well as the fields of (religious) research themselves. In that sense, the conversation of “Old and New Gods” takes the conference and the city of Berlin as a starting point and relates it to current developments in social and political as well as academic life. By doing so, it presents the often-lacking and vitally needed meta-analytical conversation on research on religion, in short on “religion in motion”.

The rare opportunity for this kind of exchange, involving the past and future of research on religion and academia, which tend to be less-openly discussed within the confines of the university, was at once cathartic and refreshing. Perhaps even more refreshing, and reassuring, was the apparent enthusiasm of the esteemed anthropologists for the city of Berlin. Drawing from experiences both past and present, the senior researchers speak openly about their cultural encounters in this city which espouses the virtues of tradition and innovation, seemingly at the same time.

Departing from the themes of our opening discussion, we then proceed to the first of our four sections.

## **Part I: Religion, Gender, Body and Aesthetics—Stagnation or Change in the Authority Over Religious Knowledge Production**

In the spirit of perspectival inclusion, the first section, “*Religion, Gender, Body and Aesthetics*”, begins with a collection of “embodied” approaches to the study of religion; formerly marginalized perspectives exhibiting a keen awareness of the significance of gender, body, performance and even technology in religious praxis, interpretations and cultural representations and productions. As such, they present targeted challenges to traditional rigidities—orthodoxies both academic and religious. Bodily practices, and the body itself, have long been marginal to research on religion, and the same may be said about many of the voices emanating from these bodies. The feminist and queer perspectives among the contributions in this section are an enriching addition to research, not least of all because of their radical divergence from the traditional producers and enforcers of (heteronormative and androcentric) orthodoxy. As a whole, these divergent voices and approaches share a broad concern with reinterpretations and contemporary approaches to ethics, (religious) belonging, as well as transformation of theologies amid a rapidly changing world, evoking often overlooked discussions on popular culture and going beyond the Global North.

This is most explicit in the article “*Feminine Power and Agency in the Ilê Axé Oxum Abalô*”, where **Inga Scharf da Silva** takes us to the globally active religious movement of the *Umbanda*. Her multi-sited ethnography in Brazil and Berlin highlights the centrality of female priesthood and the material significance of female ownership. In so doing, her work enriches the understanding of the negotiation of gender positions inside religious communities and the way in which religious communities seek to perform resistances by way of performing, cultivating and establishing alternative ways of (religious) life and worship.

**Teresa Forcades i Vila’s** “*Pleasure from a Theological Perspective*” draws on the rich writings offered by Teresa of Avila. Starting from an auto-ethnographic positionality of a Benedictine nun, Forcades engages in an exciting connection between her own experiences and those of her namesake. In exploring the writings of the Saint, Forcades i Vila shows how the body, bodily experiences, pleasure and the erotic were not absent from Christian thought, writings and the Catholic tradition, but were indeed inside of it. Drawing and engaging in Saint Teresa’s historical documents and writings, Forcades i Vila connects it to her “queer theology”. The latter presents an understanding of God which is in correspondence with the human body, sexuality, desire and pleasure. This sets the ground for a gender-queer theology and most pointedly overcomes traditional mind–body dualisms.

In “*Dead or Dying. Jewish Religious Cultures and Brain Death as the Modern Mind–Body Dualism*”, **Sarah Werren** equally reconsiders traditional dualisms and discusses the bioethical issues of brain death and organ transplantation in relation to Jewish orthodoxy. Using this example, she demonstrates how the human body can present the centre of theological discussions and interpretations. Werren vividly shows how rabbinic discussions and interpretations are at the heart of Jewish tradition and its religious practice. Taking the body and brain death as a starting point, this article thus demonstrates that the body is central in Jewish tradition and practice and never absent from it. Connecting historical and contemporary debates over death and dying in Jewish traditions, Werren then succinctly highlights the necessity and urgency of bringing “the body back in” since it has, so she demonstrates, always been central to religion and religious practice.

## **Part II: Religion, Economics and Development—Interaction of Discursive Spheres**

The second section, “*Religion, Economics and Development—Interaction of Discursive Spheres*”, invites the reader to reconsider the increasingly untenable secular-religious dichotomy in the study of religion, economics and development. Sparked by a recent interest in development policymakers and development economists, religion (re-)entered the discursive spheres of economics and development around the turn of the century.<sup>14</sup> Earlier contributions, such as Adam Smith’s

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<sup>14</sup> Swart and Nell (2016), Ver Beek (2000).

treatment of religion, Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and Eisenstadt's notion of religion's "transformative capacity", are beginning to resurface in the development debate.<sup>15</sup> The section focuses on the fundamental ideological presuppositions underlying discourses on socioeconomic structures and processes. These structures and processes are to a large extent rooted in discursive spheres marked by a "secular distinction": they are seen as part of a secular, or profane, realm, in contrast to a religious, or sacred, realm. This causes inherent tensions, as religion has to be conceptually secularized to fit into the categories available in these secular discourses. As religion enters (in their own perspective) secular spheres such as economics and development, friction is generated between "religious" and "secular" discourses, which each in their own right are (largely mutually exclusive) forms of creating reality through specific use of language.<sup>16</sup> The three contributions in this section focus on this field of tension from different empirical and theoretical perspectives and thereby challenge the "secular distinction" from different angles.

**Celine Righi** offers a conceptual treatment of the interaction of notions of sacredness and neoliberal technologies relating both to religious studies and political economy. In her contribution, "*New Technologies' Promise to the Self and the Becoming of the Sacred: Insights from Georges Bataille's Concept of Transgression*", she uses George Bataille's account of the sacred to scrutinize the self-empowerment promises of new technologies. Neoliberalism's technological promises are juxtaposed with Bataille's notions of eroticism in the sacred and transgression and their inherent emancipative potential against power. Righi relates this to Stiegler's critique exploring the ambiguous relation of sacredness, magic and power within contemporary neoliberalism.

Focusing on the Haitian context, **Andrea Steinke** deconstructs binary readings of (religious) faith and (secular) professionalism in her paper "*Faith and Professionalism in Humanitarian Encounters in Post-Earthquake Haiti*". Based on ethnographic fieldwork, her analysis of two religious development organizations, Caritas Jacmel and Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, shows the dynamic interrelation of religious identity and professionalism in humanitarian work. Humanitarians active in post-disaster Haiti, she argues, constitute "mediants that produce materialities" with transcendental underpinnings, be it religious faith or secular moral imperatives dictated by contemporary humanitarianism. Steinke highlights that faith and professionalism are not antipodes, but rather both constitute essential dimensions contributing to the impact of the work of religious development organizations.

This relates well to the article "*Religion and Sustainable Development: The 'Secular Distinction' in Development Policy and its Implication for Development Cooperation with Religious Communities*" by **Philipp Öhlmann, Stefan Hunglinger, Marie-Luise Frost** and **Wilhelm Gräb**. Using the example of German official development policy, the authors juxtapose dominant Western notions of

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<sup>15</sup> Smith (1992), Weber (1958), Eisenstadt (1968).

<sup>16</sup> Feldtkeller (2014).

development with views on development by religious communities in Africa and argue that notions of development constitute situated knowledge. They show that the recent discourse on “religion and development” takes place in a secular framework and thus fails to account for the perspective of the actors themselves, in whose perspective the “secular distinction” does not exist. This has implications for development policy: if development cooperation, as it claims, is to engage with religious communities at the level of values, ideas and beliefs, it must also engage with their notions of development as ends of mutual partnership.

### **Part III: Theological and Religious Knowledge Production: Overcoming the Dichotomy between Inside and Outside Perspective(s) on Religion**

Religion, just like any other institutionally organized formation of subjectivity, has to be able to productively relate to, regulate and (re-)form itself and its praxis. Present-day academic theologies, with their specific task of theological knowledge production, may be understood as vehicles for the professionalized intellectual self-relation and self-regulation of religion basing on continuous knowledge transfers with other academic disciplines. As a result, academic theologies, unlike for example sociology, ethnology, psychology, philosophy or cultural studies *per definitionem* display a unique institutional double “nature”: they are both of religious as well as of academic “nature” and so is their production of knowledge. Due to their institutional intermediary positionality, however, academic theologies, more than other academic disciplines (also interested in religion), are forced to face a well-known challenge regarding the intellectual involvement with religion posing nothing less than an existential threat to them: the challenge of overcoming the basic problem of a fixed dichotomy between phenomenal-experiential and habitual insider perspectives *of* religious practitioners (‘emic’) on the one hand and academic or intellectual outsider perspectives *on* religious practitioners (‘etic’) on the other. Succeeding in this challenge is the very condition of possibility for academic theologies, for if they are unable to surmount the said dilemma, which would imply the mutual exclusion of one perspective through the other, they cannot at all or at least not properly fulfil their intermediary function. Further unfolding the basic problem of a dogmatically fixed and substantial insider–outsider disjunction unveils two main problem levels: the epistemological and, as an immediate consequence, methodological problem level and the (meta-)political problem level concerning an adequate engagement with and for religion.

Each in their own way the section’s contributions directly target the basic problem with differing respect towards its two main levels by answering the following guiding question: are there new or previously unexplored strategies or approaches to constructively bridge this dichotomy of perspectives?

In his programmatic essay, “*The Study of Religion as the Study of Discourse Construction*”, **Gerhard van den Heever** introduces an innovative option for a meta-theoretical self-description of theology as well as other disciplines (or discourses) interested in the study of religion as a justifying base of their work explicitly including religiously motivated political interventions. The concrete innovativeness of Heever’s contribution lies in the idea of a reconciliation of the divide between a phenomenological perspective and a Foucauldian discourse-analytical perspective, which Heever perceptively interprets as an echo of the insider–outsider dichotomy, through a meta-theory of scholarly production. On the basis of this meta-theory both theological and other scholarship on religion as well as religion itself can be analysed or described as discourses of world-making. That way the perspectival difference between insider and outsider is no longer a difference in kind. Consequently, the scholar of religion—if he/she sees the necessity—can interpret his/her own doing as a religious act or an act of religiously motivated (meta-)political activism.

In a theological-philosophical attempt to tackle the basic problem of a (substantial) dichotomy of perspectives from its very (logico-)metaphysical roots, **Julian Hensold’s** “*Beyond a Dichotomy of Perspectives. Understanding Religion on the Basis of Paul Natorp’s ‘Logic of Boundary’*” centrally presents Paul Natorp’s—largely unknown—late post-Neo-Kantian work on a *non-reductionist* as well as *non-essentialist* reconception of the notion of religion. Following Natorp’s “Logic of Boundary” he argues that religion neither operates “‘*within*’ nor ‘*beyond*’ the boundary” of human reason but “*exactly on* [or ‘*in*’] *this boundary*”, making religion not only accessible (meaning understandable) for but also justifiable through academic knowledge production such as theology and other humanities. Unreservedly and radically explicating “sense” as the principial medium of its own performance, academic knowledge production—*nolens volens*—has to position itself “in” the boundary of human reason and, thereby, enters the very dimension (of knowledge production) in which religion operates. As a result, the problematic inside–outside divide regarding an adequate realization of religion is sublated or mediated while at the same time religion’s claim(s) of first and last positive knowledge reveal(s) as principally justified.

## Part IV: Religion, Politics, Power—Decentred Analyses

In the fourth section, we explore the crucial significance of epistemic positioning in regulating the dissemination of knowledge. Ever since Michel Foucault and Edward Said became household names, the idea that discursive frameworks shape notions of power, legitimacy and authenticity has become common fare. What each contribution in this section emphasizes, however, is the role that location and positioning play in these processes. With an increased focus on the migration of knowledge, it becomes apparent that even essentially similar discourses reproduced in distinct contexts lead to vastly different, even contrary results. This applies as much to

“secular” discourses posing as religious nationalism, to a French discourse on the natural sciences enlisted to make a claim for Arab-Islamic cultural renaissance, and to the reintroduction of historiographically suppressed epistemologies as a pedagogical practice.

In “*Making Global Connections: Critical Pedagogy and the Decolonization of History*”, **Harun Rasiah** offers a decentred approach to critical pedagogy in undergraduate courses on Islam and modern Middle Eastern History. He begins with critical media literacy as a requisite skill for deconstructing and challenging both popular and academic representations of Islam and the Middle East. His approach is undergirded by a deep appreciation for the role of hegemonic historical narratives in the construction of political imaginaries. To the extent that students seriously engage epistemological alternatives, distinct cartographies, contextual practices of knowledge production, suppressed intellectual genealogies—they open themselves to historical alternatives, making them less reliant upon more conventional narratives for building their own intellectual orientations. Rasiah emphasizes the importance of binding knowledge to experience, which he promotes via an academic excursion of American students to Granada’s Alhambra and the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba.

In “*The Function of Bachelardian Epistemology in the Post-colonial Project of M.A. al-Jabri*”, **Jordan Kynes** explores the intrinsically political function of historical epistemology in the dual discursive contexts of interwar France (Bachelardian epistemology) and the post-1967 Arab debates over cultural “authenticity” between the “tradition” and “modernity”. In the latter context, Moroccan philosopher Mohammed ‘Abed al-Jabri appeals in part to Gaston Bachelard in a project of cultural renaissance circumscribed by notions of religious tradition. In doing so, however, Al-Jabri did not simply translate Bachelard’s concepts into Arabic, but found in his ostensibly apolitical musings on the natural sciences the articulation of an Arab-Islamic renaissance on its own terms. From al-Jabri’s decentered perspective, Bachelard’s justification for the methodological independence of scientific communities (*les cités savantes*), which inspired a generation of post-modern thinkers in the West, is transformed into a political project for an Arab-Islamic Enlightenment.

In “*Rethinking the Religion/Secularism Binary in Global Politics*”, **Mohammad Abdul Gaffar** argues for the dislodging of the Global South from the Western-centric “imperialism of categories”; its “religious-secular” binary imposed through “objective” notions of history and exclusive formulations of identity. Departing from modern scholarship on the so-called “religious resurgence”, Gaffar focuses on the context of South Asia to explore parallel discursive developments in Hindu and Islamic nationalism as articulated by V.D. Savarkar and M.A. Jinnah, respectively. He highlights the secularist foundations of political religion in the hope of making room for the temporal pluralities and transcendence of everyday religion. By means of discourse analysis, Gaffar shows that, contrary to the explicit claims of these thinkers, their secular impulses remain intact beyond their self-proclaimed turn towards religious communalism as the foundation for the modern state.

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# Old and New Gods: In Conversation with Arjun Appadurai and Michael Lambek



Jordan Kynes, Vanessa Rau, and Rosa Coco Schinagl

**Abstract** “Old and New Gods: in Conversation with Arjun Appadurai and Michael Lambek” introduces the reader to some of the broader themes of the work – appropriately – through dialogue; a casual discussion between three young researchers and two distinguished anthropologists. Here the passage of time is thematized as the latter reflect on the various institutional and intellectual changes which they have witnessed leading up to the present; a point in time which constitutes for the junior researchers, a point of departure into an uncertain but exciting future. Furthermore, as with all dialogue, context and location is significant. Though Berlin’s status as a cultural and creative metropole is widely-confirmed, it remains in many ways ‘a house divided unto itself’. No two areas in Berlin are exactly alike, and the young and senior researchers – relative ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to the city, respectively – explore together its many contours, textures, and contrasts.

## Stage: Berlin, Grunewald

A few months after the research laboratory ‘Bridging Gaps and Breaking Paths’ took place in Berlin, three junior researchers—young dynamic academics brimming with questions—made their way across Berlin from the ceaseless commotion of Neukölln to the sleepy sprawl of Grunewald to meet with two of the event’s distinguished guests; Arjun Appadurai and Michael Lambek. They meet Michael Lambek in the mansion-like villa of the *Wissenschaftskolleg* Berlin, where he had spent a year as a residential fellow. Lambek holds a professorship in Anthropology at the University of Toronto in Scarborough where he specialized in the anthropology of religion and has become especially well-known for his work on ethics and ritual and

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Islam and had carried out fieldwork in the Indian Ocean islands of Mayotte and Madagascar.

The manorial space of the *Wissenschaftskolleg* brings a certain atmosphere to our encounter with the two professors, one which differs from the University atmosphere at the Department of Theology. Arjun Appadurai arrives in haste. Holding a professorship in Anthropology at New York University, he had also spent the academic year as a guest professor at the Institute for European Ethnology at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

The ensuing conversation rejoined various themes from Appadurai's and Lambek's keynote lectures,<sup>1</sup> giving all a chance to reconnect and reflect—not only on the conference itself, but on its location in one of the most dynamic and in some ways self-contradictory capital cities in Europe. As is so often the case with international conferences, the level of excitement and intellectual rigor leaves less time and energy for shared exploration of the physical site of the encounter, which tends to serve only as the scenery and setting of the production.

In this conversation, however, the conference becomes much more a prop; a shared point of reference inviting us, the “junior researchers” and the two anthropologists to reflect more individually on their experiences with the space where this exchange of ideas occurred. With its many historical layers and divisions, Berlin is a living testament to the changing fortunes of time. It has witnessed regime-change, periods of economic prosperity and decline, stark shifts in social demographics, and was for most of the latter half of the twentieth century truly a house divided amongst itself.

Today, the city remains as dynamic as ever, with a unique character of which all might intuitively speak, but none can definitively describe. In this sense, it was perhaps the most fitting location for a laboratory soliciting new perspectives and approaches to the study of religion. As one institution among many which has shaped—and been shaped by—the city, the university system is adapting to pressures both, old and new. Unsurprisingly, these tensions would emerge in our discussion, in which the apparent certainties of the past met with the uncertainties of the future.

The *Wissenschaftskolleg* is surrounded by villas; some of new, some of old glory, reflecting wealth and affluence, privilege and a German *Bildungsbürgertum*. Here, at the far affluent West of Berlin, the turbulences of metropolitan cosmopolitanism and the buzzing life of multi-culture we know from our homes in Kreuzberg and Neukölln are virtually absent. The cast enters the stage, and the plot is yet to unfold. We, three PhD candidates in Theology, Philosophy and Sociology are all familiar with the city which we have called our home for some time. Yet, given the opportunity to question these relative-outsiders to Berlin about the shifting structures of academia, the problem of defining religion, and our roles as thinkers and researchers, we equally entered and left the conversation with the question “Where do we

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Magic and Religion’ (Appadurai) and ‘Religion—The Obscure Desire for an Object’ (Lambek), both held at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, February 2017

find ourselves? How does place affect our knowledge production? What are our responsibilities as researchers?" It is this question that runs through the following conversation with Michael Lambek and Arjun Appadurai.

It is us who start the conversation:

**Rosa Schinagl (RS)** I suppose I'll begin. I am doing a PhD in Theology and looking at the young Hannah Arendt's critique of the concept of Love. It's a critique she formulated already at age 22 in which she claims that Augustine's concept of love provokes a structure of worldliness.

**Arjun Appadurai (AA)** I wonder what she'd think if she knew she was a subject in a Theology Department?

**RS** I think she would have liked it. She would have said 'Ok, they are re-thinking my thoughts there.' I think that's what she would have wanted, as she was fond of concepts and being in conversation.

**Jordan Kynes (JK)** My focus is on philosophy. I am from Florida, originally, and studied philosophy undergraduate at the University of Florida and then a master's degree in 'Religion and Culture' at the Humboldt University here in Berlin. My current PhD thesis examines the early works of Moroccan philosopher Mohammed 'Abed al-Jabri, who basically drew from early French historical epistemology to formulate a critique of what he refers to as 'Arab-Islamic culture'. So my interest here is both in the discourse of ideas between cultures as well as between the natural and human sciences. Al-Jabri employs both discourses for his own political and philosophical project.

**Arjun Appadurai (AA)** So you are here, an American PhD candidate in Berlin, in a German context writing about an Arab drawing from French thought. Oh, that's impressive!

**Vanessa Rau (VR)** I am a sociologist doing my PhD at the University of Cambridge and my work is on Israeli migration and new Jewish communities in Berlin, negotiations of religion and the secular and belonging in relation to processes of migration and conversion, some of them expressed in and related to music.

**AA** Music? Sociology? Hmm... I can see that it is very anthropological.

### [The 'place']

**VR** We would like to start by thinking about Berlin, since we all have a different perspective, either having grown up here or moved here a long time ago. And we know that you two have spent almost a year here and we would like to know how you find yourselves here as researchers and scholars and what impression the city has made on you, perhaps also in terms of its religious diversity.... What did you discover? What have you seen that you would like to share with us?

**Michael Lambek (ML)** Well, as you can see, I am here in Grunewald and it's not exactly typical of Berlin as a city. And I feel that I haven't spent nearly enough time in Berlin or drawn on its resources nearly enough. But it seems to me like a city with an infinite number of resources and a very exciting place. I like the diversity and dynamism of the city. But again, maybe you don't see that in Grunewald. I don't know how representative Berlin is of the rest of Germany, but I suspect not so much.

I really don't know... In terms of cultural distinctiveness, one of the things that interests me about Berlin here in Grunewald is that people are really appreciative of nature. There are all of these green spaces that are really well-used, people are spending time in the parks and the forest. You walk around these lakes on a warm Sunday and you suddenly see naked people. I was really struck not so much by the fact that there were people in the nude but that there was a complete mix of nude and dressed people side by side, and people just seemed so relaxed about it! I mean, I haven't talked to anybody—I mean you don't interview naked people, well, until they're dressed—but I'm sure it has something to do with an ideology about nature and being natural and so on. This kind of green movement I think is very strong here, so for me all of that is something that characterizes the place. It would be distorting to put it under the label of 'religion', but it's in the same sort of family of things, in the sense that it is about the world and how we relate to it (...) It would be unthinkable in any North America city; people would be arrested and arguments would be made that it is harmful to children. I also saw a wild boar in the forest and, again, I think most North Americans would worry much more about safety and try to insulate themselves.

**AA** I want to go back a little bit to my mental life in relation to Berlin. I mean, there is the Berlin of lived reality, with places like Neukölln, Kreuzberg, even the more complex edge areas like Pankow, Wedding or Moabit which I haven't had the time to see properly. But I have been here and there enough, to think, in a sense, that it's a remarkable city. And I've written a bit about this and I think Germany is in a remarkable moment now, to exercise true leadership in terms of Europe as an alternative to authoritarian populism in the world. So, I think Germans are certainly cautious for all the best reasons, about taking on a stronger role. I don't think Germany is willy-nilly going to be in such a role or is currently in such a role. And I think Berlin isn't that role in Germany. That is, by every impression I have.

I'm actually, truly seeing what it means to be a city that was unified after being on both sides of the German divide and the Cold War divide. And before that, the city that Hitler tried to rule Europe and the world from. So, its history is at least, as far as the last century or 150 years, not comparable to anywhere in the world in terms of complexity. [...]

But I'm wondering, rather than speaking about wanting to see more of Berlin and learning more about it, going to more neighborhoods and sights and museums. This only scratches the surface. But mentally, I have two associations of my own about prior intellectual life, which remain in my mind in my kind of semi-conscious as I experience practical life in Germany.

One is Hannah Arendt and I want to mention this because, speaking of Hannah Arendt, I had the privilege of being in some very small classes with her, when I was a graduate in about your position, actually earlier. I was not even at my dissertation stage in Chicago at a very special and bizarre faculty called The Committee on Social Thought, which had people doing literature, classics, philosophy, a strange hybrid and three or four people came regularly from New York to teach there. One of them was Arendt, and there were two or three others; Harold Rosenberg the great

art critic who wrote for the *New Yorker*; Hans Jonas<sup>2</sup> was a philosopher from the New School for Social Research. But Arendt was, doubtless, the superstar. When I was a graduate student, I didn't realize it was the time of her Eichmann book,<sup>3</sup> so the people in their department, despised it, they didn't look at it. She would be standing at the board and no one would look. They saw her as the essence of evil. So, they hated women and smart women anyway. But then, in our case, five months, later, I realized, all this was going on right there, 1972, or 73 or so.

[...] In the 1970s, which, as it turned out, the last phase of her life, she was working on the will<sup>4</sup> and was teaching a set of seminars at Chicago, lecturing for very small groups. And I attended those as well. And there were some other even smaller classes that I had with her. She was a spectacular person and I have to share one of the two or three things she said in these classes, which has stayed with me now in almost 50 years, 45 years, something like that. And she said, with her very delightful but special and rather thick, German accent: "I want to explain to you the difference between love and desire." And we were all 22, 23 [years old], we were waiting. So, she says: "When you desire strawberries, you eat some. When you love strawberries, you plant some."<sup>5</sup> Boom. You see why it stayed with me 50 years?

**ML** That's fantastic!

**AA** So, she said a few things like that, and she just used to smoke with her lighter, [she was] very beautiful! Even at that age, she was quite luminous. So anyway, that simple quote has always stayed in my mind as one of those deeper perceptions. But I didn't know, where it was in her autobiography, that she had thought about [this idea] much earlier and was now returning to it in the context of the will and the war. But anyway, it was a remarkable process...

**RS** Related to Arendt but also returning to where we are, I was wondering, in terms of inside or outside perspectives. Even among those of us who have grown up here, we see symbols such as the wall and it can kind of represent different things: either "oh yes, the division" or "'we' came back together". How does it look from your perspectives to be in this city? Does it seem unified or divided?

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<sup>2</sup>Hans Jonas: German-born Jewish philosopher, former student of Martin Heidegger and close friends. He is best known for his work on bioethics, philosophy of religion and philosophy of technology.

<sup>3</sup>Hannah Arendt: *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books: London: 1963. First published as a series of articles in *The New Yorker*. Hannah Arendt translated it herself into the German version. The book triggered a worldwide conversation about the crime on the Jews and others during the Second World War. It is still the most read book of Hannah Arendt.

<sup>4</sup>Posthumous publications *The Life of the Mind* (1978) in which she also deals with the phenomenon of the will.

<sup>5</sup>Arendt uses the Christian concept of love that is divided between cupiditas (cupidity) and caritas (charity). These two concepts are from Church father Augustine on whom she wrote her dissertation. Cupidity is always worldly and bounds you to the world that is transitory but carity is a concept of God that bounds you to him and leads you finally into freedom of the world. Hannah Arendt: (1996). Scott, Joanna Vecchiarelli; Stark, Judith Chelius, eds. [Love and Saint Augustine](#). [University of Chicago Press](#).