Valeri’s interest in a global theory of religion contrasts with approaches to cosmology expressed in Framing Cosmologies. Valeri’s claim for a “global theory” (p. 34) of religious ritual highlights how his rather classic anthropological approach deals with the relationship between religious expressions and an idea of ‘reality’. Making explicit the role of Valeri’s works on the conceptualization of reality allows one to compare it with recent anthropological approaches to religious phenomena that stress a methodological abstention and wonder that emerges from the refusal to assume the existence of “pre-given wholes” (p. 68).

The treatment of diverse ethnographic and historical contexts in Valeri’s posthumous book (edited by Giovanni da Col and Rupert Stasch) might give us insight into how classical topics of anthropology such as religion, ritual, and myth were debated in the late second half of the twentieth century. In advocating for a “global theory of ritual” (p. 101), Valeri explicitly rejects notions such as ritual, religion, ceremonial, and symbol, which “are used in an imprecise and elastic way” (p. 51). The reason for this lies in the fact that “a universally accepted theory of the phenomena that they designate is still lacking” (ibid.).

What should this universally accepted theory look like? Valeri mentions some key requirements. It should be able to cover a wide range of practices, from mourning to play, and grasp the religious dimensions of activities as diverse as worship and festivity. The building of such a theory of ritual would also imply...
the inference of certain “structural principles” whose identification would constitute “the problem central to every comparative attempt: how to identify not an abstract essence that sacrifices differences and history, but on the contrary certain structural principles that testify for both” (p. 121; emphasis added).

What could be the nature of these “structural principles” that are able to explain both ethnographic and historical differences detected by anthropology across the globe? In one of the chapters of *Framing Cosmologies*, Marshall Sahlins proposes a conceptualization of structure (linked to the avoidance of what he calls a “static sort of yin-yang structuralism”) that could constitute a good enough answer to Valeri’s pursuit: “Inherently temporal, if not necessarily historical, the structure is as such diachronic. It describes a series of successive relations between its opposed terms” (p. 155). Sahlins’s emphasis on “successive relations,” similar to Valeri’s interest in bearing witness to “differences and history,” could be useful when giving careful attention to diachronic and synchronic variations of religious expressions. But what is important to notice here is that Valeri’s call for a global theory of religion is also closely linked to his idea of the existence of ‘real connections’ between religious expressions and what he calls ‘reality’. Furthermore, this relationship between reality, on the one hand, and symbolism and ritual, on the other, assumes the existence of the former as something fixed and external to religion and as something that has real causal connections with religious expressions.

Certainly, I do not intend to state here that Valeri’s approaches to the relationship between religious expressions and reality are either totally rigid or completely unproblematic. Regarding the relationship between symbolism and reality, for instance, Valeri recognizes at least two ways “to produce a reality by conventional definitions”: one is “postulating that the symbol is identical to what it symbolizes,” and the other is asserting “that the symbol is of a reality different from what it symbolizes” (p. 16). And regarding ritual, cautiously, Valeri also acknowledges that “relations between the ideal order of the ritual and the order of everyday life are thus complex and ambiguous, with aspects of contrast and aspects of agreement” (p. 17). In consequence, it is actually not theoretically acceptable for Valeri to simply treat the real causal connections trapped by symbolism’s and rituals’ nets as either “real infrastructure masked by … superstition” or as the “technical-rational ‘dimension’” of rituals (p. 183).

Valeri’s treatment of myth might help us to illustrate the nature of these real causal connections. He asserts that “mythic cosmogonies extend the fundamental experiences of the order of daily life to the entire world” (p. 76). Aiming to specify this extension, Valeri contrasts myth against the scientific knowledge of facts: “While for science order is necessary because it is eternal, for myth it is contingent because it has not always been there … Myth prefers the temporal intelligibility of experience” (p. 68). Thus, while science discovers laws that are in principle applicable always and everywhere, myth narrates instead the transformation of chaos into an order where the world becomes intelligible. What I would like to stress here is that this dichotomy between scientific statements and myths mirrors that between nature and culture: science offers a window into a fixed nature, while myths are variable accounts of more or less subjective cultural experiences.

This version of the nature-culture dichotomy can be seen more clearly in Valeri’s treatment of the problem of the efficacy of symbolism and ritual in other domains of life, a particularly common issue in contemporary fields such as medical anthropology, for instance. According to Valeri, symbolism and ritual behave as diverse huge nets sewn by particular collectives. He states that “symbolism casts over the world such a vast network of relations that some real causal connections remain trapped in its net” (pp. 182–183). There are at least two somewhat tacit statements in this argumentation that are relevant
here. The first is that real causal connections do exist in the form of scientifically verifiable facts in the study of religion. In the domain of Amerindian studies, this kind of assertion is present, for example, in recent explorations of the existence of a specific reality or of ‘real facts’ behind shamanism. The second statement is that these real causal connections contribute to perpetuating the existence of ritual. In the case of the shaman, for instance, his treatment would benefit from the ‘real’ curative effects, in his unwell clientele, of the "vast network of relations" his treatments actually cast "over the world." And, certainly, since these connections increase rituals’ efficacy, once they are trapped, they would tend to stay in place.

However, although real causal connections are in fact constitutive components of religious rituals, Valeri suggests that they are also contingent: if rites are able to trap certain connections with reality, they do so randomly. He states that each discovery of real causal connections made by ritual and symbolism “takes place thanks to schemes and procedures that are … redundant, and even incoherent” (p. 183). Thus, a more or less familiar conceptualization of symbolism and ritual as a sort of preliminary science still haunted by redundancy and incoherence appears here. In sum, ritual and symbolism are entangled with what is real in terms that are as firm as they are contingent, and this contingency is certainly concomitant with Valeri’s dichotomy between science and myth, reality and religion, or, finally, nature and culture.

A second parallel between Classic Concepts and Framing Cosmologies emerges here. In effect, Valeri’s interest in the real causal connections embedded in symbolism and ritual is, to a certain extent, analogous to the efforts displayed by the contributors to Framing Cosmologies, who link cosmology to “practical affairs” (p. 224). Nonetheless, if the chapters of this collection could be considered as efforts in search of something similar to Valeri’s “real connections,” there is also a very important difference. Framing Cosmologies’ recognition of “the varied imbrications of cosmological concerns with political and economic practices” (p. 19) is not actually detachable from its contributors’ strong determination to abandon the “ideas about wholes that are naturally pre-given” (p. 18). Thus, contrary to Valeri’s real causal connections, the imbrications evoked by Abramson and Holbraad in their introduction to Framing Cosmologies do not necessarily presuppose a fixed external reality. In fact, precisely because their proposal of a “cosmologically conscious anthropology” (p. 12) takes into account the relevance of cosmology to the understanding of the contemporary world, Abramson and Holbraad regret what they call the “reductive impulse” that has made “indigenous cosmologies become contingent, neutered and ultimately epiphenomenal to something else” (pp. 8–9), for instance, to reality. Furthermore, this reductionism would be responsible for the collapse of the “very notion of cosmology” (p. 8). In sum, for the editors of Framing Cosmologies, the avoidance of this reductionism in the study of religious expressions would mean abandoning the idea of a fixed external reality.

Valeri’s concern about the relationship between real causal connections and symbolism is also deployed in the way he relates rituals and everyday life. He considers rituals both as a device to reaffirm those values that guide its participants in their quotidian life, and also as a sort of ‘consolation’ for the ‘chaos’ that in fact permeates this same daily life. Thus, by reaffirming those values that guide us, rites also comfort us from a chaotic reality. From this tension between solace and reassertion that allows ritual participants to endure their lives also emerges a creative space. In Valeri’s terms, “rite allows people to reflect on the fundamental constituents of experience” (p. 206). Thus, ritual is not only “a code for the transmission of pre-existing messages, but rather … a mechanism that allows people to obtain new information” (p. 204), that is, new real causal connections. Therefore, and despite its condition
of preliminary science, ritual becomes here “a creator of knowledge” (ibid.), thanks to a specific mechanism: “It works by destructuring and restructuring everyday life, and it continues to be efficacious by virtue of the fact that it is not a specific code that can be learned once and for all” (p. 206). This type of perspective on ritual is actually amplified in Valeri’s definition of religion not as “simply prescriptive,” but also as “a system of communication, a place where motivations, fantasies, interpretations, and individual projects meet and are realized” (p. 15).

Valeri’s understanding of ritual as “a constant stimulator and a potential bearer of new information” that favors “reflection” (p. 206) lies at the core of his discussion of another matter that has received renewed attention also among the authors reviewed here: “the problem of the relationship between indigenous interpretation and the interpretation of the observer” (p. 196). This same issue is described, for instance, in Framing Cosmologies by Soumhya Venkatesan as the anthropology of others’ anthropology, that is, “one that draws attention to and theorises upon the human condition as understood, articulated, theorised, and lived by those with whom we work” (p. 94).

In his book The Relative Native, Viveiros de Castro also provides us with important clues on this issue. His approach to the logical and political consequences of the relationship between the native and the anthropologist begins by pointing out its constitutive inequalities and the ethnographer’s need for a certain non-reflexivity of the native: “What makes the native a native is the presumption, on the part of the anthropologist, that the native’s relationship with his culture is natural … intrinsic, spontaneous … nonreflexive or … unconscious” (p. 5). This presumption is, in turn, the reverse of the prerogative of the anthropologist to address meanings: “While the anthropologist’s capacity to produce meaning does depend on the meaning produced by the native, the prerogative to determine what those native meanings mean remains with the anthropologist” (ibid.). In sum, in this treatment of the relationship between the anthropologist and the native, “the native’s discourse is not the master of its own meaning” (p. 6). It is not only that the ethnographer requires the native’s ignorance, but that in fact the ethnographer “knows too much about the native” (p. 9). Viveiros de Castro’s answer to this extremely unequal setting is the recognition of a fictional aspect of the other in our analysis. Thus, we need to recognize that the ethnographer’s “point of view cannot be the native’s own, but only that of … [his/her] relation with it” (p. 16). And this means that any good ethnographer would need to be aware of the fact that “making two entirely heterogeneous points of view resonate with each other” necessarily involves “an essentially fictional dimension” (ibid.).

Fictionality meets virtuality when Viveiros de Castro states that “to think other thought” requires “an actualization of … yet unsuspected virtualities of thinking” (p. 25). His pursuit of the “unsuspected” aims to make analytical room for the worlds that indigenous concepts could project. Because of it, fictionality and rituality collapse into an ontological abstention: “My objective is less the indigenous manner of thinking than its objects, the possible world that its concepts project … [since in fact] no world that is ready to be viewed exists” (p. 17). The goal of Viveiros de Castro’s well-known proposal is thus not to explain any indigenous cosmology, but “to explicate” it, that is, “to explore its consequences and follow its implications” (p. 219). The premise from this exploration of the native’s own interpretation that I want to stress here is that “no world that is ready to be viewed exists.” As in the case of the comparison between the perspectives of Classic Concepts and Framing Cosmologies, here also clearly emerges the issue of the existence of an external reality.

How can we leave analytical free space for the worlds that indigenous conceptualizations project into the vacuum with which Viveiros de Castro replaced Valery’s reality? What
should the fieldworker’s outlook be in order to allow him or her to grasp what made Valeri see ritual as “a constant stimulator and a potential bearer of new information” (p. 206), but without presupposing any world ready to be viewed? A possible answer could be found in the perspective that Michael Scott, in *Framing Cosmologies*, calls ‘wonder’. In order to acquire it, an anthropologist needs to resort to a particular requirement—again, methodological abstention. Scott exhorts the anthropologist to “adopt a position of apositionality, a motile analytical transit that … is simultaneously no theoretical position, nowhere and no-when” (p. 37). Furthermore, for this author, the cultivation of the astonishment for what we observe during fieldwork “is not only the best disposition, it is itself a mode of being, the mode of being—being as wonder” (p. 33). In sum, abstention seems to be amplified here from ontology to methodology.

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This book, edited by Shalva Weil, unravels the rich legacies left behind by the minority Baghdadi Jewish community in India before they dispersed globally following India’s independence in 1947. Dedicated to the famous war hero of Baghdadi Jewish origin, General J. F. R Jacob (1921–2016), the book brings together a collection of chapters from historians and scholars who have undisputed authority in this discipline. It provides some hypnotizing glimpses of the living heritage of a shrinking Jewish community, which makes it presence felt in India through iconic landmarks and monuments in cities that include Mumbai, Pune, and Kolkata.

Unique in its disposition because of its affinity toward Iraqi and Syrian religious traditions and customs, the Baghdadi Jewish community in India embraced both British and Indian culture. Baghdadi Jews place their religious identity in juxtaposition with the Sephardic in Judaism. Sephardic Jews locate the origin of their customs, practices, and traditions in the Jewish practices found in the Iberian peninsula and Spain. Influenced by hundreds of years of co-existence with Islamic practice, the Sephardic culture, such as music, language, festivals, art, and architecture, was deeply intertwined with Islam, yet found its distinct identity after its people immigrated to India.

The book provides a gripping tale of unexplored understandings of pre-independence India through interesting pieces of information, anecdotes, and trivia, and it remains intricately intertwined with the disciplines of South Asian Studies, Diaspora and Ethnic Studies, Sociology, History, Jewish Studies, and Asian Religion. The contributors to this volume add value not only through their discerning commentary on different communities and institutions, but also by highlighting a variety of research methodologies that can be employed to study the subject. The illuminating historical research, architectural insights, examination of visuals, sociological understanding, and documentary analysis from a variety of planning, personal, and public records make it a valuable read for academicians and scholars.

While there is a rich variety of literature available to study the Baghdadi Jews, what catches the eye about this collection is how it goes beyond the surface and launches a deep exploration of every aspect of the diaspora’s lived realities. With a refined viewing lens, the book throws light on the religiosity, heritage, lifestyle, customs, traditions, and other cultural indicators of the Baghdadi Jews in India. It is nearly impossible to create a single source for every cultural facet of such a tradition-rich community. However, this volume takes a strong stride in that direction, inspiring the
interest of scholars and creating a space to delve deeper into the subject matter.

The most intriguing aspect of this book is the concept of ‘super-diversity’ among the Baghdadi Jewish community of India. Proposed by Steven Vertovec in 2007, the concept refers to “increased diversity not only between immigrant and ethnic minority groups, but also within them” (p. 3), adding a lot of flavor to the study of cultures and societies. The term is often associated with the increasing ethnic and cultural complexity of Western European societies, but this is where Weil argues that the concept is also applicable in non-Western cities such as Pune, Mumbai, and Kolkata.

The Baghdadi Jews have displayed a non-calibration in their identities before and after the colonial period. When they arrived in India, they shed their Arab culture and started associating themselves with the British and European communities, identity-wise as well as culturally. They also chose not to intermingle with the existing Indian Jewish societies. Their fair complexion helped to separate them from the Indian communities and gain European status in India. When the British Raj fell, they lost this special status, which convinced them to leave India and settle in other English-speaking countries around the globe. Joan G. Roland, in her chapter, paints a picture of Baghdadi Jews as a transnational community who were in many ways stuck in an identity limbo where they wished to be European, their past was Middle Eastern, and their present was Indian. She also talks about an ‘imagined community’ in India that was very fitting for Baghdadi Jews.

Another interesting highlight of the book is the study of the contributions made by the Baghdadi Jews to India, spanning from the architectural landscape to schools and religion. Despite their diversity, the various communities of Baghdadis, including those in Bombay and Poona, managed to foster and promote their own individualized religious practices. The religiosity within the sect revolved around the synagogue and home. Practices such as singing the Shabbath at home and at the synagogue, for celebrations, Shabbats, and commemorating milestone moments, have brought generations together through uniformity in lived religious experience.

Although there exists plenty of literature on the synagogues of India, especially the ones built by Baghdadi Jews, this book gives new insights into the schooling system introduced by the Baghdadi Jews. While the synagogues originally established by Baghdadi Jews were not fully accessible to other Jewish communities like Bene Israel, those communities were always welcome in Baghdadi schools. Furthermore, the book brings forth an interesting aspect of Jewish schools in the cosmopolitan Kolkata. As Jael Silliman remarks in her chapter, the Calcutta Jewish Girls’ School, which once boasted a Jewish student body, has come to be 90 percent Muslim due to the dwindling Jewish populace in the city over the past few decades (p. 115).

Although the book introduces us to many facets of how the Baghdadi Jewish community has impacted India and how it has added more colors to India’s super-diversity, some snippets of its data and information verge on being an extension to the literature that already exists, a case in point being the section on synagogues. This book is definitely a first of its kind, but many of its topics are already spoken about in the form of journal articles and book chapters. Nonetheless, this volume will provide immense value to scholars, researchers, and enthusiasts interested in learning more about Baghdadi Jews and how they changed the landscape of urban India. It provides landmarks to help new scholars navigate their way while venturing into Indian studies and the religions it has harbored for centuries. While no piece can serve as the ultimate single source on the history of Baghdadi Jews in India, this book has made significant strides toward attaining that goal.

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Review

This fascinating analytic ethnography of worship at ten resurgent Jewish and Christian female saint tombs in Israel/Palestine awakens the anthropological imagination with regard to the dynamics activated through these rituals. (Interestingly, Stadler found no resurgent Muslim female saint tombs in this region.) Using the approach of ‘ritual in its own right’, Stadler begins with the interiors of these rituals, with their internal logics, rather than with their socio-cultural surrounds. This enables her to identify many of the shrines studied as ‘womb-tombs’ whose architectonics position the saint within womb-like depth. These burial chambers are experienced by worshipers as apertures through which dead (and deathless) female saints may bestow new life. From tomb to womb, the desire for pregnancy and birth are the epicenter of devotional efforts at these shrines.

For Stadler, the major dynamic through which worshipers become intimate with saints is, following Walter Benjamin, the mimetic. Worshipers use mimetic movements that imitate the genesis of the life cycle: “The bodies of devotees … imitate the seed growing in the soil, the act of entering the womb, and are representations of fertilization and fertility” (p. 164). Stadler’s argument enables us to begin to comprehend how a homologizing relationship between worshiper and saint, one that is then less representational and hence less symbolic, may emerge from the mimetic, and its implications for the ontological turn in anthropology. To propose this I will focus on mimetic body rituals at these shrines (chap. 2).

Stadler argues that for the three Abrahamic religions, the Holy Land (the term preferred by worshipers) is an axis mundi within which narratives of claims to territory are embedded and enacted at saints’ tombs. Elaborating on Coleman and Eade’s idea of ‘the body in motion,’ Stadler proposes that mimetic rituals are in motion, with bodily movement motioning, beckoning. At the tomb of Rachel, the Jewish biblical matriarch, women create mimetic intimacy by kissing her gravestone and reciting psalms. Greek Orthodoxy commemorates Mary’s Dormition within a cave-church. As the clergy perform the canonic funerary rituals, the rituals in motion of the lay flock imitate bringing new life into existence as they bend, touch, pray, and crawl as many times as possible beneath the icon of the mother of God. Stadler understands these mimetic bodies in motion as *representing* the intimate quest for fertility, while the saint’s dead body *represents* the fetus and hence rebirth. Also present in female saint tombs are “magical items” (pp. 72–74), like children’s clothing brought by devotees, which are material extensions of the female body in motion.

These rituals torque back with consequence into their broader religious geopolitical surrounds. Many of these shrines are contested. Rachel’s Tomb, in Palestinian territory according to the Oslo Accords, was annexed by Israel and walled off, with access restricted only to Jews, cutting off Christian and Muslim women from a ritual source of new life—all in the name of ‘security needs’, so often used to justify Israeli land grabs. The shrine has become a key symbol of Jewish religious nationalism. In reaction, an icon of the Madonna was painted on the Palestinian side of the Separation Wall. This icon has become a site of pilgrimage, with prayers directed to the icon for a miracle to make the Wall fall. Despite the abundance of conflict over these shrines and their positioning, Stadler argues that through them femininity—motherhood, fertility, reproduction—enters the landscape as a quietening, gentler alternative to the warring belligerence of Middle Eastern masculinity. Yet is not this femininity also integral to the rising wave of Jewish ultra-nationalist messianism in Israel, which has been growing since the 1967 War?
Are the mimetic body rituals discussed by Stadler moving toward the homologic? Consider first one prominent commonality in the organization of the cosmoses of the three monotheisms. All are predicated on a major rupture, a gap, between God and human being, such that in large measure the human is separated from God. Moreover, God holds together and integrates the cosmos from outside itself. Thus, the entirety (including God) is discontinuous within itself. Mediators bridge the gap between the human and God, yet the bridging itself is representational since God is rarely known directly by the human. In other words, the bridging is symbolic. Originally, the Greek term symbolon referred to a broken half that was present and that recalled its absent half with which it could potentially reconnect (Eco 1985). Therefore, ‘symbol’ stands for ruptured absence, representing it as presence. The gap, the rupture between signifier and signified, prevents the fullness of presence of the latter.

Mimesis takes this partial connectivity a step further by actively seeking similitude, turning toward the similar, thereby minimizing representation in the drive for the closeness and intimacy of near identity. Thus, when mimesis is successful, the presence of the symbolic is diminished. Roger Caillois ([1935] 1984) argued that mimesis weakens the boundaries of selfness, allowing it to become similar to its environment. I suggest that this is the epistemological positioning of the mimetic movements of devotees at the female saint tombs, but that the desired outcome is more profound than this, and may be found in the emergence of homological relationships with the saint.

Cosmoses predicated on homological relationships are continuous within themselves, enabling smooth passage among planes or levels, and are ‘self-intragrating’ (Handelman 2021: 191–209). Homological relationships “posit a similarity, or sameness in the mode of connectedness” between beings or things on different cosmological levels, such that “a change in one can coax transformation in another” (Bar-On Cohen 2012: 426). These are relationships of mutuality, without intervening gaps, enabling cause to turn into effect, effect into cause. Examples of cosmic ontologies based on homology are numerous: Vedism (Knipe 1975), Taoism (Henderson 1984), Shinto, and so forth (cf. Eliade 1959). However, the anthropological error is to think that homology has little or no place in monotheistic cosmologies because we understand cosmo-logic and onto-logic as general premises of encompassing organization, and therefore as top-down formations. Yet the evidence for multiple ontologies within a particular cultural time-space (Mol 2002) opens up the perspective that ontology may also emerge bottom-up from the homologizing of relationships between different levels or planes of being.

Emergent homologizing with ontological implications abound in monotheistic cosmoses. One example is that of the Russian Orthodox heresy of ‘name-worshiping,’ of repeating the name of God until the presence of God within the worshiper becomes actual. The chanting of the Name may even synchronize with the body’s heartbeat, the infinite becoming finite, with an emerging relationship of mutuality between the human and the divine (Graham and Kantor 2009). Another example is how the Bobover Hassidim homologize Purim, a joyous holiday of pleasure, and Kippurim, the Day of Atonement, such that on Purim too the boundary between God and the human becomes porous, and cosmic levels become more continuous with one another. On Purim, the Bobover Hasidim perform a play thought to bring about change in the course of events in the world (Epstein 1987).

Stadler’s discussion of women practicing womb-tomb rituals of fertility through mimesis accrues greater explanatory power as ritual if one recognizes that the women’s mimetic movement not only imitates but also begins to change the character of the connectivity between themselves and the saint. Michael Taussig (1993: 35) argues that “the womb
the mimetic organ par excellence, mysteriously underscoring ... the dual meaning of reproduction as birthing and reproduction as replication.” Mimesis weakens the boundary between the divine and the human, positioning the women to relate directly to the saint. Yet the movement into mimesis then diminishes the role of representation-assymbolism, since this still embeds the fracture between levels of monotheistic cosmoses. Their mimetic positioning enables the women to intensify their desire to be at one with the saint, on the same plane, not only intimate but mutually caring. This mutuality homologizes their relationship, womb-to-womb, one may say. In effect, the women are generating emergent and consequential ontologics within their respective canonic monotheistic cosmologies, but they are at odds with those cosmologies. If so, then the turn to ontology in anthropology acquires a different set of emergent issues to contend with.

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References

Response

Voices of the Ritual speaks directly to Don Handelman’s approach to analyzing ‘ritual in its own right’. My book illustrates that the revival of female sacred places in Israel/Palestine provides a unique critical lens for examining not only how people perform rituals, but also how they reconfigure the meaning of pious performativity through contestations over land and its ownership. In his review, Handelman focuses mostly on my analysis of the interconnections between ritual and mimesis. One of the striking aspects of rituals in the Holy Land, which diverges from other holy places around the world, is that shrines tend to reflect an array of scriptural narratives, as many of them are dedicated to canonical Jewish and Christian female figures. Nevertheless, the findings in my book show that the rituals, iconography, and architecture of places in the Holy Land, more than following a canonical text, reinforce mimetic body rituals and female materiality. For visitors of different religions, body-based actions that imitate the infant coming out of the womb are a dominant practice. I term these places ‘womb-tomb’ shrines. In this context, worshippers use mimetic movements that imitate stages of the life-course—from birth to death.

Focusing on mimesis invites anthropologists to examine how a homologizing relationship between worshiper and saint in a
specific place of worship emerges from movements of the body, and extends far beyond a ‘symbolic’ reading of their actions. At the tomb of Rachel, the Jewish biblical matriarch, women create mimetic intimacy by kissing her gravestone and reciting psalms. Similarly, Greek Orthodox pilgrims commemorate Mary’s Dormition within a cave-church by crawling under her icon. Greek nuns perform the canonic funerary rituals and imitate bringing new life into existence as they bend, touch, pray, and crawl as many times as possible beneath the icon of the Theotokos—the bearer of God.

Throughout the book, I integrate these mimetic practices with materiality, space, and landscapes, demonstrating how these relationships both affect and are affected by the politics and territorial disputes in Israel/Palestine. I argue that femininity, as it shapes motherhood, fertility, and reproduction, can be seen as a softer alternative to the aggressiveness of Middle Eastern masculinities. When referring to this argument, Handelman asks, “Yet is not this femininity also integral to the rising wave of Jewish ultra-nationalist messianism in Israel, which has been growing since the 1967 War?” I agree with him. This quieter femininity is vocal in other spheres of what he terms Jewish ultra-nationalistic messianism, which is reflected in higher rates of fertility, the creation and reinforcement of the ideology of large families, and the centrality of brave or sacrificial motherhood.

In response to Handelman’s inquiry into the homology of mimesis, my research findings demonstrate that mimesis is not always utilized as a tool to uphold the prevailing social order, as is evidenced in the ethnographic record. Rather, it is also utilized as a means of contesting the social order itself. Through my research, I have shown that worshippers seek to minimize the gap between the signifier and signified, as well as reduce the tension between their desires and everyday reality. While I agree with Handelman that visitors of sacred places seek to achieve unity with a sacred center by engaging in mimetic rituals, I have found that they do so by unifying with organic objects such as soil or natural items, not as symbolic means, but by organizing tangible materials in their everyday lives, including physical objects and practices that facilitate lived religion. This response is driven by the contested landscape, violence, and militarism in their surrounding environment.

As Handelman suggests in his review, *Voices of the Ritual* opens a new possibility to look through the lens of ontology that emerges bottom-up from the homologization of relationships between different levels or rhythms of being. By following this approach, a broader comparative discussion of women practicing womb-tomb rituals of fertility through mimesis can have greater explanatory power as ritual if one recognizes, as Handelman suggests, “that the women’s mimetic movement not only imitates but also begins to change the character of the connectivity between themselves and the saint.” In that sense, women can see the tomb, the grotto, the sacred garden as their first home, a place to live, to do and to change, as many of my interlocuters argue. I agree that this dynamism should be explored further, especially with what Handelman calls the option that “movement into mimesis then diminishes the role of representation-as-symbolism, since this still embeds the fracture between levels of monotheistic cosmeses.” This form of exploration of mimetic positioning can generate what he terms “womb-to-womb” homology, the dynamic of womb as a place and womb as a body organ, integrating the ritual and also challenging it. I agree that to study this phenomenon more deeply will offer anthropologists new directions as ritual is practiced in changing worlds—an endeavor I will be happy to pursue in my future work.

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It should be no surprise that most of the existing scholarship on the Twelver Shi'i branch of Islam centers on West Asia. The faith originated in modern-day Saudi Arabia, finds its primary sites of pilgrimage in Iraq, and played an important role in recent political history as the official religion in post-revolution Iran. Yet as many as a third of the world’s Shi'a reside in South Asia, particularly India and Pakistan, where the faith is a wellspring for the material, visual, and auditory cultures of subcontinental Islam. Karen Ruffle, whose influential body of work over the last decade has examined Shi'i material culture, built space, and devotional literature, wants to challenge the view that Shi'ism in the Indian sub-continent is merely a corrupted form of its Arabic and Persian geographic prototype. What she calls “Indo-Shi’ism” (p. 12) refers to South Asian Shi'i practices that are firmly integrated into public religion and everyday life.

Ruffle’s book begins by considering how elements of Shi'i devotion become meaningful and efficacious across communities of belief, particularly for Hindu and non-Shi'i Muslims in South Asia, through the shared usage of shrines and the veneration of saints. In doing so, Ruffle draws attention to the prevalence of Shi'i orientation in day-to-day life as it is lived across religious boundaries. This is the ‘everyday Shi’ism’ that gives the book its name: devotion to the Ahl-e Bait, the family of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Twelve Imams, expressed variously in affective experiences that mediate cohesive forms of empathy, in the cultivation of Shi'i ethics through hagiographic literature and miracle tales, and in the “body oriented” (p. 166) character of Shi'i material culture.

Ruffle's proposal for an ethics of everyday Shi’ism (p. 6) locates itself in different theoretical guises, from Clifford Geertz’s notion of a ‘vocabulary of sentiment’ to Jan Assman’s ‘cultural memory’. This Shi‘i everyday includes face-to-face encounters with co-present others as well as the felt presence of the Imams and the Ahl-e Bait. This mixture of interreligious, affective, and divine forms of participation guides the cultivation of norms that both emerge from the everyday and strive toward transcendent values. Ruffle explains that the norms and values that the Shi‘i everyday carries are like a container for repertoires that “cultivate an ethos of love (mahabbah), longing …, sadness, and loyalty” (p. 7). This Shi‘i everyday also provides a theory of practice that includes women’s devotional lives without describing them pejoratively as ‘popular’. In this way, the book seeks to challenge the overemphasis on piety in the anthropology of Islam by locating normativity outside of legal-textual traditions and in material culture, devotional objects, and everyday forms of moral pedagogy.

This is not strictly the ‘everyday’ or the ‘ordinary’ that anthropologists of religion will recognize in the work of Veena Das or Michael Lambek. With such evident parallels, it would have been interesting to hear how, for example, an ethics of everyday Shi’ism speaks to Das’s work on violence and the ‘descent into the ordinary’. I felt this most strongly when reading Ruffle’s eloquent description of how Shi’ism manifests its affective power and corporeal appeal through “creative expression … of the cultural memory of a violent act without violence” (p. 4). That this transcendent ‘good’ is so intimately channeled through the recursive commemoration of cruelty provides a fascinating way of bringing together two recent approaches in the anthropology of religion. Ruffle’s book ends by introducing its readers to the possibilities of future research on Shi‘i celebration, media practice, and digital circulation through which difficult questions of public disclosure and religious co-existence play out.

As an anthropologist who has worked with Twelver Shi‘a in Pakistan, I found Everyday Shi’ism in South Asia to be an unparalleled
encyclopedia of the ‘Indo-Shi’ism’ it brings into scholarly analysis and a potent catalyst for future research. Ruffle’s book represents a sea change in the study of Shi’ism. At the same time, it proposes to fill the scholarly gaps it identifies by functioning as a textbook closely prepared for use in the classroom. In parallel sections, Ruffle introduces central concepts to readers in uncomplicated language and provides extended sections of raw source material. This collage style presentation shows great intellectual generosity by providing rare and hard to find data for further study, some of it translated by the author. A teaching appendix with seminar questions and supplementary materials serves to bring these chapters directly into the classroom, inviting students in Anthropology, Religious Studies, South Asian History and Culture, and Islamic Studies to see, hear, and feel South Asian Shi’i faith in new ways.

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“MARIA MAGDALENA” EXHIBITION

Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 25 June 2021–9 January 2022

Museum Catharijneconvent (St. Catherine’s Convent Museum) is the national museum for Christian art and heritage in the Netherlands. It is housed in the halls of a medieval monastery that hosts a large permanent collection of medieval art. The Catharijneconvent describes its aims as researching and demonstrating the “aesthetic, cultural and historical value of the art and heritage of Christianity in the Netherlands.” It is convinced that Christian art and heritage are of interest to a broad and diverse public since, according to the museum, they tell something about the past and the present, and the roots and identity of contemporary Dutch society. In order to remain in touch with academic understandings of religion and the expression of religious diversity in the Netherlands, close connections have been established with scholars of religious studies at Utrecht University as well as other academic institutions.

The 2021–2022 exhibition “Mary Magdalene” explored historical and contemporary artistic and cultural renderings of the iconic biblical figure Mary Magdalene. It was Lieke Wijnia’s first exhibition since her 2019 appointment as curator of modern and contemporary art, and in it she aimed to show the many faces of Mary Magdalene: chief witness, sinner, and feminist icon. Because of the many ways in which she has been portrayed throughout time and place, exploring various imaginations of Mary Magdalene reveals insights into the particular times and places from which they emerged. This seems a primary message the exhibition wanted to convey, combined with a desire to inspire new reflections on what Mary Magdalene might mean for individuals in the present day.

Visitors were guided through five rooms with an audio tour providing explanations of many of the artworks in the exhibition. These commentaries were presented by art historians, theologians, a mystic, and sometimes the artists themselves. In the first room, the visitors encountered familiar images of Mary Magdalene from stills of movies such as The King of Kings (1927), Jesus Christ Superstar (1973), The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), and The Da Vinci Code (2006). This display immediately hit home the message that the contemporary viewer’s perception of Mary Magdalene is largely determined by arts and popular culture.

The second room presented scriptural evidence from the Gospels as well as a few Gnostic texts. The third room demonstrated examples of Mary Magdalene as visualized in Eastern Orthodox and Western Christian art, conveying the differences between Western and Eastern iconography. In both traditions Mary Magdalene carries the title of Holy Myrrhbearer, which combines the roles of anointer and announcer of Jesus Christ’s Resurrection, but in Western Christian art she
was not considered one of the apostles, while in Eastern orthodoxy, she retained this status.

The next two rooms, which are medieval monastery corridors, comprised an impressive diverse collection of paintings, sculptures, and prints dating from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century. These rooms tackled the origins of a theme that has become very dominant in Western culture, that is, Mary Magdalene being associated with sinful sexuality. Apart from depictions presenting her material wealth and/or her life as a hermit, several contemporary images also received attention, some of which (re)claimed her as a feminist icon. Apart from existing artistic and popular culture works, we found here also some works by artists based in the Netherlands who were invited to produce a work of art on the occasion of the exhibition. The artworks made by Anjet van Linge, Egbert Modderman, and Chantal Breukers are based on their personal research into and reflections on their image of Mary Magdalene. Modderman, for example, made a deliberate choice to depict Mary Magdalene with a fierce facial expression, wearing an androgynous white robe, and seated with her legs wide apart. Thus, as he considered history to have ‘messed with’ Mary Magdalene, he now portrayed her as an independent and authoritative woman, someone who needs to be taken seriously.

The exhibition underlined the fact that images of Mary Magdalene have always been changing and thus hinted at the possibility of new imaginary. In the last room, the painting *Mary Magdalene* by Alfred Stevens (1877) seemed to gaze at the visitors, as if asking, who am I to you? In this room, attendees were asked to cast their vote for who Mary Magdalene is for them. They were provided with seven possibilities: “Powerful Woman,” “Apostle of the Apostles,” “Spiritual Initiate,” “Lover of Jesus,” “Chief Witness,” “Penitent Sinner,” and “Miracle Worker.” Given the structure and message of the exhibition, the result is perhaps no surprise. After three months, art historian Tijana Zakula (2021) reported that “Powerful Woman” was leading the vote.

The exhibition was primarily aimed at facilitating a reflection on the diverse representations of Mary Magdalene that have emerged throughout time, especially in Western Christian art and contemporary popular culture. Its focus was less on showing more ethnic-cultural diversity within Christianity in the West generally, or in the Netherlands specifically. It did not give clues as to how, for example, Maluku, Ethiopian, or black Pentecostal Dutch churches and communities might imagine the persona and role of Mary Magdalene in different ways compared to members of the white Christian and/or secularized majority.

A second sidenote regards the way that the exhibition historically and theologically situated and critiqued the notion of Mary Magdalene as a ‘fallen woman.’ It is important to deconstruct the connections made between sexuality, women’s bodies, and sin, and the exhibition needs to be lauded for the careful deconstructive work it accomplished. However, in its foregrounding (and arguably promotion) of an image of Mary Magdalene as ‘cleansed’ from associations with sexual sins and now (re)invested with authority, a possible effect might be that it is assumed that an apostle is someone other than an imagined or actual sex worker. By separating Mary Magdalene from her image of being sexually sinful, those who find comfort precisely in her visibility as a ‘fallen woman’ might no longer have someone with whom to identify or maybe struggle. Another step, after the already mentioned successful deconstruction, would have been to address just that (probably unintended) effect.

Finally, the exhibition did not leave room for relating images of Mary Magdalene to the lived religion of individual Christians or Christian communities, although the exhibit’s accompanying book, *Mary Magdalene: Chief Witness, Sinner, Feminist* by Wijnia (2021), offers a few examples. The volume comprises essays written by art historians, curators, and theologians. The essay written by Marije de Nood (2021) is based on an interview with
Maria Magdalena, the prioress of the Norbertinessen monastery Sint-Catharinadal in Oosterhout, the Netherlands. The prioress relates how she chose the name Maria Magdalena upon her entry into the monastery in 1979: “Since my childhood, I was fascinated by Mary Magdalene, because of her strong loyalty to Christ … That still makes an incredible impression on me” (ibid.: 71).

Another essay, by Joanne Anderson (2021), also connects the biblical Mary Magdalene to lived religion. She focuses on various artworks present at the exhibition, among them the Magdalene Laundry Shrine by Patricia Cronin. This piece of art comprises a wooden crate with a pile of bleached aprons, accompanied by a painting of an individual Magdalena sister. Cronin’s work refers to women’s experiences in the laundries of Mary Magdalene monasteries in Ireland. In these laundries, women of various ages, who were considered ‘fallen’ because they had (voluntarily or involuntarily) engaged in sex outside of wedlock, were forced to do harsh labor and were treated cruelly. Cronin’s work and Anderson’s analysis of it thus provide a valuable hint toward the intersection of the biblical figure Mary Magdalene and women’s lived experiences. In this context, the image of Mary Magdalene becomes part of the institutional disciplining of Irish Catholic female bodies that were supposed to be docile and productive, penitent and obedient (see also Gott 2021).

These two essays provide a glimpse of two sides of the Mary Magdalene imagery coin and how it relates to lived religion: on the one hand, it infuses women’s personal religiosity in a supportive and generous manner; on the other, it has been part and parcel of disciplinary apparatuses that structure and limit women’s sexuality and punish those who transgress existing norms about proper female embodiment and piety. Of course, these two sides of the same coin are not necessarily contradictory. The exhibition can thus be seen as an occasion for visitors not only to rethink who Mary Magdalene is or can be for them, but also to think about what different imaginations of Mary Magdalene potentially generate in the lives of individuals and communities, in both positive and negative ways.

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Notes
2. Ibid.

References
At the beginning of *Digital Mythology and the Internet’s Monster*, Vivian Asimos suggests that Slender Man—an unnaturally thin, faceless fiend—is a case study that can “demonstrate the role of mythology in the contemporary world” (p. 1). The Slender Man story emerged in 2009 initially on a forum dedicated to the sharing of allegedly paranormal images. However, it soon spread, adopting multiple formats in the process such as “digitally manipulated photos, pseudo-documents, personal narratives, video games, [and] web videos” (p. 31), each retelling a variation on, and transformation of, previous iterations.

Asimos is not simply telling tales. The book aims to discover whether Claude Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist approach to myth might be able to tell us something new and interesting about digital cultures and mythology, and how digitally mediated myths spread and change, as well as what they might mean. To this end, Asimos collates multiple versions of the Slender Man myth, which together form a “spiral” (p. 24) of transformations. The majority of the chapters in the book focus on these versions of the Slender Man mythology, prefaced by two chapters that discuss its origins and original form, crossing multiple genres and platforms in the process.

I am not an expert in digital cultures, but I have written about structuralism and Claude Lévi-Strauss, and I found Asimos’s point of departure original and compelling. I agree with her that Lévi-Strauss’s approach to myth can help us understand digital cultures and the Slender Man phenomenon, but I am not persuaded that Asimos’s conclusions quite live up to that initial promise. As such, in this review I will do two things: first, I will critically examine Asimos’s analysis of the Slender Man myth and its “triadic structure” (e.g., see pp. 56, 76, 97, 214), and, second, I will propose an alternative analysis of the Slender Man myth that also addresses how the mythology changes and spreads. I hope that this review is read as it is intended—not as a correction but as a deep engagement with Asimos’s book that seeks to extend her study of Lévi-Strauss and contemporary digital cultures.

Asimos represents her account of the meaning of the Slender Man myth in terms of three circles arranged in linear fashion from left to right, designated “Untouched” (A), “Transformed” (B), and “Removed” (C), with the left and right edges of the middle circle B overlapping with the edges of the circles A and C. According to Asimos, the Untouched are those who have no knowledge of the Slender Man, the Transformed are those who have some knowledge, while the Removed are those who ended up too close to the Slender Man and have since disappeared or even been murdered as a result. Asimos designates the middle circle as the “liminal” element of a “ritual” (p. 78) structure, but she never discusses Arnold van Gennep’s model of the rites of passage, which also has a linear, triadic structure, with a liminal phase in the middle, and which her model resembles in significant respects. What, then, might a more obviously structuralist analysis of Slender Man look like?

In chapter 6, in which a video game called *The Arrival* is introduced, the key events of the narrative are summarized by Asimos as follows: (1) the player is a girl who discovers a series of strange drawings in a room before leaving a house and going into a forest in response to a distant scream; (2) the player wanders the forest collecting more drawings and is stalked and finally attacked by the Slender Man; (3) the player wakes up in an abandoned underground mine shaft and must start the generator to power the lift to escape; and (4) the player is back in a forest and can see the Slender Man moving through the trees. The Slender Man is setting the forest on fire, and the player must make her way to a radio tower (pp. 110–111).

The first event relates to communication failures (the player does not know what the
The scream is pure noise), and the second accentuates the first. More unintelligible drawings are located before the attack by the faceless Slender Man, whose violence is itself unintelligible. In the third event, the passage underground evokes the silence of death, while in the fourth, escape is signaled by a radio tower and the possibility of restoring communication.

Most of the action of the narrative takes place in the wilds of a forest and points to the fundamental opposition of nature (the forest) to culture (the house), coupled with the further opposition of the Slender Man to the player. The first event relates to an overvaluation of speech/communication (the player responds to a scream even though s/he does not know who screamed, where the scream came from, or its cause); the second event relates to an undervaluing of speech/communication (the violence of the Slender Man); the third event relates to the absence of speech/communication (the silence of the mine); and the fourth relates to the possibility of speech/communication and the safety and understanding that it might bring.

I would suggest, then, that the Slender Man mythology is an attempt to resolve a contradiction seemingly inherent to international communication technologies (and which is essential to speech and writing as well) regarding the identity and the intentions or sincerity of interlocuters, and the consequences of communication that, on the one hand, can facilitate pro-social understanding but, on the other, can sow anti-social discontent and violence. The Slender Man myth is, in short, a meditation on communication, particularly its digital media form.

If this is the meaning of the Slender Man myth, then what accounts for its proliferation and transformation across multiple versions of the story? Asimos locates this in what she describes as “the agency of storytellers” (p. 217). But what about the agency of the digital? Indeed, following the Lévi-Strauss of The Raw and the Cooked, what about the agency of the myth itself? What of Lévi-Strauss’s pessimistic account of entropy and the inevitable decay, as he saw it, of social worlds? Asimos does not engage these elements of Lévi-Strauss’s thought, which I find surprising. Asimos’s Digital Mythology and the Internet’s Monster begins as a brilliantly envisioned application of structuralism for the digital age, but for me ends disappointingly.

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David Morgan’s latest publication is titled The Thing about Religion. The use of such a casual title is usually reserved for major academic authors. When it comes to the study of material religion, it is safe to say that Morgan has earned the right to use a somewhat less formal title. This book is emphatically framed as an introduction to the study of material religion. It is presented as accessible to students from the BA level onward. Have you heard of material religion but were unsure what to do with it in your own work? This book is the place to start. It is divided into two parts: the first concerns theories and definitions, the second explores the application of theoretical considerations to the field. One notable example, the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, is discussed in chapter 5. Its recent fire and the implications of its rebuilding process are events no doubt familiar to this book’s intended readership.

The title of this book is deceptively simple, because looking at religion from a material perspective allows for an incredibly broad approach. It promotes seeing religions as embodied, material forms of practice, but it also encourages searching for religion in
materiality and embodiment, beyond institutional and clearly defined religious contexts. Rather, material religion means studying how religious meaning is enacted in the material world. Yet, simultaneously, the thing about religion is that it concerns not only matter but also phenomena that won’t let themselves be objectified, such as encounters with angels or demons. Morgan explains: “In this book, thing refers to both senses—the yet to be specified and that which is not (readily) specifiable” (p. 5). Trying to find terminology around objects and matter, Morgan often uses ‘thing’ and ‘stuff’. With these words, he refers not only to high art or architecture, but to all things religious, “the material character of the look and smell and sound that make a religion what it is in the daily lives of its adherents” (p. 3). By means of the notion of things, Morgan also taps into the fields of “lived religion” (p. 66) and the “sensational form” of religion (p. 75).

Change is inherent to the nature of religious things. While objects might materially remain the same over time, people’s attitudes toward them can significantly change. Through their materiality, things have agency: “Humans invest the material world with agency that in turn enables them. But that agency is more than merely projected by human beings. In a very real sense, human beings cooperate with objects” (p. 7). The relationality between humans and things is the book’s main object of study, which, in turn, can theoretically be found anywhere. Already invested in its subtitle, An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions, this volume deals with religions—in the plural. While Morgan has previously worked on material and visual culture within Christian traditions, this book decidedly looks at things, materiality, and its agency across religious and cultural traditions. It places on the same level of scholarly interest a replica of the head of Michelangelo’s David found in the Morgan family home, Polynesian sculptures of deities, and magic wands ranging from ancient Greece to neo-paganism and Harry Potter. Morgan’s approach of seeing all these objects as things avoids a normative approach. It is not his aim to conclude which things are more religious or more theologically justified. Instead, each religious embodiment or interpretation of the object’s agency—and the human behavior reinforcing this agency—is of equal relevance: “Religions are embodied, material processes that shape societies, prompt behavior, affect interaction with the physical world, and organize relations among human beings” (p. 98). This pluralistic approach, although not new, remains refreshing and offers a relevant point of departure for new students in this field.

Religious things tend to elicit rule-governed behavior, receive special representations, and be protected from harm. Here parallels are found in sociological approaches to ‘the sacred’, with, for instance, Gordon Lynch arguing how the sacred only comes to the fore when it is under threat. On the opening page of the chapter on the Notre Dame, Morgan writes: “We don’t know how important something is until we face losing it” (p. 129). This implies a switch from taking iconic, sacralized things for granted into a necessary reorientation to ensure their survival. In the case of the Notre Dame, this reorientation also implied a transformation, enforced by the devastating fire.

This seems one of the most urgent aspects in the study of material religion. A situation of threat or potential loss reveals the dynamic nature at the very heart of relationality to things. Part of this dynamic nature is the relationship between the thing’s religious dimension in respect to other layers of meaning, such as history, politics, heritage, or national identity. In President Emmanuel Macron’s initial response to the fire, it was immediately clear that “the building is not about the Catholic faith but about the French nation” (p. 153). By proclaiming the intention to make the building even more beautiful than it was before, Macron’s words expressed sentiments on French nationhood rather than the site’s function as a cathedral. However, as Morgan duly notes, this does not make the site less
interesting for students of material religion. Civil religion is very much a form of religion, an embodiment of the sacred as well.

The Notre Dame is one of many examples Morgan explores in this book. *The Thing about Religion* encourages students to study how things function within networks of actors that embody religion. As such, the book is a celebration of potential roads of inquiry exemplified by the field that Morgan helped to define and establish. It proves that material religion is no longer a new kid on the block, but is located at the heart of religious studies. Therefore, as a final remark, I would like to discourage the use of the frame that religion is commonly viewed through the lens of beliefs, ideas, and doctrines (mentioned on the book’s back cover). This frame undermines the status and influence that material religion has by now gained as an academic field that productively nuances the religion-as-belief approach. Material religion no longer needs that argument to demonstrate its relevance, as Morgan aptly demonstrates with his latest book.

Lieke Wijnia
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A scene from *The Healer and the Psychiatrist* stayed with me long after watching the film. Not the more viscerally potent moment when traditional healer Emeline Lolohea squeezes a liquid herbal medicine into the eyes of the daughter of a Christian minister suffering from spirit possession. But rather the calm, peaceful scene of men sitting around a large bowl of kava singing in Tongan, their voices ringing out in harmony, reminiscent of a men’s church choir. These men are participating in a unique ritual—a traditional collective kava drinking ceremony, but one led by Dr. Mapa Puloka, the only psychiatrist in the Kingdom of Tonga, an archipelago of islands in the South Pacific Ocean. Frequent gathering and talking around the kava bowl is a key part of his psychiatric practice, both as a form of therapy and as a space where he makes diagnoses and assesses whether his patients’ medication requires adjustment. Kava has analgesic and sedative properties and is traditionally drunk by men in clubs. Excessive use within the community has lately come under public scrutiny and criticism. Yet Dr. Puloka compares his use to the ‘amytal interview’ technique, barbiturate-assisted interviews once used in Western psychiatry to reveal concealed emotions. “No need for injections here,” he says. “Just drink kava and talk.”

For me, this scene perhaps best captures the essence of the film. First, that mental distress in terms of both its cause and treatment is not an individualistic phenomenon. Traditional healer Emeline connects it to the spirits of the dead and their relationships with the living, and Dr. Puloka advocates treatment through the communitas invoked through his version of kava ceremonies. Second, compared to common assumptions that ‘traditional’ practices and biomedical psychiatry exist in tension, Dr. Puloka at least seems to see no such opposition. Avanga, or spirit possession, is the main Tongan source of mental distress. Some avanga can be treated by traditional healing, while other forms require psychiatrist intervention. Even then, what is needed is not just medication, but also somatic practices, like the kava sessions or the growing of food, which Dr. Puloka encourages his patients to do at his own farm. “What happens if you don’t have traditional healers?” he asks at an international conference of psychiatrists. “Does our government have the money to treat everyone? No way!” Or, in the words of Emeline, sometimes you do not need to “plaque yourself with pills” to find healing. It seems clear to both practitioners, and to others in the film, that some things are the business of spirits, and some are not.
Directed by anthropologist Mike Poltorak, *The Healer and the Psychiatrist*, through a mix of observation and interviews, introduces us to the therapeutic life-worlds of Emeline Lolohea, a spirit healer in the island group of Vava’u, and Dr. Mapa Puloka, the only local psychiatrist living on the main island of Tongatapu. The two have never met, but through Poltorak’s intervention, a dialogue of sorts is created between them; it should be noted, however, that it is somewhat one-sided. Dr. Puloka is invited to comment on some of Emeline’s patients when Poltorak shares video footage, leading to interesting questions such as how to distinguish psychotic speech from spirit possession. But this activity does not go the other way. Perhaps due to the particular relationship the anthropologist has with each of them, Emeline is most often seen at home, and Dr. Puloka in his office.

During the film we are taken into several of Emeline’s therapeutic encounters. What is most striking is not the treatments themselves, but their gentle insertion into the everyday life scenes of families. Relatives and children sit casually around the patient, birds sing quietly in the background, and these occasions seem quite ordinary. The moments of healing do not feel like liminal events. This is further emphasized by the depiction of Emeline’s multiple roles in the community, including lay preaching in a Christian church. Dr. Puloka reinforces this when he notes that although patients face stigma if they attend his hospital, there is no stigma at all associated with spirit possession and visiting traditional healers.

The film also follows a parallel story, that of a physical illness suffered by Emeline’s husband. He had suffered from a chronic knee infection for several years, and the family struggled to get effective treatment at the hospital. But they do not return for follow-up appointments, with eventually devastating consequences. Including this story serves to reveal the deep relationship that developed between the family and the anthropologist. It also shows the struggles some Tongans face with gaining accessing to and placing trust in health services. But it also leaves questions unanswered. Emeline does use some traditional healing with her husband alongside biomedical medications, but it seems that this is because of the difficulties engaging with the hospital. There is no suggestion that the persistence of the illness has a spiritual source, and in fact it feels quite different from the dilemmas facing Emeline’s other clients. I was left wondering if the family considered this affliction part of the cosmological world in which Emeline practices, partly because others suffering spirit possession had identified physical as well as psychic symptoms, including leg pain. This film and the life stories it reveals make me realize that there is still much to be learned about avanga, suffering, and distress in Tonga.

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The title of this book is instantly compelling. It contains an ambitious promise to generate a new theory of two vast phenomena—religion and society—in a way that overcomes well-trodden polarized approaches to religion and secular society as fissured realms. I have to say the book does not disappoint. Not only does it offer a masterful overview of key debates that have shaped current anthropological approaches to religion. It also brings us to the most pertinent claims about seeing the world as a matter of assemblages, flows, complexities, and entanglements of agencies, materialities, spaces, and more. Clearly, Tremlett’s thought has been influenced by the new or speculative materialisms of Harman and Bennett, by the imaginaries of Deleuze and Guattari, and the
cat’s cradle experiments with lines, knots, and assemblages of Latour, Harroway, and Ingold. Tremlett does not deny that some of these notions might seem familiar. What is worth highlighting is that he sees these theoretical framings as a point of departure rather than an explanation of unpredictable processes that we gloss as religion, political constellations, and social transformation. In other words, instead of endlessly arriving at the above-mentioned theory, this sophisticated book suggests that thinking through flows, assemblages, and agency of objects is an already established methodology. Far from being a recondite analytic, irrelevant to ‘actually existing’ political and social struggles, assembling is a method rather than a metaphor.

The four chapters, entitled “Energy,” “Biology,” “Generative Interactivity,” and “Emergence,” continue to build a fascinating history of socio-anthropological ideas by tracing lines and connections (i.e., assembling) between ideas of Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, and Weber (among others) and by substantiating thought with ethnographic content. The chapter “Energy” offers a provocative argument that religious and social vitality can be understood as energy shifts, including entropy and effervescence. An example of how this happens is Tremlett’s own study of Occupy Democracy’s assembly in London in 2014, which was a series of dense events that implicated protesters, with their nearly totemic objects, placards, and tents, and wardens and police officers, who repeatedly attempted to seize and dismantle the protesters’ human-object collectives.

The chapter “Biology” is intriguing because, for a hundred years, anthropologists have pushed back against the analogy between evolution and social change. Tremlett does not reinstate the analogy. On the contrary, he succinctly and critically reprises theories of religion that have seen it as an atavism, an evolutionary mistake, a parasite on our cognitive capacities, and so on. Next, biology appears at a different juncture of “biological imagination” (p. 54) or a “body without organs” (p. 78) to show that the idea of biology as a deterministic law of nature needs upending. The problem is not the comparison between biology and society per se. The problem is that biology is given a trivial meaning of a linear evolution instead of a rhizome. Theoretical ruminations are grounded in a very short description of Christianity from the Flores, an island of the Indonesian archipelago, which seems to display the usual mixture of local rituals, syncretic Christianity, colonialism, tourism, and heritage industry. Maybe it is the brevity of the example, but I have struggled to fully see its potentialities. In the previous sentence, I have mentioned mixture and syncretism; the Flores life does not strike me as anything other.

The chapter “Generative Interactivity” resonates with the language, even a dialectic, of invention of social and religious worlds. Assemblages entail a newness that does not reproduce binary structures or transmit traditional ontologies. The question of continuity and change is revitalized as a topography of the simultaneity of Christians, communists, students, feminists, documents, urban infrastructures and noises, concrete artifacts, and colonial histories that Tremlett encountered in the Philippines. This is the longest chapter because it presents an analytical elaboration of the church-plaza colonial settlement in the Philippines and contains the pencil-sketched diagrams by Atsuhide Ito that initially come across as ‘illustrations’ of networks and nodes of colonial and urban entanglements of Christianity and everything else. This is an important chapter, precisely because Ito’s drawings cannot be dismissed as mere illustrations. I will return to this point in the end.

The chapter “Emergence” is an interesting account of the tension between rationality and charisma and an explication of bricolage thinking in relation to Cargo Cults. I haven’t worked with Cargo Cults, but they hold a special place in the imaginaries of many anthropologists, both for the notoriety of explaining Cargo Cults away and for the many challenges they pose to our understanding of the limits of human agency and history. While
these points are discussed thoughtfully in the book, a few brief historico-ethnographic examples stop short of elucidating the workings of non-human agency. The chapter declares that we should pay attention to it, but it is unclear how it can be detected in the broad-stroke discussion.

The last two chapters have prompted a nagging concern. I can't brush aside a feeling that either the empirical reality or our mode of manifesting it in writing seems to confound our flights of theoretical imagination. Tremlett’s efforts to synthesize what is usually dubbed as theory and ordinarily ethnographic description are exceptional. Yet a few examples seem a bit drab, without much storytelling craft or poetic density. Perhaps the author was suspicious of presenting a new theory of religion according to the old conventions of academic writing. Is this why Tremlett’s analysis switches from writing to drawing? Is it a gesture that questions the adequacy of a certain kind of writing for conveying the flows and assemblages of the living, the dead, gods, and buildings?

Atsuhide Ito, who was tasked with providing and explaining drawings of a Christo-Filipino colonial city assemblage, comments on applying full body weight to paper to produce a visible mark, a line, a dot, an accidental smudge in an “apophenic exercise” (p. 159) that renders assemblage visible. The collaborative labor of Tremlett and Ito render a glimpse of generative interactivity. Recommended!

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Laurel Kendall’s new book offers an interesting and compelling study of the production and ensoulment of specific sacred objects and of their interrelations with shamans and spirit mediums in East and Southeast Asia. Highly interdisciplinary, it derives from four collaborative projects that the author undertook in South Korea, Vietnam, Bali, and Myanmar. Kendall’s years of fieldwork with Korean shamans particularly shine through, but the ethnographic accounts of the other three contexts are also so captivating that readers get to experience part of her journey, approached as “a wide-ranging conversation where things learned in one place pose fresh questions in another and sometimes garner surprising answers” (p. 180). Moreover, the use of anecdotes and vivid analogies makes it easy to follow the narration, and the beautiful illustrations and photographs included offer a useful visual support that renders this journey even more enjoyable.

The only weakness of the book is that readers unfamiliar with Asian religions might find it difficult at times to follow Kendall’s analysis. A brief description of the four religious contexts might have been useful. Readers would also have benefited from the presence of a glossary of specific emic terms. Although this is a minor aspect, in a future edition the author might wish to provide a revised and more coherent use of Chinese and Korean characters throughout the text, and perhaps also add the Vietnamese, Burmese, and Balinese alphabets.

The opening chapter introduces Kendall’s research, presenting her four main case studies: statues used by Vietnamese and Burmese spirit mediums, paintings used by Korean shamans, and masks used by entranced dancers in Bali. These “are all considered by devotees to be inhabited by gods/spirits/energies
that become present and agentive through appropriate use in appropriate settings” (p. 8). Students and scholars interested in the study of the materiality of religion might want to pay particular attention to this chapter, where Kendall explains how she conducted her research, thus providing a practical example for those wishing to follow the same path. In particular, she briefly reviews the state of the art in the field of studies on object agency and material religion.

Kendall acknowledges the risks of adopting certain concepts, such as that of magic (pp. 9–10), and certain strategies, such as that of comparison (pp. 15–25), and she carefully clarifies why and how she made certain choices and produced this research. The author also carefully presents the discussion on new animism based on Viveiros de Castro’s and Descola’s works. Throughout the chapters, she contributes to broadening and deepening this discussion by showing elements that conflict with the animist ontology outlined by these two scholars. This could have been made even more explicit, since it is one of the most interesting contributions of Kendall’s work.

Chapter 2 focuses on the topic of image agency. Through vivid accounts of her encounters, Kendall discusses how Vietnamese and Burmese statues, Korean paintings, and Balinese masks are enlivened with gods/spirits/energies, and how spirit mediums and shamans interact with them. In chapter 3, the author deals with the processes by which the sacred images at the core of the study are made. Kendall shows how image-makers need to carefully consider circumstances, materials, and modes of productions to make their images efficacious. Since, as she notes, gods/spirits/energies need “both the image body and the medium’s more mobile body to be vividly present” (p. 103), in the following chapter, Kendall turns her (and the reader’s) attention to the relationship between sacred objects and shamans and spirit mediums.

In chapter 5 Kendall takes a detour in her analysis to focus on the porous “boundaries between magically empowered (or empowerable) things and pure commodities” (p. 131). The relation between this chapter and the previous ones is made clear only in the last pages of the chapter itself. In a future edition it might be a good idea to make this connection more explicit at the beginning of the chapter to allow the reader to better follow her analysis. The final chapter explores the processes by which (once) sacred images become museum objects. Through various anecdotes, the author shows how “the ambiguous status of an image may become a matter of consequence” (p. 177) for the many actors connected to its museumification. In the conclusion, Kendall reflects upon her “exercise in thinking through things” (p. 178) and retracts in a very clear way what she has come to understand and realize through this process.

All in all, I highly recommend this book as a significant contribution to the field of material religion studies. In presenting a detailed account on how her study was undertaken, Kendall encourages students and scholars to adopt a similar approach to sacred images. This book is also an excellent resource for all those academicians who are interested in ways of interacting with deities and spirits in Asia. General readers, too, will enjoy being guided by Kendall on her journey across East and Southeast Asia.

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Natalie Lang’s Religion and Pride looks in detail at the specific context of Hindus in the French overseas department of La Réunion, located in the Mascarene Islands in the Indian Ocean. Through her research on religious practices
and public performance, the author demonstrates how recognition functions as a driving force in the making of religious minorities.

The author presents the struggle for recognition of Reunionese Hindus through negotiations with state institutions, highlighting how certain strategies—the creation of cultural and religious associations, the acquisition of knowledge, and an orientation toward India—integrate the process of pride into their religious identity. This pride in their religion can be inspired by India, which validates Hinduism as a world religion, but it is also expressed in the traditional practices of their local socio-historical contexts. Hindu religion thus becomes a form of recognition and a strategy for the acquisition of self-esteem, social status, and social mobility.

Through the lens of pride, used as an alternative to diaspora approaches, Lang uncovers the everyday lives and goals underlying the social and religious negotiations of Reunionese Hindus. The concept of pride—fierté—emerges from the discourses of her interlocutors as a public celebration of the differences embodied by a religious minority group. Pride also emerges from a conscious self-positioning of their history in the local society and of their contact with Creole culture, as well as other ancestral traditions. It is thus a form of recognition and simultaneously a social strategy. Pride is thereby deeply associated with the process of recognition, whereby religious aspirations function as globalizing and diasporic consciousness-creating forces. This outcome is the reverse of what diaspora scholarship usually presents—that is, religious transformations resulting from diasporic processes. Throughout the six chapters, the author demonstrates how, by claiming pride, Reunionese Hindus claim recognition by connecting to India and to local religious practices, by investing in religious knowledge and its diverse forms, and by experiencing ritual emotions and aesthetics.

Chapter 1 presents the complexity of developments of Hinduism in La Réunion, given the diversity of the society and its historical past, defined by colonialism, slavery, and indenture, where assimilationist practices and the dominance of Catholicism influenced the local stigmatization of Hindu practices. Chapter 2 analyzes the creation of religious associations in the French secular state, and how efforts to gain recognition adapt to local laïcité and complexify it. The struggle for institutional recognition is illustrated by the cases of public holidays and the presence of the Hindu religion on television. Chapter 3 explores the various levels of relationships with India to address recent globalization processes, demonstrating that it is not always globalization that leads to religious transformations: religious aspirations themselves can trigger globalization processes, as evidenced by this ethnographic case. In chapter 4, the author explores how the acquisition of knowledge—used by both priests and practitioners as a source of pride—is pivotal in the processes of self-making and the recognition of individuals and groups vis-à-vis various audiences. The chapter also introduces a gender perspective, focusing on the religious and social negotiations undertaken by women through social media, particularly Facebook.

In chapter 5, double religiosity is examined from different individual perspectives toward multiple and overlapping religious belongings. The author presents religious bricolage strategies held by Reunionese Hindus as a means to negotiate between various religious practices according to their individual beliefs and to the collective purpose of claim for pride and recognition. Chapter 6 analyzes the intersection between religious practices, personal goals, and attempts at distinction through religious aesthetics. This connectivity unfolds in displays of social capital and the affective and emotional dimensions provoked by religious rituals, individually and collectively. Used in a balanced way, they create the spirit of belonging to a group and, consequently, can lead to various dimensions of recognition, namely, from the state and from Reunionese society.

The conclusion reinforces the author's proposal of using the politics of pride to explain
Reunionese Hindus’ recognition processes. According to Lang, the diaspora approach could lead to “overlooking or downplaying other important factors in people’s lives” (p. 207). Alternatively, she uses pride as a lens of analysis to examine people’s aspirations and self-making projects by linking emotional, social, and institutional dimensions. Lang thus offers an innovative way to considering the specificities and complexities of diasporic phenomena.

The book takes a detailed look at the complexity of Hindu religious practices in La Réunion, providing a thorough portrait of the diverse cultural composition and of the porous and fluid religious, ethnic, and social identities that are involved. The constant presence of the author, through her ethnographic reflections, accompanies the narrative of the book, interconnecting anthropological research, the interlocutors’ voices, and the author’s reflexivity. This approach brings readers closer to the universe of analysis of Reunionese society and to the dynamics of ethnographic research, resulting in a stimulating narrative of dialogue between fieldwork data and the conceptual and theoretical framework in a balanced and comprehensive manner.

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In this slim and agile yet dense ethnography, Andrew Alan Johnson offers us precious insights into the riverine cosmos of a village on the Lao-Thai border. As the title suggests, dreams play a role here, but don’t be fooled: the reader will not find placid waters and fishermen’s stories exchanged on the riverbanks during starry nights. There are multiple dreams surfacing here: underwater currents that may pull down the occasional swimmer, non-human entities lurking and sending opaque messages, the after-effects of development projects and capitalist exploitation, voices from beyond or from distant lands, and more.

Through these pages, the village of Ban Beuk (a pseudonym) becomes the focal point of a multiplicity of lines that involve voices (including the ethnographer’s), policies, projects, and agencies. Despite belonging to diverse dimensions (local/global, national/international, human/non-human, ordinary/weird, etc.), each of these voices brings to the village a shard of knowledge. From their interplay, as interpreted through the eyes and voices of the villagers and the ethnographer, we grasp (together with them) potential or partial truths.

Agents exchange dreams. In southern China, beyond the border, the Jinghong Dam regulates the Mekong River waters flowing southward. This affects the life—and lives—along and inside the river, not only materially (i.e., ecologically, economically), but also cosmologically. We learn that the dam itself projects its shadows into the dreams of people. It is also thought to send dreams or to make itself visible through the dreams that people have, with ominous references to natural disasters to come. As such, it is a source of anxiety acting on a multiplicity of levels. Dreams are also sent by ghostly river kings and lords, supernatural fish lords, or the serpentine entities known in South and Southeast Asia as naga. These non-humans inhabit specific potent places. In this geography of potency, particularly important are rapids, islands, and deep pools.

It is important to note that all these ecological niches are endangered by changes in water levels due to the dam’s activities. We are reminded en passant that the long war between the naga and garuda (the winged vehicle of Vishnu) also exemplifies the conflict between Laos and Thailand. The border area was often the stage for millennial revolts
and, in more recent years, a hub of communist insurgency and a stronghold of the Red Shirt movement.

The theoretical framework of the book situates it among works reflecting on the ontological turn, the Anthropocene, and the role of the human/non-human (to which we find here an additional group termed the ‘inhuman’) heterogeneous collectives. Behind the obvious focus (a riverine life ethnography), the author explores nuanced margins: the potency and potentialities of beings, partial and opaque knowledge, distance and absence. Indeterminacy and uncertainty emerge as sources of ambiguity and hence power. Let us turn to Johnson's concept of the ‘inhuman’. It could appear redundant when we already have in our jargon expressions like ‘non-human’ and ‘other-than-human’ persons. According to Johnson, if we take the informants’ ontologies for granted, we inevitably tend to silence the dimension of doubt and uncertainty that is part of the human experience. For this reason, he proposes “the inhuman as a term to refer to these beings whose subject position is beyond human perception or imagination,” thus allowing for “the recognition of fuzzy boundaries to ontological worlds” (p. 167). An anecdote quoted in the introduction, taken from Lisa Stevenson’s (2014) *Life Beside Itself*, aptly exemplifies the certain existence of something whose exact nature eludes us or leaves us baffled: “One of her interlocutors mentions that a raven in his backyard might be an ancestor, or might just be a raven. He’s not sure. Then, he adds, ‘It’s still there’” (pp. 13–14).

This level of indeterminacy, that is, the potential, the maybe, the unknown, surely qualifies as a key element of religious experiences across various cultures. In his book, Johnson reframes it as ‘the inhuman’ to enable its application to a wider set of agents positioned beyond the immediate sphere of legibility of the subject. In doing so, the term indicates not only ghosts and spirits, but also those apparently distant and immaterial entities (i.e., the dam authorities, the global market, etc.) that, despite being removed from view, have a deep impact and a material and tangible effect on the river ecology and the lives of its inhabitants.

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Reference