

Journal
of the
Oxford
Graduate
Theological
Society

**Issue 1:
Religious Life**



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

FACULTY OF
**THEOLOGY
AND
RELIGION**

Editors

Nikolaas Deketelaere (Managing Editor); Mark Aloysius (Associate Editor); James Lorenz (Associate Editor); Tim Middleton (Associate Editor); Andrew Shamel (Web Editor); Caleb Brown (Reviews Editor)

Editorial Board

James Hooks; Andrew Cowan; Taman Turbinton; Victoria Gross; Stevan Veljkovic; Ghila Amati; Liam McDonnell; Harry Lines; Elizabeth Li; John Olson; Henry Shea; Itzhak Berkman

The Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society (JOGTS) is a peer-reviewed journal that publishes scholarly articles in the field of theology and religion.

Each issue divides contributions into two categories: i) responses to each edition's thematic call for papers; ii) articles that fall under the general scope of the journal. As an affiliate of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford, the scope of the journal is defined by the breadth of research undertaken by the members of the faculty. It includes Biblical studies, historical and systematic theology, philosophical theology, Christian and religious ethics, history of Christianity, science and religion, and the study of religions. The journal also publishes critical book reviews, media reviews, and featured articles.

By submitting to JOGTS, authors accept the terms of Open Access publication. JOGTS is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Contents

Editorial Introduction (Nikolaas Deketelaere)	3
---	---

Themed Articles: Religious Life

For a Phenomenology of Religious Life (Emmanuel Falque)	5
Superior Points of View: William James and Aldous Huxley's Reflections on Mystical and Religious Experiences (Ghila Amati)	25
Eucharist and Technology: A Heideggerian Critique of Virtual Communion (John Olson)	41

General Articles

Midrashic Wishful Thinking: Constructions of Esther in Twenty-First Century Novels (Sorrel Shamel-Wood)	69
---	----

Book Reviews

Review of 'Saving Fear in Christian Spirituality' edited by Ann W. Astell (Henry Shea)	100
Review of 'Theology and Philosophy in Eastern Orthodoxy: Essays on Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought' edited by Christoph Schneider (Harry Moore)	103
Review of 'The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City' by Deonnie Moodie (Matthew Martin)	106

Editorial Introduction

Nikolaas Deketelaere

Balliol College, University of Oxford

nikolaas.deketelaere@balliol.ox.ac.uk

It is a great privilege to be able to introduce this inaugural issue of the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society (JOGTS)*: I am immensely proud of my fellow graduate students in theology and religion at the University of Oxford, who could not have risen to the challenge of producing this first issue with greater dedication or ability. This issue, the first in what I am confident will be a long series, is a testament to the talent that resides within the Faculty of Theology and Religion's graduate community as a whole.

Going forward, the JOGTS will publish peer-reviewed work of the highest quality, in the form of both articles and book reviews, related to the research areas in which the University of Oxford's Faculty of Theology and Religion is active: Biblical studies, historical and systematic theology, philosophical theology, Christian and religious ethics, history of Christianity, science and religion, and the study of religions. Nevertheless, the journal belongs chiefly to the Oxford Graduate Theological Society, meaning that it is run entirely (from setting editorial policy to copyediting and typesetting) by the Faculty's graduate students. In that sense, the journal certainly hopes to be an important platform for the unceasing theological and scholarly discussions going on in Oxford, particularly among its graduate students. However, as its founding editor, I should also note that the JOGTS' intended scope extends far beyond that: we welcome all contributions of sufficient quality, whether they are submitted from Oxford or thousands of miles away from its dreaming spires, by a graduate student or a senior academic.

Each issue will host a special section of articles dedicated to a specific topic whilst also reserving space for contributions that fall within the journal's general scope. We chose the topic 'Religious Life' in the autumn of 2019, not knowing quite how urgent theological reflection on this issue would become in the face of the various measures governments around the world introduced to mitigate the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which often included closing places of



worship. As a result, I am proud that this inaugural issue of the JOGTS includes John Olson's 'Eucharist and Technology: A Heideggerian Critique of Virtual Communion', which reflects on the meaning of the Eucharist when public health measures make it impossible to physically partake in that sacrament. This issue also includes an essay by the French philosopher Emmanuel Falque, entitled 'For a Phenomenology of Religious Life', delivered in Oxford as a lecture on the occasion of the centenary of Martin Heidegger's lecture courses dedicated to the phenomenology of religious life. This text forms both a helpful synthesis of Falque's work as well as a fascinating autobiographical exercise in which the author traces his own intellectual roots. The final contribution to this special section on religious life is Ghila Amati's forceful defence of religious experience in her 'Mystical and Religious Experiences as Superior Points of View: William James and Aldous Huxley's Reflections on Mystical and Religious Experiences'. Sorrel Shamel-Wood's 'Midrashic Wishful Thinking': Constructions of Esther in Twenty-First Century Novels', meanwhile, does not deal with religious life, but instead offers a thoughtful engagement with scripture in light of contemporary culture that is fascinating in its own right.

Finally, this issue includes reviews—by Henry Shea, Harry Moore and Matthew Martin respectively—of three recent books that deal with religious life in one way or another. These books were generously provided to us by the *Journal of Theological Studies*, for which we are grateful.

Indeed, the publication of this inaugural issue would not have been possible without the support we received from a great variety of individuals and institutions. First of all, we thank the Faculty of Theology and Religion for generously funding the journal until 2021. Personally, I am extremely grateful to Professor Graham Ward, chair of the Faculty during the 2019-2020 academic year, for kindly encouraging me to pursue this project in the summer of 2019, and Dr Sarah Apetrei, the Faculty's Graduate Studies Coordinator, for her support in our endeavour to get it off the ground. Launching a journal and publishing its first issue has proved to be a task of significant managerial, technical and administrative complexity; it would undoubtedly have overwhelmed me if it were not for the constant assistance and great skill of the other members of the core editorial team: James Lorenz alongside Tim Middleton and Mark Aloysius as associate editors, Andrew Shamel as web editor, and Caleb Brown as reviews editor. Finally, I am grateful to the other members of the extended editorial board: James Hooks, Andrew Cowan, Taman Turbinton, Victoria Gross, Stevan Veljkovic, Ghila Amati, Liam McDonnell, Harry Lines, Elizabeth Li, John Olson, Henry Shea and Itzhak Berkman. They brought a wealth of different skills and perspectives to the project that would be beyond any single one of us, testifying to the unparalleled strength of the graduate community.

In publishing this first issue, I also hand the reigns of the journal over to Tim Middleton, who will succeed me as editor for the 2020-2021 academic year. I am delighted to see this project go on without me and wish Tim the best of luck in further developing and expanding the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society*.

For a Phenomenology of Religious Life

Emmanuel Falque

Catholic University of Paris

Translated by Nikolaas Deketelaere

Balliol College, University of Oxford

nikolaas.deketelaere@balliol.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

With this essay, Emmanuel Falque pays off his debt to Martin Heidegger by tracing the methodological roots of his own work to *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Falque shows how Heidegger draws a 'facticity in common' from a variety of Christian texts (Paul, Augustine, medieval mysticism) that is nevertheless not limited to a theological form of discourse, but is precisely held 'in common' between the atheist and the Christian: the terms of the general philosophical analysis of 'the human being as such' have a theological provenance. Moreover, Falque holds up Heidegger's engagement with the history of Christian theology as an example of how studying the history of thought does not have to mean sinking into a straightforward historicism.

Delivered as a lecture at the University of Oxford on 13 March 2020, the centenary of Martin Heidegger's Freiburg lecture courses (1919–1921).



Emmanuel Falque, 'For a Phenomenology of Religious Life',
trans. Nikolaas Deketelaere, *JOGTS* 1.1 (2020), pp. 5-24.

That I am indebted to Martin Heidegger's *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, that I would have to pay off this debt one day – I have never doubted this, and the time has now come to do so. Rarely has a reading or a book marked my philosophical trajectory to this extent, even before its publication in French.² *Herkunft bleibt stets Zukunft* – 'Provenance always comes to meet us from the future.'³ The famous phrase of the phenomenologist, from his 'Dialogue on Language', resounds here with a rare aptness: 'Without this theological provenance [or rather philosophical, here] I should never have come upon the path of thinking.'⁴ From *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, where 'the burden of time' is made felt (see §9: *Oneri mihi sum*),⁵ to *Crossing the Rubicon's* 'philosophy of religious experience' (see §13: 'Philosophy of the Decision'),⁶ or *God, the Flesh, and the Other*, where the method of the 'phenomenological practice of medieval philosophy' is established (see the introduction),⁷ or furthermore *The Book of Experience*, of which the title as well as the very expression are drawn from Heidegger's note on Bernard of Clairvaux's third

² Martin Heidegger, *Phénoménologie de la vie religieuse*, trans. Jean Greisch, Œuvres de Martin Heidegger (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), the German being *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, ed. Matthias Jung and Thomas Regehly, Gesamtausgabe 60 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995). One can only be astonished by, and emphasise, the delay with which this French translation was published. An English translation, meanwhile, appeared in 2004 as *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). The French translator – Jean Greisch, whom I pay tribute to for his fierce work, ever useful to philosophy – explained to Dominique Janicaud: 'I find it [problems of translation] difficult to talk about, since I have just completed the translation of volume sixty of the Gesamtausgabe, the *Phenomenology of Religious Life*. I gave the manuscript to François Fédier in March. It goes without saying that I am happy to revise my translation, but I am not happy to compromise on the terminological choices I saw fit to make. [JANICAUD:] Could we speak of blocking? [GREISCH:] Perhaps. . .' (Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, vol. 2: *Entretiens* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 196). In addition to the fact of translation – Vezin translates *faktisch* as *factive*, Martineau as *factice*, and Greisch as *facticiel* (the correct translation in my view) – it seems that political and editorial questions were taken into account between the end of the work of translation here announced (1999, the year the quoted conversation took place) and its publication by Gallimard (2011). This gap of over ten years, which we can only deplore, probably produced a certain delay in the French reception of Heidegger's *Phenomenology of Religious Life*. It did not, however, prevent me from having access to it very early on, in the German indeed, but also through the generosity of Professor Greisch, who was kind enough to provide me with a provisional copy of his translation as soon as it had been completed.

³ Martin Heidegger, 'A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer' in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 10 (translation modified).

⁴ Heidegger, 'A Dialogue on Language', 10 (translation modified).

⁵ Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 27–29. —Trans.

⁶ Emmanuel Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, trans. Reuben Shank (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 101–107. —Trans.

⁷ Emmanuel Falque, *God, the Flesh, and the Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus*, trans. William Christian Hackett (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 3–19. —Trans.

sermon on the Song of Songs (see §3: 'The Book of Experience');⁸ everything seems to come from [venir], or to 'originate in' [*pro-venir*] (*her-kommen*), the young Heidegger: precisely in this sense, the provenance or origin [*provenance*] (*Herkunft*) comes to meet me from the future [*l'avenir*] (*Zukunft*) as well.

However, the question is not solely one of returning to a past. For what is said is said, and what is done is done. Reading, or rereading, the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* at the moment opens onto a future [*futur*]. Rather than speaking of 'phenomenology of religion' (Hegel) or of 'phenomenology and religious philosophy' (Hering), it is worth considering a 'philosophy of religious experience'.⁹ Nevertheless, this phrase still awaits its determination, or rather its orientation. For to announce it, by way of a title ('For a Phenomenology of Religious Life'), is neither to return to a past nor to repeat a present – knowing what Heidegger, for his part, said so well, if he did not write it down. It is rather a matter – and this is essential – of reflecting *starting from* Heidegger and not *on* Heidegger. Factual life experience, as emphasised at the start of the lecture course 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion' (1920–1921), is characterised by the fact that this phrase must be understood as a subjective genitive rather than an objective genitive: 'One finds that philosophy arises from factual life experience. And within factual life experience philosophy returns back into factual life experience.'¹⁰ Otherwise put, it is 'factual life', namely the *how* of my experience of the world, or 'how I stand with regard to things' (9/12), that must give birth to philosophising itself. The petition, even the clamour, introduced by the young Heidegger at the turn of the previous century, must still reverberate today, at least for those who have 'ears to hear': 'I ask myself how I experience *myself* in factual life experience – no theories!' (9/13).

Philosophy (*Philosophie*) and life (*Leben*) are therefore linked, and this is probably the greatest as well as deepest teaching of this *Phenomenology of Religious Life*. For 'religion' matters little here – although it is far from being a mere pretext for the young Heidegger, as I will show. Of first and foremost importance is the method, or rather the new philosophical attitude, in matters of philosophy of religion certainly, but also in the guise of the phenomenological mode [*manière*] or attitude in general – tearing oneself away from 'theory', the double flight into historicity and scientificity, as the three lecture courses collected here unceasingly emphasise.¹¹ At least in the 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion' (1920–1921), the Protestant theologian Ernst

⁸ Emmanuel Falque, *Le livre de l'expérience: D'Anselme de Cantorbéry à Bernard de Clairvaux* (Paris: Cerf, 2017), 28–34 (English translation forthcoming from University of Notre Dame Press as *The Book of Experience*). For Heidegger's note, see *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 252–254/ 334–337. —Trans.

⁹ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 104–106 ('Philosophy of Religion and Philosophy of Religious Experience').

¹⁰ Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 6–7/8.

¹¹ In order of publication (but not of writing), the first course is entitled 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion' (winter semester 1920–1921) (1–111/1–156); the second course is entitled 'Augustine and Neo-Platonism' (summer semester 1921) (113–227/157–299); and the third course (not held) is entitled 'The Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism' (1918–1919) (229–254/301–337).

Troeltsch functions as a foil, someone to articulate one's own position against, as an example of everything one must not do in philosophy of religion, or at least in religious phenomenology: 'psychology, epistemology, philosophy of history, metaphysics' (14–18/19–26). In the eyes of Heidegger, none of his predecessors really have the right to be cited: Hegel (the system), Kant (the limits of reason), Troeltsch (the religious *a priori*), but also Otto (the numinous) and Reinach (values). According to the lecturer from Freiburg, only Schleiermacher (but with a reservation concerning his sentimentalism) and Dilthey (a hermeneutics of life, but without reducing it to a *Geisteswissenschaft*) can properly inspire a true *phenomenology of religious life*.

It is therefore a new start, and even a new beginning, that must be taken up. Hence the young professor's spirited opening to his 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion'. I am myself not far from sharing this attitude, at least as concerns medieval philosophy, which today remains stuck in a pure historicism. Thus, in his course on 'Augustine and Neo-Platonism' (1921), or in editing his working notes for his undelivered course on 'The Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism' (1918-1919), Heidegger teaches the following: 'The interest in the philosophy of religion is currently increasing. Even ladies write philosophies of religion (*selbst Damen schreiben Religionsphilosophie*) and philosophers who wish to be taken seriously welcome them as the most important contributions in decades!' (14/19, translation modified).

As we can see, he who will probably become the most important philosopher – or one of the most important philosophers – of the previous century, never failed to let himself get carried away. This is probably the reason why, or rather the sign of the fact that he already knew how to decide. To say that 'even ladies (*selbst Damen*)' write philosophy of religion is not, of course, to be misogynistic here, as scandalmongers might say or believe. The young Heidegger would of course subscribe to Descartes' warning to Father Vatier, which appears in a letter of 22 February 1638, just after the publication of the *Discourse on Method* (1637): 'These thoughts did not seem to me suitable for inclusion in a book which I wished to be intelligible in part even to women [*femmes*]'.¹² This is neither derogatory nor condescending, quite the contrary: to write 'even for women [*femmes*]' is not to write 'for the ladies (*Damen*)' – Descartes knew this, and as did Heidegger after him. For, in the seventeenth century at least, 'women' were those who had not gone through schooling, in particular the nets of a scholasticism that encloses thinking in a system. They retain, therefore, the 'freshness of mind' that makes for the fact that 'good sense (that is, reason) is the best distributed thing in the world' (Descartes),¹³ or that 'authentic facticity' (*die eigentliche*

¹² René Descartes, 'Letter to Vatier of 22 February 1638' in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 3:86/AT I 560 (my emphasis).

¹³ René Descartes, 'Discourse on the Method' in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1985), 1:111/AT VI 1. —Trans.

Faktizität) does not in the first instance designate life in the sense of being ‘biologically, objectively isolated’, but rather ‘concrete life, “marriage” (?) [sic.] – eating, drinking, meals, “teatime” – concrete, surrounding-worldly significance’ (189/252), as an astonishing note in the appendix to the course on Augustine and Neo-Platonism emphasises.

Therefore, reading, or rereading Heidegger’s *Phenomenology of Religious Life* for our present day, does not consist in entering into a ‘taking-cognizance-of’ [*prise de connaissance*] (*Kenntnisnahme*) nor a ‘consciousness’ [*prise de conscience*] (*Bewusstsein*). It is rather a matter of rendering oneself capable of ‘taking position’ [*prise de position*] (*Position*) or what the course ‘Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion’ calls ‘the whole active and passive pose [*positionnement*] (*Stellung*) of the human being toward the world’ (8/11). Indeed, the ‘believing subject’ – but only in the most general sense of one who adheres to something (‘primordial Christianity’ [*christianisme primitive*]) – becomes the object questioned rather than the subject doing the questioning. ‘Turning-around’ and ‘transformation’ mark the two achievements, of phenomenology for sure, but also of ‘religious life’ itself.

First of all, there is no phenomenology without a turning-around [*retournement*] (*Umwendung*) that does not, at least under the name of the ‘reduction’ or *epochē*, lead (back) to philosophy itself: ‘Factual life experience is very peculiar; in it, the path to philosophy is made possible and the turning-around which leads to philosophy is enacted’ (8/11). But this ‘turning-around’ (*Umwendung*) then accomplishes itself as ‘transformation’ or ‘conversion’ (*Umwandlung*), not in the sense that philosophy leads to believing in a confessional God, quite the contrary; but rather by reading and discerning, within the field of ‘primordial Christianity’, the necessity for each of us of an ‘act of faith’, at least in the sense of a ‘transformation of oneself’. Just as, in matters of ‘religious life’, the faithful does not present himself ‘before God’ (*coram Deo*) without turning himself towards God (*in Deum*), no more readily will the phenomenologist remain ‘near philosophy’ (*vor die Philosophie*) without going ‘up to philosophy’ (*bis zur Philosophie*). One enters philosophy as one ‘enters the religious life’ [*entre en religion*], to use the French idiom here,¹⁴ and this is what constitutes the meaning of factual life experience – not simply ‘to position oneself before’ but ‘to penetrate in’, or being properly speaking *inter-esse*: ‘The point of departure of the path to philosophy is *factual life experience*. It seems, however, as if philosophy is leading us out of factual life experience (*faktische Lebenserfahrung*). In fact, that path leads us, as it were, only *near philosophy* (*vor die Philosophie*), not *up to it* (*bis zu ihr hin*). Philosophy itself can only be reached through a turning around (*eine Umwendung*) of that path, but not through a simple turning which would orient cognition merely toward different objects but, more radically, through an authentic *transformation* (*eine eigentliche Umwandlung*)’ (8/10).

¹⁴ The French *entrer en religion* means not simply to take up a religion, to enter religious life in general; rather, it indicates entering *the* religious life, as in joining a religious order or taking religious vows. —Trans.

“‘Hands off’ for those who do not ‘feel’ genuinely at home here’ – *Es besagt nur ‘Hände weg’ für den, der sich dabei nicht auf echtem Boden ‘fühlt’* (232/305). This new and astonishing spirited remark by the young philosopher – in his working notes for the course on ‘The Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism’ (1918–1919) in this instance – may certainly suggest that ‘only a religious person can understand religious life’ (*nur ein religiöser Mensch kann religiöses Leben verstehen*) (232/304). However, this is to not see or to not understand that, phenomenologically speaking, a ‘ground’ [so] (*Grund*) is always given, to be believed or thought – including in the phenomenology of religious life, whether we consent to said religion or not: we are ‘always believing’, as I have shown in *Crossing the Rubicon*. This phrase does not mean that every ‘position’ implies a ‘confession’, in the sense of adhesion to the contents of faith (*fides quae*), quite the contrary; it instead merely indicates that we are always inhabited by an ‘act of believing’ (*fides qua*), by which we unceasingly adhere to or believe in someone or something: the world, oneself, others, even God himself. There is a ‘philosophical faith’ before any ‘confessional faith’, and the second can never take place independently of the first.¹⁵

Thus, aside from ‘ordinary facticity’ – which I will return to – human beings have in common this ‘turning-around’ (*Umwendung*), even this ‘transformation’ (*Umwandlung*), which are called for by both ‘phenomenology’ and ‘religious life’. Just as the dream for Freud’s notion of the unconscious, the ‘transformation’ shows the ‘royal road’ to a genuine *phenomenology of religious life* for the young phenomenologist. There is no ‘confession’ here, at least not in the sense of a categorical imperative to be imposed; rather, there is an attitude or a ‘taking-position’ [*prise de position*] ensuring that nothing can really be thought if one does not first know how to decide. ‘No real religion allows itself to be *captured* philosophically’ – *Erphilosophieren lässt sich keine echte Religion* (244/323). This axiom does not state that one must, in philosophy at the very least, confess divinity; it rather states that the phenomenologist shows [*laisse voir*] how much the necessity for each of us to involve ourselves philosophically hides itself behind this gesture or this religious act of believing.

‘Facticity’ and ‘transformation’ (*Faktizität und Umwandlung*), following ‘philosophy’ and ‘life’ (*Philosophie und Leben*), make up the heart and the keystone, of the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* for sure, but probably also of my own work – and for that I am now paying my debt here. [The coupling of] ‘finitude’ and ‘metamorphosis’, as in the title of *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, already learnt that lesson; though the ‘facticity’ of the young Heidegger (1921) had at this point not yet been tied to ‘finitude’ (1927). ‘He who climbs never stops going from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end,’ Gregory of Nyssa remembers in the midst of ‘primordial Christianity’.¹⁶ The same goes for the warning of the young professor from Freiburg, who already

¹⁵ Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 77–98.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, 8: PG 44, 941C.

knew and foresaw that one must now substitute, for the *lectio faciliior* of systems and historical considerations concerning the ‘philosophy of religion’, the *lectio difficilior* of the description of the factual life experience of what belongs to the ‘phenomenology of religious life’: ‘No high-flying philosophy of religion (*Keine hochfliegende Religionsphilosophie*). We stand at the beginning (*Wir stehen am Anfang*), or more precisely: we must go back to the genuine beginnings (*order genauer: wir müssen in die echten Anfänge zurück*), and the world can calmly wait (*und die Welt kann ruhig warten*)’ (235/309).

1. The Facticity in Common

Facticity is first of all the site of a communality. It is in this sense that the young Heidegger sees in the religious kind of conversion a sort of turning-around for factual life. In other words, if the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* bases itself on a body of theological texts (Paul, Augustine, or medieval mysticism), its aim is first of all philosophical. The experience of the factual life of each of us, not the religious life experience granted to few, is the site of the turning-around first of all: ‘We have to look around in factual life experience in order to obtain a motive for its turning around’ (13/18). Therefore, far from separating ‘those who believe’ from ‘those who do not believe’ – or even seeing atheists only against the horizon of belief (even as its refusal) –, as a reader of Paul (winter 1920–1921) and subsequently of Augustine (summer 1921), Heidegger immediately understood that there is ‘originality’ (*Ursprünglichkeit*) in primordial Christianity, but not ‘exceptionality’ (*Außerordentlichkeit*): ‘For all its originality (*all ihrer Ursprünglichkeit*), primordial Christian facticity gains no exceptionality (*keine Außerordentlichkeit*), absolutely no special quality at all (*keine Besonderheit*). In all its absoluteness of reorganizing the enactment, everything remains the same in respect to the worldly facticity (*bleibt hinsichtlich der weltlichen Faktizität alles beim Alten*)’ (83/117). Dismantling all forms of apologetics that would reduce Christianity to some kind of ostracism, the young phenomenologist already knew – and understood this at a time when it was still far from self-evident (a time that is sometimes still our own) – that the Christian ‘does not live in a separate world’.¹⁷ If there is, therefore, a specific transformation in Christianity – and I will show how it is not merely a matter of a ‘turning-around’ (*Umwendung*) and ‘transformation’ (*Umwandlung*), but also of ‘enactment’ (*Vollzug*) – then ‘worldly facticity’ (*weltliche Faktizität*) remains the in-common to which all Christianity must remain anchored.

If, for me as well, there is not first of all a ‘drama’ of atheist humanism, but rather a minimal place where human beings, believing or not, can understand one another or at least encounter each other and engage in conversation – where does such a communality come or originate from [*provient*]?’ ‘To be me, atheist, at home with oneself, separated, happy, created – these are

¹⁷ See Jean Greisch, *L'arbre de vie et l'arbre du savoir: Les racines phénoménologiques de l'herméneutique heideggérienne* (Paris: Cerf, 2000), 202: ‘Originaire mais non extraordinaire: le chrétien ne vit pas dans un monde à part.’

synonyms,' the Jewish philosopher of *Totality and Infinity* will later say.¹⁸ It is born, according to Heidegger – a few months later, in the Natorp-Report (1922), he would precisely draw this from his lectures on Paul and Augustine – out of what he calls, from the Latin, 'care' (*curare*), the equivalence with *Sorge* later becoming one of the fundamental achievements of *Being and Time*: 'The basic sense of the movement of factual life is caring (*curare*)' – *Der Grundsinn der faktischen Lebensbewegtheit ist das Sorgen (curare)*.¹⁹ We will then not be satisfied with (merely) tracing the genealogy of the lecture courses contained within the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* up to *Being and Time*, by passing through the Natorp-Report. This has been done to such an extent that there is nothing I could add, especially since Heidegger himself, as I indicated, claimed the 'theological provenance' of philosophical concepts. The genealogies of other authors have the merit of better explaining these concepts as well as showing how they evolved, but the trouble is that these genealogies remain within a pure historicism that the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* unceasingly castigates.

The 'factual possibility' (*die faktische Möglichkeit*) that I am calling here *facticity in common* [*facticité en commun*] then comes down to (still according to a rereading of the Natorp-Report) 'seeing oneself in concern' (*in der Bekümmernung sich selbst in der Blick . . . nehmen*).²⁰ As specified in a footnote to this phrase, 'concern (*Bekümmernung*) does not mean a mood with a worried mien, but rather the factual Being-decided (*das faktische Entschieden sein*), the apprehension of *Existenz* as the apprehension of that about which one is to be concerned (*das Ergreifen der Existenz als des zu Besorgenden*).'²¹ One could therefore think, but probably incorrectly, that 'concern' [*inquiétude*] is here simply the equivalent of what would later become 'care' [*souci*]. In fact, however, there is nothing to this. Or better, there is perhaps 'more', or at the very least 'something else', in concern compared to care, that is to say, in 'factual life' compared to 'finitude'.²² Indeed, characteristic of 'concern' (*Bekümmernung*) – as inherited from Paul and Augustine (1920–1921), as I will show – is that it is still wholly oriented towards life, or at the very least that it has the possibility of 'falling' within this life. Care (*Sorge*), meanwhile, expresses – according to the turn taken in *Being and Time* (1927) – the characteristic of being-unto-death, as the possibility of the impossibility of *Dasein*. In other words, for the 'wakefulness' [*être en éveil*] brought into view in the *Phenomenology of Religious*

¹⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 148 (translation modified). This should be related to my *Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 30–40.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, 'Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle: Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation', trans. Michael Baur, *Man and World* 25, nos. 3–4 (1992), 361/'Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles (Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation)', ed. Hans-Ulrich Lessing, *Dilthey-Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften* 6 (1989), 14.

²⁰ Heidegger, 'Phenomenological Interpretations', 364/11 (translation modified).

²¹ Heidegger, 'Phenomenological Interpretations', 393n1/11n1 (translation modified).

²² Greisch, *L'arbre de vie et l'arbre du savoir*, 21–26 (23, 26): 'l'idée de facticité contient plus que la simple idée de finitude et de limitation Elle est beaucoup plus riche que la simple idée de finitude.'

Life by rereading Paul, *Being and Time* substitutes 'authentic Dasein' as the assumption of its being-there. There we are, or we were, before God (*coram Deo*); here we stand before ourselves (*Authentizität*).²³

However, there's nothing to condemn here, or even to regret – as is so often and surreptitiously done by the 'believing or confessing thinkers', unceasingly and more or less explicitly denouncing this 'trick' or 'bad move' made by Heidegger in the *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, which was in itself nevertheless a step in the right direction. One does not judge a philosopher on what one would have liked him to have become, but rather on what he actually became. Now, Heidegger neither became an atheist resentful of Christianity, nor a Christian philosopher who no longer explicitly claimed his faith or who resented the institution without having lost his convictions. Those two readings are as extreme as they are arbitrary, they do not correspond to the phenomenologist's 'path of thinking': in search of a new 'common ground' between human beings (named facticity and then finitude), rather than the specificity of an experience of faith that remains impossible (or at the very least difficult) to be shared.

Indeed, explicating Paul's 'fundamental religious experience' whilst 'remaining in this fundamental experience' (51/73) – quoting here the commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians in the course 'Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion' – does not mean to confine oneself to Paul, quite the contrary. Rather, it means understanding factual life in general starting from [*en partant*], or by thinking *taking off* from [*en pensant à partir*], Paul's fundamental experience. Neither reserved to the apostle Paul, nor uniquely communicated to believers alone, the Pauline though also human experience is here extended, even universalised, to all and for all – at least in terms of the 'care' (*cura*) and turning-around it implies: 'The primary point is', according to Heidegger, that 'the life-worlds (*Lebenswelten*) . . . become accessible to factual life experience (*faktischen Lebenserfahrung*)' (9/12).

What determines factual life experience is, precisely, what determines *all* life – Christianity in an originary way for sure, but all life in an ordinary way, namely 'concern' or 'insecurity' as such: 'There is *no security* (*gibt es keine Sicherheit*) for Christian life,' the commentary on the Epistle to the Thessalonians reads, 'the constant insecurity (*die ständige Unsicherheit*) is also characteristic (*das Charakteristische*) for what is fundamentally significant in factual life (*die Grundbedeutendheiten des faktischen Lebens*)' (73/105).²⁴ 'Factual life' (*faktischen Lebens*) or 'ordinary life' – the facticity in common – is thus paradoxically what is already brought into view here. Not merely or exclusively

²³ See Claude Romano, *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 33: 'The instantaneous wakefulness as hope for the return of Christ is replaced by Being-towards-death qua authentic resoluteness . . . ; presence before God is replaced by the mortality of *Dasein*.'

²⁴ Greisch's translation (117) speaks of *ordinary life* (*la vie ordinaire*) instead of *factual life*. —Trans.

the insecurity of the Christian before the end of time, but the insecurity of every human being before every end – whether it is a matter of Parousia, as in the lectures on Paul (1921), or of death, as in the explication of authentic Dasein (1927).

Indeed, one particular passage especially draws the young Heidegger's attention (a) in his reading of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, even though the reference mostly hits (b) in his approach to Augustine. (a) Starting with the Thessalonians: 'Now, brothers and sisters, we do not need to write to you about times and dates (*peri de tōn chronōn kai tōn kairōn, adelphoi*). You know very well that the day the Lord comes again will be a surprise, like a thief that comes in the night (*ēmera kuriou ōs kleptēs en nukti*). . . So we should not be like the other people who are sleeping (*apaoun mē katheudōmen ōs oi loipoi*), but we should be vigilant and sober (*alla grēgorōmen kai nēphōmen*)' (1 Thess. 5:1-2, 5:6). Man's 'wakefulness' [*en éveil*] or 'vigilance' (*grēgorōmen*), and 'God's vigil' [*Dieu en éveil*] with man, such is the definition of Christian existence in the *Guide to Gethsemane* – if the understanding of the whole of my work as inheriting Heidegger's *Phenomenology of Religious Life* needed to be demonstrated again.²⁵ The 'when' (*potē, Wann*) of Parousia does not express a moment in time for Paul – and this is the great originality of Christianity that Heidegger understood so well – but rather returns, and referring ourselves to Heidegger's own commentary here, to the mode [*manière*] of being and living presently awake [*en éveil*] to this end of time, which is to say, in a 'constant and essential uncertainty': 'Through this [Paul's answer] ('let us keep awake') we see: the question of the 'When' (*Wann*) leads back to my comportment (*mein Verhalten*). How (*wie*) the Parousia stands in my life, that refers back to the enactment of life (*den Vollzug des Lebens*) itself. The meaning of the 'When' (*Wann*), of the time in which the Christian lives, has an entirely special character' (73/104). The Christian relation to time modifies time, or qualifies another temporality of time [*un autrement du temps*].²⁶ The 'end of time' [*fin des temps*] already sets in motion the 'end time' [*temps de la fin*] and its *kairos*, or opportune moment. What matters is less the end itself than the *mode* of relating oneself to this end. This is what will distinguish, at least as by extension of the method, the 'fear of dying' from the 'anxiety of death' in *Being and Time*: the 'fear of dying' as the end of life and the 'relation to death' as the modality of life.²⁷

²⁵ See Emmanuel Falque, *The Guide to Gethsemane: Anxiety, Suffering, Death*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 41–44 ('God's Vigil').

²⁶ The point here is not that a *different* time is established (*un autre temps*), like another or a separate world (*un monde à part*), but rather that time itself is temporal in a different way (*un autrement du temps*). On this distinction, which does not lend itself to translation, see Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 21–29, 112–126. —Trans.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, rev. Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), §30 ('Fear as a Mode of Attunement') and §40 ('The Fundamental Attunement of Anxiety as an Eminent Disclosedness of Dasein').

(b) The approach of Augustine, then. *Oneri mihi sum* ('I am a burden to myself', *Conf.* X.28.39),²⁸ *Factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio* ('I have become a great question to myself', *Conf.* IV.4.9),²⁹ or further *Quis velit molestias et difficultates?* ('Who would long for troubles and difficulties?' *Conf.* X.28.39).³⁰ These are the three points, the three places, or the three great formulae, that the young Heidegger takes from the Doctor of Hippo in his lecture course on 'Augustine and Neo-Platonism' (summer 1921). Without having to return to it here, for I have shown it elsewhere, it is the 'burden' (*onus*) that determines existence for Augustine. Even though one must avoid the 'reading with scissors' executed by the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* – for example, cutting off the phrase 'I am a burden to myself' (*oneri mihi sum*) from 'because I am not filled with you' (*quoniam tui plenus non sum*) and thereby relating it philosophically to the neutral place of concern, rather than theologically to the possibility of sin³¹ –, what he here calls care or rather 'being concerned' (*curare*), determines the whole of existence itself: 'The *curare* (being concerned) as the basic character of factual life (*als Grundcharakter des faktischen Lebens*)' (151/205, title of §12). With Augustine, though, an additional step is taken, at least as compared with Paul. Whereas it is explicitly a matter of 'concern' (*Bekümmern*) or 'tribulation' (*thlipsis*) with regard to the end of time in the first letter to the Thessalonians, it rather becomes, as we have seen (§26: 'The Expectation of Parousia'), *cura* or 'care' in Book X of the *Confessions*. What the 'burden of life' (*onus*) brings to its concern (*thlipsis*) is the charge of facticity as such, which seems to be detached little by little from all fault or sin, until reaching its peak in a 'finitude' that is this time absolutely constitutive of humanity. It is not, or not only, before [*au regard de*] God that the risk of temptation (*tentatio*) is judged and felt, but also before oneself and in light of the proper burden that one is to oneself, whether or not one is cut off from God: 'The most uncanny power of *tentatio* opens [itself] precisely in the most radical, genuine self-concern (*in der radikalsten Selbstbekümmern*), so that only here has the most radical situation of self-experience (*die radikalste Selbsterfahrungssituation*) been won, in a direction of consideration in which the self knows neither in nor out (*in der das Selbst nicht mehr aus und ein weiß*) – *quaestio mihi factum sum* [I have become a question to myself]'³² (189/253).

²⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, vol. 2: *Books 9–13* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 136–37.

²⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, vol. 1: *Books 1–8* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 146–47 (translation modified).

³⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, 2:136–37. I will add *Conf.* X.16.25/2:110–111: 'I am really struggling over this, Lord, and struggling with myself (*laboro in me ipso*). To myself I have become a land which is too unyielding, demanding too much sweat (*factus sum mihi terra difficultatis et sudoris nimii*).'

³¹ See Emmanuel Falque, 'Après la métaphysique? Le "poids de la vie" selon Augustin' in *Après la métaphysique: Augustin? Actes du colloque inaugural de l'Institut d'études médiévales de l'Institut catholique de Paris, 25 juin 2010*, ed. Alain de Libera (Paris: Vrin, 2013), 115–119.

³² The move from 'tribulation' in Paul (*thlipsis*) to 'care' in Augustine (*cura*) is perfectly demonstrated by Greisch, *L'Arbre de vie et l'Arbre du savoir*, 204–206.

These two successive stages in the lecture course on Paul's Epistle to the Thessalonians (1920–1921) and Book X of Augustine's *Confessions* (summer 1921), make up the heart and the centre of what Heidegger at that time still called facticity. For if there is one thing characteristic of the 'concern' (for the end) or the 'care' (for oneself) – otherwise put, of factual life experience – it is that “‘world’ is that in which one can *live* (one cannot live in an object)’ (8/11). In other words, concern and care are dimensions of the self and not of the world; or rather, they are only dimensions of the ‘world’ insofar as the world is the place of the ‘meaning’ [*sens*] of my life (facticity), instead of a series of ‘facts’ [*faits*] of life (objectivity).

‘One cannot live in an object’ – *In einem Objekt kann man nicht leben* (8/11). Here, again, the genius of the young phenomenologist – defining factual life experience in order to introduce the philosophy of religion, or rather the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* – appears forcefully. An expression – a parenthetical expression even – is all the professor needs to say everything [*tout dire*], or rather to articulate the whole [*dire le tout*], by way of a metonym ('having a drink'). Indeed, recognising that no one lives 'in an object' (*in einem Objekt*) is already admitting that only the human being [*l'homme*] lives 'in the world' (*in der Welt*): it alone suffers or enjoys [*jouit*] concern and care – and is therefore simultaneously projected towards what is to come [*l'avenir*] (concern) and turned-around towards himself as towards his own burden (care). Here, being 'factual' (*faktisch*) – understood in French as *facticiel* rather than *factice*, to avoid the risk of misinterpreting it as 'falsity' (to be *factice* is to be false, imitated, poorly formed) – denotes not the 'artificial' but the 'contingent' in the etymological sense of the word: contingent is what is most my own and closest to me, what properly speaking 'touches me' (*con-tingere*) and therefore 'forms' [*fait*] my life. Factual life experience does not let itself be reduced to life as it is 'biologically, objectively isolated,' but relates to what the young Heidegger at that time called 'concrete life' (*konkretes Leben*): “‘marriage’ (?) – eating, drinking, meals, “teatime” – concrete, surrounding-worldly significance’ (189/252). There is nothing here that belongs specifically to the order of belief or religious life. However, it is within belief or a *Phenomenology of Religious Life* that one reads and deciphers in an exemplary way, and does so for all, what it means to relate to the future (concern) and to carry the burden of oneself (care), including in the smallest, and allegedly insignificant, moments of our life. 'Religious life' does not simply and trivially let itself be opposed to 'atheistic life'; rather, it makes evident [*fait voir*] in its own body of texts and by way of its specific experience – in particular on the basis of a reading and a commentary on the *Epistles* of Paul and the *Confessions* of Augustine – what it means to be *human as such* [*l'homme tout court*],³³ when one is either before oneself (*oneri mihi sum*) or before God (*coram Deo*).

³³ Throughout Falque's work, including in this text, the task of thinking *l'homme tout court* takes centre stage. By this, he means the human being (finitude) on its own terms, without reference to a divinity (infinity) from which the human would derive its meaning. On this, see especially Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude*, 11–40. —Trans.

2. Atheistic Life

As we know, a double break marks Heidegger's advance down the path of atheism: (a) a break with the system of Catholicism, (b) followed by a break with Christianity in general. (a) Starting with the break with the system of Catholicism – which is not therefore a break with Christianity as such, however – as it is famously expressed in a letter to Engelbert Krebs of 9 January 1919: 'Epistemological insights, extending to the theory of historical cognition, have made the system of Catholicism problematic and unacceptable to me – but not Christianity and metaphysics (these in a new sense, however).'³⁴ At the time of the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* (1919–1921), Christianity was safe and only said 'system of Catholicism' the subject of severe condemnation. In addition to the historical reasons that justified it at the time (the prevalence of Neo-Thomism) – but nevertheless do not give us any reason to think that it would have been any different if the Catholic faith had expressed itself otherwise (according to a 'false' presupposition often expressed by the 'believing' interpreters of Heidegger's thought) –, the act of breaking with the system, and even with all systems, lies philosophically within the lecture courses of the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* as such. Heidegger does not mince words, to put it mildly, as in the following quotation from the course on 'The Philosophical Foundations of Medieval Mysticism' (1918–1919) (exactly contemporaneous with the letter to Krebs of 9 January 1919). Any shackles of thought that would impede thinking must be banished, whether it is a matter of Catholicism – as it certainly is – or of all dogmatic thought as such: 'the *structure of the system* – that itself did not grow out of an *organic* cultural deed – . . . must first find its way through contorted, inorganic, theoretically *entirely unclarified*, dogmatic principles and evidential procedures, only to finally dominate, darkly burden, and repress the subject as a statute of canon law with police force (*mit Polizeigewalt das Subjekt zu überwaltigen*). Still further: within itself, the system fully excludes an original, genuinely religious lived-experience of value (*ein ursprüngliches genuines religiöses Werterlebnis*)' (238/313, translation modified).

(b) The break with Christianity, this again is well known, followed very shortly after the lecture courses published as the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* (1918–1921). It expresses itself definitively, even trenchantly, in the Natorp-Report – the autumn 1922 entitled 'Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle: Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation' – which marks the turn from a religious body of texts (medieval mysticism, Paul, Augustine) to a Greek body of texts (Aristotle): 'If philosophy is *fundamentally atheistic* and if it understands this about itself (*wenn die Philosophie grundsätzlich atheistisch ist und das versteht*); – then it has decisively chosen factual life in its facticity and has made this an object for itself'.³⁵ In addition to the personal reasons leading to the break (in particular Heidegger's newfound fascination with Greece and his desire to join

³⁴ See *Heidegger und die Anfänge seines Denkens*, ed. Alfred Denker et al., Heidegger-Jahrbuch 1 (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2004), 67–8.

³⁵ Heidegger, 'Phenomenological Interpretations', 367/15.

the University of Marburg), the question arises whether it is a matter here of a real ‘epistemological cut’ (of the sort that would change Heidegger’s work as a whole), or rather a straightforward translation or ‘retranslation’ of what already gave itself in another field. These two positions – a total break with the body of Christian texts, on one side, or a hidden continuity with a heritage that is never denied, on the other – can never be reconciled, if you ask me. Neither ‘antagonism’ nor ‘neutrality’ can truly capture the relationship that Christianity and philosophy still maintain with one another. Rather than searching for the ‘points of compatibility between Heidegger’s thought and Christian faith, as well as its fecundity for theology’,³⁶ today at least, it strikes me as more pertinent to think how atheism might change Christianity, and not merely the other way around. If it is an act of ‘crossing the Rubicon’, where the backlash [*le choc en retour*] of theology on philosophy is felt,³⁷ we can put forward the hypothesis – or at least imagine – that ‘another Rubicon’, or a small river, must this time be crossed: the impact of an atheist position, on philosophy for sure, but also on theology. Is Heidegger *without* God necessarily *against* God? Nothing is less certain. There is no *a priori* justification whatsoever to affirm that his atheism is a form of anti-theism, rather than a simple non-theism. Not, or no longer, desiring God, the Heidegger of Marburg would not deny anything from his Freiburg period, but he oriented it differently: not in the often and wrongly proclaimed way [*voie*] of a ‘hidden Christianity’, but rather on the path [*chemin*] of non-theism that calls-out Christianity itself.

We only need to read this little but crucial footnote to the Natorp-Report to be convinced of this: ‘Atheistic means (*atheistisch besagt hier*) keeping oneself free from misleading temptation which merely talks about religiosity. [One may very well ask] whether the very idea of a philosophy of religion (especially if it makes no reference to the facticity of the human being) is pure nonsense.’³⁸ The backlash of Marburg on Freiburg is clearly expressed here, or we might say the return to Greek philosophy (‘Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle’) in the face of a body of Christian texts (*Phenomenology of Religious Life*). Far from sticking to the lone figure of Heidegger, this turn – or rather this turning-around – must extend its questioning to philosophy in general and theology as such, including for our time. Indeed, the problem is not the move from one body of texts to another (from Jerusalem to Athens, for example), but the effect produced by the second (Athens) on the first (Jerusalem or Rome). Certainly, Heidegger has changed. However, this change raises questions for us, questions concerning ourselves, not just concerning Heidegger – that is what every reader must accept. One does not decipher or interpret a text in order to find oneself in it, but on the contrary in order to lose oneself there and let

³⁶ As developed in E. Brito, ‘Heidegger et le christianisme’, *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 82, no. 2 (April 1999): 241–272.

³⁷ See Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 147–152 (§20: ‘The Principle of Proportionality’).

³⁸ Heidegger, ‘Phenomenological Interpretations’, 393n2/16n2 (translation modified).

oneself be changed by it, in what I have called elsewhere a 'phenomenality (rather than a hermeneutic) of the text'.³⁹

A double lesson is then learned – by us, today – from this short but crucial note to the Natorp-Report. (a) First lesson: 'Atheistic means keeping oneself free from misleading temptation which merely talks about religiosity.' The matter is clear and will be a constant elsewhere in Heidegger. 'Atheistic' (*atheistisch*) does not mean going against religiosity – as, for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism would later practice it. 'Atheistic' means in a way 'suspending' all questions of religiosity – or better, 'keeping oneself free from misleading temptation' (*sich freihalten von verführerischer*), namely that of 'treating' or even 'saying a word' on religiosity itself. This is somewhat surprising, especially as the 'phenomenology' (*Phänomenologie*) of what he precisely calls 'religious life' (*des religiöses Lebens*) has just been completed. It takes place as a kind of phenomenological *epochē*, in the proper sense of the word, of 'religiosity' (*Religiosität*). 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence,' to reprise here the famous finale of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1918), which is contemporaneous with this same period.⁴⁰ However, here this is due not to its inexpressible character, but rather its bygone [*dépassé*], or at least bypassable [*dépassable*], character. (b) Second lesson: '[One may very well ask] whether the very idea of a philosophy of religion (especially if it makes no reference to the facticity of the human being) is pure nonsense (*ein purer Widersinn ist*).' Here, the backlash is radical but also crucial. For, far from bypassing or silencing all 'philosophy of religion' or 'phenomenology of religious life' for a second time, it is rather a question of returning to it – but this time on the basis of [*à partir de*] facticity itself. New here, what we did not expect or were no longer expecting, is the 'turning-around' (*Umwendung*) that the profession of atheism now inflicts on the philosophy of religion itself. The path is the other way around [*inverse*] – this can and must inspire us today: not simply from Christianity to factual life (the way of the *Phenomenology of Religious Life*), but of factual life to Christianity (the path of 'Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle'). Admittedly, there is but a suggestion of this on the part of the young philosopher: no deployment of a system, nor a true walking of the path of thinking. The task is therefore still to be accomplished, for it is precisely indicated rather than developed.

3. Transformation

As I have said – or rather, as I have announced – in the young Heidegger, the great 'turning-around' (*Umwendung*) slips quietly into 'transformation' (*Umwandlung*), even 'enactment' (*Vollzug*). One could believe, and one could say, that this 'turning-around' is first of all that of the believer and therefore belongs exclusively to the *Phenomenology of Religious Life*. In reality, however, it is

³⁹ See Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 50-54 (§6: 'Toward a Hermeneutic of the Text').

⁴⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), 89.

nothing of the sort. If there is a turning-around, it is also – but, in the eyes of the young Heidegger who would soon leave Freiburg (1916–1922) for Marburg (1923–1928), perhaps *first of all* – the transformation, not of the Christian himself, but of the atheist or the ‘without’ God: without being against God, he understands that what takes place through faith before God (*coram Deo*) must now take place only with himself (*oneri mihi sum*). The metamorphosis (*Umwandlung*), more so than the turning-around (*Umwendung*), now amounts to recognising that ‘humanity as such’ must also transform itself, and that such a privilege is not the prerogative of Saints Paul and Augustine. If the ideas ‘turning-around’ and ‘transformation’ originate in or come from [*provient originairement*] theology, their true place and true meaning belong today to philosophy, even atheism as such.

A note from the appendix to one of the last lecture courses delivered at Freiburg, devoted to *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* but not identical to the Natorp-Report (1921–1922), is slightly clearer this time: ‘philosophy itself is, as such, atheistic (*Die Philosophie selbst als solche ist atheistisch*), if it understands itself radically (*wenn sie sich radikal versteht*); cf. concept of life (vgl. *Lebensbegriff*).’⁴¹ This time, atheism is declared, and even claimed. ‘Rigorous methodological atheism’ becomes the norm, and the law, for all philosophical thought as such. However, something new comes about, or rather a new communality that is now to be inhabited, whether we are in the ‘religious life’ or the ‘atheistic life’: ‘cf. concept of life (*Lebensbegriff*)’. Precisely ‘life’ (*Leben*), or better ‘factual life’ (*faktisches Leben*), will form the object of the last Freiburg lecture course, entitled *Hermeneutics of Facticity* (1923). It maintains, or retains, a true ‘being in common’, the whole of living beings insofar as they are ‘human’ and ‘in the world’: open to a future to come [*un avenir*] (concern), and bearing the load of their own existence (the burden). ‘Being a question to myself’ – *quaestio mihi factus sum* – is indeed a phrase from Augustine, but it determined or will later on determine Dasein at the opening of *Being and Time*: ‘This being, which we ourselves in each case are and which includes *questioning* among the possibilities of its being (*die Seinsmöglichkeit des Fragens hat*), we grasp terminologically as Dasein (*fassen wir terminologisch als Dasein*).’⁴² We equally find it, according to certain translations, in the conclusion of the episode of the blind-born man in the Gospel of John: ‘I came into this world to call it into question’ (*eis krima egō eis ton kosmon touton ēlthon*) (John 9:39). ‘Life’ or the ‘way’ [*manière*] of living life, or one’s life (facticity), becomes the injunction of all human beings that constitutes them in their ‘authenticity’.

As Edmund Husserl himself emphasises, comparing Heidegger with Heinrich Ochsner – who was at the time also a lecturer in philosophy of religion at Freiburg – in a letter to the protestant theologian Rudolf Otto of 5 March 1919: ‘Both of them are really religiously oriented personalities:

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 149/*Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles: Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*, ed. Walter Bröcker, 2nd ed., Gesamtausgabe 61 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1994), 199.

⁴² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 7 (my emphasis [translation modified]).

with Heidegger, the *theoretical-philosophical interest* takes priority; with Ochsner, the *religious*.⁴³ So, I will not say that Heidegger changed (in moving [*en passant*] from the theological to the philosophical), nor that he was always doing the same thing (being just a philosopher); I maintain that he crosses [*passé*] the Rubicon, the other way around [*inverse*] this time: not theology informing and transforming philosophy, but atheism changing both philosophy and theology. Everyone is called to a shared understanding of ‘life as such’ [*la vie tout court*], as well as ‘humanity as such’ [*l’homme tout court*]. True atheism is neither pugnacious nor destructive, but rather what Heidegger – in this same note to the Natorp-Report – still calls ‘honesty’ [*loyauté*] (*Ehrlichkeit*), in a rarely equalled synthesis of his position. We should respect this *today as well* in order not to condemn the atheists, but to let oneself be changed or transformed by them: “‘Atheistic”, but not in the sense of a theory such as materialism or something similar. Every philosophy which understands itself in what it is must – as the factual How of the interpretation of life (*als das faktische Wie der Lebensauslegung*) – knows (and it must know this precisely when it still has some “notion” of God) that life’s retreat towards its own self (which philosophy achieves) (*das von ihr vollzogene sich zu sich selbst Zurückreißen des Lebens*) is, in religious terms (*religiös gesprochen*), a show of hands against God (*gegen Gott*). But only then is philosophy honest (*damit allein aber steht sie ehrlich*), i.e. only then is philosophy in keeping with its possibility (which is available to it as such) before God (*vor Gott*).⁴⁴

Whether Christianity or atheism, ‘the enactment of life is [thus] decisive’ (*der Vollzug des Lebens ist entscheidend*) (56/80). Certainly, ‘decisive’ and ‘decision’ do not mean the same thing when providing a commentary on the ‘phenomenon of proclamation’ in the Epistle to the Galatians – which is at issue here –, as when considering solely, or perhaps fully, mere factual life as such [*tout court*], as in ‘Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle’. However, we would be wrong to believe that Christianity keeps the truth and specificity of the phenomenon of enactment (*Vollzug*) to itself, keeping it for itself, as if the New Testament had no other task than to enact and therefore to ‘complete’ [*mener à terme*] the Old Testament, or as if Christianity would have to enact itself in atheism or the other way around. The structures of enactment sometimes, oftentimes wrongly, turn out to assume and swallow up what they have absorbed, like a too well-mastered *Aufhebung*. For Heidegger, ‘enacting’ [*accomplir*] – *vollziehen* – means neither ‘to assume’ nor ‘to bypass’, but rather ‘being transformed’, even ‘being converted’, to assure oneself that in one’s ‘having-become’ one will also oneself have been changed: ‘The “Having-Become” of the Thessalonians’ (65/93, title of §25). Otherwise put, ‘the conversion to Christian life experience

⁴³ Edmund Husserl, ‘Husserl an Otto, 5.III.1919’ in *Briefwechsel*, vol. 7: *Wissenschaftlerkorrespondenz*, ed. by Elisabeth Schuhmann and Karl Schuhmann (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), 205-208 (205).

⁴⁴ Heidegger, ‘Phenomenological Interpretations’, 393n2/16n2.

concerns the *enactment* (*die Umwendung zur christlichen Lebenserfahrung betrifft den Vollzug*)' (86/121).

Hodie legimus in libro experientiae – 'today we read the book of experience'.⁴⁵ This phrase, drawn from the third of Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* – on which the young Heidegger himself provided a right commentary (252–253/334–335) and which, as I said, for myself served as the spur and starting point for a book on monastic theology (*The Book of Experience*) – now prompts us to extend it to all life, and to facticity in general. *Crede ut intelligas*, 'believing and understanding' for sure, to follow the literal translation of the famous Augustinian formula; but also, and most of all, to conclude what is at issue here, the contents of facticity in volume 58 of the *Gesamtausgabe* (*Basic Problems of Phenomenology*): '*Crede, ut intelligas*: live your self vivaciously (*lebe lebendig dein Selbst*) – and knowledge is first erected on the basis of this experience (*und erst auf diesem Erfahrungsgrunde*), your last and fullest experience of self (*deiner letzten und vollsten Selbsterfahrung*). Augustine saw in '*inquietum cor nostrum*' the great unstoppable distress of life (*Augustinus sah im "inquietum cor nostrum" die große unaufhorliche Unruhe des Lebens*)'.⁴⁶

References

Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. Carolyn J.-B. Hammond, 2 volumes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014-2016.

Brito, E. "Heidegger et le christianisme". *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 82, no. 2 (April 1999): 241–272.

Denker, Alfred (ed.), *Heidegger und die Anfänge seines Denkens*, ed. Alfred Denker et al. *Heidegger-Jahrbuch* 1. Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Alber, 2004.

Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 volumes, trans. and ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoof, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Falque, Emmanuel. "Après la métaphysique? Le 'poids de la vie' selon Augustin". In *Après la métaphysique: Augustin? Actes du colloque inaugural de l'Institut d'études médiévales de l'Institut catholique de Paris, 25 juin 2010*, ed. Alain de Libera. Paris: Vrin, 2013.

⁴⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 3.1.14—Trans.

⁴⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, ed. Hans-Helmuth Gander, *Gesamtausgabe* 58 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1993), 62, quoted in the German editor's 'Afterword' to the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* (350), and translated accordingly into English (262).

Falque, Emmanuel. *Crossing the Rubicon: The Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology*, trans. Reuben Shank. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

Falque, Emmanuel. *God, the Flesh, and the Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus*, trans. William Christian Hackett. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015.

Falque, Emmanuel. *Le livre de l'expérience: D'Anselme de Cantorbéry à Bernard de Clairvaux*. Paris: Cerf, 2017.

Falque, Emmanuel. *The Guide to Gethsemane: Anxiety, Suffering, Death*, trans. George Hughes. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019.

Falque, Emmanuel/ *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

Greisch, Jean. *L'arbre de vie et l'arbre du savoir: Les racines phénoménologiques de l'herméneutique heideggérienne*. Paris: Cerf, 2000.

Heidegger, Martin. "A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer". In *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Heidegger, Martin. "Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles (Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation)". *Dilthey-Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften* 6 (1989).

Heidegger, Martin. "Phenomenological Interpretations with Respect to Aristotle: Indication of the Hermeneutical Situation", trans. Michael Baur. *Man and World* 25, nos. 3–4 (1992): 355–393.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, rev. by Dennis J. Schmidt. Albany: SUNY Press, 2010.

Heidegger, Martin. *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, ed. Hans-Helmuth Gander. Gesamtausgabe 58. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1993.

Heidegger, Martin. *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, ed. Matthias Jung and Thomas Regehly. Gesamtausgabe 60. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995.

Heidegger, Martin. *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles: Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*, ed. Walter Bröcker, 2nd ed. Gesamtausgabe 61. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1994.

Heidegger, Martin. *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Initiation into Phenomenological Research*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Heidegger, Martin. *Phénoménologie de la vie religieuse*, trans. Jean Greisch. Paris: Gallimard, 2011.

Husserl, Edmund. *Briefwechsel*, vol. 7: *Wissenschaftlerkorrespondenz*, ed. by Elisabeth Schuhmann and Karl Schuhmann. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994.

Janicaud, Dominique. *Heidegger en France*, vol. 2: *Entretiens*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2001.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991.

Romano, Claude. *There Is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing*, trans. Michael B. Smith. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, 2001.

Superior Points of View

William James and Aldous Huxley's Reflections on Mystical and Religious Experiences

Ghila Amati

Balliol College, University of Oxford

ghila.amati@theology.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

The question of the nature, truthfulness and value of mystical and spiritual experiences is thought-provoking and puzzling. Even today, it is not possible to provide a clear and univocal answer. There are multiple unsolved questions: What is a mystical or religious experience? Does a mystical experience supply knowledge about the transcendental? Are psychological, theological, and metaphysical speculations forever relegated to the limbo-land of mere possibility, or do they, on any level, reflect anything real? This article is an attempt to analyze these questions and to elaborate upon them; if not to find a definite answer to these questions, then to propose possible answers. I start by analyzing the account of the pragmatist American philosopher and psychologist William James, mostly focusing on two chapters of his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Secondly, I discuss how James' account supports and expands upon that of Aldous Huxley as set out in his work *The Doors of Perception*. Then, I show how both James and Huxley's ideas find empirical support in a scientific study. Finally, I bring in the phenomenon of shamanism as a practical explanatory example of the views of these two thinkers. In this way, I propose a different and new outlook on the shamanic practice, less common in academic discourse.



Introduction

The question of the nature, truthfulness and value of mystical and spiritual experiences is thought-provoking and puzzling. Even today, it is not possible to provide a clear and univocal answer. There are multiple unsolved questions: What is a mystical or religious experience? Does a mystical experience supply knowledge about the transcendental? Are psychological, theological, and metaphysical speculations forever relegated to the limbo-land of mere possibility, or do they, on any level, reflect anything real? Are these speculations true? If so, how do we go about determining their truth value? Furthermore, what exactly do we mean when we use terms such as "real" and "true", especially when these terms are applied to mystical religious experiences? What is the value of those experiences? Should we consider whatever is at the origin of those experiences as a fundamental aspect of their evaluation? Is it possible for different layers of reality, only open to a "mystical" brain, to exist? Are there other types of consciousness beyond our waking one? May mystical states be superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world? This article is an attempt to analyze these questions and to elaborate upon them; if not to find a definite answer to these questions, then to propose possible answers. I start by analyzing the account of the pragmatist American philosopher and psychologist William James, mostly focusing on two chapters of his work *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Secondly, I discuss how James' account supports and expands upon that of Aldous Huxley as set out in his work *The Doors of Perception*. Then, I show how both James and Huxley's ideas find empirical support in a scientific study. Finally, I bring in the phenomenon of shamanism as a practical explanatory example of the views of these two thinkers. In this way, I propose a different and new outlook on the shamanic practice, less common in academic discourse.

William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

The Varieties of Religious Experience is a book written by the American pragmatist philosopher and psychologist William James. It comprises his edited lectures on natural theology, which were delivered at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland between 1901 and 1902. The lectures focus on the question of the nature of religious experience and the neglect by science of the academic study of religion. In addition to these issues, the book analyzes and discusses the origins and value of religious and mystical phenomena. This discussion constitutes one of the central topics of the book.

In his discussion and evaluation of religious experiences, James was, on the one hand, unwilling to accept the dogmatic claims made on behalf of religious and mystical experiences; but, on the other hand, he was equally unwilling to dismiss such experiences as merely interesting psychic phenomena with no objective import. To James, the claim that during a mystical experience a person experiences a wider reality than the ordinarily known one, must be taken seriously and cannot be dismissed.¹

¹ Robert Burgt, *The Religious Philosophy of William James* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1981), 56.

Even more so, since James strongly believed in the existence and goodness of a hidden spiritual world – he considered religious experiences as evidence of the existence of a transcendental reality.² Furthermore, he was convinced that mystical experiences serve a vitally important personal and social function.³ However, James was determined to establish clear boundaries of what the mystics could and could not legitimately tell us about the nature of reality, especially the reality of the unseen spiritual world and “his sympathetic and receptive investigation of mysticism was honed by a keen critical awareness.”⁴ Thus, he was open to learning about unknown and different realities from the mystical experiences of others; while, at the same time, he stressed the importance of being aware that these descriptions may still be faulty and incapable of truly describing the complexity of the unseen world.⁵

Although James was fascinated by mysticism, he was not a mystic. That is, he did not himself have frequent and profound mystical experiences. As he states in a letter written in 1904 to James H. Leuba:

My personal position is simple. I have no living sense of commerce with a God. I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly. The Divine, for my active life, is limited to personal and abstract concepts which, as ideal, interest and determine me, but do so but faintly in comparison with what a feeling of God might effect, if I had one.⁶

Not being able to rely on his own mystical experience, in *The Varieties*, James gathers a wide-ranging mass of data on religious life and experience. He discusses religious conversion experiences, the mind-cure movement, prayer, and saintliness. His aim is not simply to examine these phenomena for their own sake; rather, he wishes to utilize these descriptions as evidence that belief in an unseen, transcendental, and spiritual world can have a positive impact on people and their lives, especially if this belief is the result of a profound religious experience.

However, as James suggests, to say that strong religious beliefs and intense mystical experiences frequently initiate positive changes in the lives of men and women is not the same as saying that those beliefs and experiences are true. Therefore, in *The Varieties*, James also seeks to formulate criteria to assess the truth value of religious beliefs, which I will analyze below. These criteria, together with numerous examples of the positive effects that a dynamic spiritual life has on the individual, form an attempt at justifying the belief in the reality, power, and goodness of a hidden, transcendental world based solely on pragmatic grounds.⁷

² Bernard G. William, “The Varieties of Religious Experience, Reflections on its Enduring Value,” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Essays*, ed. Michel Ferrari (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2002), 65.

³ Bernard G. William, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65

⁶ Quoted in William, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 273-274.

Chapter 1: Religion and Neurology

In the first pages of *The Varieties*, before beginning to describe their differences in kind, James distinguished between two kinds of judgments usually applied by academics to religious experiences: the 'existential judgment' and the 'spiritual judgment'.

By the 'existential judgment', James means a type of judgement resulting from an investigation into the question of the origin of a certain phenomenon. It analyses the different historical, economic, psychological and cultural factors that have contributed to the development of a specific fact or experience.⁸ It is therefore merely descriptive. The 'spiritual judgment', on the other hand, is normative. This kind of judgment is interested in evaluating a certain phenomenon in either a positive or negative manner: it seeks to establish the philosophical, ethical, or practical "importance, meaning, or significance" of what is being studied.⁹

James emphasizes that it is fundamental to distinguish between these two kinds of judgment: often, especially in the analyses of religious experiences, scholars inappropriately confuse and merge these two kinds of judgment. As a consequence of this confusion, many scholars, based on a description of the origin of a certain religious phenomenon (existential judgment) evaluate it negatively (spiritual judgment). That is, by showing that certain religious experiences have psychological origins, they conclude that these experiences are also unworthy and unevaluable, since the "the spiritual authority" of those undergoing them "is successfully undermined."¹⁰ According to James, this is a conceptual error, as the descriptive teaches us nothing about the normative. For example, James calls the reduction of all religious expressions to a medical disorder "medical materialism":

Medical materialism seems indeed a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out Saint Teresa as a hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as a hereditary degenerate. George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age, and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as a symptom of a disordered colon. Carlyle's organ-tones of misery it accounts for by a gastro-duodenal catarrh. All such mental over-tensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter, mere affairs of diathesis (auto-intoxications most probably), due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover.¹¹

James readily concedes that it may well be true that all religious phenomena have organic underpinnings, but he also points out that, if we accept the theory that all states of mind are ultimately organic, then we equally have to acknowledge that atheistic conclusions and scientific insights also result from different physiological states. Or, in the words of James:

⁸ Ibid., 275.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902), 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 22-23.

Modern psychology, finding definite psycho-physical connections to hold good, assumes as a convenient hypothesis that the dependence of mental states upon bodily conditions must be thorough-going and complete. If we adopt the assumption, then of course what medical materialism insists on must be true in a general way, if not in every detail: Saint Paul certainly had once an epileptoid, if not an epileptic seizure; George Fox was an hereditary degenerate; Carlyle was undoubtedly auto-intoxicated by some organ or other, no matter which—and the rest. But now, I ask you, how can such an existential account of facts of mental history decide in one way or another upon their spiritual significance? According to the general postulate of psychology just referred to, there is not a single one of our states of mind, high or low, healthy or morbid, that has not some organic process as its condition.¹²

Therefore, we cannot measure the relative worth of different “states of mind” based on their physiological origin. After all, one would never argue that a certain scientific discovery were invalid simply because the scientist had a fever the day he made the inspired breakthrough. Therefore, James concludes:

To plead the organic causation of a religious state of mind, then, in refutation of its claim to possess superior spiritual value, is quite illogical and arbitrary, unless one has already worked out in advance some psycho-physical theory connecting spiritual values in general with determinate sorts of physiological change. Otherwise, none of our thoughts and feelings, not even our scientific doctrines, not even our disbeliefs, could retain any value as revelations of the truth, for every one of them without exception flows from the state of their possessor's body at the time.¹³

This argument, albeit written down at the beginning of the 20th century, is still relevant today: many scholars still make these same assumptions. Moreover, as James explains, the fact that a religious experience happens by way of a psychopathic state does not mean that it has less value. He takes his argument even further, affirming that a psychopathic personality is sometimes even more likely to perceive those aspects of reality that healthy people do not have access to. James claims:

In the psychopathic temperament, we have the emotionality which is the sine qua non of moral perception; we have the intensity and tendency to emphasis which are the essence of practical moral vigor; and we have the love of metaphysics and mysticism which carry one's interests beyond the surface of the sensible world. What, then, is more natural than that this temperament should introduce one to regions of religious truth, to corners of the universe, which your robust Philistine type of nervous system, forever offering its biceps to be felt, thumping its breast, and thanking Heaven that it hasn't a single morbid fiber in its composition, would be sure to hide forever from its self-satisfied possessors? [...] If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish the chief condition of the requisite receptivity.¹⁴

Thus, not only must we not discredit a religious and mystical experience simply because it was experienced by a psychopathic temperament, but we could even hypothesize that only a person of that kind – because of their special perceptive abilities – possesses the necessary characteristics to get in touch

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32-33.

with the ‘corner of the universe’ that the healthy nervous system hides from us. This view is not at all esoteric, and I will show later on that it is very much present in contemporary science as well.

In the last part of the first chapter, James outlines his own method for determining the relative worth of the ‘states of mind of the religious experience’ independently of their physiological origin by developing three different criteria. It seems that James does not separate truth from value. Therefore, if religious experience is defined, according to these three criteria, as valuable, the experience is equally true.¹⁵ The three criteria developed by James to assess religious experiences are: 1) ‘immediate luminousness’, 2) ‘philosophical reasonableness’, and 3) ‘moral helpfulness’. ‘Immediate luminousness’ is a criterion based on the intensity, the force of the mystical experience or their degree of immediacy. The criterion of ‘philosophical reasonableness’ assesses whether a religious state of mind fits logically into the broader religious system of belief of that person and evaluates it according to that fitness. Finally, ‘moral helpfulness’ is the pragmatic criterion which assesses whether the insights gained from the religious experience will have, in the long run, a positive effect on the individual and the community. If these three criteria are met, the mystical or religious experience must be considered, according to James, both valuable and true.

Chapter 16: The Mystics

In chapter sixteen of *The Varieties*, probably the most central and important chapter of the book, James focuses on the topic of mysticism. According to James, personal religious experience has its roots in mystical states of consciousness.¹⁶ He understands religious experience as having two necessary recurrent factors. The first factor is the fact that subjects who undergo a mystical experience hold that the experience cannot be adequately expressed. According to James, when going back to their regular state of consciousness, these people cannot express properly what they experienced during their mystical state since human language is unable to express it properly. To understand a religious experience, one must have experienced it for oneself, much like having a particular feeling.¹⁷ This is what James calls a “mystical experience’s ineffability”. He explains:

In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it consists. One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one’s self to understand a lover’s state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly, and are even likely to consider him weak-minded or absurd. The mystic finds that most of us accord to his experiences an equally incompetent treatment.¹⁸

The second factor is the mystical experience’s “noetic quality,” i.e. its cognitive or intellectual quality. According to James, mystical experiences, as much as they may be hard to explain to others, are still

¹⁵ Niek Brunsveld, “The Varieties and the Cognitive Value of Religious Experiences”, in *William James on Religion*, eds. H. Rydenfelt and S. Pihlström (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 58.

¹⁶ James, *The Varieties*, 365.

¹⁷ Bernard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, 13.

¹⁸ James, *The Varieties*, 366.

intellectual experiences: “States of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance [...] as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.”¹⁹ For James, a state of consciousness can only be defined as mystical if these two factors are present.

According to James, there are two additional factors that, though not necessary, are usually present in religious and mystical experiences: namely, their 1) transiency, and their 2) passive nature. By their transiency, James means the way in which mystical experiences are usually circumscribed in time and cannot persist for long. By their passive nature, James means the way in which the subject experiencing a mystical state feels they no longer have a personal will, even when they themselves consciously provoked this experience in the first place.²⁰

Following this outline of the four fundamental characteristics of the mystic experience, James offers a list of a whole range of experiences that he considers mystical, from the most trivial to the most significant. As we saw above, to James, there are many kinds of spiritual experiences that all differ in their degree of intensity and perception of different realities. The first and most rudimentary kind of mystical experience, according to James, “would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one, ‘I’ve heard that said all my life,’ we exclaim, ‘but I never realized its full meaning until now.’”²¹ This experience is a sort of sudden understanding of a principle or an idea that was previously obscure to us. Even this brief experience, like a flash of inspiration, which is common to all of us, is considered by him to be a mystical one, the simplest mystical experience of all.

Next comes the experience that we nowadays call *déjà vu*: “that sudden feeling, [...] which sometimes sweeps over us, of having ‘been here before.’”²² James sees this as the kind of experience making us vaguely aware of the possibility of things beyond our ordinary perception.

A more radical kind of mystical experience is what James calls “dreamy states,” those are states in which we feel surrounded by mystery and the metaphysical duality of things. James brings as an example, the experience reported by Charles Kingsley:

When I walk the fields, I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded by truths which I cannot grasp amounts to indescribable awe sometimes.²³

A further class of mystical states that James takes into account and of which he claims to have some experience himself is what we today call drug-induced states, a state that is produced by intoxicants and anesthetics, especially by alcohol. The writer states that his own experience of nitrous oxide intoxication has led him to the conclusion that:

¹⁹ Ibid., 367.

²⁰ Brunsveld, “The Varieties and the Cognitive Value of Religious Experiences”, 60.

²¹ James, *The Varieties*, 368.

²² Ibid., 368.

²³ Ibid., 370.

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness, as we call it, is but one especial type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.²⁴

This is one of the most important conclusions of *The Varieties*. James here underlines that our waking and rational consciousness is very specific and not exclusive. Indeed, other kinds of consciousness certainly exist, even though “we might go through life without suspecting their existence.”²⁵ James points out that, with the right stimuli, such as the use of specific drugs, we can experience these different forms of consciousness whose existence we did not even suspect. These experiences, therefore, expose us to unknown and rich worlds.

Thus, James not only claims that spiritual experiences are not necessarily false, but he adds that we can all have a taste of them through the use of these drugs. He goes so far as to say that we do not get an account of the universe in its totality without having an experience like that. Therefore, the lack of mystical experiences is considered by James a lacuna in the complete understanding of reality and not the opposite. The person who undergoes a mystical experience has the chance to encounter aspects of reality that are unknown to individuals who don't. Those aspects of reality are extremely important and valuable.

Continuing his survey, James now reaches “religious mysticism pure and simple”. This is the experience of being in the presence of God. A religious experience in which, as one of the writers quoted by James states: “I was aware that I was immersed in the infinite ocean of God.”²⁶ Certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods. Most of the striking cases that are collected by James about this kind of experience have in fact occurred outdoors.

At this point, James diverges slightly by introducing a variety of mystical experiences identified by an author, Dr. Bucke, as “cosmic consciousness”. According to the latter:

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe. Bucke describing his experiences writes: ‘I saw that the universe is not composed of dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence; I became conscious in myself of eternal life.’²⁷

James completes his survey of the range of different mystical experiences by looking at “its methodical cultivation as an element of the religious life.”²⁸ He focuses on mysticism as an element of the religious life, specifically on the different means and methods through which different religions achieve mystical experiences and different level of consciousness. He starts with yoga, used by the Hindus, which is a

²⁴ Ibid., 388.

²⁵ Ibid., 388.

²⁶ Ibid., 385.

²⁷ Ibid., 386.

²⁸ Ibid., 387.

means to achieve “the experimental union of the individual with the divine.”²⁹ He subsequently turns to the description of the various levels of contemplation in Buddhism. He then continues by quoting an account that offers insight into the practices of Sufism. Finally, James comes to the mystical theology of Catholicism as exemplified in three Iberian mystics: St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Teresa of Avila. According to James, the experiences of these Christians are characterized by two important stages: illumination and ecstasy. St. Teresa, for example, describes receiving privileged insights into the nature of the Holy Trinity (illumination), as well as experiencing a rapture of the mind and senses (ecstasy). The main benefit that James seems to find in all of these practices is an “overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute”³⁰ In mystical states, we become both one with the Absolute and aware of this oneness.

Finally, James concludes his chapter on mysticism by considering what truth it might hold for us. He makes three points. Firstly, the subjects of mystical experiences are themselves totally convinced by them. He explains:

As a matter of psychological fact, mystical states of a well-pronounced and emphatic sort are usually authoritative over those who have them. They have been ‘there,’ and know. It is vain for rationalism to grumble about this. If the mystical truth that comes to a man proves to be a force that he can live by, what mandate have we of the majority to order him to live in another way?³¹

Secondly, there is no reason why other people should share that conviction, but we should at least open ourselves to the possibility of their reality:

If we are ourselves outsiders and feel no private call thereto [...] non-mystics are under no obligation to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority conferred on them by their intrinsic nature [...]. The utmost they can ever ask of us in this life is to admit that they establish a presumption. They form a consensus and have an unequivocal outcome; and it would be odd, mystics might say if such a unanimous type of experience should prove to be altogether wrong. At bottom, however, this would only be an appeal to numbers, like the appeal of rationalism the other way; and the appeal to numbers has no logical force. If we acknowledge it, it is for ‘suggestive,’ not for logical reasons.³²

Moreover, different subjects’ experiences generate different messages. James suggests that mystical experiences, viewed overall, are non-specific in doctrinal content; but even if this were the case, it is still not a reason to embrace them as true.

Thirdly, the existence of mystical experiences prevents us from rejecting the possibility of a world beyond our senses out of hand and overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate arbiters of what we may believe:

²⁹ Ibid., 388.

³⁰ Ibid., 406.

³¹ Ibid., 408.

³² Ibid., 411.

It must always remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be such superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world [...] the counting in of that wider world of meanings, and the serious dealing with it, might, in spite of all the perplexity, be indispensable stages in our approach to the final fullness of the truth.³³

Therefore, James concludes the following: on the one hand, mystical experiences are extremely powerful and real for the people who partake them, and we cannot convince them of the opposite; on the other hand, for a person who has not experienced them for themselves, it is very hard to be convinced of the reality of mystical experiences. This is mostly because these states of consciousness, as explained earlier in the chapter at issue, are ineffable, impossible to explain. What we have to keep in mind, however, is that the existence of these experiences is still extremely important, since it opens us to the possibility of a level of consciousness and reality that is hidden to our ordinary understanding of reality.

Aldous Huxley and *The Doors of Perception*

As indicated at the begging of this paper, I argue that the ideas expressed by William James about religious and mystical experiences are strengthened and expanded upon by a theory formulated about 50 years later by Aldous Leonard Huxley.

Huxley was an English writer, novelist, and philosopher. He is famous for his philosophical essay, entitled *The Doors of Perception*, first published as a book in 1954. The title is derived from the following statement by William Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite."³⁴ The idea that the possibilities of perception are greater than what we ordinarily believe is a recurrent argument in Huxley's essay, which is characterized by his memory of an ecstatic experience he underwent over the course of an afternoon in May 1953 as a consequence of the use of the drug mescaline. In the book, he recalls the insights he experienced and reflects on the meaning of those experiences.

At the begging of the book, Huxley argues that the human mind and brain – partly because it is unable to handle the infinite number of impressions and images coming in, and partly because this is the way it was thought to function – filters reality. He believes that psychoactive drugs or certain kinds of people and practices can remove this filter to some degree. Certain drugs, for instance, leave the user exposed to 'Mind at Large'. In Huxley's words:

The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful. According to such a theory, each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. But in so far as we are animals, our business is at all costs to survive. To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the

³³ Ibid., 415.

³⁴ William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1972), 14.

surface of this particular planet. [...] Most people, most of the time, know only what comes through the reducing valve and is consecrated as genuinely real by the local language. Certain persons, however, seem to be born with a kind of by-pass that circumvents the reducing valve. In others temporary by-passes may be acquired either spontaneously, or as the result of deliberate “spiritual exercises,” or through hypnosis, or by means of drugs.³⁵

Therefore, Huxley argues that the brain functions as a “reducing valve” that reduces conscious awareness to somethings that is bearable for us. The use of mescaline and other hallucinogens, which induce psychedelic effects, inhibit the filtering mechanism that acts on our brains. In this way, we have access to new worlds of consciousness that were previously foreclosed to us. According to Huxley, drugs are only one way to get access to these different worlds. The inhibition of the reducing valve can happen spontaneously in some people (for example, in the psychopath) or through the use of different techniques such as hypnosis or meditation.

Huxley argues that the things we perceive when we overcome the constraints of the filtering mechanism are real. The fact that our brains perceive the things surrounding us only partially, for the sake of survival, does not mean that the only reality is the one we perceive through the reducing valve of the brain. We are led to believe that this “reduced awareness” is the only awareness of reality possible since it is the only one we know. This is, according to Huxley, wrong. Different layers of awareness do exist, and it is our brain’s mechanism of survival that prevents us from perceiving them. Huxley describes in detail the process of the deactivation of the reducing valve on the brain and its consequences on our perception of reality:

These effects of mescaline are the sort of effects you could expect to follow the administration of a drug having the power to impair the efficiency of the cerebral reducing valve [...] the brain runs out of sugar, the undernourished ego grows weak, can't be bothered to undertake the necessary chores, and loses all interest in those spatial and temporal relationships which mean so much to an organism bent on getting on in the world. As Mind at Large seeps past the no longer watertight valve, all kinds of biologically useless things start to happen [...] Other persons discover a world of visionary beauty. To others again is revealed the glory, the infinite value and meaningfulness of naked existence, of the given, unconceptualized event.³⁶

Therefore, according to Huxley, the inhibition of the reducing valve’s function initiates one to a world of “visionary beauty” and “glory”. This is a powerful experience of unknown and wonderful different worlds around us.

Relating his own experience under the influence of mescaline, Huxley describes the objects he sees. He talks about how everything becomes more brilliant and colorful during this experience, and how everything becomes more powerful and variegated. His perception of the world changes completely as it becomes richer and more detailed. Aspects of reality that were previously only perceived as secondary become extremely central and important:

³⁵ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (New York: Random House, 2010), 6-7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

How significant is the enormous heightening, under mescaline, of the perception of color! [...] Man's highly developed color sense is a biological luxury—inestimably precious to him as an intellectual and spiritual being, but unnecessary to his survival as an animal. [...] Mescaline raises all colors to a higher power and makes the percipient aware of innumerable fine shades of difference, to which, at ordinary times, he is completely blind. It would seem that, for Mind at Large, the so-called secondary characters of things are primary.³⁷

This experience is not only real, but also extremely valuable and important. Huxley claims:

To be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and inner world, not as they appear to an animal obsessed with survival or a human being obsessed with words and notions, but as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large — this is an experience of inestimable value to everyone and especially to the intellectual.³⁸

Furthermore, the man who trespasses the doors of perceptions, who is introduced to these different layers of reality, undergoes a permanent transformation, he is no longer the same. From now on, he will be aware of his ignorance and inability to perceive the world in its totality. He will be wiser and at the same time more doubtful about the things he believed beforehand. People who do not go through the doors of perception and do not have these experiences tend to dismiss them. But the person who undergoes the mystical experience cannot dismiss it anymore, and their entire understanding of reality changes:

The man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less sure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable mystery which it tries, forever vainly, to comprehend.³⁹

Huxley's theory strongly echoes James' account in *The Varieties*. James, as I explained above, suggests at the beginning of the 20th century that mystical experiences need to be taken into consideration as possible and true accounts of the real. According to James, when we undergo a mystical experience, our consciousness expands to include aspects of reality that we are not able to perceive in its normal state. The questionable psychological health of spiritual practitioners does not make the spiritual experience less valuable. Even more so, James suggests, a psychopathic personality may even have a higher chance of perceiving aspects of reality that healthy people do not have access to, though he does not specify how this happens.

Huxley, about 50 years later, expands on James' ideas, claiming that people under the effect of drugs and with specific personality traits are not sick or crazy, but rather have access to aspects of the world which are foreclosed to most of us in normal situations. He understands mystical experiences of reality as being the product of the inhibition of the "reducing valve" that acts in our brain as a filter of the stimuli that surround us. Since most of us know only what comes through the reducing valve, we believe that reduced

³⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

³⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

consciousness is the only consciousness. However, some people – such as mystics, visionaries, and psychics – seem to be born with a way of bypassing the reducing valve, whilst others acquire it temporally one through meditation, yoga, hypnosis, or certain drugs. Huxley suggests that mescaline is one of these drugs, i.e. a drug that has the power to impair the efficiency of the cerebral reducing valve and thereby creating a temporary bypass. The reducing valve helps us adaptively survive in this world. When this reducing valve is impaired or does not properly work, we are suddenly introduced to a brand-new world.

Therefore, these two thinkers agree on the existence of a world and a level of awareness that is outside of our normal perception, as well as on the fact that we have access to these different levels of consciousness and reality through mystical and religious experience. Neither of them is willing to dismiss these experiences as untrue and invaluable; instead, they both invite us to take them seriously, and, even more so, to consider them as extremely important, since they give humanity access to a world otherwise unknown. James adds to Huxley's considerations the idea that those experiences are not only valuable in how they introduce us to unknown aspects of reality, but also in the way they have positive consequences on both the person who undergoes them as well as on society in general. Huxley is less certain about these positive consequences but nevertheless affirms that the opening of the doors of perception adds both to our knowledge of the world and to our doubts and insecurity about what we knew before.

Huxley and Modern Neuroscience

Even though Huxley proposed this theory in 1954, decades before the advent of modern neuroscience, it turns out that he may have been correct. Although the prevailing view has been that hallucinogens work by activating the brain, rather than by inhibiting it as Huxley proposed, the results of a recent imaging study challenge these conventional explanations. The study in question was conducted by Dr. Robin Carhart-Harris together with a group of other scientists.⁴⁰ The study in question used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), a technique for measuring activity in specific regions of the brain, to study the effects of the psychedelic compound psilocybin on brain activity in 30 regular consumers of this hallucinogen. In this study, 2 milligrams of psilocybin were administered intravenously to the study subjects. The psilocybin caused a moderately intense psychedelic state that was associated with a decrease in neuronal activity in brain regions such as the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). These are both believed to be involved in functions like emotional regulation, cognitive processing and introspection, and as such highly connected to other regions of the brain. The researchers therefore concluded that hallucinogens *decrease*, rather than increase, activity in certain regions of the brain. This decreased activity lessens the ability of the brain as whole to coordinate other specific cognitive functions. More precisely, confirming Huxley's hypothesis, the psilocybin seems to be responsible for the inhibition of those brain regions that are responsible for restraining consciousness within the narrow limitations of the usual waking state.

Thus, Huxley, James, and neurology all propose a new direction for the interpretation of mystical and religious experiences. For the sake of this paper, I will give an illustration of James and Huxley's theory by way of a description of the phenomenon of shamanism. By defining and describing shamanism in light of Huxley and James, I will illustrate their views and show how their ideas stand in opposition to the

⁴⁰ Robin L. Carhart-Harris et al., "Neural Correlates of the Psychedelic State as Determined by fMRI Studies with Psilocybin", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 6 (2012): 2138-2143.

mainstream scholarly definition of the same phenomenon.

James and Huxley's Hypothetical Definition of Shamanism.

Ecstasy is defined by the *Random House Dictionary* as the ability "of being taken or moved out of one's self or one's normal state and entering a state of intensified or heightened feeling" and as "the ability to voluntarily enter altered states of consciousness". Roger Walsh argues that this definition may be applicable and appropriate to the phenomenon of Shamanism as well.⁴¹ He also adds that "shamans experience themselves leaving their bodies and journeying to other realms in a manner analogous to contemporary reports of some out-of-body experiences."⁴² Michael Harner likewise suggests that a key element of shamanic practices may be "contact with an ordinarily hidden reality." He defines a shaman as "a man or woman who enters an altered state of consciousness at will to contact and utilize an ordinarily hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power, and to help other persons."⁴³

Are these features of "contacting a hidden reality," and "communication with spirits," crucial aspects of a definition of shamanism? Mainstream scholars often dismiss this definition. The most widely shared definition of shamans in the scholarly literature is, in fact, one that states that shamans are "psychologically disturbed individuals who have managed to adapt their psychopathology to social needs."⁴⁴ Throughout the years, "Shamans have been diagnosed, labeled, and dismissed in many ways."⁴⁵ For instance, shamans have been described as charlatans and "healed madmen."⁴⁶ They have also been called neurotic, epileptic, impostors, "mentally deranged," and "outright psychotic."⁴⁷ Perhaps the most common diagnoses have been hysteria and schizophrenia.⁴⁸

The possible authenticity of their experiences has not concerned the majority of the scholarly discourse. According to many scholars, there is no reason to suppose that shamans actually get in touch with a 'hidden reality,' or with 'spirits.' Certainly, this is what shamans experience and believe they are undergoing, but there is no value and no truth in this experience.

I believe that James and Huxley propose another option. They expose us to the possibility that shamans, because of their special abilities and qualities, can experience aspects of reality that regular people are unable to experience: we should not exclude the existence of these aspects a priori. Both Huxley and James open us to the possibility that shamans do get in touch with a 'hidden reality' unknown to us. James would strongly criticize those who focus on the origin of the phenomena, categorizing the shamans as mentally ill, instead of focusing on the phenomena themselves and determining their value. The fact

⁴¹ Quoted in Roger N. Walsh, *The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition* (Portland: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2007), 14.

⁴² Roger N. Walsh, "The Shamanic Journey: Experiences, Origins, and Analogues", *ReVision* 12 (1989): 25.

⁴³ Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman* (New York: Bantam, 1982), 25.

⁴⁴ Roger N. Walsh, "The Psychological Health of Shamans: A Reevaluation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (1997): 101-124

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Walsh, *The World of Shamanism*, 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Richard Noll, "Shamanism and Schizophrenia: A State-Specific Approach to the 'Schizophrenia Metaphor' of Shamanic States", *American Ethnologist* 10, no. 3 (1983): 443-459.

that ecstatic experiences happen in people that we today define as psychopathic does not necessarily falsify their value and truthfulness. Huxley and James push us to open our minds to the option of a different reality that we simply, for many reasons, are not able to perceive. They both stress the importance of giving attention as well as credit to the experiences that shamans undergo, for they could open our eyes to layers of reality that we are not able to grasp. Both authors would not stop at a simple medical definition of shamanism and would instead define them as the gatekeepers of different realities.

Shamanism is only one of many examples of spiritual and mystical states. I employed this example to illustrate what James and Huxley mean by taking a mystical experience seriously. But it is clear that, to them, all mystical experiences, no matter what they are or where they come from, can be the access doors to worlds unknown to our everyday perception.

Conclusion

It is nearly impossible to give definite answers to the multiple questions posed at the beginning of this paper. Many people, both within and beyond the academic circles, tend to dismiss mystical and spiritual experiences, defining them as valueless. This is simply because the individuals who undergo these experiences are often strange or different. James and Huxley invite us to stop and think, to ask ourselves if we have not judged too hastily and if there could be some truth to and value in those experiences that are so different from our own. Of course, this awareness will also change how we relate to mystics or shamans, and make us look at them with more respect and more interest. Those individuals, whom we often see and dismiss as "crazy," could, in fact, have access to realities and levels of understanding of the world that surrounds us that we cannot even dream of. It is important, therefore, not to dismiss them right away, but instead to be open to the alternative that the world is a much richer place than what we are used to thinking.

References

- Blake, William. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Miami: University of Miami Press, 1972.
- Brunsveld, Niek. "The Varieties and the Cognitive Value of Religious Experiences." In *William James on Religion*, edited by Henrik Rydenfelt and Sami Pihlstrom, 56-77. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Burgt, Robert J. Vanden. *The Religious Philosophy of William James*. Burnham: Inc Pub, 1981.
- Carhart-Harris, Robin L., David Erritzoe, Tim Williams, James M. Stone, Laurence J. Reed, Alessandro Colasanti et al. "Neural Correlates of the Psychedelic State as Determined by fMRI Studies with Psilocybin." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 109, no. 6 (2012): 2138-2143.
- Harner, Michael. *The Way of the Shaman*. New York: Bantam, 1982.
- Huxley, Aldous. *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Noll, Richard. "Shamanism and Schizophrenia: A State-Specific Approach to the 'Schizophrenia Metaphor' of Shamanic States." *American Ethnologist* 10, no. 3 (1983): 443-459.

Walsh, Roger N. *The World of Shamanism: New Views of an Ancient Tradition*. Portland: Llewellyn Worldwide, 2007.

Walsh, Roger N. "The Shamanic Journey: Experiences, Origins, and Analogues." *ReVision* 12 (1989): 25.

Walsh, Roger N. "The Psychological Health of Shamans: A Reevaluation." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (1997): 101-124

William, Barnard, G. *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism*. New York: SUNY Press, 1997.

William, Barnard, G. "The Varieties of Religious Experience, Reflections on its Enduring Value." In *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Centenary Essays*, edited by Michel Ferrari. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2002.

William, James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Harvard: University Press, 1902.

Eucharist and Technology

A Heideggerian Critique of Virtual Communion

John Olson

Oriel College, University of Oxford

john.olson@theology.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Responding to debates within Christianity during the COVID-19 pandemic about the merits of virtual communion—the practice of individuals receiving the Eucharist alone while a priest enacts the liturgy via video conference call—this piece argues against online practice of the sacrament in times of separation and isolation. Against the case made by theologian Deanna Thompson, whose work focuses on the virtual quality of Christ's presence in the church, I use Martin Heidegger's reflections on technology to examine how practices of virtual communion commodify the Eucharist and thus seek to domesticate and control Christ's presence therein. After giving an overview of Thompson's case for the virtual presence of Christ in the church, I turn to Heidegger's examination of the technological worldview and evaluate how Thompson's treatment of Christ's real presence falls into the trap which Heidegger sees therein: namely, treating otherwise free and dynamic beings as static standing-reserve. I then conclude with a section evaluating how Heidegger's examination of human Being-in-the-world opens up a possible alternative understanding of the Eucharist as a dynamic world rather than as a static thing. In such an examination, Christ's presence is disclosed not in the things of bread and wine but in the dynamics which they perform and the patterns of movement they establish, so that one's proximity and understanding of Christ comes from a shared attunement as opened up in the character of the eucharistic world which he is. As a result, the Eucharist can be understood as both free from human determination on the one hand while on the other hand still bearing fruits in the Christian life even where the sacrament cannot be practiced.



I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has presented a series of challenges to the life and practices of religions across the globe. Within Christianity, a particular debate has sprung up as to whether and how to practice the sacraments in a time of social distancing and online communication. Within that debate, theologian Deanna Thompson has recently endorsed a model of virtual communion, wherein she argues that quarantined individuals may reliably encounter the real presence of Christ in their partaking of bread and wine while a socially distanced priest or minister enacts the eucharistic liturgy over a video conference call.¹ In response to Thompson's position, this paper will argue against the practice of virtual communion. However, rather than arguing for the inherent inferiority of virtual connectivity to embodied presence—a tack which Thompson sees as the primary challenge to her argument—I will instead argue that Thompson's treatment of the Eucharist itself constitutes an objectifying—and thus, for the Christian, idolatrous—enframing of the sacrament along the lines of Martin Heidegger's interpretation of technology. After giving an overview of Thompson's case for the virtual presence of Christ in the church, I will thus turn to Heidegger's examination of the technological worldview and evaluate how Thompson's treatment of Christ's real presence falls into the trap which Heidegger sees in that worldview: namely, treating otherwise free and dynamic beings as static standing-reserve. I will then conclude with a brief counter-proposal: continuing our conversation with Heidegger, I propose that the Eucharist is better thought of as a world of dynamic involvements than as a static thing, so that the freedom and mystery of Christ's presence in the sacrament are preserved at the same time that Christians can intimately engage with that presence in an embodied, unconscious manner. The result, I hope, is a non-objectifying picture of the Eucharist as a pedagogical tool for Christian formation and attunement, so that separation from eucharistic practice during times of social distance and isolation need not encumber the fruits of the sacrament from manifesting themselves outside the sanctuary.

At this point, however, it might be asked whether my introduction of phenomenology to Thompson's theological project of largely pastoral concern is appropriate. One might suggest that Thompson's writing style and ecclesial focus indicate a different kind of project from that of more philosophical theology. But it is not *despite* but in fact *because* Deanna Thompson focuses her well-written and well-researched work toward lay as well as academic audiences that I think it is worth taking up in this way. I think that I am in agreement with Thompson in my belief that the religious life of the church is the ultimate end of good theology, and so I do not introduce a phenomenological insight here for the sake of extracting Thompson's work from its pastoral

¹ See Deanna A. Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion," Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community, St. Olaf College, March 26, 2020, <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/>.

audience. On the contrary, it is precisely because I believe that systematic theological concerns are put to best use when directed toward pastoral ends that I find her wholly legitimate concerns worth taking up as a starting point for such a philosophical conversation. Moreover, I think I am in further agreement with Thompson when I say that such ostensibly academic concerns are best assessed in light of crises such as the current pandemic. Where I ultimately disagree with her findings, then, my aim is as much to promote the importance of the topic she brings to the fore as it is to try to improve the Christian church's ability to hone in on a fruitful solution.

In bringing to light the technological treatment of the Eucharist inherent in an endorsement of virtual communion, my hope is to highlight the ways in which our contemporary technological attitude already affects eucharistic theologies in problematic ways. Far from denouncing what is ultimately a plea for compassion and connection in Thompson's work, then, I hope to demonstrate how Thompson's advocacy of virtual communion merely typifies temptations already present in Christian theology. Insofar as moments of crisis provide an opportunity to expose and revise theological defects in any religion, then, the current pandemic offers a window in which to assess where previous eucharistic theologies may have fallen short or retained unnoticed infelicities. My caution against practices of virtual communion, therefore, will hopefully not be taken as a cold-hearted attempt to rob a church in crisis of its most sacred ritual but rather as a gesture toward opening up the mysterious otherness of Christ's real presence therein. While the world in which this piece is read will invariably be quite different from the one in which it was written—such is the speed of change in this pandemic—my intention is to use the current public health crisis as an occasion for necessary reflection on eucharistic practice more generally. My gesture towards a constructive alternative in the final section, then, is meant as a hopeful contribution to a church scrambling for answers. Rather than accommodating our religious practice to uncertain times, I recommend a theology of the Eucharist which takes seriously the mysterious otherness of Christ's presence while simultaneously endowing the Christian with trust in their intimate relationship with that presence which then prepares them to encounter Christ at work beyond the sacramental table, even in worlds of loneliness, fasting, and uncertainty.

II. The Virtual Body of Christ

Let us begin with Deanna Thompson's argument on behalf of virtual communion. In order to evaluate her belief in Christ's real presence in an online setting, we need to first understand her interpretation of the body of Christ as a virtual body. Thompson makes her case against the backdrop of her own experience as a cancer patient, wherein her one-time skepticism of virtual connectivity was challenged by her experience of intimate connection through a personal website and online communication.² Whereas Thompson once saw modern digital technology as a force

² Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 3-5.

of isolation, herding human participants into silos of self-absorption and short attention spans, her experience of sickness enlightened her to the ways in which human connection has always been mediated through virtual—that is, *immaterial*—means.³

Thompson thus makes her case that the virtual world is continuous with the “real” world by insisting that the real world has always been constituted through virtual means. While admitting a qualitative difference between in-person and written communication, Thompson argues that written communication has always brought with it the inclination to virtual interaction. Drawing on the work of digital culture scholar T.V. Reed, she suggests that so long as novels, myths, and other manifestations of culture have existed, humans have been engaged in virtual worlds.⁴ That which is not physically present is made present to mind through the means of language. Language is thus opened up as the primal virtual reality, transmitting meaning across space and time in ways of which bodies are simply not capable. Language provides the building blocks of virtual reality by endowing one physical space with the effects of causes remote to it. Thompson thus argues that virtual worlds, far from being deviations from “actual” reality, constitute continuations of that reality beyond the physical sphere.⁵

The importance of this point for Thompson is that the reality of the virtual makes it possible to conceive of virtual relations as real relations. She employs the sociological language of *strong-tie networks*—“networks of people we trust who can help us weather change and the uncertainty that comes with it”—in order to evaluate the efficacy of online relationships.⁶ Opposing those who suggest that online relationships are essentially *weak-tie networks*—that is, networks of low personal investment and therefore minimal social efficacy—Thompson argues from her research and her own experience as a cancer patient that there is in fact significant evidence for strong-tie relationships in a virtual sphere. “Just as it’s possible to be in close physical proximity with others while simultaneously being absent mentally or spiritually,” she writes, “it’s also possible to be virtually present to one another in profound, meaningful and real ways even when we’re physically distant.”⁷ The strength of human relations, then, is not dependent upon the means of

³ Thompson is somewhat vague in her use of the term “virtual,” for which I criticize her below. In my own usage, however, I will define the “virtual” as “immaterial.” I make this definition as much for the sake of casting a wide interpretive net—“immaterial” embraces more of what counts as virtual than, say, “mental” or “imaginary”—because it highlights the distinction of the virtual from the intrinsic physicality of worldly existence I will later examine in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

⁴ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 25. Cf. T.V. Reed, *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power and Social Change in the Internet Era*, Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2019), 21.

⁵ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18. Cf. David Krackhardt, “The Strength of Strong Ties: The Importance of Philos in Organizations,” in *Networks and Organizations: Structure, Form, and Action*, ed. N. Nohria, et al. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1992), 216-239.

⁷ Thompson, “Christ is Really Present Virtually.”

communication but the intention and attunement of the communicants to one another. Summing up her argument, she writes,

First, strong and weak ties are not opposing forces but instead work in complementary ways within social networks; second, the ties that bind are often fluid, with strong ties sometimes growing weaker and weak ties sometimes growing stronger; and third, weak ties play vital roles in social networks, expanding and making room for new insights, new opportunities, and new ways of interacting.⁸

That an online community might be composed of weak ties, then, does not, therefore, render it incapable of becoming a strong-tie network. Likewise, not all in-person communities constitute strong-tie networks, so that associating one level of relationship exclusively with a particular degree of physical proximity overlooks the myriad ways humans relate to one another.

It is on this basis that Thompson suggests that the body of Christ is a primarily virtual community. As a strong-tie community constituted across space and time, the church is constituted as a single entity through the connective tissue of the written word. Thompson takes her cue from the apostle Paul, whose physical absence from the many churches he serves provides the occasion for his relationship with each of them through virtual means. That Paul is able to have strong-tie relationships with churches to which he is almost never physically present indicates the strength of the virtual means by which those relationships are sustained. As Thompson believes, "This point highlights... the inadequacy of thinking about the term *virtual* as *almost*. Paul is decidedly more than *almost* a part of these communities; he is founder, leader, guide, and inspiration to multiple church communities simultaneously."⁹ Moreover, "Paul's connections with all other members of local incarnations of the body of Christ are nurtured and maintained mostly through a virtual form of communication."¹⁰ Paul's centrality to the communities he serves through the medium of his letter-writing testifies to the strong-tie potential of virtual presence. The otherwise disparate communities which together constellate the body of Christ are thusly arranged primarily through the virtual communication of an absent leader. Insofar as the various churches together make up one body, then, their configuration as such is a virtual one.

Consequently, Thompson argues that the Christian's encounter with the risen Christ within the church is also a necessarily virtual one. Just as Paul makes his presence felt in the community through means other than bodily presence, so he identifies Christ as active in those same communities through the mediation of the Christians therein. Thompson writes,

Indeed, if we return to the vision that confronted Paul on the road to Damascus, we find a Paul who heard a voice (a virtual encounter?) saying, 'Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?' (Acts 9:4).

⁸ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 19-20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

It is important to note that Paul was persecuting the followers of Jesus rather than the person Jesus who lived, died, and rose before Paul took up his role as a persecutor of those who followed Jesus. In other words, from the very beginning of his relationship with Jesus and his followers, Paul's connection to Christ was a virtual one, mediated primarily through his followers.¹¹

Because the Christ who speaks to Saul identifies himself with the people Saul is persecuting, Saul/Paul's relationship to Christ is from the outset mediated through the community of the church. These individuals, though not Jesus of Nazareth himself, nevertheless collectively constitute Christ's presence, so that Paul's encounter with that presence is always a mediated one. Even when Paul does have material relations with members of Christ's body, the presence of Christ remains decidedly *immaterial* and therefore virtual in nature. That Paul has a real, efficacious encounter with the risen Christ even as that very encounter is meted out virtually thus grounds his later description of the church as Christ's body so that this moniker is able to denote reality without referring to biological matter.

Thompson's argument on behalf of virtual communion, then, rests on the efficacy of Christ's virtual presence. Drawing on Luther, Thompson writes, "the Word is a gift from God that comes to the congregation through public reading of Scripture and proclamation of the gospel; ... the liturgy and hymns are means for the community to proclaim and respond to God's Word."¹² Because Christ is present through the words and actions of Christian participants in his body, that same presence can now be mediated through the virtual communication of those words and actions. Thompson goes on, "And if God is *really present* through the Word in all these ways—even through virtual forms of worship—it is worth reflecting on the theological possibility of the real presence of the Word incarnate in, with and through the experience of virtual communion."¹³ Insofar as the church gathers and performs itself online in a time of pandemic, then, it makes the risen Christ present through that same online medium. Anything the church can do materially it can do immaterially. And because Christ's presence to the embodied assembly of a congregation is already a virtual presence, it is not only possible but entirely natural for that same presence to be meted out online without deficiency.

However, Thompson's advocacy of a virtual body of Christ is not without its ambiguities. Chief among these is the vagueness of the term "virtual" in her description of the presence of the risen Christ. Thompson is adamant about rejecting any definition of "virtual reality" as "almost reality," thereby bifurcating the virtual from the real.¹⁴ Indeed, her whole argument hinges on the claim

¹¹ Ibid., 41.

¹² Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 24-25.

that the virtual *is* the real and that what we call "real life" has in fact had a virtual quality all along. But insofar as this is the case, it raises the question of what usefulness the term "virtual" has at all.

If by "virtual" Thompson means "metaphorical," then we face an immediate contradiction. To say that something is a metaphor for something else is to say that it is semantically representative, that it stands in as a sign for something the metaphor itself is not. To say that Christ is really present virtually, where "virtual" means "metaphorical," is thus a contradiction in terms. To be fair, Thompson nowhere suggests that she understands "virtual" to mean "metaphorical." But so far as this is the case, her treatment of the term "body of Christ" needs assessing. Exploring the ways Paul uses Greco-Roman imagery to articulate a Christian theology to a Gentile audience, Thompson acknowledges that the body imagery Paul employs is a metaphor for the church as a diverse collection of myriad parts.¹⁵ So far as Thompson wishes to undermine any prioritization of the body over the virtual, this is not a problem. But insofar as Christ's presence to the Christian community is a *real* (i.e., *non-metaphorical*) presence, the strictly metaphorical interpretation of Paul's language of the body leaves Thompson wanting for a more substantial ontology of Christ's real presence. Giving a meaningful epithet to an institution or community does not then endow it with a new ontological status. If the term "body of Christ" is merely a metaphor for the community that is the church, then we have no problem. But if Christ is really present as a risen agent in and through that body, then a further account of real presence is necessary beyond simply giving Christ's name to his followers.

If by "virtual" Thompson means "invisible," then we are faced with a contradiction between how virtual worlds operate online and how Christ presences in communities. On the one hand, online virtual worlds cannot be considered invisible because it is precisely upon visibility that they depend. Whether through written type or animated virtual reality or video streaming, the online world operates through predominantly visual media. And while much of this is augmented by audial stimuli, the two-dimensionality of bodily encounter with the online world limits the types of connection available. So, for instance, a blind person who can read another's writing through an embodied encounter with braille is bracketed from that same possibility with, say, the words on a Facebook page. Contrast this, then, with the universality accredited to Christ's presence in the church. Across the visual differences of geography, race, gender, culture, liturgical performance, and so on, the unity of the church universal is maintained on the grounds of a common belonging to Christ, whose risen presence is not particularized according to space or time. The simultaneous presence of Christ in churches across the world is contingent upon an *invisibility* that is not sustained in virtual worlds that rely on the predominance of the visual.

¹⁵ Ibid., 35: "So Paul turns to salient images and metaphors to help communicate his vision for what it means to be this new community that sees itself as unified in Christ despite the many differences that threaten to separate members of the community from one another."

I therefore think that Thompson's most likely meaning of the term "virtual" is simply "mediated." So far as her argument that all reality is virtual reality relies on the premise that all reality is mediated reality, she has a legitimate point to make (and a considerable amount of philosophical, sociological, and psychological research to back her up as well). However, Thompson's argument for the mediatory nature of the church's connective tissue comes down to *communication*. It is by exchanging *information* that the church universal sustains its ties. Thompson substantiates this claim in her examination of Paul's virtual presence to the churches to whom he writes, where Paul's presence is manifested through the mediatory means of language. But to say that Paul is present without diminishment through the virtual medium of his letters is to limit the whole of Paul's being to his thinking, thereby bracketing the myriad habits, tones, attitudes, ticks, moods, and so forth which oriented him within the worlds in which he was the unique person that he was. Paul may indeed be communicating something very real about himself and his experience, and he may even be able to elicit a similar experience in his readers. But the communication of thoughts *about* a person seems quite different than communicating that person *themselves*.

This is not such a problem for our consideration of Paul, though, since we are not so concerned with the reality of his presence to his readers. But Thompson's insistence upon the real presence of Christ conveyed through virtual means seems to reduce Christ's presence (and the Eucharist as a whole) to a thought-event on par with Paul's written communication. But to condense Christ's sacramental presence into communicable mental content is to reduce Christ's presence to information, which seems entirely different from the dynamic person whom he is. To receive the interpreted meaning of Christ is quite different than receiving the thing itself. Moreover, meanings and information can be wrong, so that any communication of information about Christ in the sacrament that is not accountable to some more substantive criterion is subject to criticism as a subjective whim rather than any reflection of reality.

It is because Thompson and I both wish to advocate for a real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, then, that I find this association of presence with communicable mental content such a threat to her account of Christ's virtual presence. A theology which wishes to take real presence seriously must also take seriously the great atheist Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of projection: "Faith is the power of the imagination, which makes the real unreal, and the unreal real: in direct contradiction with the truth of the senses, with the truth of reason."¹⁶ Mental, informational presence comes fearfully close to imagined presence, so that a self-aware Christian who associates the presence of Christ in the Eucharist with the communication of speech should be wary of where the two might overlap.

¹⁶ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Elliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 242.

It is thus this conveyance of Christ's personal presence into the communication of mental categories—its package-ability, as it were—that I find so disconcerting about Thompson's model of communion. And it is for this reason that I now turn to the work of Martin Heidegger, whose critique of technology centers not so much on the psychological effects of technology to which Thompson responds but more on the contemporary worldview of objectification and domestication of beings that I think typifies her treatment of the sacrament.

III. Technology and Idolatry

Deanna Thompson's advocacy for virtual communion stems largely from her rejection of the belief that the physical world is somehow superior to the virtual, that is, the non-physical. While acknowledging the social and psychological risks posed by digital technology—social isolation, immersion in ideological echo chambers, unequal access to online resources, etc.—Thompson makes the case that the positive potential of online connectivity outweighs the potential costs.¹⁷ So long as we proceed with the critical caution she recommends, I am in complete agreement with her on this point. Digital technologies are here to stay, so it is best to make use of the opportunities they provide while striving to mitigate the risks they pose. My concern with her recommendation for virtual communion, however, stems less from her wholesale embrace of online communication and more from the way she shoehorns Christ's real presence into readily conveyable mental content. Such a move typifies what Martin Heidegger identified as the underlying worldview of our technological epoch: namely, the inclination to objectify, domesticate, and thereby colonize the world under our conceptual mastery, what Christians would call *idolatry* and which Heidegger calls *enframing* [*Gestell*]. Shown in this light, technology is not so much the sum of technological artifacts—the phone in my pocket or the computer on which I am writing—as it is a worldview. And as a worldview, technology poses a risk to true understanding which I think Thompson overlooks. I will therefore argue in this section that Heidegger's treatment of technology as enframing poses a serious challenge to the case for virtual communion. That Heidegger articulated this phenomenon well before the onset of personal computers, smartphones, and the internet, though, further indicates that the threat of technology to an authentic human encounter with the world is not limited to the digital sphere. I will thus further suggest that the threat of a technological view of the Eucharist is not unique to the world of online connectivity but constitutes a challenge to eucharistic theologies in general, which the virtual context only exacerbates and brings to greater light.

When Heidegger speaks of technology, he is speaking not primarily of technological entities but of the contemporary world as it has been oriented by scientific, calculative thinking. Whereas earlier human epochs understood their worlds and the beings that populated them through myth, art, and religion, the modern perspective is largely shaped by the scientific method and the

¹⁷ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 13-21.

industrial attitude of production. So far as modern technology is a world-revealing perspective, then, we might say that Heidegger is more interested in the *technologism* of modern life or, to parse out the Greek origins of the word “technology,” he is interested in the *logos* of *techne*. In its original meaning, the Greek word *techne* refers to craftsmanship and thus entails a bringing-forth or revealing along the lines of art. In his landmark 1953 essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger writes, “*Techne* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*.”¹⁸ In this bringing-forth capacity, *techne* also belongs to *episteme*, knowing.¹⁹ All making is a showing. Every employment of a tool or material in my hands showcases it as a certain kind of something. For instance, a potter makes a jug and opens up a world of *pouring*, with all its associations of wine and dancing, of washing and bathing, or even of baptism.²⁰ Likewise, it is in response to such worlds that call for pouring that one makes a jug in the first place. The craftsmanship of *techne* thus belongs to the activity of *logos*, which Heidegger defines in terms of gathering and showing.²¹ As disclosive in this way, *techne* is therefore revelatory.

What, then, does modern technology reveal? According to Heidegger, “The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [*Herausfordern*], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such.”²² The way that modern technology showcases beings within a world is by showing them as resources. The *challenging* of modern technology is the process of domesticating beings, shoehorning them into preconceived conceptual silos, framing their existence according to functionality. Beings become resources from which energy, nutrients, and even information can be extracted at will.

This much is as true for the premodern potter as it is for us today, though. All *techne* is a showing, a disclosing of a world, and an opening up of possibilities therein. But what distinguishes modern, post-industrial technology from its predecessors, says Heidegger, is its seeking to store the resources derived from beings. The purpose of domesticating beings is to make them readily available, pliable in human hands and obedient to human manipulation. Whereas a premodern windmill’s sails “do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind’s blowing. But the windmill does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it.”²³ The defining trait of modern technology, as opposed to earlier human tool-usage, is thus the captivity of beings under

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 318.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 318.

²⁰ See Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001): 164-168.

²¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 132-142.

²² Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 320.

²³ *Ibid.*, 320.

human mastery, what Heidegger calls *standing-reserve* [*Bestand*].²⁴ Challenging, then, is the human provocation of nature under the specific intent of mastery. As master of beings, the technological human both extracts resources from beings and hems them into storage units (everything from animal cages to electric batteries) from which they can be summoned at will. Beings are no longer available for discovery so much as to be controlled. As standing-reserve, beings are always on call, so to speak, always available for the purposes humans assign them. Think, for instance, of the contemporary meat industry. Whereas premodern humans hunted and gathered for their food, and later humans learned farming by tending animals in open pastures, the rise of modern market capitalism incentivizes large, corporate farms to pen in animals, maximizing the number of creatures that can be fit into a minimal container-space, and controlling everything from their reproductive activity to their genetic makeup so as to keep up with demand. As a type of disclosure, then, technology reveals beings as fundamentally storable, manipulable, and thus as existing solely for human purposes.

The abiding characteristic of this technological worldview is *measurement*. Beings disclosed according human measure are what Heidegger calls *ta mathemata* in his 1962 essay “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics.” In contrast to *ta physica*—“the things insofar as they originate and come forth from themselves”²⁵—*ta mathemata* “are the things insofar as we take cognizance of them as what we already know them to be in advance.”²⁶ Measuring, Heidegger goes on, “is therefore an extremely peculiar taking, a taking where one who takes only takes what one basically already has.”²⁷ To interpret a thing in terms of concepts already possessed is to subject it to measurement.²⁸ Measurement does not so much reflect that we have names for things—dogs and cats, knives and forks, and so on—but that we rather submit all these beings to our expectations of standardization. Such standardization, then, discloses beings as existing for ease of human use rather than for their own, individual sake. The result is that, in our belonging to a technological world, we automatically interpret beings according to our expectations of what they ought to be rather than what they may show of themselves.

The measuring, mathematical gaze typifies what Heidegger calls technology’s *enframing* [*Gestell*]. Enframing is “that challenging claim which gathers man thither to order the self-revealing as standing-reserve.”²⁹ Technology frames the world as stable and domesticated to human purposes. The measure of human concepts thus becomes the colonizing grasp we exert on beings in making

²⁴ Ibid., 322.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 274.

²⁶ Ibid., 275.

²⁷ Ibid., 275.

²⁸ Ibid., 276.

²⁹ Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 324.

them conform to our own intentions. The technological worldview demands stability out of beings so that they can all the more readily be put to use for our predetermined purposes. In this way, technology suffocates the freedom of beings.

Digital technology is particularly adept at this measuring treatment of beings as standing-reserve. The internet allows me to summon up other humans, their thoughts, and their experiences at my discretion in the form of photographs, videos, audio files, news articles, and community forums. Moreover, digital technology as a storage device allows me to hold all this data as available to my every need. If I need to find a picture of something, I can Google it and then review the results generated according to the measure of what I typed in my search bar. I can watch the same YouTube video over and over again. I can stop it at my convenience and come back to it at the moment where I left off. I can skip what I do not want and return again and again to the same content with confidence it will remain unchanged. As a result, the person in this photo or behind that tweet ceases to be real because they are instead domesticated to my whim. They may have elected to speak and act of their own accord, but they are only now heard because I say so. The digital world thus takes what Heidegger observes as the essence of the technological epoch to an extreme level. The threat of standing-reserve is that it makes beings—even our fellow human beings—into static things obedient to the measurement of our desire. With the world of beings condensed into visual frames and text and sorted into a network of easily navigable sites, I maintain the interpretive order of my world and affirm my place at its center. The content available to me may alter with time, but it will always be reliably packaged in such a way that is stable, static, and subject to my direction.

The peak of technological thinking, then, is its commodification of human beings themselves. As curator of my online world, I not only filter and control the data at my fingertips, but I further control what of myself is disclosed to others. Those parts of myself I wish to accentuate as part of my “true self” can be highlighted through photos on Instagram and pithy comments on Twitter, while those bits I deem less worthy of my ideal self can be bracketed as unimportant embarrassments. My person is thus something to be made, refined, and published, so that the inconsistencies, idiosyncrasies, and flaws that invariably contribute a great deal to the person I am in reality are easily disposed of as lesser truths and little concern. Moreover, this crafted persona reduces my being into the limited sensory scope of the visual, either by condensing my person into descriptive information or displaying select moments through photography or video. Thompson herself admits as much, reflecting on her experience as a cancer patient,

It is almost always the case that it is less difficult for me to explain how I'm doing in an online post than in a face-to-face conversation. In virtual reality, tears do not make my explanations of my condition unintelligible. When I draft a post about how I'm doing, I can go back and edit out

something that sounds more bitter or more optimistic than I intend it to be. In cyberspace, my vulnerabilities often can be better managed than they can be in face-to-face interactions.³⁰

Thompson is certainly right in recognizing that written, virtual communication makes conveying oneself according to one's wishes easier. But Heidegger's examination of technology as a measuring and constricting force in the name of efficiency should give us pause. As inconvenient as they may be, emotions and physical limitations are significant parts of our persons, often disclosing what words can only imperfectly describe. That we would wish to bracket some of these elements is only natural and sometimes necessary. But Heidegger's point is that the technological worldview invites us to *always* see ourselves in terms of communicability and efficiency. The ability—and, in some cases, the obligation—to broadcast myself imposes on me the expectation to filter and refine myself. Our persons thus become editable, so that our online presence is a product of choice and measurement and not of our totality, personal infelicities and all. As Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa observe, "Heidegger came finally to see that technicity could treat people and things as resources to be enhanced."³¹ Online, I am incited to distinguish my best self—defined according to human measurements largely inherited from others—from the rest of myself. And such broadcasting takes place through a conglomeration of media which makes that fabricated, efficient self into a reliable standing-reserve of me-on-display.

Similarly, this self-curation of online personas fosters increased categorization of others. If all I know of a person is some data about them translated into the standing-reserve of online news articles, photos, and maybe some audiovisual files, I can better shoehorn that person into my own conceptual containers and the labels made readily available to me through the online marketplace of ideas. Online, one quickly ceases to be an individual, shaped by the inconsistencies and strangeness which make a whole person difficult if not impossible to categorize. One is now black, male, Christian, rural, conservative, college-educated, gay, etc., that these may render the individual stable and identifiable, algorithmically packaged for targeted advertisements and available to our moral judgments.

Such curation of persons is precisely the threat I see not only in Thompson's advocacy for virtual communion but in overly intellectual treatments of the Eucharist in general. To conflate Christ's presence with information about him or a conceptual predetermination of his character is to define his person according to our measurement. Certain words or actions of Jesus are prioritized over others in order to frame the meaning of his existence in a particular way. Insofar as this is to convey the Gospel message, this is entirely consistent with the purpose of language itself. We are not wrong to want to know *about* Jesus and what he means to us. But this does not yet give us

³⁰ Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 8.

³¹ Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa, "Further Reflections on Heidegger, Technology, and the Everyday," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 23.5 (October 2003): 341.

Christ's risen, personal presence unless we insist on distilling that presence into the stability of premeasured mental categories and dogmatically agreed-upon meanings. Just as there are countless aspects of my person which do not exist online—many of which can never be put into words—so there are aspects of Christ's person that exist beneath what the church says or conveys about him and which give further content and context to those aspects which we do put into speech. To condense Christ's presence into the utterable or into some repeatable recipe of words and signs thus seems to fit the vastness of his person within the measure of our own determination of his meaning. In other words, it is to treat Christ's presence as standing-reserve.

Contrast this attitude, then, with what Heidegger suggests is a truer form of interaction with beings: *letting-be* [*Gelassenheit*]. "The essence of truth is freedom," he writes in his 1943 essay, "On the Essence of Truth."³² This freedom is not simply human freedom, however. That would reduce truth to human measurement, which is precisely what technology does. As theologian and Heidegger scholar Judith Wolfe writes:

This [mindfulness of beings] requires not so much deliberate *action*—since a proactive 'framing' of the world is precisely what has distorted it—as an attentive letting-be, a spiritual discipline that allows the self to become a 'clearing' on which the light of Being may fall and show forth beings as they are. It is important for the later Heidegger that it is never in one's own power whether this coming-into-view will occur: revelation and communion must always come from without. The human calling is merely to hold oneself in readiness for them.³³

The truth of beings always comes over and against our determinative intentions. The reality of any particular being—from the pen on my desk to the bird outside my window—consists in that being's freedom to stand forth as it is in itself and not as it is defined by human measurement. The essence of truth as freedom "now reveals itself as letting beings be."³⁴ This letting-be occurs wherever we allow the strange and foreign aspects of a being to hold sway over us. Heidegger thus writes, "where beings are not very familiar to man and are scarcely and only roughly known by science, the openedness of beings as a whole can prevail more essentially than it can where the familiar and well-known has become boundless, and nothing is any longer able to withstand the business of knowing, since technical mastery over things bears itself without limit."³⁵ Within our technological world, saturated as it is by the attitude of enframing, the beings which most resiliently resist the captivity of standing-reserve are those beings that are foreign to us, which arrest our gaze precisely because they do not fit into our preexisting worldview. If the attitude of letting-be is to be the antidote to the commodification of beings in technology, then it must adopt just this

³² Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 123.

³³ Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 138.

³⁴ Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," 125.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

posture of wonder, allowing the strangeness of beings to wash over us rather than closing them down with immediate interpretive mastery.

My chief concern about Deanna Thompson's advocacy of virtual communion, then, is that it takes an insufficiently available posture toward Christ's presence in the Eucharist. In presuming that Christ's presence is automatic within the church and that the sacraments may therefore be practiced with equal efficacy through whatever media in which the church operates, the underlying assumption is that Christ's presence is subject to the measure of the church's action. That Thompson sees no qualitative difference between Christ's presence within the sacramental community and Christ's presence in online communication further indicates her willingness to distill that presence into the mental categories of the community of faith. Recall from above that Thompson's argument for virtual communion rests on the premise that, because Christ is already virtually present to the church through the mediation of its people, and because the church is already a virtual body via the connective tissue of language, the church can reliably undertake the sacrament of Christ's real presence through virtual media even when separated by social distance. Drawing on Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers, she writes, "Lutheran claims of the priesthood of all can empower us to commune in our living rooms while we're virtually connected to the larger church at this time of physical separation."³⁶ If by "commune in our living rooms," Thompson means that Christians can meaningfully relate to each other as a community of faith during their time of separation, then I take no issue with her claim. But within the context of her argument for virtual communion, and furthermore against the backdrop of her belief in the virtual presence of Christ in the church, she clearly intends something more by this statement. This being the case, it is telling how her description of the priesthood of all believers lends itself to Heidegger's concept of measuring: because the measure of a Christian entails priesthood, and because the measure of priesthood entails celebration of the sacrament, the efficacy of the Eucharist is guaranteed wherever these conditions are met. Thompson's treatment of the real presence of Christ in the church as something stable and available on-demand establishes the conditions for her to treat the sacrament as standing-reserve. Christ's promise to be present in the meal is thereby easily converted into Christ's on-call status, available at our fingertips and contained in our ritual, which is neatly packaged for easy transportation. We are thus forced to ask: Does the church really receive the strange and wondrous presence of Christ in the sacrament, or is that presence actually something made by the church? And if it is the latter, if the Eucharist has become a technology and Christ's presence a standardized product, has the church not then committed idolatry?

³⁶ Deanna A. Thompson, "Being the Body of Christ in a Time of Pandemic and Beyond," Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community, St. Olaf College, April 2, 2020, <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/04/being-the-body-of-christ-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-beyond/>.

Consider Thompson's cursory outline of virtual communion:

What might it look like to do virtual communion well? We could start with preparing members beforehand, encouraging them to prepare the table in their own homes. Send along the recipe for the bread regularly used in communion; invite people to consider what cup and plate might be meaningful to hold the elements; remind them of the confidence we have that God is the one who acts in the sacrament; affirm what so many already know, that Christ comes to us even when we gather virtually.³⁷

Thompson's description here in many ways typifies what we have just seen in Heidegger's treatment of technology's standing-reserve. Parishioners are invited to prepare their own table, bake their own bread, determine which tableware is most suitable according to their own measure of meaning, and, above all, to believe with pre-determined assurance that Christ is present therein. It is true that Thompson also wishes to "remind them of the confidence we have that God is the one who acts in the sacrament," though, short of any fuller explanation, this perhaps reads more like lip service in a paragraph where all other actions are undertaken by people in their homes. Christ's agency in his real presence in the church and sacrament has been left rather vague in Thompson's account to this point, and it is no different here. The point of the preparations undertaken by parishioners is to "get it right," as it were: to bake the right recipe, to set up the sacred space, and so to create the necessary preconditions for the magic to occur. The result is an objectification of the Eucharist as something made by human intention, and insofar as Christ's real presence is attested therein, the implication to a Christian could all too easily become that said presence is produced—*conjured*, even—by human action.

Far from the availability of letting-be, the treatment of the Eucharist as some object, something made or produced, indicates a posture of control and determinism on the part of the Christian church. The treatment of Christ's presence as portable in the Eucharist both suffocates the freedom of Christ's dynamic agency in the sacrament and covers over the posture of wonder that might alert us to the strange new ways Christ presences in our fasting. As theologian Serene Jones points out, in a quote that Thompson herself admires,

This community, therefore, does not possess itself but always receives itself from God. This community does not own the terms by which it is collected, named, and defined; these too it receives. This community's core identity cannot therefore be defined by kinship ties, geographic region, and ethnicity... Thus, at the most fundamental level, this church knows itself to be constituted by its intrinsic openness to God.³⁸

³⁷ Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually."

³⁸ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 172. Cf. Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 93.

The church is made the church from without. As such, the church's posture of receptivity positions it fundamentally against the impulse of domestication that typifies the technological worldview. One does not give themselves the sacrament. One does not *make* anything happen. The Eucharist is instead something a Christian goes *to*, something to which one gradually and through repetition *comes to belong*, something in which *one is swept away*. The idea that such an event could be condensed into a sequence of ritual actions aimed at producing a reliable and predetermined outcome discloses an attitude of arrogance and mastery that is in fact a sharp departure from the posture of waiting and wonder that characterizes sacramental practice.

Note, then, that my argument against Thompson's case for virtual communion is not based on some ontology of ordination or a metaphysic of transubstantiation or consubstantiation. So far as each of these are liable to domesticate the presence of Christ into reliable, measured standing-reserve, these too deserve examination in the light of Heidegger's technological critique. And with that in mind, it is worth acknowledging that virtual communion is not a uniquely flawed distortion of the Eucharist but in fact reflects a whole history of Christian sacramental tensions. For example, it became common practice prior to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 for many Christians to not receive communion more than once or twice a year because it was so strongly believed that the consecrated elements would cause physical ailments or death to any unworthy person.³⁹ Similarly, "even when the term 'transubstantiation' (*transsubstantiatio*) entered the theological vocabulary to denote the change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ in the first half of the twelfth century..., a more crass materialistic view of the nature of that presence still tended to dominate people's thinking."⁴⁰ Christians have always been liable to objectify the Eucharist in a technological mindset. But as Heidegger has helped us see, as this enframing worldview has increasingly encroached on our collective consciousness, we must also be increasingly aware of the limits and dangers of that mindset and so attune ourselves more fervently to the posture of letting-be. It is thus not enough to simply critique the practice of virtual communion (and the technological attitude toward the Eucharist in general) without providing some way forward. I will therefore now turn to a final section in which I will briefly sketch how an understanding of the Eucharist might be achieved within the framework of Martin Heidegger's philosophy of involved understanding.

IV. An Alternative Proposal: The Eucharist as a World

How does Martin Heidegger expect us to adopt the posture of letting beings be? And how do Christians understand the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion without squashing that presence under the categories and measures of our technological gaze? The early

³⁹ See Paul Bradshaw and Maxwell Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Pueblo, 2012), 211.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

Heidegger gives us a means of addressing these questions in his magnum opus *Being and Time* with his analysis of human Being-in-the-world. I will here briefly explore how Heidegger's notion of human understanding in terms of worldly involvement lays a theoretical foundation for both fleshing out the later Heidegger's ideal of letting-be while also providing a non-technological interpretation of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist.

Heidegger famously defines human Dasein⁴¹ as "Being-in-the-world" [*In-der-Welt-sein*]. That is, the human way of existence is principally not that of a thinking subject but one of dynamic involvement. Heidegger writes, "In directing itself toward and grasping something, Dasein does not go beyond its inner sphere, in which it is first encapsulated, but its primary way of Being is to be always already 'outside,' alongside encountered beings in the already discovered world."⁴² Being-in-the-world should therefore not be considered a procedure whereby Dasein reaches out of some closed self toward an external world.⁴³ Rather, Being-in-the-world is a way of existing that begins with that very externalization. We are "outside" long before we are ever "inside" ourselves. As Hubert Dreyfus succinctly puts it, "Heidegger holds that all relations of mental states to their objects presuppose a more basic form of being-with-things which does not involve mental activity."⁴⁴ Our everyday interactions with things—from the pages I turn in a book to my typing the keys on my computer as I write—are not thought-relations but a deeper bodily involvement. We mostly interact with the beings in our worlds unthinkingly, which allows us to then have a familiarity with them beneath objectifying thought.

Heidegger calls this the *readiness-to-hand* [*Zuhandenheit*] of beings.⁴⁵ We know beings principally through our pre-reflective enmeshment with their dynamic activity within a world already in motion. In his famous example of the hammer, Heidegger writes, "The less the hammer-thing is simply ogled at, the more accessible it becomes, the more primordial is one's relationship to it, the more unconcealed [*unverhüllt*] it is as what it is, a thing."⁴⁶ The readiness-to-hand of beings, then, denotes the way in which we and the objects that surround us are mutually available to be what we are in, with, and through each other. When we hold an object before our gaze for conscious

⁴¹ Heidegger famously refers to Dasein as the object of his analysis in *Being and Time*, though it is generally agreed that he does not mean this term as a simple synonym for "human being." For a helpful definition of Dasein and its difference from the human being itself, see John Haugeland, *Dasein Disclosed: John Haugeland's Heidegger*, ed. Joseph Rouse (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 81-82, where Haugeland defines Dasein as "a way of living that embodies an understanding of being." That is, according to Haugeland, Dasein denotes the mode of being particular to humans, a mode which entails a pre-apprehension of the Being of beings through worldly familiarity and the importance of that Being to oneself.

⁴² Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §13:62. All translations of *Sein und Zeit* used here are my own.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, §13:62.

⁴⁴ Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 52.

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §15:69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, §15:69.

consideration—what Heidegger calls beings' *presence-to-hand* [*Vorhandenheit*]⁴⁷—we distinguish ourselves from it as a static, thinking subject and a quite separate but equally static object.⁴⁷ But this is not how we primarily operate in our interactions with beings. We know things by *doing* alongside them. We become *involved* [*Bewenden*] with beings in their doings in the world.⁴⁸ As such, both we ourselves and the beings we encounter are revealed most basically as fluid, dynamic, and relational. So, when Heidegger says the hammer is more truly unconcealed the less it is ogled at and the more it is used in actively hammering, he is highlighting the nature of our involved understanding as enmeshed activity before it ever becomes conscious reflection. What is really real of a being is not what meaning we assign to it but how it unveils itself within the dynamic play of a world. To know a being in its truth, then, is to resist the temptation to objectify it and instead become caught up in its own activity and the worldly trajectory it opens up.

One thus comes to understand their world most basically not through an intellectual grasp of each component part but rather like a surfer riding a wave, finding an intuitive feel for the flow under one's feet and maintaining the necessary balance to navigate the ever-changing dynamics at play, what Heidegger calls "the emerging-abiding sway" of Being.⁴⁹ Like an athlete dribbling a ball or a maestro at the piano, we do not make our way by consciously thinking (in fact, were they to think, such figures would likely trip themselves up!) but rather through involved understanding of worlds in motion. As Heidegger helpfully sums up in his 1929 essay "On the Essence of Ground," "World refers to a 'how' of being of beings, rather than to these beings themselves."⁵⁰ The character of a world is its dynamism, its particular thrust in this or that direction. Like planets and stars caught up in the nebulous drift of a galaxy's spin, beings are opened up to be what they are within the gravitational pull of a world that exists before and yet through them. To understand such worlds—and the beings that populate them—the human need only learn to ride the wave of these involvements, becoming attuned to the myriad and changing dynamics therein.

We thus have some basis in the early Heidegger's analysis of our Being-in-the-world for how to interpret the later Heidegger's emphasis on letting-be. Were letting-be simply an inverted objectification—a kind of apophatic passivity before beings—it would likely not yield us either any true or particularly helpful understanding of beings. Such a posture would exemplify Heidegger's notion of presence-to-hand and thus create mental distance between ourselves and the world. In the context of the Eucharist, focusing at the consecrated bread and wine while desperately trying not to project a technologizing constraint on them would be both mentally exhausting and unhelpfully distracting. But against the backdrop of the early Heidegger's work on Dasein's Being-

⁴⁷ Ibid., §9:42.

⁴⁸ Ibid., §18:84.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 15.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, "On the Essence of Ground," trans. William McNeill, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112.

in-the-world, we get a clearer picture of what a true letting-be looks like. Letting beings be means setting them free within their dynamic worlds to act out—to be—their-selves. Such beings are thus disclosive of themselves not by providing a stable set of data for our analysis but by drawing us into shared involvement with their own dynamic doings. In fact, as Andrew Mitchell argues, because beings are intrinsically relational, they can never become established things that we possess, and so they can never be strictly called “things” at all. Rather, beings must always be seen as they are in reality, as always coming-to-be, and so there are no things that remain neatly within the grasp of our words or concepts.⁵¹ To understand a being in this way—to let it stand forth as what it is in reality—is to undermine our objectifying gaze essentially by forgetting to think. We relate to such beings by entering into flow with their doings, when our unconscious activity becomes flush with their own, when we are swept up in a synchrony we ourselves do not establish, what Dreyfus sums up succinctly as “know-how.”⁵² To know, in this case, is to do, and to further do in, with, and through the beings that are the media of our understanding.

If we think of the Eucharist as a world in these terms, then we may begin to uncover an antidote to the technological closing down of reality I found so troublesome in Deanna Thompson's advocacy for virtual communion. Recall that my concern with her treatment of the real presence of Christ was that it was effectively rendered as standing-reserve, as a presence which is assumed to be automatic and therefore portable. But if the Eucharist is instead viewed as a world rather than an object, then our attention is removed from the things of the sacrament—consecrated bread and wine, for instance—to what those things *do* and the presence they thereby disclose.

This is the move the Anglican monk and liturgical scholar Gregory Dix makes in his famous characterization of the four-action shape of the Eucharist. Since the earliest Christians, argues Dix, the Eucharist has been most fundamentally an action.⁵³ While most moderns consider the Eucharist to be something *said*, so that what is most important in the rite is the meaning conveyed through spoken words and material signs, prior to the Fourth Century the case was exactly the opposite.⁵⁴ As something *done*, rather, and moreover done by the congregation as a whole, the Eucharist was an act of obedience and response to God, wherein one's sanctification was effected and one's moral compass shaped through repeated patterns and habits.⁵⁵ The four basic actions which Dix then suggests constitute this active, dynamic Eucharist are: (1) *Offertory*, in which the bread and wine are offered together with the gifts of the congregation, (2) *Prayer*, in which the president gives thanks to God over the elements, (3) *Fraction*, in which the bread is broken, and

⁵¹ Andrew Mitchell, *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 310.

⁵² Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 184.

⁵³ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Continuum, 2005), 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

(4) *Communion*, in which the bread and wine are distributed and consumed.⁵⁶ These actions, along with the myriad details that qualify them and situate them within the liturgy, give shape to the worldly dynamism of the Eucharist. Bodily movements such as kneeling, passing peace, crossing oneself, opening hands to receive, and so forth situate the Christian within a particular world in motion. Far from a world of *things*, the Eucharist is a world of breaking, pouring, giving, sharing, lifting, bowing, praying, confessing, etc. Moreover, all of these actions are performed in relation and response to one another, so that the character of the sacramental world is disclosed through the habituating force of familiarity and repetition. I do not merely receive the sacramental bread, for example, but I further receive it after its breaking, alongside those with whom I have shared peace and made confession, and under the prayerful anamnesis of Jesus' passion. What one discovers in such a world of involvement, then, is an orienting paradigm established through a lifetime of sacramental belonging.

This is what Heidegger calls a *mood* [*Stimmung*]. For Heidegger, mood is more basic than emotion. It is rather the existential coloring and orientation of our situatedness in a given world. He writes, "A mood makes manifest 'how one is and becomes.' In this 'how one is' attunement brings Being into its 'there.'"⁵⁷ Moods disclose just how we are located within a given world. They are our feel for our surroundings. They are the hue of our responses to external stimuli and the point of departure for our every interpretation. And because we are never outside a world of some kind, we are never without a mood. As Heidegger scholar Katherine Withy suggests, moods are the foundation of our finding ourselves to be this or that Being-in-the-world at all: "Like soundtracks or climates, they set the stage for our immersion in our lives."⁵⁸ Moods indicate just how I am always *from* some situation and *toward* another.⁵⁹ Without a mood, I could not truly inhabit any world, for to be without a mood would render me unaffected and thus uninvolved.

But the Eucharist is not simply a world of mooded, involved understanding. For Christians also confess that Christ is really present in the sacrament. In fact, they name the actions of the eucharistic world as Christ's own actions, confessing Jesus' words, "This is *my* body," though always with the active addendum, "*given for you*" (Lk 22:19). To participate in this world, then, is to be swept up in its motion as credited to Christ; to find oneself immersed in and involved with the Christ whose personal world this is. The character disclosed in the habituating rhythms of these particular actions in this particular orientation opens up a way of Being-in-the-world under the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48. The historical accuracy of Dix's ascribing this fourfold shape universally to ancient liturgies is widely challenged, as in Bradshaw and Johnson, *Eucharistic Liturgies*, 20-21. However, for the purposes of contemporary reflection on the liturgy, this historical dispute is less important than the insights gleaned from an analysis of the dynamics of the sacrament itself.

⁵⁷ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §29:134.

⁵⁸ Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 52.

⁵⁹ Cf. Katherine Withy, "Situation and Limitation: Making Sense of Heidegger on Thrownness," *European Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (March 2014): 66-71.

name of Jesus Christ, a way that becomes embodied and enacted in the sacramental doings of the church. When Christians “do this in remembrance” of Jesus, then, their active, embodied doing is the medium of Christ’s re-membering, the coming-to-presence of Christ’s particular attunement and orientation within the contemporary world. When the Christian develops a mood of existential orientation and response to the sacramental world, then, she can say that such a mooded understanding is one founded upon and oriented toward Christ, with whose dynamic activity she has become familiar through habituating involvement.

But is this not precisely the kind of thing Thompson describes in her recommendation for how churches can undertake virtual communion? Far from treating the Eucharist as a plastic-wrapped microwavable dinner to be had while watching the nightly news, Thompson actually takes seriously the world-character of the sacrament. In a quote we visited earlier, she writes,

What might it look like to do virtual communion well? We could start with preparing members beforehand, encouraging them to prepare the table in their own homes. Send along the recipe for the bread regularly used in communion; invite people to consider what cup and plate might be meaningful to hold the elements; remind them of the confidence we have that God is the one who acts in the sacrament; affirm what so many already know, that Christ comes to us even when we gather virtually.⁶⁰

Indeed, this recommended procedure for virtual communion indicates an appreciation for the mooded world-character of the Eucharist. But two problems still emerge in this scenario. Firstly, the world is in this case produced by the Christian. If it is indeed God who acts in the sacrament, then it is imperative that Christians be drawn into the world of that action, not constitute it for themselves. To do the latter is to treat God as a tool to be called into service, as standing-reserve. Secondly, the predetermined assumption of Christ’s presence regardless of circumstance further treats his presence as stable and guaranteed under the gaze of measuring. Of course, even in more conventional settings, Christians confess Christ’s real presence in the sacrament. But insofar as the Eucharist is a world that predates and supersedes the Christian, their entrance into it constitutes an entrance into that which gives from without. That is, because the Christian who enters the eucharistic world does not give that world to themselves, the precise character of that world—and the risen Christ whose person is that world—is open for new and unforeseen disclosure. Where the sacrament is a work of personal creation, by contrast, it should not be surprising when its character reflects that of its creator.

The key distinction between the technological model and the Being-in-the-world model of Eucharist, then, is the role of the human mind in defining the truth of the situation. Any sacrament which treats the presence of Christ as package-able, as it were, does so as a result of human

⁶⁰ Thompson, “Christ is Really Present Virtually.”

interpretive assignments: The bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ because certain determinable conditions are met. As a world of involvements, by contrast, the presence of Christ is disclosed in a distinctly uncategorizable encounter. Christ is effectively *transparent* in the sacrament: invisible to the objectifying gaze at the same time that he is immanent to our dynamic doing. Like a ballroom dancer, the Christian does not know her partner in Christ by thinking about his actions but by acquiring a feel for the character of his particular dynamism, reading his movements, and coordinating her being with his own. So, when I meet Christ in the Eucharist, I may well be thinking about my shopping list or worrying about what I have to do after the service, but by belonging to the world of Christ's dynamic person, my own person comes into greater, habituated proximity to his. Christ is not in the Eucharist *because* we think or say he is; we think and say he is present because we are drawn into the ineffable pattern of his Being before we ever come to conscious recognition of it.

It is thus worth pointing out that the same criticism Heidegger's take on technology exercises upon virtual communion can also be applied to more conventional Eucharists. Does not someone have to set the table and bake the bread and say the words even when Holy Communion is held in a "traditional" context like a church sanctuary? Of course. Do we not expect Christ to be present with rather alarming regularity—say, every Sunday at 10:30? Indeed. But it is worth pointing out how agency is dislocated within the ecclesial setting. The vestments and decoration are not there out of the priest's personal preference. The acts of preparation—from baking the bread to saying the eucharistic prayers—belong to a diverse collection of people. The words and actions undertaken are inherited from a living and dynamic tradition that predates everyone's existence. And, most crucially, the communion to which one belongs through the sacrament is not selected by anyone in particular. Just as no one hosts a private Eucharist for only their close friends, so we do not choose those people who occupy our sacramental space. In communion, Christians are rather thrown into a cloud of witnesses that is as often annoying and inconvenient as it is expedient to our spiritual life, and this provides an essential quality to the world disclosed therein. One may have to pass the peace to an unsavory rival or receive the elements from a priest whose theology is a little milquetoast or be seated next to someone who consistently sings out of tune. One's location within the communion of saints is thus more akin to being sucked under the water by a powerful wave than it is a matter of choice and control. The reality of the church is thus uncovered through the awe of letting-be, by becoming enmeshed within a communion already in motion, not through the determination of enframing.

So does this account leave us without a Eucharist in time of physical separation, then? Yes and no. On the one hand, in describing the Eucharist as a world in terms laid out by the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, I have cautioned against the technologizing interpretation of the sacrament implicit in practices of virtual communion. On the other hand, in setting out the Eucharist as not a thing but a dynamic world of personal possibilities and existential orientation, I have hopefully

brought to light the pedagogical function of the eucharistic enterprise. That is, as a habituating force of personal formation, the eucharistic world can still spring up where the sacrament itself is not practiced. Because Christians inhabit the sacramental world as mooded creatures, and because their attunement to that world is further shaped and coalesced through years of practice and discovery under its sway, the orientation which characterizes one's involved encounter with the dynamic Christ of the Eucharist may also become the orientation with which one lives life beyond the sanctuary. Embodied behaviors of openness, receptivity, blessing, prayer, confession, forgiveness, and so on build up a posture of existential attunement akin to muscle memory. A Christian coming from a lifetime of belonging to this world may be more easily able to slide into patterns of participation in Christ's worldly orientation and so not have to consciously seek out a mentally palatable presence. Though we may be without the Eucharist, then, we are not without its fruits, as the habits of Being which are inculcated through the sacrament shape our orientation to worlds beyond the sanctuary, giving us eyes to recognize Christ where we least expect him to be. In this way, beneath the level of conscious reflection, the effects of the Eucharist may yet sprout even where the ritual itself leaves off.⁶¹

Thompson adopts something like this posture herself, emphasizing the pedagogical role of eucharistic practice. She writes, "Union with Christ is also judgment for the ways we participate in the suffering of others each and every day. The Eucharist—indeed the full scope of the liturgy—makes it possible for the community of sinners to be remade by a grace that permits us to forever start anew."⁶² I agree. But what Thompson appears to miss in her endorsement of virtual sacramental practice is the way that the Eucharist engenders this pedagogical function precisely

⁶¹ It is for this reason that, perhaps counter-intuitively, I believe this model of the Eucharist as a world actually has something meaningful to say in discussions around disability and equal access. Whereas eucharistic theologies that focus on the meaning or substance of the sacramental elements are inevitably exclusionary—either to those who are physically unable to be present or participate in a traditional Eucharist or who lack sufficient internet access to partake in a virtual one—the Eucharist as a dynamic world has its character in shaping the possibilities and attunements of one who belongs to it. Just as the priest and the laity occupy different positions within the same sacramental world, so there is no privileged vantage or point of access. So long as one belongs to the world broadly characterized by the dynamics of the Eucharist, one can come under the sway of Christ's person at work therein. Even where participation in a formal Eucharist is impossible, then, wherever one recognizes the patterns of Christ's behavior as learned in the sacrament to occur outside of the sanctuary, the "muscle memory" kicks in and one can recognize and name what otherwise goes unnamed as Christ's presence in the world. And just as the world of a football match can spring up as easily in a backyard as it can on a regulation pitch, so too can the world of the Eucharist emerge in, say, hospital rooms or around a family's kitchen table, where those with a lifetime of world-participation may be trained to see the same dynamics of Christ at play where they would otherwise go unnoticed. Where the Eucharist is seen as a world, then, Christ's real presence is allowed the freedom to spring up as an unexpected grace rather than a scarce commodity to which we have unequal access.

⁶² Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 92.

through the habituating orientation of bodies in motion. Her assumption that what is most vital about the sacrament can be conveyed through the words of a pastor through online communication overlooks the way that speech is always mooded, and mood is always involved in worlds beneath the plane of the mental. Technology reifies the mental as though it were something that existed in itself, as though thought and language were not themselves practices of embodied involvement in fluid and dynamic worlds. So, to then technologize the Eucharist is to thereby limit its reality to the reality of what is conjured in human words, overlooking how such words are in fact only meaningful as embedded.

By contrast, the Eucharist as a world instills its participants with a taste for Christ's character through the building up of habits and reflexes, so that one's eyes are primed to witness the unpredictable irruption of Christ's presence in foreign worlds. It is thus because Christians are already embedded in such a eucharistic world that there is still hope. In a time of crisis and confusion, when we long for each other's touch and find ourselves starved of the worlds that set our lives in motion, the Christian's attunement to the real presence of Christ may become the lens of her attunement to isolation. Like lovers who have learned to unconsciously read each other's facial expressions and nervous ticks, the Christian whose bodily orientation has been shaped by a lifetime of eucharistic involvement has an eye primed to pick up the dynamics of Christ wherever they emerge. The Christ-in-motion with whom we become pre-consciously familiar in our weekly immersion in the sacrament can, therefore, be reliably recognized in the experiences of fasting, loneliness, wandering in the wilderness, and even despair and abandonment that also constitute Jesus' way of Being-in-the-world. We need not condense Christ's real and ineffable person into the stable things of bread and wine to uncover his presence. Rather, his person may show itself in a new light as the church attunes itself to the world of this particular crisis. Such is the attunement attested in the story of the road to Emmaus, where it is through familiarity with Jesus' particular way of speaking and behaving that the disciples eventually recognize him as who he is and so say "Were not our hearts burning within us?" precisely at the moment when his visible presence evaporates (Lk 24:32). Knowing Christ with such understanding, then, Christians have the familiarity by which to recognize his presence under alternative circumstances and precisely where we do not expect him to be.

V. Conclusion

Times of crisis often (and should) give pause to both the Christian church and its theologians. It is in such moments of confusion, when the strange and absurd rears its head and dissipates the often illusory comforts of our daily lives, that theology is put to the test. In advocating for practices of virtual communion, Deanna Thompson endorses a compassionate response to Christians suffering from fear and loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. So far as her case for the virtuality of the body of Christ is an endorsement for the church's use of online media to communicate and sustain a community of faith, I wholeheartedly agree with her goals. But insofar as her operative

assumption that Christ's presence in the church—and more specifically, the Eucharist—is communicable through speech places an outsized weight on the disembodied mental and our human meaning-making capacity, I find her call for virtual communion to fall into the trap of idolatry.

I have argued along the lines of Martin Heidegger's interpretation of technology in order to show how virtual communion commodifies the Eucharist by capturing Christ's presence within the measuring gaze of human mastery, thereby suffocating the freedom of the risen Christ's true being in the sacrament. As a counter-proposal, I have suggested that, rather than a thing under the objectifying measure of our technological worldview, the Eucharist is better considered as a dynamic world, wherein Christians are shaped according to pre-reflective patterns of involvement that open up the character of the Christ whose risen person is that world. Through such an approach to the sacrament, the once commodified (and therefore idolatrous) "Christ" given by Christians to themselves in a technological communion is cast off to reveal a Christ transparent in his ready-to-hand directing of our actions and so invisible to our objectifying gaze. The goal of my argument has been to de-technologize the Eucharist and so to set out a description of Christian letting-be in the face of the Christ who comes to us mysteriously even as he is eagerly awaited in the meal of bread and wine. Ultimately, my hope is that such a treatment, far from denying the presence of Christ to a church in need, will in fact increase the church's awareness of its unconscious familiarity with the person of Christ already in motion and so help refocus the church's attention well beyond its current challenges.

It is because crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the flaws of earlier eucharistic theologies and shape the adjustments we must make for the future that I find Thompson's discussion of virtual communion worth engaging. If the church is to have an adequate eucharistic theology, it should be a theology that takes times of crisis into account instead of needing to be adapted or accommodated when normal life is interrupted. The world in which this piece is read will invariably look different to the one in which it was written. And yet it is precisely because we live in a world of such rapid change, technologically as well as socially, that theology must address practices of religious life in the context of crisis. It is in the hope of contributing to a more robust eucharistic theology for just such a future that I have here sought to engage with Deanna Thompson's endorsement of virtual communion as a worthwhile conversation for the church, not merely in the time of pandemic but for years to come.

References

- Bradshaw, Paul and Maxwell Johnson. *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Pueblo, 2012.
- Dix, Gregory. *The Shape of the Liturgy*. London: Continuum, 2005.

- Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.
- Dreyfus, Hubert and Charles Spinosa "Further Reflections on Heidegger, Technology, and the Everyday." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 23, no. 5 (October 2003): 339-349.
- Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. Translated by George Elliot. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989.
- Haugeland, John. *Dasein Disclosed: John Haugeland's Heidegger*. Edited by Joseph Rouse. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics." In *Basic Writings*, edited and translated by David Farrell Krell, 267-305. New York: Harper Collins, 2008.
- "On the Essence of Ground." Translated by William McNeill. In *Pathmarks*, edited by William McNeill, 97-135. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- "On the Essence of Truth." In *Basic Writings*, edited and translated by David Farrell Krell, 111-138. New York: Harper Collins, 2008.
- "The Question Concerning Technology." In *Basic Writings*, edited and translated by David Farrell Krell, 307-341. New York: Harper Collins, 2008.
- "The Thing." In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, edited and translated by Albert Hofstadter, 161-184. New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001.
- *Sein und Zeit*. Neunzehnte Auflage. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006.
- Jones, Serene. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Krackhardt, David. "The Strength of Strong Ties: The Importance of Philos in Organizations." In *Networks and Organizations: Structure, Form, and Action*, edited by N. Nohria, et al., 216-239. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1992.
- Mitchell, Andrew. *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015.
- Reed, T.V. *Digitized Lives: Culture, Power and Social Change in the Internet Era*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Thompson, Deanna A. "Being the Body of Christ in a Time of Pandemic and Beyond." Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community. St. Olaf College. April 2, 2020. <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/04/being-the-body-of-christ-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-beyond/>.

----- "Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion." Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community. St. Olaf College. March 26, 2020. <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/>.

----- *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

Withy, Katherine. *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.

----- "Situation and Limitation: Making Sense of Heidegger on Thrownness." *European Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (March 2014): 61-81.

Wolfe, Judith. *Heidegger and Theology*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

‘Midrashic Wishful Thinking’

Constructions of *Esther* in Twenty-First Century Novels

Sorrel Shamel-Wood

Ripon College Cuddesdon, University of Oxford

revdsorrelshamelwood@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper uses tools from feminist literary theory to analyse three twenty-first century novels: *Esther: Royal Beauty* by Angela Hunt (2015); *Esther: A Novel* by Rebecca Kanner (2015) and *The Gilded Chamber* by Rebecca Kohn (2004). The novels are all creative retellings of the Book of Esther, and the paper situates them in the context of a textual reception history which has been characterised by rich and varied ‘aggadic interpretation and a tendency to creatively rewrite, rather than translate, the problematically subversive canonical version. Working from the premise posited by structuralist Gérard Genette, that whenever a text is creatively retold, it is “transvalued” (the derivative text replaces aspects of the target text with the values of its own context), it considers which cultural values are being imputed into twenty-first century retellings of the story. Using Meir Sternberg’s narratological criticism as a framework, which posits that the ways in which readers fill in the “gaps” in texts can either be valid or constitute “misreading”, and drawing upon Daniel Boyarin’s supposition that readers fill in textual gaps with whatever is most culturally contingent, the paper identifies some key “gaps” in the story and analyses how the novels (that is, the “hypotexts”) have filled them. It focuses especially on the characterisation of the main female characters, Esther and Vashti, and the relationship between them. The paper identifies some troubling misogynistic motifs which persist, and are even intensified, in the twenty-first century novels. It also concludes that the detailed characterisation of the characters in the novels, in keeping with the expectations of the novel genre, ultimately constitutes a “misreading”, destabilising the balance of the hypertext.



Introduction

The structuralist Gérard Genette claimed that every time a narrative is rewritten, the text is transvalued. This transformational process, for example extending, redacting or parodying a text, involves the replacement of the value systems of the “hypotext” (the target text) with those of the “hypertext” (the derivative text).¹ To put it another way: aspects of the story are repeated, but the new version is imbued with the ideology of its own context. The aim of this article is to ask: what transvaluation has occurred in three recent transformations of *Esther*?

The “hypertexts” in question are three twenty-first century novels: *Esther: Royal Beauty* by Angela Hunt; *Esther: a Novel* by Rebecca Kanner and *The Gilded Chamber* by Rebecca Kohn.² There is no definitive “hypotext” in this case: as David Clines explores in *The Esther Scroll*, the MT and LXX textual witnesses have a complex literary prehistory which can only ever be hypothetically reconstructed. However, the apocryphal and ‘aggadic additions to the Megillah in the Talmud, Midrashim and Septuagint attest to an enduring tendency to creatively reinterpret aspects of the story. This is, as I shall proceed to explore, arguably testament to *Esther*’s slippery resistance to ideological or theological categorisation, and to its tantalising lacunae. This article will focus on the construction of Esther, the eponymous protagonist, and the extent to which the three twenty-first century “hypertexts” have “transvalued” the character. I shall be using tools from feminist literary criticism in order to shape my approach. Drawing upon the “mad woman in the attic” theory propounded by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, I shall particularly consider the ways in which the anti-heroine, Vashti, functions as a doppelgänger to the protagonist and the extent to which the various writers foreshadow and develop the slippage between them. This comparison will enable an analysis of how elements of monstrosity emerge in the depiction of the female characters, a phenomenon which, following feminist literary thinkers such as Savannah Woodworth, I treat as a litmus test for identifying nuances of cultural change.³

Esther is problematic and subversive. Not only is the Hebrew text famously lacking in any direct references to the tetragrammaton, but from a Torah perspective, Esther’s behaviour at King Ahasuerus’s palace is questionable. There is no indication in the text that she observes food laws or prays during her time at the palace, and her marriage to a gentile king apparently contradicts the much stricter marriage ethic in the similarly post-exilic Ezra-Nehemiah.⁴ Contra Elsie Stern, it probably originated outside of the land and partly functions to legitimise a festival which is not

¹ Gérard Genette, Channa Newman, Claude Doubinsky and Gerald Prince, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

² Angela Hunt, *Esther: Royal Beauty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2015); Rebecca Kanner, *Esther: A Novel* (New York: Howard Books, 2015); Rebecca Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber* (London: Penguin, 2004).

³ Savannah Woodworth, “Monstrous Silhouette: The Development of the Female Monster in British Literature” (Huntsville, TX: Sam Houston State University, 2017).

⁴ See, for example, Martien Halvorson-Taylor, “Displacement and Diaspora in Biblical Narrative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Fewell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

featured in the Pentateuch.⁵ Moreover, as Alice Bach observes, the seductive and sensual Esther arguably has more in common with infamous biblical femme fatales such as Jezebel and Delilah than paradigmatically virtuous Jewish heroines.⁶ It is one of only two books of the Tanakh to bear the name of a female protagonist. The depiction of violent retaliations against the pogroms in the denouement of the story has also caused problems, particularly in the Christian tradition: Luther said of *Esther*, "I am so hostile to this book that I wish it did not exist".⁷

The anomalous nature of the text is evident in its historically unstable canonical status. Frederick Bush states that, in the Christian tradition, there is "little evidence for its canonicity before the end of the second century".⁸ In the Jewish tradition it was not immediately or easily accepted as canonical scripture. Lee Martin McDonald states that, from the second to the fifth centuries CE, there was "so much discussion [...] about whether books like *Ezekiel*, *Ruth*, *Esther*, *Ecclesiastes* and *Sirach* 'defile the hands'".⁹ *Esther* has also not been found at Qumran.¹⁰ Crawford White argues that the Megillah's connection to Purim is probably the reason it is included in the Jewish canon "unlike the very similar book of *Judith*".¹¹ W. Lee Humphreys describes it as a "barely tolerated stepchild".¹²

Concomitant with the book's precarious canonicity and subversive content has been a tendency to treat the story more freely than more central and indisputably canonical texts. Writing in the introduction to the BHQ translation of the MT, Magne Sæbo notes that "the textual history of the Book of Esther shows considerable fluidity"; he draws the reader's attention to "major variants and differences" and a "broad and variegated tradition history".¹³ The Septuagint is, in the words of Crawford White, a "distinctly different literary piece from the MT".¹⁴ Carey Moore describes it as "more or less worthless as a critical witness to the original Hebrew".¹⁵ Similarly, the Targums are, according to Sæbo, "remarkably expansive and paraphrastic".¹⁶ White describes them as "more like midrashic free renderings than strict translations".¹⁷ The midrashim also contain a

⁵ Elsie Stern, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no. 1 (2010), 25-53.

⁶ Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁷ Martin Luther, cited by Sidnie Crawford White, "Esther," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 3, ed. Leander Keck, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 869.

⁸ Frederic Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth, Esther*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1996), 274.

⁹ Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders. *The Canon Debate*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 56.

¹⁰ Martin Abegg Jr, Peter Flint and Eugene Ulrich eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: Translated and with Commentary*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 630.

¹¹ Crawford White, "Esther," 859.

¹² W. Lee Humphreys in Coats, George W. *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (Sheffield: JSOT 159, 1985) 99.

¹³ Magne Sæbo, "Esther" in *Torah, Nevi'im u-Ketuvim: Biblia Hebraica quinta editione cum apparatu critico novis curis elaborato* ed. Schenker, Adrian (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004), 22.

¹⁴ Crawford White, "Esther," 861.

¹⁵ Carey Moore, cited in Bush, *World Biblical Commentary*, 278.

¹⁶ Sæbo, "Esther," 22.

¹⁷ Crawford White, "Esther," 861.

plethora of ‘aggadic interpretations and addendums; an interpretative tradition alongside which the modern novels investigated in this article stand in intertextual dialogue. The protean nature of the versions of the Esther story—we cannot call them translations—is arguably related to its suspect status and subversion. When stumbling upon some of the aforementioned problems in the story’s subject matter, the tendency has been to harmonise, sanitise and theologise the text, particularly in relation to the titular character.¹⁸

This tendency to add creative details to *Esther*, particularly those which function to “transvalue” the story by harmonising it with the recipient community’s ideology, can be explained with reference to Meir Sternberg’s narratological theory. Sternberg argues that texts contain “gaps”: lacunae not explicitly addressed by the narrator. These omissions can be because the ambiguity is more compelling than the closure of interpretative options, because all narrative—especially plot-driven narrative—is necessarily selective and these details were not prioritised, or possibly as a type of self-censorship to avoid offence. According to Sternberg, the reader is the agent of “gap-filling”. He defines “gap-filling” as “restoring the continuity that the narrator broke”.¹⁹ Some gaps, Sternberg suggests, are more interesting than others. For example, in biblical narrative, “violation of biblical norms draws attention to gaps”.²⁰ *Esther* is guilty of “violating” several “biblical norms”, some of which the narrator euphemistically skips over.²¹

Sternberg also recognises that the way readers fill in gaps is culturally contingent. He suggests that the reader “tends to ‘adjust’ the narrated world, as far as possible” to premises and models from his or her own culture. He writes, “the hypothesis that is most conventional in terms of his own culture also yields the simplest and certainly the least demanding answers and linkages”.²² Daniel Boyarin phrases the phenomena thus: “the text of the Torah is gapped and dialogical, and into the gaps the reader slips, interpreting and completing the text in accordance with the codes of his or her culture”.²³ For both Sternberg and Boyarin, then, the resources for “gap-filling” are typically provided through recourse to what is most culturally conventional for the reader. We see that in

¹⁸ For example, the Septuagint additions include Esther’s prayer, which transforms the character into a more pious figure. The midrashim use creative devices to circumvent Esther’s questionable morality: for example, describing an angel taking her place in the king’s bed to preserve her modesty. Several add details that typify Esther with Sarah, such as attributing her with a very old age. Others state that she subscribed to Mosaic food laws during her time in the palace.

¹⁹ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 235.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

²¹ For example, the concise statement in 2:14 “in the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem”. The compound sentence, echoing the liturgical repetition of God’s creative pattern in Genesis 1, illustrates Sternberg’s example of a gap contrived by “temporal displacement”. The details of the young women’s nights spent with the king are brusquely passed over, either to avoid offence or because it is more tantalising to leave the details to the reader’s imagination.

²² Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 189.

²³ Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 14. *Esther* is not in the Torah, but the point stands.

the reception history of *Esther* as in all biblical narrative.²⁴ *Esther: Royal Beauty*, *Esther: A Novel* and *The Gilded Chamber* can all be situated within this tradition of creative revisions that seek to address the Megillah's troubling lacunae. They should be considered, if not as midrash proper, as part of the same phenomena which seeks to grapple with the subversion of a problematic text; evidence of the continued attempt to control and close down troubling "gaps" by making hermeneutical choices. I am interested to ask: what "gaps" have been filled in the construction of *Esther* in the modern novels and, most importantly, what have they been filled *with*? Is their transvaluation of *Esther* in continuity with the conservatising tendencies of the text's interpretative tradition or, alternatively, can they be said to constitute a break from it?

There is a critical precedent for approaching *Esther* scholarship from imaginative angles, particularly in feminist biblical criticism. Danna Fewell, Bea Wyler and Diane Wolkstein all offer their own creative rewritings of the story as a way of commenting on the text.²⁵ Alice Bach speaks of the need to approach the text "playfully" and take a "kaleidoscopic approach".²⁶ Scholars including Mieke Bal, Alice Bach and Zefira Gitay have all used the arts to explore *Esther's* reception history.²⁷ Partly, I think, scholars respond to *Esther* by creatively rewriting the story because it is so problematic from a feminist perspective that they succumb to what Wyler describes as "midrashic wishful thinking".²⁸ However, it is also more radical than that. It is a response to what Esther Fuchs describes as the need for a feminist epistemology which is "revisionist" and "transformational".²⁹ Peggy Day sums up the phenomena thus:

When feminist theologians reshape biblical traditions and retell biblical stories in a way that assigns importance and imports dignity to female characters, or affirms gender equality, or deplores the denigration of women, they are doing what the theological tradition has always done, which is to

²⁴ For example, as Barry Wolfish explores in the essay "Esther in Medieval Garb", Jewish interpretation of *Esther* in the Middle Ages was filtered through medieval cultural and intellectual life. Johannes Serwouters' play *Hester*, first performed in 1659, imagined the potential genocide in the story with inspiration from the contemporary pogroms in Eastern Europe. And in Rembrandt's painting *Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther*, the characters wear clothes typical of the Renaissance court.

²⁵ Danna Nolan Fewell, "Nice Girls Do" in *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 133-196; Bea Wyler, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen" and Diane Wolkstein, "Esther's Story", both in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, Ruth and Susannah* ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 111-134 and 198-207.

²⁶ Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal*; Mieke Bal, "Lots of Writing" in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion* ed. Athalya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 212-238; Zefira Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne" in *Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 136-148.

²⁷ Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal*, 3.

²⁸ Wyler, "Esther," 134.

²⁹ Esther Fuchs, "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women: The Neoliberal Turn in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24 (2008), 64.

read and retell the story in light of contemporary experience and as an affirmation of their values and worldview.³⁰

The key questions I will be asking are: with the details Hunt, Kanner and Kohn use to delineate and embellish the character of Esther, in what “light” are they retelling the story? To what extent can these literary recreations of *Esther* be considered “revisionist” and “transformational”, in addition to being rooted in and in dialogue with the reception history of the text? Do their transvaluations of the character spiritualise and theologise her, and attempt to harmonise her subversive sexuality and authority to biblical norms? Or are they doing something quite different?

There is a plethora of fictional versions of *Esther*, in the mediums of film, theatre, visual art and literature.³¹ Due to the spatial limits of this project and to allow for some depth of interpretation, I have chosen to focus on just three novels. Although any generic overlap between the novels and a post-exilic *Diasporanovelle* should not be overstated, I chose novels partly because, as written texts, they share a formal proximity to the biblical text and to the Targums and Midrashim that other mediums, such as visual arts, do not. I chose these specific novels because they are recent (published in 2015 and 2004), they are written in English, they focus specifically and entirely on Esther, and they are written in prose. Beyond that, I selected the novels for their circulation statistics, and by the size and distribution scope of their publishing companies. The aim was not to attempt a scientific mode of data sampling and I do not make any universalistic claims about my findings: I merely wish to interrogate three twenty-first century creative reconstructions of the character of Esther and consider what they might be implying about the cultural milieu of the hypertexts’ thought-world.

I. Esther: Subject or Object?

In *The Second Sex*, first published in France in 1949, de Beauvoir argued that “woman” is typically conceptualised in dualistic opposition to “man”, with man as “subject” and woman as an objectified “other”. She wrote:

She is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called “the sex,” meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.³²

³⁰ Peggy Day ed., *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 2.

³¹ See, for example, Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) and Anne Stewart, “Esther (Book and Person)” in *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception* eds. Allison C. Dale et al (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 2014).

³² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* trans. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Random House, 2010), 26.

The postmodern distrust of binaries has problematised de Beauvoir's categories of man = subject, woman = other. Almost seventy years later, critical theory is less comfortable with essentialist constructions of gender, and more conscious of the multi-layered intersectionality that underpins power dynamics and social identity. This development serves to accentuate the rendering of Esther as "other": not only is she a woman in a patriarchal society, but also ethnically other: a threatened minority in a totalitarian Persian court, a "Jew" in the first biblical text to understand that term as signifying socio-ethnic and religious, rather than geographical, identity. As such, Esther epitomises "other"; Timothy Beal, Joshua Berman, Anne-Mareike Wetter, Angeline Song and Daniel Smith-Christopher all examine this intersectional otherness in recent essays. Late to mid-twentieth century feminist biblical scholarship tended to deride Esther for her passivity and submission to objective status, taking what Fuchs labels as a "gynocritic approach".³³ However, in contrast to this, more recent criticism has recognised her submission as a survival tactic, personifying the compromises demanded for the survival of the Jewish nation in a Diaspora existence.

Broadly speaking, we might expect the twenty-first century novels to reflect the feminist trajectory of the Western cultural consciousness, dignifying the character of Esther with more subjectivity than the ancient texts and 'aggadic commentaries, or possibly highlighting and deconstructing her multi-layered otherness. Not only are they written by women (in so far as we wish to accept that as an essentialist category), but they are more closely aligned to the protagonist's perspective: *Esther: A Novel* and *Gilded Chamber* are entirely written from the first-person narrative perspective of Esther, and *Royal Beauty* utilises a split narrative perspective, oscillating between Esther and the eunuch Harbonah. In contrast to this, Bush argues that the MT is most closely aligned to King Ahasureus' and Haman's perspective; Beal also notes that the text "never explicitly conceives of the inner lives of its Jewish heroine Esther, its Jewish hero Mordecai, or [...] Vashti" but "only those of King Ahasureus and Haman".³⁴ For Beal it is these two powerful men who are the subjects of the story, albeit with "a highly insecure subjectivity that is never fully in possession of itself".³⁵

Is it the case, then, that these novels reconstruct *Esther* by shifting the eponymous protagonist from object to subject? The answer is not that straightforward. Some critics have characterised Esther in the biblical story as a passive object, passed from the ownership and control of one man to another, with very little autonomy or control over her fate.³⁶ However, she is also the eponymous protagonist of the story; Brenner suggests that the text "makes a female character visible" in contrast to the invisibility of women in the vast majority of historical or historiographical

³³ Fuchs, "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women," 53.

³⁴ Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 315; Timothy Beal, "'Who Filled His Heart to do this': Conceptual Metaphors of the Self in the Book of Esther," *JOT* 40.1 (2015), 106.

³⁵ Beal, "Conceptual Metaphors of the Self," 98.

³⁶ See, for example, Angeline Song, "Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model?: A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of the Character of Esther". *Dialog* 49 (2010), pp. 56–69.

records.³⁷ It is, to use a trite and clichéd pun, a *herstory*, as opposed to a history (although the scholarly consensus is that the text has very few connections to specific historical events).

Some critics identify a progression in Esther's character throughout the biblical story: a development in confidence and autonomy as she adopts the role of queen and takes responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people. Bush sums up this character progression by stating that "she begins as a nonentity, valued in the courtly world only for her good looks and body" but "becomes a force to be reckoned with" and "the main agent in effecting [the Jewish people's] deliverance".³⁸

Several scholars identify a peripety in the narrative concerning Esther's character in Chapter Four, during which the power shifts from Mordecai to her and she arguably takes control of events.³⁹ Bush describes Esther's acceptance of Mordecai's "challenge" to use her position as queen for the good of her people as the "decisive moment" in the story.⁴⁰ Rivkah Lubitch writes, "at a certain point in the story [...] she 'snaps' out of the dream world she has been in and assumes a role which is good enough for any feminist".⁴¹ Fox describes the change as "abrupt"; the OBC describes it as "the turning point of the tale".⁴² This difference is specifically pinpointed as occurring between 4:8 and 4:15. In verse 8, we read that Mordecai sends Esther a command via an envoi: *לצוות עליה* ("to declare it to her").⁴³ However, by verse 15 it is Esther who has taken control: *ותאמר אסתר לך להשיב אל-מרדכי* ("Esther told them in reply to Mordecai, 'Go...']").

The 3fs *waw* consecutive imperfect *tō'mer* identifies Esther as the subject of an action and affords her direct speech for the first time in the Megillah. Moreover, the 2ms imperative *lēk*, unequivocally identifiable as an imperative by the weak verb losing its final *Hē*, renders Esther fully in control of the discourse. Her command that Mordecai should "go" even evokes YHWH's call to Abraham in Genesis 12. Moreover, the repetition of two morphological variants of the *Piel* *צוה* ("command", "charge", "instruct", "enjoin")⁴⁴ in 4:8 and 4:17 emphasises that it is now Esther who is issuing commands and Mordecai who is obeying them:

³⁷ Klara Butting, "Esther: a New Perspective of the Joseph Story in the Fight against Anti-Semitism and Sexism" in Athalya Brenner ed. *Ruth and Esther: a Feminist Companion to the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999. pp. 239-248.

³⁸ Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 321.

³⁹ I am aware that biblical chapters are a paratextual addition dating from the 13th century CE, but I refer to them for ease of identification.

⁴⁰ Bush, *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Rivkah Lubitch, "A Feminist's Look at Esther", *Judaism* 42, no. 4 (1993), 438.

⁴² Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 28.

⁴³ All translations are my own.

⁴⁴ David Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 376.

ויעבר מרדכי ויעש ככל אשר-צותה עליו אסתר ("And Mordecai went away and did everything that Esther had commanded"). The OBC remarks: "Esther has her own voice now and is now acting in her own right, no longer under her mentor's direction".⁴⁵

It could be argued, then, that although Esther is first introduced in the story as a patriarchal object: הנערה ("the girl") in 2:9 and אסתר בת-אביהל ("Esther, daughter of Abihail") in 2:15, by 2:22 she is אסתר המלכה ("Queen Esther"); a new title to accompany significant—but limited—new power and status. Critics debate the extent to which Esther is afforded any real power or autonomy in the biblical text. For example, Song describes her as "a complex character who started out being passive, but who develops as the narrative progresses".⁴⁶ Fuchs, on the other hand, claims that both Ruth and Esther are "agents rather than free actants" who "obey rather than initiate".⁴⁷ Beal insists on a translation of המלכה as "the king's wife" because "queen" "implies an autonomous authority that Esther never displays".⁴⁸

Even if the character of Esther does undergo a significant shift in the direction of autonomy and subjectivity in the biblical story, it could be argued that this change is only temporary, and only born of the un-ideal circumstances of Diaspora existence, in which the normal rules of "the land" do not apply. It is also possible that the ending of the text functions to re-subsume the character of Esther into an orthodox, patriarchal/androcentric schema by rendering her abject: having served the function of securing a reversal of the threatened pogroms, she is ultimately punished for transgressing the acceptable sphere of Jewish morality and female behaviour by being banished from the narrative. Esther is not featured at all in Chapter 10 of the biblical text, effectively disappearing with no indication about her ultimate fate, and it is Mordecai who is credited with גדלות ("high honour", "greatness") and רצוי ("popularity", "esteem") as well as being משנה ("second") to King Ahasuerus.

Several scholars, including Clines, argue that Chapter 10 has a "different literary prehistory" from the rest of the text and demonstrates evidence of redactional layers.⁴⁹ It as if an MT redactor felt compelled to add to a proto-Esther, which Clines suggests was similar to the A-Text in the LXX, in order to render it more acceptable or canonically justifiable. Conservative, conventional endings are famously effective at counterbalancing more radical features in a narrative proper and reassuring reactionary readers: for example, *Jane Eyre* concludes with a biblical quotation, as if to reassure readers who were unsettled by the more progressive "Reader, I married him".⁵⁰

⁴⁵ "Commentary on Esther." In *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford Biblical Studies Online.

⁴⁶ Angeline Song, "Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model?: A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of the Character of Esther," *Dialog* 49 (2010), 62.

⁴⁷ Fuchs cited in Song, "A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of Esther," 62.

⁴⁸ Beal, "Conceptual Metaphors of the Self," 650.

⁴⁹ David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1984), 49. Also Bush, 293.

⁵⁰ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin, 1992), 618.

Perhaps, then, it is possible to trace a conservative impulse in the reception history of Esther, in which a remarkably autonomous female character is gradually shifted to a more peripheral position. The reference in 2 Maccabees 15:26 to “Mordecai’s Day” is certainly in keeping with this theory.

However, the ‘aggadic material in both the Talmuds and the Midrashim tell a much more complicated story. For example, Talmud B. Meg. 7a presents an assertive Esther who demands to be written into history:

Esther sent to the Wise Men saying, “Commemorate me for generations!” They sent back to her, “You will awaken the envy of the nations against us.” She sent back to them, “I am already recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia”.⁵¹

She is presented here as a strong figure, arguing for inclusion in the Tanakh on the grounds that she is already recorded in the Persian chronicles (MT 10:22). Talmudic thought is by no means monolithic. Bernard Grossman notes that “the Targums were translated at different times, and most probably for varying purposes, and have more than one interpretative approach to the Hebrew Bible”.⁵²

Leila Bronner also traces some key trends in rabbinic constructions of Esther in her essay “Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach”. Firstly, she notes that the rabbis did not criticise or challenge Esther’s leadership qualities to the extent that they did with Deborah. Secondly, she highlights the tendency for the Midrash and Talmuds to imbue Esther with prophetic powers; she writes, “The rabbis saw in Esther a spirit of prophecy, which strengthened her and enabled her to wield power to save her people”.⁵³ Lubitch agrees, stating that the rabbis attributed Esther with “amazing courage and authority” in the midrashim.⁵⁴ However, this celebration of Esther as a powerful, assertive prophet did not equate to ascribing the character with augmented subjectivity or autonomy; in fact, the inverse is the case. Bronner states that, “Rabbinic literature, by emphasizing God’s constant assistance, in a way diminishes Esther’s personal strength and independence of action; but it also increases her spirituality, which was, after all, where rabbinic interest lay”.⁵⁵ Thus, Esther functions as a sort of conduit for God’s power in the rabbinic hypertexts; a way of asserting God’s presence in a story from which it was otherwise problematically absent. The foregrounding of Esther’s strength and piety in the text, therefore, is a symptom of the rabbi’s theological schema rather a project in itself.

⁵¹ Talmud B. Meg. 7a, cited in Judith Z. Abrams, *The Talmud for Beginners Volume II* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), 25.

⁵² Bernard Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark: 1991), vii.

⁵³ Leila Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994), 193.

⁵⁴ Lubitch, “A Feminist’s Look at Esther,” 446.

⁵⁵ Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 197.

I shall now turn to the three twenty-first century novels, and their constructions of the character of Esther. To what extent do they depict her as an autonomous agent in the texts? Do they ascribe her with subjectivity in a way that the biblical story does not? Firstly, all three novels are significantly longer than the canonical version of the story in the Hebrew Bible. Naturally, this gives them more space to embellish the plot with imagined details, and we should therefore expect the character to be more delineated, and to develop more subtly and along a wider narrative arc, than in the biblical version.

Both *Royal Beauty* and *Esther: A Novel* imagine some degree of character development for the eponymous protagonist. Hunt initially exposites Esther as a silly, wistful thirteen year old who “dreamed of visiting the palace”, who has a crush on her Persian friend Parysatis’s “handsome brother” and who pushes the boundaries by sneaking out to meet her friends at the market place.⁵⁶ After first believing herself to be in love with Ahasuerus when she is chosen to be his queen at the palace, she ultimately realises that “clearly, the king cared more for his honour than for me or my people”.⁵⁷ The novel ends on an anti-climactic note after the dramatic reversal of the Jews’ fortune: Esther realises that her husband’s eyes are “as wide and blank as windows” because “the soul they harboured had long since flown away” but resolves to continue in her duty to “respect him, honour him, and obey him. And through it all, to love him”.⁵⁸ The split-narrative perspective ends in Harbonah’s voice for the final two chapters, as he fills in the imagined detail that, “After the king’s death, my beloved friend Queen Esther and her maids left the queen’s palace and retired to quiet rooms in the harem”.⁵⁹

Thus, in a notably similar way to the MT, Esther disappears at the end of *Royal Beauty*. In Hunt’s case, this may be as a result of her incorporation of extra-biblical ancient sources into the account. Hunt draws on Herodotus’s *The Histories* to fill in some of the gaps in the biblical text: equating Amestris with the Biblical Vashti, she refers to the fact that it was Amestris’ three sons who were in line to the throne after Xerxes (Ahasuerus). It may be, therefore, that she banishes Esther to a “quiet” life at the end of her novel, and emphasises her childlessness, in order to correlate the story with the details in the Greek Chronicle. Hunt is writing from a “Christian perspective”⁶⁰, and of the three modern novels takes by far the most maximalist approach to the biblical text. She states that she “never knowingly contradicts the biblical account” and asserts that Herodotus “did not mention a queen called Esther, but just because he didn’t mention her doesn’t mean she didn’t exist”.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Hunt, *Esther*, 28; 27; 30.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 319.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 329.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 336.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 340.

⁶¹ Ibid, 342.

This hermeneutical framework also shapes the arc of the titular character's development: Hunt describes *Esther* as a "story of how God worked within a pagan culture to sustain His people... and drew the heart of a distracted daughter back to himself".⁶² We therefore trace a character who begins as frivolous and charmed by the worldly delights of Persian culture, to end as more pious and spiritual. However, unlike the powerful female prophet figure imagined in the 'aggadic imagination, by the end of Hunt's novel, Esther epitomises the complementarian perspective of conservative, Reformed Protestant Christianity: her final words at the end of the text, in which she resolves to "respect" and "obey" her husband and do her "duty", echo the marriage vows of traditional Christian liturgy. Hunt's Esther has more agency and subjectivity than the Esther imagined by the rabbis, and—by the end of the novel—uses her free will to voluntarily subject herself to the submissive role in a marriage which originated in capture. It is, perhaps, the Stockholm Syndrome of a woman who by that time has spent more than half her life effectively imprisoned in a palace, or the consummate female construct of reactionary fantasy.

Despite notably similar tropes throughout the story, which I shall explore further in due course, Kanner's ending is very different. Kanner departs from the biblical ending to imagine that, eight years after the biblical narrative closes, Esther elopes from the palace with Erez, a soldier in Ahasuerus's court and a clandestine Jew. She writes:

I had not been outside the palace for fifteen years. Half my life. When I fled, my crown would not go with me. I unpinned it without my servant's help and stood feeling its weight upon my head one last time. I thought of all I had done to get it, how hard I had struggled to keep it, and the many people who had helped me.

Am I ready for another journey?

My hands were steady as I took off the crown and set it on a table beside the bed. *Yes, I am ready.*⁶³

If Hunt's ending is Revelation 22:20, Kanner's is "Reader, I married him". The proliferation of active verbs in the closing paragraphs ("I fled", "I thought", "I unpinned") strongly imbues the character with autonomy and agency, and is reminiscent of MT Esther's turnaround in Chapter Four. This version, however, is no less problematic from a feminist standpoint: Kanner's Esther first encounters Erez as the soldier who kidnapped her from her village at the beginning of the novel. Like Hunt, Kanner draws upon detail from Herodotus, describing Erez and his fellow soldiers as "Immortals". Unlike Hunt, there is no exposition of the Persian setting or establishment of Esther's character at the beginning of the novel. The story begins *in media res* with Esther's kidnap. The reader first encounters Erez on the second page of the novel, in the following sentence: "He pulled me from my straw mattress, threw me over his shoulder, and began walking. My head fell against

⁶² Ibid, 345.

⁶³ Kanner *Esther: A Novel*, 376.

his armour".⁶⁴ The ending is a stark grammatical reversal of this sentence: Esther begins the novel as object, and ends as active subject, indicating a development that, unlike the MT and Hunt's re-creation, is not curtailed or lessened by a more conservative ending. However, the *Beauty and the Beast*-esque denouement of captive falling in love with captor is still unsettling, and is no way alluded to in either the MT or any of the 'aggadic traditions.

In contrast to *Royal Beauty* and *Esther: A Novel*, *Gilded Chamber* constructs an Esther who is notably less different at the end of the novel than she is at the beginning. Drawing upon midrashic sources which understood Esther to be married to her cousin Mordecai, Kohn establishes a situation in which Esther and Mordecai are betrothed. Kohn writes:

I was still an infant when Mordechai [sic] came into full beard. But our parents wanted to preserve and strengthen the family by uniting their children in marriage. Mordechai agreed to the match and so we were betrothed. I, Hadassah daughter of Avihail son of Shemei, was two years old. Mordechai son of Yair son of Shemei, was twenty.⁶⁵

Kohn imagines an Esther who feels positive about the match, and clings onto its prospect throughout her time in the harem. In this version of the story, Mordecai is presented as a sinister character who fails to adequately protect Esther when she is captured:

I told myself that Mordechai did not fight because he did not have a soldier's strength and had no chance of succeeding against them. He did not argue because the king's edict was issued with no provision for exceptions. He did not bribe the soldiers by mention of his wealth and influence in the king's court because he knew the disobedient would be subject to cruel punishment.⁶⁶

Kohn invites the reader to disagree with Esther's excusal of her guardian and interpret Mordecai as a suspect figure. However, unlike Hunt and Kanner's versions, which portray Esther reaching a greater level of self-awareness by the end of the novel, Kohn's Esther ends as naïve and deluded as she was at the beginning. The novel ends with the following two sentences:

Each morning I wake filled with hope that this is the day I will be reunited with my beloved cousin. Each night I pray that he will find me worthy of his love.⁶⁷

Unlike the MT and *Royal Beauty*, the narrative ends in Esther's voice. However, unlike the self-assurance and self-actualisation conveyed in Kanner's story, the reader is left doubting that Esther's subjectivity is rooted in reality, or that it is accompanied by any autonomy. She is more like Haman in Chapter Six of the MT, whose perception is recognised as erroneous by the reader through

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁵ Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 353.

the device of dramatic irony. However, whilst Haman's delusion is accompanied by a sense of poetic justice, here there is only pathos.

It would seem like a reasonable hypothesis that we could trace a progressive line of increasingly feminist tendencies in the reception history of *Esther*, and that imaginative rewritings of the text, particularly some two generations after Simone de Beauvoir, would shift the character from object to subject when retelling the story from her perspective. So far, a brief survey of some of the text's creative revisions indicates that this is by no means straightforwardly the case. Whilst MT Esther is not unequivocally the subject of the text, we cannot rightly label her a mere object, either: there is some degree of agency and autonomy evidenced in her character at points in the story, although this is not sustained all the way to the closure of the narrative. The rabbinic interpretations of the text appear to both strengthen and weaken the character's subjective status, in an idiosyncratic and theologically-driven way. The twenty-first century texts are by no means monolithic, and shifting the narrative perspective to first person does not automatically increase the character's agency or autonomy. The feminist trend to rewrite history as *herstory* is problematic with regard to *Esther*, because to some extent the text defied the generally androcentric ideology in the Hebrew Bible and has therefore arguably always been her story. In considering the filling in of "gaps" in the text, already we see that not all gaps are created equal, and that beginnings, endings and critical junctures in the text are by far the strongest indicators of the re-imagined story's ideology.

II. Esther and Vashti

"Take an Esther, let Vashti go!" *Luther: The Estate of Marriage*, 1522⁶⁸

A significant aspect of the construction of Esther as a character, both in the "hypotexts" of the MT and LXX and the "hypertexts" by Kanner, Kohn and Hunt, is the way in which Esther and Vashti function as foils of each other. In this section, I will use the feminist literary criticism of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to consider whether the contrast between the only two named female characters in the text is simply an antithetical dichotomy between a virtuous and villainous woman, or whether the dynamic is more complex. Do the twenty-first century recreations demonstrate the capacity to construct a conceptual framework in which women are more than just vacuous victims of the patriarchy or manipulative misandrists? Does their "gap-filling" strategy reinforce or challenge female literary archetypes?

Gilbert and Gubar posit that, across literary genres, women are characterised according to "the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster'".⁶⁹ The "angel" constitutes the perfect, passive, virginal

⁶⁸ Susan Karant-Nunn and Merry Wiesner-Hanks Ed. *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 105.

⁶⁹ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 17.

woman who is so ethereal that she “simultaneously inhabits both this world and the next”.⁷⁰ In contrast to this, the monster is a “representative of otherness; she incarnates the damning otherness of the flesh, rather than the inspiring otherness of the Spirit”.⁷¹ Drawing upon the work of de Beauvoir, to which I referred in the previous section, they argue that:

[T]he female monster is a striking illustration of Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that woman has been made to represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death. As the Other, woman comes to represent the contingency of life, life that is made to be destroyed.⁷²

Crucial to the relationship between the “angel” and “monster” women in the text is an anxiety that the dichotomy is unstable, and that there is a precarious slippage between them. The “angel” is constantly threatened by the “monster”, who may destroy or usurp her at any time. Hence there is “always a wicked stepmother trying to chase the virgin” and “the monster may not only be concealed behind the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within”.⁷³

Whilst Gilbert and Gubar focus their thesis on nineteenth century literature, most famously on the “mad woman in the attic” in *Jane Eyre*, they argue that the phenomenon is evidenced throughout a much longer period of literary history. They suggest it can be found “descending from Patristic misogynists like Tertullian and St Augustine through Renaissance and Restoration literature”.⁷⁴ Might it be possible to identify the trope as far back as Esther and Vashti in the Hebrew Bible? And if not, where might we begin to see its influence creeping into literary recreations of the story?

The reader of the Hebrew Bible first meets Vashti in 1:9. Unlike Esther, we meet her as an active agent as the subject of the verb (עשתה *‘āśētah*: 3 fs. *Qal*), and we discover that she gave (literally “did”, “executed” or “performed”) a banquet.⁷⁵ Wolkstein notes that “Vashti is the first acting subject in the narrative other than the king”.⁷⁶ However, the next reference to her in 1:11 indicates that Vashti is very much an object; not only grammatically (as indicated by the object marker), but thematically. The inebriated king calls the seven eunuchs to bring his wife before him in order to להראות (*Hiphil*: “to display”, “to let see”, “to cause to see”, “to show”) her beauty.⁷⁷

Whereas I explored in the previous section how Esther's subject/object status is ambiguous and shifts throughout the story, Vashti categorically refuses to submit to being treated as an object.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁷¹ Ibid., 28.

⁷² Ibid., 34.

⁷³ Ibid., 28; 29.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁵ Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 326.

⁷⁶ Wolkstein, “Esther's Story,” 105.

⁷⁷ Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 409.

We are told that she **תמאן** (“refused”: **מאן** always takes the *Piel*) to come at the king’s **דבר** “word” (“command” arguably works better in this context, given the wide semantic range of Biblical Hebrew lexemes).

Some critics have postulated that her refusal may have been as a result of the king treating her like a concubine, rather than his queen, by calling her to appear at the men’s banquet after the dinner had finished—a space which only lower status females such as dancers would typically have occupied.⁷⁸ Regardless of her motivation, the text makes it clear that Vashti’s behaviour is interpreted as monstrous by the Persian court. The ramifications of her action are explored in 2:16-19 in a semantic field of hyperbolically negative language. Vashti has **עושה** (*Hipil*: “done wrong”, “committed iniquity”, “transgressed”, “been deceptive”, “been treacherous”, “brought ruin”, “subverted”, “falsified”). Her insubordination threatens to destabilise the hierarchical order of the Persian system. The conduct of the queen will “go out” (**יצא**) and cause the women to despise (**להבזות**: appears here in the *Hipil* for the only time in the HB) their husbands. Of **בזיון** (“disrespect”, “despising”, “contempt”) and **קצף** (“anger”, “frustration”, “wrath”, “judgement”, “punishment”, “resentment”) there will be “no end” (**כדי**).⁷⁹ In other words, Vashti’s monstrosity is contagious: it has the potential to infect the other women in a limitless epidemic of monstrosity. The Persian court’s histrionic fear is arguably satirical here, but the trope is still evidenced nonetheless.

As a result of Vashti’s noncompliance, she is banished from the presence of the king (1:19) and also from the text. There is no indication of what happens to the character after her deposal; she simply disappears. Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror* is helpful for explaining the court’s exaggerated knee-jerk reaction here. Kristeva suggests that anything that threatens the distinction between subject and object, inhabiting the liminal space between them, threatens the symbolic order and disturbs conventional cultural concepts. It is thus rendered “abject” and has to be expunged.⁸⁰ The monstrosity of Vashti is that she is an object who behaves like a subject, and the cognitive dissonance provoked by such confusing, paradigm-destabilising behaviour means that she has to go. Or, to use the starker words of Mary Gendler: “she lives in eternal exile; the ultimate bitch; the woman who said no!”⁸¹

Except that Vashti refuses to disappear. Vashti lingers in the text after she has been banished, by haunting the memory of the king. We are told in 2:1 that King Ahasuerus “remembered” (**זכר** *Qal* 3ms perfect: “called to mind”, “recalled experience”, “was mindful of”) Vashti and what she did

⁷⁸ André LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel’s Tradition*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 55.

⁷⁹ All definitions are from Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*.

⁸⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 11.

⁸¹ Mary Gendler, “The Restoration of Vashti” in Elizabeth Koltun ed. *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 244.

(ואת אשר-עשתה). Bush suggests that what Vashti “did” could be construed in a sexual sense.⁸² The point, though, is that Vashti remains in the text after she is supposed to have left. Her irrepressible invincibility is further evidence of her monstrosity: Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the “monster” also represents “the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained ‘place’ and thus generates a story that ‘gets away’ from its author”.⁸³

The rabbis were fascinated with Vashti: her charismatic presence dominates the Targums and the Midrashim, threatening to overshadow the eponymous protagonist. They add copious details to delineate her character. Some serve to accentuate her monstrosity, for example the bestial language “raven” and “she-wolf” employed in *Esther Rabbah One*.⁸⁴ The *Bavli Megillah* includes the detail that Vashti grew a tail.⁸⁵ The *Targum Rishnon* refers to the “wicked Vashti” and “the sinful Vashti”, and credits her with halting the rebuilding of the temple.⁸⁶ It also states that she made Israelite girls work naked and made them beat wool and flax on the Sabbath.⁸⁷ The sense of the infectiousness of the monstrous is implied in the detail in the *Bavli Megillah* that she refused to appear for the king on account of having leprosy.⁸⁸ The *Targum Sheni* describes how, at the banquet, she poured the women large glasses of wine, then took them to the king’s bedroom and “told them everything; whatever the women wanted to know”.⁸⁹ The scene is reminiscent of a raucous hen party.

There is an ambivalence in the rabbis’ characterisation of Vashti. Some emphasise her subjectivity and augment her high status. The *Targum Rishon* traces her lineage to Nebuchadnezzar.⁹⁰ In *Esther Rabbah I*, sugyot 1:9 states, “four women took over the government in the world. [...] Jezebel and Athaliah in Israel, Semiramis and Vashti among the nations”.⁹¹ The *Targum Sheni* also gives her a lengthy monologue in direct speech. It begins: “This is disgraceful! Go tell your foolish master that you are also fools like him. I am a queen, the daughter of kings [...] I am Queen Vashti...”.⁹²

However, in contrast to this increased subjectivity, in other places she is emphatically an object. In *Esther Rabbah I*, the king refers to her as “the utensil that I use”.⁹³ There is also a tradition, prevalent across the Targums and the Midrashim, that the king demanded Vashti appear before him and his

⁸² Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 357.

⁸³ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 28.

⁸⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 90, 86.

⁸⁵ Undwin, Rav Shmuel. *Talmud Bavli Tractate Megillah*. (Brooklyn, NY: Menucha, 2014), 103.

⁸⁶ Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 28, 34.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 35.

⁸⁸ Undwin, *Talmud Bavli Tractate Megillah*, 103.

⁸⁹ Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 127.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 28.

⁹¹ Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 83.

⁹² Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 129.

⁹³ Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 94.

courtiers naked.⁹⁴ In Neusner's translation of *Esther Rabbah I*, we find the detail that "she wanted to come in wearing at least a bikini, like a whore, but they wouldn't allow it".⁹⁵

Across the Palestinian Targums and the Midrashim there is the consensus that Vashti was executed, with the *Targum Rishon* adding the detail that her head was removed.⁹⁶ Perhaps that was assumed given the context of a totalitarian power structure governed by an erratic and wrathful monarch. Perhaps this detail served to emphasise the danger of Esther's situation and consequently her bravery. An alternate explanation is that the expulsion of the "monster" was deemed too ambiguous in the biblical text, and the rabbis needed to be sure that her presence, and contagious influence, was really gone. Either way, Vashti was not gone: she continues to be regenerated and further elaborated upon in literary recreations of the text.

This identification of Vashti as a "monster" is crucial for understanding the construction of Esther as a character in the biblical text. Esther functions in opposition to Vashti, but is also infected with some of her monstrous characteristics as the narrative progresses.

Vashti's deposal provides the catalyst for Esther's arrival in the narrative, and as such, the former queen predominantly functions as a plot device to explain why the king needs a new queen (although the reception history suggests that Vashti far transcends that peripheral role in the reader's imagination). 1:19 states that the king wishes to give Vashti's "royal position" (מלכותה) to "a contemporary" of her (לרעותה); one who is "better than her" (הטובה ממנה). Holmstedt and Screnock translate this as "someone like her who is better than her" and note that the adjective טוב has already been used in the text to describe Vashti.⁹⁷ Thus, Esther's selection as the new queen is in response to, and in dialogue with, the characteristics and behaviour of the previous queen. In 2:17 we read: ימליכה תחת ושתי ("he made her queen instead of Vashti").

Esther is made queen תחת: "instead of", "in place of", "as a substitute for", "in exchange for", "in replacement of", "in succession to", "on account of" Vashti.⁹⁸ By 2:22, she has usurped Vashti's appositional title: she has become אסתר המלכה and stepped into the space formally occupied by the previous queen. Holmes and Screnock state, "Esther, the antitype to Vashti, now occupies that role".⁹⁹ Even the detail in 2:17 that the king sets the royal crown on Esther's head "recalls that he wanted Vashti to wear the crown".¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 28.

⁹⁷ Robert Holmstedt and John Screnock. *Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 68.

⁹⁸ Clines ed., *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, 486.

⁹⁹ Holmstedt and Screnock, *Esther: A Handbook*, 101.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Thus, Esther is Vashti's more compliant and submissive replacement, but in emphasising the differences between them, the text also underlines their similarities. Indeed, there is arguably an uncanny slippage between the two queens. Esther only secures the salvation of the Jewish people by directly, publicly disobeying the king, just as Vashti did. However, her disobedience is the opposite of Vashti's. Vashti refused to appear when she was summoned, whereas Esther took the initiative of appearing when she was not summoned, an action the text emphasises was illegal. Bal states:

Against many commentators who emphasize Esther's obedience, it must be stressed that she is more like Vashti than they care to admit. Each is guilty of disobedience in terms of approaching the king, hence taking control over her relationship with her husband.¹⁰¹

Holmstedt and Screnock note the lexical and grammatical parallels between the text's descriptions of the two women. Both give banquets; Vashti in 1:9 and Esther in 5:5 and 6:14. The language is very similar: in 1:9 we read that "Vashti the queen prepared a banquet": *וַשְׁתִּי הַמַּלְכָּה עָשְׂתָה מִשְׁתָּה*. In 5:12 we read about "the banquet which she [Esther] prepared": *הַמִּשְׁתָּה אֲשֶׁר-עָשְׂתָה*. The dramatic, suspenseful moment in 5:2 when the king sees Esther at the banquet and he is pleased functions like a rerun of the moment when Vashti refused to appear, and he was filled with rage (1:12). It is as if Esther has learnt from Vashti's mistake. Whereas Vashti was directly disobedient, Esther plans a more subtle, gradual approach, building up to her request over the course of two banquets.

Both Butting and Beal recognise that Esther learns from Vashti and is, to some extent, haunted by the disappearance of her predecessor. Butting writes:

For Esther, Vashti's story becomes a living source from which she takes directives for her own resistance. [...] Esther's plan would not be conceivable without Vashti's refusal. [...] There is public power hidden in Vashti's broken-off story that is available to Esther.¹⁰²

Beal states:

Esther fills the space from which Vashti was erased—but not entirely. Vashti is the supplement that Esther requires. Her erasure marks on Esther's character remember the extremes to which this ridiculous patriarchy will go to in order to maintain itself.¹⁰³

For both Beal and Butting, it is learning from Vashti's example which gives Esther the resources to challenge the apparently insurmountable patriarchal strictures in the court. Whilst Vashti's blatant

¹⁰¹ Bal, "Lots of Writing," 227.

¹⁰² Klara Butting, "Esther: a New Perspective of the Joseph Story in the Fight against Anti-Semitism and Sexism" in Athalya Brenner ed. *Ruth and Esther: a Feminist Companion to the Bible*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 246.

¹⁰³ Beal, "Conceptual Metaphors of the Self," 105.

insistence on subjectivity was too stark, too overtly monstrous, for the context in which she should conform to being an object and an “other”, Esther shifts from object to subject more covertly.

However, by the end of the text Esther has indubitably adopted some of Vashti’s more monstrous characteristics. Most notably, she demands Haman’s ten sons should be “hanged on the gallows” (9:13). The demand, an intertextual, prophetic reversal of Saul’s failure to destroy the Agag in 1 Samuel 15, casts Esther as the ultimate monster: a child-killer. The child killer, epitomised in the monstrous female characters of Medea and Lady Macbeth, is the anti-female, the consummate dangerous threat.

Esther, then, is partly constructed as Vashti’s doppelgänger in the text. She is the antithetical “angel” to Vashti’s “monster”, but is also infected by Vashti’s monstrous assertiveness, subjectivity and violence.

If the “angel/monster” motif is already demonstratively present in the biblical version of the story, the trend is considerably further developed in the twenty-first century novels. In *Esther: Royal Beauty*, Hunt departs from the rabbinic tradition—which assumes Vashti was killed for her disobedience—to imagine that she retained a prominent position in the court as “mother of the crown prince”; a detail she gleaned from Herodotus. This interpretation means that Vashti remains throughout the text, not just as a symbolic or remembered presence as she does in the midrashim, but as a real, physical presence.

Hunt describes Vashti as a combination of monstrosity and beauty. She is an “icy beauty” and “a majestic column pivoting in one graceful movement, leaving a trail of awe in her wake”.¹⁰⁴ The association between a beautiful woman and a pillar recalls Psalm 144:12. Like the Targums, Hunt’s Vashti is associated with animalistic imagery. Hunt describes her having a “tongue as sharp as a serpent’s tooth”.¹⁰⁵ Serpents, of course, are particularly associated with “monstrous” women. Both Eve in Genesis 2 and Medusa in Hellenistic mythology. She also described as “the queen of cunning”¹⁰⁶ and as a woman with a “thirst for blood”¹⁰⁷. Vashti is repeatedly associated with violence in the text and presents a real, genuine threat to Esther’s safety at the court. The story includes an account of Vashti seeking revenge on Artayana, the king’s daughter in law, by mutilating her mother, Parmys. The narrator states:

The beautiful Vashti took the sword and began to mutilate an innocent woman, choosing to strike at Artaynta through her precious mother.

¹⁰⁴ Hunt, *Esther*, 216.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 153.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 236.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 201.

When Maistes's wife had lost her breasts, ears, lips, nose and tongue, Vashti calmly asked for a carriage to send the wounded woman home.

Parmys died a few hours later.¹⁰⁸

The description closely parallels a similar description in *The Histories*.

Royal Beauty also includes an incident in which Vashti sacrifices a child in order to petition Ahura Mazda that Esther will miscarry her foetus. The story imagines Esther losing her baby in the next chapter, but does not directly attribute Vashti's curse as the cause of the miscarriage, rather leaving the reader with the sense that it is a chilling, ambiguous coincidence.

The physical presence of Vashti throughout the narrative serves to intensify the story's suspense and drama, as the protagonist is forced to grapple with a fierce, unpredictable and highly dangerous antagonist. It also directly impacts the characterisation of Esther. Her status is diminished by Vashti's power and prominence in the text, and she is frequently described as anxious, insecure and lacking in confidence. For example, Harbonah the Eunuch comments: "This one had not entered the great hall like Vashti, with an uplifted chin and mincing step. This girl would never stiffen her spine in defiance of the king."¹⁰⁹

The first-person narrative perspective gives the reader an insight into Esther's insecurity. For example, she confesses:

Though I had lived in the former queen's chambers for some months, I still felt her presence in those rooms. She had slept in the columned bed, walked through the private garden, and run her hands along the tiled walls [...] Vashti's voice seemed to echo in the high-ceilinged rooms.¹¹⁰

She comments: "I'm not sure why my stomach knotted at any mention of the former queen" and "I slept and woke in the queen's palace like an imposter who expects to be unmasked and evicted at any moment. My anxiety grew from a niggling apprehension to a near constant dread."¹¹¹

The creative decision that Vashti remained in the palace allows Hunt to imagine an encounter between the former and current queens. Esther describes:

A shadow fell across the law, forcing me to look up. Vashti waited on the portico, still far more regal and lovely than I could ever hope to be. She stood at least a hand's width taller than me, and though she had borne three children, she remained slender through the waist and richly endowed above.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 187.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 212.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 216.

She adds, “I resisted the urge to bow before her”.¹¹³

Thus, the “monster” trope in the characterisation of Vashti has been further developed and delineated, with more imagined details of horror, and it has also been extended so that the character presents a real threat throughout the text. The result is an eponymous protagonist who weakens in comparison: one referred to by the king as “my little queen”. Esther, characterised in opposition to Vashti’s confidence, remains fearful and threatened throughout Hunt’s story. There is less of a sense that the character is infected by the monstrosity. Her request at the end of the story that “Haman’s ten dead sons [be] impaled for all to see” emphasises that they are already dead. The narrator comments that this response demonstrates “wisdom” and will prevent the Jews from further attacks: a preventative measure against violence, rather than an act of monstrosity.¹¹⁴

Esther: A Novel, depicts a darker, more sinister Persian court as the setting, in which the harem women are brought to the palace in what is essentially a death march, and cope with the trauma of being imprisoned there by spending their time high on opium or drunk on wine. A sense of danger pervades the novel: frequent murder plots emerge both within the court and the harem, adding to the murder plot foiled by Mordecai in the Hebrew Bible (2:21). Threats include the king’s pet lions which roam the palace and even when Esther is queen, she is constantly in danger from disloyal soldiers and rival factions in the court.

In this setting, a meaner, stronger Esther emerges whose behaviour could be construed as monstrous at certain points in the narrative, and is also explicitly modelled on the example of Vashti. In Kanner’s version of the story, Vashti disappears after she is deposed from the court. Rumours circle surrounding her ambiguous disappearance, with some servants suspecting she committed suicide.¹¹⁵

However, whilst Vashti is physically absent, the servants and women believe that “Vashti’s spirit flies over the harem”.¹¹⁶ In addition to this, the female “monster” is personified in Kanner’s imagined additional character Halannah, the king’s favourite concubine. Halannah presents a real, physical threat to Esther and the other women in the harem. At one point she physically attacks Esther:

Halannah let go of the blade, grabbed my hair and yanked my head back. Her other hand drew into a claw. I could see that her nails were filed into sharp points and that she was going to rake them over my face.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 333.

¹¹⁵ Kanner, *Esther: A Novel*, 82.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

Like Vashti, Halannah is described with recourse to animalistic imagery, including the above reference to her "claw". She is a "demoness", who even tries to "ruin" the girls before they have a chance to be with the king by attacking them in the night. In a similar motif to the aforementioned one in Hunt's *Royal Beauty*, Halannah arranges for Esther to be poisoned by substituting her mint tea for penny royal when she is pregnant, causing Esther to miscarry her child.

However, whereas Hunt's Esther was intimidated by the threat of the female "monster", Kanner's Esther is emboldened and quickly learns to fight back and hold her own. After Halannah attacks her, she comments: "It seemed that my childhood was leaving me through that cut, that Halannah had opened me to what I could become. I felt strong".¹¹⁸ Esther rises to the challenge of Halannah's bullying, retorting to being threatened and called a "peasant", with: "You will never be queen, Halannah. [...] Xerxes may like you beneath him, but he does not want you beside him."¹¹⁹

Esther, taking advice from Hegei the eunuch, also consciously constructs her image and behaviour on Vashti's in order to win the king's favour. Hegei advises her: "All the other girls seemed conquered even before he took them—all but Vashti. Be bold and meek in turns. Be a puzzle he wishes to solve".¹²⁰ Kanner draws heavily upon the Targums and Midrashim to fill the gaps in her version of the story. As in *Targum Sheni* and *Targum Rishon*, Vashti is banished from the court for refusing to obey the king's request to appear at the banquet naked.¹²¹ Esther exploits her knowledge of this to win the king's favour. When she approaches the king to petition for mercy for the Jewish people, she reverses Vashti's disobedience by appearing naked before the king and his courtiers. Esther explains her unorthodox appearance by telling the king: "I wanted to be naked but for your love and the crown you placed upon my head".¹²² It is both a manipulative ploy and a form of protest against the unjust treatment of the Jewish people.

Kanner's version is arguably more similar to the biblical story than *Royal Beauty* in the way that Esther learns from Vashti in order to consciously become the beta version of the former queen: just as strong and ruthless, but even more calculating.

Finally, in *The Gilded Chamber*, the angel/monster motif is played out in Kohn's construction of a dichotomy between two women at the court: Vashti and Freni. Vashti has been banished from the court before the novel opens but her presence continues to haunt the court. When Esther is moved into the former queen's chambers, she comments: "The queen's quarters had stood empty for four years. But all was spotless and unspoilt, as if Vashti has been absent only an hour. [...] I knew Vashti was watching".¹²³ Kohn also conveys the ubiquity and inescapability of Vashti's

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 153.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 161.

¹²¹ Ibid., 37.

¹²² Ibid., 348.

¹²³ Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 155.

presence in the evocative, Brontë-esque sentence, “I could feel in my bones, in the wind that blew over the marshes and across the wide plain from Chaldea to Susa, that the rage of Vashti never slept”.¹²⁴ Esther discovers that Vashti has left manic, scratched markings on the wall of the chamber, all the more frightening because she is illiterate and cannot decode them. The first-person narrator states, “I could not close my eyes without imagining those lines and triangles floating down from the wall and encircling me with deep and everlasting sleep. The writing seemed to me to be the work of a demon”.¹²⁵ The most obvious symbol of Vashti’s presence, though, is the “life-sized sculpture” of her in the king’s chamber.¹²⁶ During Esther’s first night with the king, she is confronted with the statue and finds it disconcerting:

I stared for a moment at Vashti, the queen of cruelty, blessed with more beauty than any woman known to the king. Her face was a perfect flower, yet cold as the marble from which it was carved. And though her eyes were almond empty, they flashed at me in defiance and I felt her hot, poisoned breath upon my cheek. [...] *Your blood shall drain like a slaughtered bird.*¹²⁷

Kohn later describes how the king destroys the statue of Vashti when he has settled on Esther as his queen.¹²⁸ The image of the king keeping an icon or statue of Vashti in his chamber is one which commonly occurs in the midrashim, some of which suggest the icon smashed supernaturally on the king’s first night with Esther.

However, Kohn’s novel is unique in its construction of a third female “type”: Freni. Freni, captured and taken to the harem at the same time as Esther, is the epitome of the perfect Jewish girl. Kohn describes how she wastes away in the harem because she refuses to eat any unclean food. Her unhealthy, unattractive thinness leads to threats that she will be “given” to the soldiers in the barracks, or even fed to the lions.¹²⁹ Freni is the consummate “angel”. In comparing herself to Freni, Esther notes: “her innocence was more delicate, her spirit more fragile”. She is repeatedly described as “weeping” and at one point she is “as pale as a corpse”.¹³⁰

The text makes it clear that Freni will not survive in the harem, and is at serious, immediate risk. However, Esther also envies Freni’s more overt Jewishness, commenting, “In my heart I envied her. They were my people too, yet I was no longer one of them”.¹³¹ Freni’s overt fidelity to the

¹²⁴ Ibid., 190.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 69.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 142.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 179.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 74.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 75.

Jewish faith causes Esther to feel “shame”.¹³² Interestingly, Esther also channels Freni on her first night with the king, imagining, “that I had all Freni’s grace and charm”.¹³³

Even more interestingly, on the same night that the king smashes his statue of Vashti, Esther persuades him to set Freni free. She escapes from the harem, with her virginity intact, to a life of relative poverty on the outskirts of the city, later getting married to a Jewish man and having a child. The chronological proximity between the incidents, which happen in the same episode in the narrative, indicate that the “monster” is destroyed at the same time the “angel” is set free: the two, antithetical women disappear from the text almost concurrently. Where do they go? I would argue that both are channelled into Esther, who in Kohn’s novel finds a *via media* between the “angel” and “monster” in order to survive. Vashti’s obstinance led to her banishment, and Freni’s attempt to continue living as the perfect Jewish woman in the sinister world of the court almost killed her. Esther incorporates both of those types. The complexity of the character and the compromises she learns to make represents the precariousness of Diaspora existence and its confusion, blurriness and subtlety.

In conclusion, the “angel/monster” motif is already present in the biblical story of *Esther*, but it becomes further developed in the twenty-first century novels, which explore it in diverse and contrasting ways, as well as rendering it more explicitly. Foils, or doppelgängers, are more than just opposites. As Gilbert and Gubar explore, they are interconnected and there is an uncanny slippage between them. In both the biblical story and its twenty-first century creative rewritings the “monster” is irrepressible and indestructible: her presence lurks in the text, always waiting to infect the angel with her monstrosity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Esther* is a text perforated with unsettling gaps and ambiguities. From the earliest days of the Megillah’s existence, the problematic nature of the “gaps” has unsettled the reader; the temptation to impose order and control by filling its troubling silences has often proved to be irresistible. The compulsion to creatively re-tell the story persists in the form of twenty-first century Western novels, which demonstrate considerable variations in their characterisation of the eponymous protagonist.

As a whole, though, there was little indication that these novels had departed from some of the more patriarchal tropes which are present in the Hebrew Bible version of the story, or that a line of development could be traced from the conservatism of rabbinic midrash to a more progressive characterisation of Esther in the modern novels. Rather, it appeared to me that creative retellings of *Esther* are analogous to a snowball rolling down a hill—the porous nature of the text means

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., 142.

that it seems to gather cultural baggage as it is regenerated throughout history, but finds it much harder to drop outdated tropes. Thus, tropes such as the “angel/monster” motif which are embryonic in earlier versions of the story, germinate and become more detailed and developed in the later reception history of the text. If there is a modern novel which self-consciously deconstructs or interrogates these tropes, then I did not manage to find it within the course of this research. Angela Hunt’s *Royal Beauty*, constructed from an evangelical Christian hermeneutical framework, was the most ideologically conservative. Rebecca Kanner’s *Esther: a Novel*, which emerged from a Jewish cultural context, created the most assertive and self-defining Esther, but I would argue that the novel still depended upon some troubling patriarchal motifs to achieve its denouement. A creative retelling of the story which was in closer dialogue with recent, intersectional *Esther* scholarship, incorporating ideas posited by Angeline Song, Timothy Beal and Daniel Smith-Christopher, would arguably be a valuable contribution to this ongoing process of transvaluation. A hypertext which self-consciously critiqued the patriarchal overtones in the story would demonstrate the continuing potential of the plot and protagonist to speak to the concerns of the twenty-first century reader and signal that the creative chain of retellings has not run its course.

Or perhaps the “gaps” in *Esther* are fundamental to the character of the text. The spaces between the words are as important as the words, and we should leave them alone. Despite their attempts to add details which subsumed *Esther* into their theocentric, Torah-focused ideology, the rabbinic authors of the midrashim and the Talmud also recognised that the gaps in *Esther* are deliberate, and that they constitute a type of strength. Like many modern scholars, the rabbis recognised that the name *Esther*, in addition to a cognate of *Ishtar*, may be a play on the Hebrew “hidden” or “concealed”. As Timothy Beal explores in *The Book of Hiding*, Esther’s refusal to reveal her inner life in the text is a Diaspora survival strategy. In a world in which the God of Israel is ostensibly absent, but also ontologically necessarily present, Esther learns, partly by the anti-example of Vashti, to be both present and absent, to be hidden in plain sight. Thus, imposing psychological realism on the protagonist, and retelling the story from her perspective, is arguably a type of symbolic violence: a voyeuristic invasion, a systematic dismantling of her absent presence, her enigmatic, impenetrable character.

An eponymous protagonist devoid of inner life is difficult to decode in the modern novel, which developed as a direct result of Protestant individualism, and typically demands that principle characters be three-dimensional and delineated. However, this approach is fundamentally incompatible with the broad brush strokes and “flat” characterisation of the version in the MT, and destabilises the chiasmic balance the story. Esther and Mordecai are representative types of the Diaspora Jew: they function as blueprints for survival. Any attempt to fill in the “gaps” in the story, particularly in relation to the characterisation of Esther, is therefore not just “midrashic wishful thinking”, but constitutes what Sternberg refers to as a fundamental “misreading” of the

text. If there is a “correct” way to read *Esther*, it is, as the text itself demands: as a complete, uninterrupted entity, on the fourteenth day of Adar and on the evening of the thirteenth day. It is a text to be performed at Purim as a defiant symbol of survival in a violent and uncertain world, with its nihilistic lacunae gaping open.

References

- Abegg Jr, Martin, Peter Flint and Eugene Ulrich eds. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: Translated and with Commentary*. New York: Harper Collins, 1999.
- Abrams, Judith, *The Talmud for Beginners Volume II*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993.
- Bach, Alice, *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.
- Bach, Alice, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Beal, Timothy K, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Beal, Timothy K, “‘Who Filled His Heart to Do This?’ Conceptual Metaphors of the Self in the Book of Esther”, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 1 (2015), pp. 97-111.
- Beal, Timothy L, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Bible and the Arts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Berman, Joshua “‘Hadassah bat Abihail’: The Evolution from Object to Subject in the Character of Esther”, *Journal for the Study of Biblical Literature* 120 (2004), pp. 647–69.
- Brenner, Athalya, ed. *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.
- Brenner, Athalya ed., *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999.
- Bronner, Leila. *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994.
- Brontë, Charlotte *Jane Eyre*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Bush, Frederic. *World Bible Commentary 9: Ruth/Esther*. Dallas, TX: World Books, 1996.

Butting, Klara "Esther: a New Perspective of the Joseph Story in the Fight against Anti-Semitism and Sexism" in Athalya Brenner ed. *Ruth and Esther: a Feminist Companion to the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999. pp. 239-248.

Carruthers, Jo *Esther through the Centuries*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

Clines, David. ed. *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009.

Clines, David, *The Esther Scroll*. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1984.

Coats, George. *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*. Sheffield: JSOT, 1985.

Crawford White, Sidnie. "Esther." Vol. 3 pp. 855–972 in *New Interpreter's Bible*. ed. Leander Keck. Nashville: Abingdon, 1999.

Dale, Allison C. et al eds., *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception Vol 8*. Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 2014.

Day, Linda. *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Book of Esther*. JSOT Supplement Series 186. Sheffield, Yorkshire: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.

Day, Peggy, ed. *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Random House, 2010. First published in French, 1949.

Fewell, Danna, ed. *The Children of Israel. Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003.

Fewell, Danna ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Forster, Edward. *Aspects of the Novel*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975. First published 1905.

Fox, Michael. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.

Fuchs, Esther. "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women: The Neoliberal Turn in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship". *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24 (2008), pp. 45–65.

Gendler, Mary "The Restoration of Vashti" in Elizabeth Koltun ed. *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*. New York: Schocken Books, 1976. pp. 241-46.

Gérard, Genette, Channa Newman, Claude Doubinsky and Gerald Prince. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.

Grossfeld, Bernard. *Two Targums of Esther*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991.

Herodotus, *The Histories*: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/herodotus-history.txt> accessed August 11th 2018.

Holmstedt, Robert and John Srenock. *Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015.

Hunt, Angela. *Esther: Royal Beauty*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2015.

James, Carolyn. *Lost Women of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

Kanner, Rebecca. *Esther: A Novel*. New York: Howard Books, 2015.

Karant-Nunn, Susan and Merry Wiesner-Hanks. *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Kermode, Frank. *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl. ed. *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex and Violence in the Bible*. Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2003.

Klein, Lillian. *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

Kohlhnbeger III, J. R. ed. *The NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Regency, 1987.

Kohn, Rebecca. *The Gilded Chamber*. London: Penguin, 2004.

Koltun, Elizabeth. ed. *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*. New York: Schocken, 1987.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. First Published in French, 1980.

LaCocque, André. *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990.

Lim, Timothy and John J. Collins eds. *The Oxford Handbook to the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Lubitch, Rivkah. "A Feminist's Look at Esther". *Judaism* 42, no. 4 (1993), pp. 438–46.

McDonald, Lee Martin. *The Biblical Canon: its Origin, Transmission & Authority*. Hendrickson: Peabody, Massachussetts, 2007.

McDonald, Lee Martin and James A. Sanders. *The Canon Debate*. Hendrickson: Peabody, Massachussetts, 2002.

Mindel, Nissan. *The Complete Story of Purim*. New York: Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, 1999.

Moore, Carey. "Archaeology and the Book of Esther." *Biblical Archaeologist* 38. 3 (1975) pp. 62.

Nadler, Steven. *Rembrandt's Jews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Neusner, Jacob. *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989.

O'Brien, Julia. ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Radford Ruether, Rosemary ed. *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian traditions*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974.

Sasson, Jack M. "Esther". In *The Literary Guide to the Bible* eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Schenker, Adrian ed. *Torah, Nevi'im u-Ketuvim: Biblia Hebraica quinta editione cum apparatu critico novis curis elaborato*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004.

Song, Angeline. "Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model?: A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of the Character of Esther". *Dialog* 49 (2010), pp. 56–69.

Southwood, Katherine and Martien A Halvorson-Taylor, *Women and exilic identity in the Hebrew Bible*. New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017.

Stern, E. R. "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no. 1 (2010), pp. 25-53.

Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

The Holy Bible NRSV, (Anglicized Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

The Oxford Bible Commentary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Undwin, Rav Shmuel. *Talmud Bavli Tractate Megillah*. Brooklyn, NY: Menucha, 2014.

Walfish, Barry. *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretations of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages*. New York: State of New York University Press, 1993.

Woodworth, Savannah. "Monstrous Silhouette: The Development of the Female Monster in British Literature". Huntsville, TX: Sam Houston State University, 2017.

Review of Ann W. Astell (ed.), *Saving Fear in Christian Spirituality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

Henry Shea

Campion Hall, University of Oxford

henry.shea@theology.ox.ac.uk

The title of this volume, which is “grammatically ambiguous and deliberately so,” captures well its grounding intention: to save a fear that is itself saving (1). The pervading uncertainty and disquiet of the present time could make it seem distinctly inapt for salvaging fear from its detractors. For many, at least, the burden of proof will reside with the initiators of such an effort. To add to several long-established concerns about the role of fear in religious life—such as the inhibiting of relationships based on love or the fomenting of irrational, even violent, behaviors—fear seems to surface most prominently today as an emotion to be exploited by demagogic and divisive political leadership. The sixteen essays of this collection proffer no clear consensus on the salutary aspects of fear, and their diverse and divergent perspectives will confirm and challenge every reader’s intuitions. Yet, when taken together, their range gives rise to a certain harmony, eliciting the sense that there is a kind of fear that is redemptive and worthy of being saved.

The volume also manifests the hand of a seasoned editor. Ann W. Astell has not only collected articles from several preeminent voices in diverse areas of theology, but their pieces are skilfully arranged and balanced. While organized principally by historical period, from the biblical and patristic era into the twenty-first century, the essays are juxtaposed to evoke a sense of dialectical conversation. The section on modern theology, for instance, features a beautiful essay from Julia Lamm on the common theological logic that Julian of Norwich and Schleiermacher derive from the principle that God is love, thereby casting out every fear while engendering a reverent, *soft dread*. But this essay is followed by a striking comparison of Newman and Kierkegaard, both of whom, Cyril O’Regan recollects, distinctly commended fear and trembling before God not only as integral to biblical faith but as a crucial guard against rationalist manipulation.



A similarly conversational dialectic courses through a string of essays situated in the twentieth century. The God who brings a fearful justice for the oppressed has been both a consolation and an impetus for liberation for countless victims, Pieter G.R. de Villiers recollects, citing the sermons of Desmond Tutu against Apartheid and the hope given to Eastern Europeans resisting communist rule. The same thread reappears in a stirring essay from Todd Walatka on social sin and liberation theology, whose exegesis of Jon Sobrino and Oscar Romero concludes that it is the God who “hears the cry of the poor and oppressed” who provides the true basis for Christian love as well as fear (374). Perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, Walatka’s reflections are coupled with a probing exposition by Anstell herself of the apparition narratives from Fatima, in which an awe-filled fear before supernaturality is conjoined with the imperative to avoid the hellishness that war and oppression bring to earth. In the same historical period the pen of Léon Bloy was exposing the hellishness that forms the “underside of bourgeoisie modernity,” elucidates Brenna Moore, such that a Christian faith of mere consolation proves unavailing if it cannot confront the fearful nightmare that so many victims of modern life—child laborers, exiles, “the insane, the poor, prostitutes”—endure (298).

Perhaps the most familiar distinction in theological tradition regarding the fear of God hails, as might be expected, from Augustine, who contrasted a servile fear that “dreads divine punishment” with a pure, or chaste, fear that is compatible with love (76). Such was the principal tool he used to work through the paradox of a biblical text that alternately lauds the fear of God as the beginning of wisdom (Ps 110:10; Prov 1:7, 9:10) yet declares there to be “no fear in love,” for “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Even as servile fear has its usefulness for fallen beginners, only chaste fear ultimately remains as love approaches perfection. In a sweeping yet penetrating survey of several Augustinian texts, John Sehorn illustrates how Augustine ultimately integrated the diverse aspects of this distinction in one christological movement; in the kenosis of the Incarnation and the agony of the passion, Christ assumes and transfigures servile fear so as to render it a pathway to humility and love. Christ thereby “threads the needle” such that what begins as a servile fear finishes only with what is purely knit into love (93-95).

The patristic and medieval sections also contain rewarding historical analyses from Donna R. Hawk-Reinhard on Cyril of Jerusalem, Catherine Rose Cavadini on the *timor Dei* in Cistercian commentaries on the Song of Songs, and Joseph Wawrykow on the fear of Christ in Aquinas. Ephraim Radner sketches an intriguing existential and christological spirituality in his exegesis of Pascal, in whose *Pensées* the fear and love of Christ conjoin paradoxically to touch and comprehend both our quotidian anxieties and joys. There is also a delightful essay by Wendy M. Wright on the love of God that dispels and purifies fear in Francis de Sales, whose spiritual counsel on working through inner anxiety toward love is echoed later in a concluding case study from Astell on spiritual direction.

The abiding questions that recur throughout this book are strikingly similar to those Augustine originally tackled: How are the types of fear to be distinguished? Which of its aspects are truly worth preserving? How are they to be integrated with love? Comprehensive as the volume may be, it inevitably has many lacunae, even within its singular focus on Christian spirituality. With some exceptions, such as a brief essay by Ralph Keen on the wrath of God in reformed theology, the collection leans Catholic. There is little engagement with other disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, and the hard sciences, not to mention postmodern and critical thought. This is not a book in which to look for an analytic study of religious fear in contemporary perspective or even systematic theological development. But as a broad and balanced collection of focused historical theological essays, it fulfils what it promises, proffering a splendid resource for research and reflection on saving fear in the Christian spiritual tradition.

Review of Christoph Schneider (ed.), *Theology and Philosophy in Eastern Orthodoxy: Essays on Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019).

Harry Moore

Brasenose College, University of Oxford

harry.moore@bnc.ox.ac.uk

The exchange of ideas between Eastern Orthodox theology and modern Western philosophy was for a long time prohibited by the political circumstances which dominated the 20th century. Today, however, this exchange is rapidly accelerating, and the current publication is a case in point. *Theology and Philosophy in Eastern Orthodoxy* is a collection of essays edited by Christoph Schneider, who is currently Academic Director at the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge. This collection of eight essays discusses Orthodox Christian approaches to a range of philosophical issues. The publication's initiative is that 'Orthodox theology (...) will gain intellectual credibility if it engages with the intellectual debates of its time' (4). The essays, therefore, aim 'to give an overview of how scholars working on the intersection between Orthodox theology and philosophy understand the interrelationship between these two academic disciplines' (4). These scholars represent a variety of methods, including historical, philosophical, phenomenological and theological.

However, what clearly unites the various contributions is a common emphasis on 'the religious life'. The distinctions of an Orthodox religious life are variously portrayed here, with three approaches standing out: phenomenology, philosophy of the self, and virtue ethics. Christina M. Gschwandtner takes the first approach, dealing with self-humiliation as central to Orthodox spirituality and demonstrating the antinomy of the 'higher' and the 'lower' in Orthodox religious life (68). The second approach is most evident in Sergei Horujy's essay. For Horujy, the religious self is shaped by the practice of Hesychasm. Horujy interprets Hesychasm as 'a process of man's self-transformation, having the structure of a ladder with steps ascending from the *metanoia* to the meta-anthropological *telos* of *theosis*' (112). The third approach to religious life is that of virtue ethics and is taken up by Rico Vitz, who shows how key aspects of Orthodox religious life originate in Greek ethics (155).



Harry Moore, 'Review of Christoph Schneider (ed.), *Theology and Philosophy in Eastern Orthodoxy: Essays on Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought*', *JOGTS* 1.1 (2020), pp. 103-106.

Christina M. Gschwandtner's chapter, 'Religious Experience in the Eastern Christian Tradition', provides a phenomenological analysis of 'Orthodox consciousness'. Gschwandtner focuses on texts by Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) and the anonymous work *The Way of a Pilgrim* (first published in 1884). Gschwandtner begins her analyses with Max Scheler's (1874-1928) essay on the differences between Eastern and Western Christianity, 'Über östliches und westliches Christentum' (1916). Scheler argued that Eastern Orthodox consciousness is defined by a 'grovelling humility' and a 'quasi-masochistic quiescence to suffering' (54). Scheler went so far as to claim that 'Orthodoxy (...) kills the Christian thought of love and values *passive* virtues, like humility and patience, above *active* ones' (55). Gschwandtner aims to put these claims to the test. Humility is incredibly important in Orthodox asceticism, but is only one side of an *antinomy* between 'the low' and 'the high' (Matthew 23:12)—as Symeon writes: 'The higher they ascend the more they abase themselves; the more they humble themselves the higher they are lifted up' (68). Likewise, in *The Way of the Pilgrim*, 'joy and delight' (not despair and self-abasement) are just as central to the ascetic's path as self-abasement. In the author's words, 'I was moved to tears of joy and felt such gladness in my heart at times that I do not have the words to describe it' (67). Gschwandtner argues that Orthodoxy is not preoccupied with passive virtues, and points again to Symeon, who once remarked that 'not feeding the poor if one is able to do so is tantamount to murder' (71). However, Gschwandtner goes far beyond a mere defence of these texts and even suggests that they can be archetypal for understanding consciousness itself. This is thanks to the detailed account given by these authors of how 'emotive states are linked to patterns of thought', and how these in turn lead to 'patterns of behaviour' (72). The texts uniquely demonstrate an escape from undesired habits through 'the cultivation of predispositions that involve a struggle with certain aspects of the self, rather than simple self-affirmation' (73). A partial self-overcoming is vital in understanding our destructive habits and how to avoid them.

The contemporary Russian philosopher Sergei Horujy presents his complex 'Synergic Anthropology' in his essay 'Orthodox Theology and Philosophy of the Self'. Before presenting his own philosophy of the self, Horujy summarises both the patristic 'Theocentric Personalistic Paradigm' (98) and the secular 'Anthropological Personalistic Paradigm' (107). Horujy's genealogy of the 'theocentric' paradigm runs from the Church Fathers to Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958), then to John Zizioulas and Christos Yannaras. Horujy unfortunately ignores the decisive influence of secular German 'personalists' such as Gustav Teichmüller (1832-1888). The 'Anthropological Personalistic Paradigm' receives a similar analysis, now focusing on Heidegger: 'The main organizing principle of this system is being-toward-death, a mode of being constituted by the fundamental predicate of the finitude/mortality of Dasein' (108).

Horujy's own original system starts with 'an analysis of a particular domain of anthropological experience (Hesychasm)' in order to gain the 'source of notions and principles' for a 'general anthropological theory' (112). For Horujy 'there are three and only three ontologically different

kinds of reality' (113): the 'Ontological Human', the 'Ontic Human' and the 'Virtual Human', each with its own separate 'personalist structure' (114). Each of these are deduced from the 'principle of unlocking' – 'the act by which man becomes open or *unlocked* towards contact with the other' (112). The first kind of reality is characterised by 'the unlocking towards God as personal being-communion, which is separated by the ontological difference from man's mode of being. It is thus called the *ontological unlocking*' (112). This unlocking is realised by hesychast practice 'with steps ascending from the metanoia to the meta-anthropological *telos* of the *theosis*' (112).

The second kind of reality is made possible by the Other of the unconscious to which we are 'unlocked'. 'The unconscious is ontologically not different from empirical being whence it follows that this paradigm is not the same as the constitution in the ontological unlocking' (113). The third kind is constituted in 'the going out into anthropological virtual reality' (113). Virtual reality is unfinished or under-actualized reality: 'Due to its piecewise nature, any virtual constitution excludes the wholeness and integrity of the human being', leading to 'deanthropologization' (116). Horujy, in this way, gives more consideration to broader 'notions of the self' (in dialogue with Levinas and Foucault) than did previous Orthodox thinkers (namely Zizioulas), who reject the 'self' entirely and see the person as only that constituted by communion and relation with God.

Rico Vitz's essay, 'Orthodoxy, Philosophy, and Ethics', highlights key affinities between Orthodox spirituality and 'the ancient virtue traditions of Greece' (149). One affinity is an objectively purposeful and teleologically-oriented human nature. The *telos* itself, of course, is markedly different in Orthodox ethics. The latter is not 'contingent upon certain privileges of upbringing', as in Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* (149). In contrast to Aristotelian 'elitism', Orthodoxy provides a 'super-naturalistic conception of human flourishing that is available to everyone – namely, *theosis*, or *deification*, i.e., union with God' (149). Another key affinity is found in 'a distinction among three parts of the soul: the intellective, the incensive, and the appetitive' (150). Platonic virtues depend on the proper function and order of these faculties. For Plato 'the principle virtue of the intellectual part is wisdom, the principle virtue of the incensive part is courage, the principle virtue of the appetitive part is temperance' (153). Orthodoxy cultivates the acquisition of such virtues 'not only in the Church's ascetic but in its sacramental way of life' (153).

Vitz also explores the importance of ritual and liturgy, and looks to both Aristotle and Confucius, for whom 'characters are shaped, for better or for worse, from the steady accumulation of seemingly minor events' (159). The Church Fathers similarly cultivated character by: '(1) actions, (2) involving the mind and the body, (3) that people repeat regularly, (4) within specific contexts, (5) under specific conditions, (6) for the purpose not merely of cultivating character, but of cultivating a Christ-like heart' (160). This liturgical ethics, in Vitz's account, 'constitutes a distinctively Christian way of life' (160). This concept of the 'way of life' poses a challenge to contemporary 'situationist ethics' which suggests that behaviour originates not in character traits but in specific empirical situations. In Orthodox ethics this cannot be the case because of the extent to which

humans are socially (and liturgically) embedded: 'Behaviours rely on interdependent communal support' (161). Vitz thus concludes that Orthodoxy's 'stronger conception of the sustaining social contribution to character' has much to offer contemporary virtue ethics in its case against the situationist challenge (162).

All eight contributions to *Theology and Philosophy in Eastern Orthodoxy* consider a wide range of topics, showcasing the organic relationship between philosophical reflection and Eastern Orthodoxy. All of these contributions in some way relate to the 'religious life'. However, the three essays addressed here shed the most powerful light on this issue and exemplify the volume's three prevailing approaches: phenomenology, philosophy of the self, and virtue ethics. Despite this array of methodologies, *Philosophy and Theology in Eastern Orthodoxy* will provide a clear and accessible introduction to Orthodox religious life and the intersection between philosophy and Orthodox theology.

Review of Deonnie Moodie, *The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City: Kalighat and Kolkata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Matthew Martin

Pembroke College, University of Oxford

matthew.martin@pmb.ox.ac.uk

In *The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City*, Deonnie Moodie explores the journal's inaugural theme, 'Religious Life', through a study of Kālighāṭ, a famous Hindu temple in Kolkata, West Bengal. Located in the city's southern district, Kālighāṭ is a bustling pilgrimage site where the goddess, Kālī, is worshipped by Hindu devotees from various backgrounds through ritual obeisance and goat sacrifice. By combining historical and ethnographic sources in interdisciplinary unison, Moodie illustrates how religious life at Kālighāṭ is not diminishing but is attuning to the modern metropolis.

In this impressive work, Moodie tracks the ways Kālighāṭ – redefined as 'public space' by the courts – is being modernized via renovations in its infrastructure, cleanliness, and practices. At the turn of Indian Independence, these changes were effectuated by Kolkata's elite (known then as the *bhadralok*) during several legal cases. To this day, such temple reforms are set in motion by middle-class organizations, mainly NGOs, who insist their plans benefit the common good. As such, at Kālī's shrine the goddess's authority has become subsidiary to appeasing the devout collective who gather there. Moodie writes, 'Gone are the concerns for purity and the goddess'[s] efficacy. They are replaced by ideas about what the modern Indian cities ought to look and feel like' (20). In this contemporary city, it seems Hindu religiosity, typified by Kālighāṭ, is not excluded from broader social changes but is, rather, intrinsic to them. The author also cites two informants who oppose gentrification at Kālighāṭ, a Brahmin priest (*sevāyet*) and a subaltern beggar, which augments the overall picture she presents. Like a stereoscope, then, Moodie shows how a Hindu temple is a locus of hegemony *and* resistance, all at once.

Overall, the book's structure – meticulously constructed – is arranged in chronological order, moving from colonial Calcutta to 21st-century Kolkata. Chapter 1 begins in colonial Calcutta, where



Matthew Martin, 'Review of Deonnie Moody, *Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City*', *JOGTS* 1.1 (2020), pp. 107-109.

Moodie traces four Bengali authors who reshaped the city's history to re-claim Kālīghāṭ as its cornerstone, contra colonial ones that decried its presence there. Chapters 2-4 expand upon the first, charting the court cases, bourgeois projects, and defiant responses that mobilized the temple's revisioning in the present.

To begin, Chapter 1 considers the work of four historians, Bysack, Caṭṭopādhyāy, Datta, and Ray, whose accounts were blueprints for processes of modernization that occurred later. For them, Kālīghāṭ was not irrelevant, as the colonists thought, but a significant part of West Bengali life; above all, its foundations lay at the centre of *kālīkṣetra* (literally, 'the land of Kālī') (51). To challenge colonial histories, the authors adopted scientific methods of their own, geological surveys, Sanskrit texts, and, in some cases, genealogies, in order to corroborate the site's centrality since antiquity. And, as an embodiment of the new nation, Kālīghāṭ's religiosity was also reframed; in these texts, Tantric forms of goddess-worship (involving blood sacrifice) were glossed over to spotlight Vedic and Vaiṣṇava ones. On that point, the reviewer wonders why Hindu sub-sects are elucidated only in passing by Moodie; a synopsis of each sect, Vedic, Tantric, Vaiṣṇava, and how each applies to the Goddess may have clarified her hypothesis further. In addition, a glossary of Sanskrit and Bengali terms would have assisted in this endeavour.

Next, Moodie brings us to Independent India, with a discussion of the judicial proceedings that facilitated Kālīghāṭ's new 'public' status. Prior to this, Kālīghāṭ was a private bequest maintained by Brahmin *sevāyets* and their families. To justify this change, the judges utilized evidence from many sources, including the authors mentioned in Chapter 1. During these lawsuits, Brahmin priests were castigated as 'corrupt' owners who accrued temple donations for their own ends (79). In response, the judges, themselves middle class, dismantled Brahmin ownership to install new temple committees comprised of Kolkata's educated citizens. As per this legislation, the committees were to manage the site's finances in a way that adhered to its new public image, that is, for 'charity and religious propagation' (72). Here, the depth of Moodie's discussion vis-à-vis temple litigation is innovative.

Meanwhile, Chapters 3-4 delve into the modernizing projects themselves, describing how NGOs, through Public Interest Litigation, work to 'clean' this 'heritage site' (as they put it), alongside the groups who rebel against them (99). In these chapters, the ethnographic tone of Moodie's descriptions is illuminating, especially when she describes the ways hawkers defy state officials *en masse* via hawkers' unions and how priests subvert state injunctions by delaying their orders. Most notably, the author's use of fieldwork material, including interactions with her informants, adds an experiential perspective from worshippers themselves.

Though I admire the author's erudition throughout, I disagree with one theoretical point set out early in the text. For Moodie, Kolkata's middle classes, as 'representatives of the public', are gentrifying Kālīghāṭ temple by 'deploy[ing] modernist idioms, including rationality, democracy, order, and cleanliness [that] stand in stark contrast to idioms [of] pre-modernity – purity, divine

power, and the valor of aristocratic lineages' (3). Here, a disjuncture is expressed between pre-modern and modern values, which is a viable position. Yet I remain unconvinced by Moodie's dichotomy for two reasons: firstly, she assumes that pre-modern values at Kālīghāṭ are *sui generis* superseded by modern ones. In North India, where Kālīghāṭ is located, it could be argued that traditional norms and idioms do not dissipate altogether. Rather, value-systems become *modified* by modernity, such that norms of ritual purity morph into a concern for temple cleanliness. Hence, to my second reason: a traditional-modernist dyad, thereby, presents a polarity seemingly at odds; Moodie notes how middle-class activists posit a return to Vedic-aligned religiosity, whilst also seeking litigation to renew temple management. In my view, her bifurcation does not encapsulate, theoretically, the in-between complexities that operate on the ground in Hindu ideology and practice. In this regard, a certain Clifford Geertzian analysis immediately comes to mind: 'Religion is sociologically interesting not because ... it describes the social order ... but because, like environment [and] political power ... it shapes it'.¹ In the North Indian context, socio-political processes tend to intersect with religious life *and vice versa*.

All that said, however, Moodie's unique methodology and scope is truly commendable. As a result, her book contains considerable insights about Hindu temples in contemporary India, which will provide essential reading for those studying them.

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973), 119.