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## Working in Between

### Interdisciplinary and Multivalent Approaches to the Study of Religion

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■ **ABSTRACT:** Through personal reflections on my work to date, this article explores how scholars of religion creatively define and redefine our subject matter. It emphasizes two main themes: temporality and the category of religion. Regarding time, I discuss how changing personal and political contexts have spurred my experiments with cross-disciplinary methodologies, as well as my reflections on citational politics and the role of citation in interdisciplinary exchanges. Regarding the category of religion, I consider the impact on my recent work of projects to deconstruct religion further by including secularism and non-religion within Religious Studies departments. Throughout, I ponder how scholars speak to one another, particularly in the interdisciplinary environment of religious studies, about the thing we call 'religion'.

■ **KEYWORDS:** citational politics, ethnography, interdisciplinarity, methodology, religious studies, secularism, theoretical tool

There is nothing like making small talk with an acquaintance to shed light on the idiosyncrasies of our scholarly endeavor. The conversation is usually of a type. After telling me that she builds bridges or makes bread or nurses bodies for a living, the friendly inquirer asks, "And what do you do?" Sometimes I answer vaguely that I'm a teacher so we can move on to another topic. But other times I throw caution to the wind and announce that I'm an anthropologist of religion and, worse yet, tell her that my work is interdisciplinary. In response to the inquirer's blank stare, I offer, "I study people." But then, again, I cannot help myself: "Well, not only people—also the relationships people have with other-than-human presences and things and places and ...". Another stare. She decides to tackle the 'religion' bit. Oh yes, she tells me, she *knows* religion—and she usually doesn't like it. She might substitute "the Church" for "religion" (we are, after all, in Quebec with its complicated Catholic legacy). She will often say that she deplores the violence that religion causes. My response is hardly satisfactory, as I explain with an anthropologist's eye that I view religion as one facet of a larger cultural field. The look on the amiable stranger's face



signals that it is time to change the subject, which I do more or less deftly by mentioning the weather or commenting on the color of her shoes.

And yet, such conversations linger in my mind. As well they should, for each time I encounter the confusion of others I am reminded that I belong to a particular guild with its own terms of engagement. I have inherited the invented categories of academic ‘disciplines’ and even religion itself. Scholars of religion have scrutinized both of these issues. With regard to disciplines, we ask whether religious studies is, in fact, a discipline or a broader field of interest. On the definition of religion, we have embraced what anthropologist Henry Goldschmidt (2009: 550) calls “a kind of [social scientific] poststructuralist antireductionism.” He refers to the awareness that religion as a category arose out of Christian Europe, structured nineteenth-century classificatory projects, and was then subsumed into modern social sciences (Asad 1993; Chidester 1996; Masuzawa 2005; Smith 1998). Scholars have traced this process with a critical eye, especially in studies of South and East Asia (Dalmia and Stietencron 1995; Josephson 2012; Lorenzen 1999; Pennington 2005). Others acknowledge this history yet defend the need for a category called religion to provide the basis for comparative study (Hanegraaff 2016). What is at stake in these debates is not whether different societies conceptualize and interact with supernatural entities, as they obviously do, but whether religion and related terms, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, impose European social thought on others. As a scholar who is second-generation to these debates—they were already well-established when I began my PhD—they seem both obvious to me and vital. It seems obvious that we, as scholars, shape our analytical categories and vital that we remain aware of the process. Therein lies the creative potential in studies of religion, as we define and redefine our subject matter.

This article, which is more like three short personal reflections, explores some of the implications of this creative process in my own work. Writing in this vein is a novel exercise for me. In response to the prompt for the Symposium section in which this article belongs, I have taken a more autobiographical tone than in my previous work. And the timing seems right for such reflection: I am writing almost exactly a decade since I graduated with a doctorate in anthropological and historical studies of North American Christianity and began a job in a Religious Studies department. I am therefore writing from the vantage point of a white, anglophone scholar working in North America at the intersection of religious studies and anthropology. The particular trends I discuss may be more or less evident in other scholarly contexts. Nevertheless, I hope this article offers fodder for broader comparison via its two central themes.

The first theme concerns temporality: how do changing personal and political contexts shape commitments to particular methodologies and disciplinary norms? I take up this question by tracing aspects of my evolution as an interdisciplinary junior scholar over the last 10 years. The first section, titled “Discipline,” explores this theme in my first book projects. A second section, “Citation,” extends the discussion, taking its cue from a growing awareness of the politics of citation in fields adjacent to my own. I discuss citations in my own work and ruminate on their role in the interdisciplinary environment of my Religious Studies department. The second central theme interrogates the concept of religion. For readability I do not use scare quotes around the word religion, although I view it as a constructed and therefore flexible term. This idea is evident in my first two reflections—what is religious studies, and how do scholars speak to one another about the thing we call religion? But it appears most obviously in the final reflection, which I have called “Disruption” after the title of my latest research project. In a general sense, my approach to the concept of religion is inspired by the pioneering work cited above, which influenced my graduate training. However, this reflection emphasizes new conceptual territory that I have encountered since, including the (even more) deconstructive project of embracing secularism and non-religion within religious studies, which bears upon my current work.

## Discipline

My academic training has proceeded in a messy, exuberant sort of way. I completed degrees in history, economics, and American studies before beginning my professional career as an anthropologist in a Religious Studies department. It is perhaps my unruly approach to disciplines that gives rise to my way of working: I focus on a subject that interests me and then follow where it leads. Did a sociologist write about it? Or a political scientist or psychologist? I quite happily hopscotch between them. At times, this approach poses difficulties, as most interdisciplinary scholars have probably found. Just the other month, for example, an article I submitted to a journal of economic history was rejected. The subject matter was interesting, I was told, but my analysis strayed too far afield by citing anthropologists and scholars of religion. “I am not sure what to make of this ‘history of the present’ approach,” one reviewer concluded.

Lack of legibility is a potential pitfall of interdisciplinarity, but there are many benefits too. For one thing, it has pushed me to be more creative in my methodological approach to gathering data. I sometimes think about my fieldwork as ‘scavenge ethnography’, picking through scraps of letters and e-mails, bits of emotion and dialogue. It is part of a broader approach to fieldwork that corresponds to what Eleana Kim (2010) has called ‘roving’ ethnography. This method was especially evident in my recent book, *Christian Globalism at Home* (Kaell 2020), which uses child sponsorship as a central axis to explore how US Christians make and imagine global relations. Sponsorship is a fundraising tool that asks donors to send a monthly contribution—usually \$40—for an individual child abroad, with whom they exchange letters and photos. It is a long-term process that occurs here and there at kitchen tables, in bedrooms, and in office cubicles. Thus, in crafting the book I ‘roved’ between places and scavenged where I could. I crisscrossed the US many times over, working in four different organizational headquarters, at least half a dozen archives, and multiple church sites.

A mixed methods approach can be especially conducive to working and training students in the interdisciplinary environment of Religious Studies departments, where I have taught for most of my career thus far. I feel the need to state the case since, as noted, such methods are not always legible to anthropologists as sufficiently anthropological or to historians as sufficiently historical, to name my two primary fields. A further potential drawback is that it is often exhausting to rove so much, literally and conceptually, as one jumps between different modes of information gathering. And yet scavenging can make us nimble and responsive to what is available in the field. It has the advantage of helping scholars piece together stories over broader distances and time periods. It has also helped me move outside the traditional sites of Christian practice to conceptualize religion more broadly as including the seemingly banal spaces of office cubicle or kitchen table.

For example, in roving between offices, homes, and churches, I became interested in the “rituals of verification” (Strathern 2000: 3) that anthropologists associate with creating trust in modern finance. At the NGOs I studied, these ‘rituals’ were tied across multiple sites, with the goal of inculcating trust by including God in the financial and bureaucratic structure. While the Christian credibility of a founder or CEO is important, I found that this process was largely a collaborative effort between lower-level female staff and sponsors to create a dense network of mutual prayers. Organizational materials ask sponsors for their prayers to aid with business decisions; female staff prayed at lunch hours for the organization’s needs; sponsors called or wrote to ask for prayers, to which mainly female staff members also devoted time every day. This system, which is built by people at every level of the bureaucratic machine, admits the financial (and even moral) fallibility of an organization’s human managers while implying the system’s larger reliance on a higher power. Had I confined my work to one site, or one form of

media, I would likely have failed to see this process in action. I may also have failed to expand my own thinking about the category of religion to see this faithful model of accounting within a putatively ‘secular’ bureaucracy.

Besides pushing me to be more creative in my approach to research, reading across disciplines has recently encouraged me to be more experimental when I put pen to paper. I am still feeling my way through this process, asking how I can uphold the empirical basis of my research yet embrace new modes of written expression. The *Christian Globalism* project lent itself well to such reflections. As I worked on it, I kept encountering gaps or silences. The Christians I got to know usually engaged with sponsorship sporadically, and the letters they kept from the children offered only brief snapshots of the children’s lives. Organizations also preserved only bits and pieces of archival records, and their staff members shared partial glimpses of their internal workings (often guided by advice from the NGOs’ robust legal teams). As an outside researcher, I got used to being given redacted e-mails or budgets with lines blacked out. These limitations prompted me to consider what to do about the gaps—a question that my interactions with sponsors helped me to plumb in more depth.

Sponsors often told me about yearning for closeness with the child they supported and, more generally, with other Christians far away. At first, many of them said that the gap between here and there was an unfortunate side effect of not having enough technological means of communication. If only we had better e-mail systems or the child had better Internet access, they would say, we could have a true connection. And yet, as I got to know them better, it became evident that gaps, irresolution, and silences are, in fact, constitutive of global relations. There is a necessary disconnect between Christian aspirations for closeness with faraway “brothers and sisters in Christ” and the embodied forms of intimacy that create relations in their everyday lives. As a result, a central theme in the book became how US Christians try to momentarily close the gap by cultivating closeness with people faraway through sensory practices of prayer, ritualization, or activities such as those related to food and dress. These attempts are often successful, but they are fleeting and must be repeated.

Viewed in broader terms, this pattern of negotiating absence speaks to a fundamental theme in the study of religion. As scholars, we are faced with the absent/present nature of other-than-human beings and the challenge of how to express their presence among the people with whom we work. I will return to this idea below, but for now let me clarify how I introduced the absent/present in *Christian Globalism at Home* (Kaell 2020: 11). In the book’s introduction, I wrote:

The collapse of absence and presence through technology or travel is a classic theme in studies of globalization. I bring a religious sensibility to bear on this discussion, since my use of “absent/present” refers to a variety of physically absent beings that are rendered present in some capacity through imaginative and sensory practices. Sponsored children are a potent example of living human beings who may fall into this category. It also encompasses other-than-human beings, such as the dead or the divine, which in various ways all Christians understand as sometimes present with believers despite bodily absence. Absent/present beings—human and divine—exert claims on believers as they waver between distance and proximity. That wavering quality is important: globalism is not only about better communications and deeper experiences of knowing. It is equally characterized by the frustrated possibilities of what is partially grasped.

The “partially grasped” is important in sponsorship, as it is in any global project, since donors must learn to imagine future successes for the children they support within a system that ultimately severs their contact, sometimes abruptly. Sponsors are not supposed to be in contact with children outside of the organization’s program. If a child is dropped from the rolls or ‘graduates’

at 18 or 21, the sponsor simply never hears from her or him again. Sponsors rarely get to know the adult the child becomes. Thus, absence always haunts the imaginative forms that sponsors try to work into being.

As this theme emerged in the project, I was drawn to theorist Saidiya Hartman's (2008) methodology of 'critical fabulation.' It refers to how she uses archives and fictional narrative to plumb the silences in personal histories of slavery. While the context is obviously different, her method inspired my own attempts to guide readers through the gaps by bringing them into the text itself. Thinking in these terms, I opted to include two sections titled "Interludes." Each one, at approximately 4,000 words, is sandwiched between two chapters and offset from the rest of the book by a gray tint on the pages. They are written very differently from my more content-driven chapters. As I explained in the book, I inserted them, first, to suggest the usefulness of experimental approaches to writing when globally dispersed sources are inaccessible or incomplete. I also hoped the prose would allow readers to better feel the temporality of sponsorship, which, as noted, is shaped by sporadic letters over many years. Most important, I used the interludes to evoke the absences, misunderstandings, and differing expectations that constitute global projects.

One interlude was shaped around the experiences of two people I call Carol and Rizal. From 1987 through the 1990s, Carol, an American woman who is now in her sixties in Massachusetts, sponsored Rizal, a Filipino man now in his early forties in Mindanao. They have been in and out of touch sporadically ever since. This interlude was meant to give the flavor of a single relationship, with some temporal depth. It consisted of a series of short entries, each with a date spanning 1987 to the present, which I wrote from the perspective of either Rizal or Carol. I underlined direct quotes from the conversations I held with each of them over two years (2017–2018). Everything else was paraphrased, apart from minor details I invented for narrative flow (or a kind of 'fabulation,' as Hartman might say). Two excerpts (Kaell 2020: 187, 189) run like this:

Springfield, Massachusetts, August 1987

The TV screen flickered in the darkness. Tired though she was, the World Vision infomercial held her attention. *There was something about the whole spiel, when they listed all the things they did.* They didn't just feed and clothe kids, they taught them about Christ. "*That's something I could get on board with,*" she thought. And she was finally making a reasonable amount of money, enough that she could put food on her table and have a bit left over ...

Baroy, Lanao del Norte, Mindanao, January 1989

Rizal held his brother's hand as they walked into Baroy with Pastor Abraham. He thought about how much had changed since Christmas Eve two years ago. December 24, 1987. The night his father was shot. *Life had been difficult before, but never like this. His mother had found a new husband and stopped caring about what happened to them. She had another family now ...*

I pondered whether to include this kind of writing in the book, as I felt uneasy about appropriating others' voices. However, I was also unsatisfied with the two basic ways that sponsorship relations are usually studied. The most common method is the one-off interview. That is how organizations study their own donors, if they do so at all. It can offer a rich snapshot of what someone is thinking and doing but mutes the extended temporality of these commitments. The other method consists of analyzing written materials to infuse the sponsor-child relationship with a sense of change over time. It produces what is essentially an amalgamated portrait. For example, a historian looks at many letters sent by South Korean children from 1953 to 1956 and then extrapolates what life was like for a 'Korean child' at the time. Although I used both

these methods in the book's chapters, my experiment with Carol and Rizal offered a third way. And true to my mixed methods approach, it utilized a wide variety of media: fieldwork notes from Massachusetts, interviews and e-mails with Carol, phone and Skype interviews with Rizal (using a translator), Facebook messages with Rizal and his sister. Carol also gave me her personal archive, consisting of years' worth of Facebook messages, e-mails, and letters. In the book, I prefaced the interlude by writing "the final product is ... a result of its creation as I stitched together a patchwork of overlapping voices" (Kaell 2020: 187). Rizal's story was undoubtedly colored by mistranslations and emotions ("I was nervous," he said at the end. "This is the longest I ever spoke to someone from another country"). Carol's bore traces of her own multiple retellings. And yet I think the gamble was worth it. As a narrative outgrowth of my methodological style in the field, the interlude is where one really gets a feel for 'the Christian global'—a sphere of relations that is necessarily dogged by informational gaps, lack of trust, and faulty telecommunications, but also by big dreams that imagine who the other might be.

### Citation

In keeping with these reflections on writing, I now turn to citations. This section leads away, for a moment, from the subject of my research to consider citation as the basic scaffolding of scholarly studies. From my perspective as an interdisciplinary scholar, the role of citation extends from the writing itself into the realm of the everyday relations in a Religious Studies department. In other words, citation is deeply implicated in the social project of (interdisciplinary) scholarship—in our work and our departments.

Citation is how scholars speak to each other; our work is valued—published, assigned, discussed—insofar as it is integrated into this conversation. Because of this important role, more attention of late is being paid specifically to the 'politics of citation' as a 'practice of "conscientious engagement"' (Mott and Cockayne 2017). It refers to the call to acknowledge the uneven nature of this system: some scholars' work is promoted while that of others is ignored. Some trace the roots of this critique to US legal scholar Richard Delgado's (1984) groundbreaking article "The Imperial Scholar," which was later picked up by critical race theorists (Ray 2018). Others trace more proximate origins to theorist Sara Ahmed's (2013) Feministkilljoys blog post that described citation as "a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies" (see also Ahmed 2017: 17). Whatever its origins—and likely there are multiple—this methodological intervention is most pronounced in feminist studies and critical race/ethnic studies. It is also strongly associated with social media. Black feminist anthropologist Christen A. Smith's successful #cite-blackwomen campaign, founded in late 2017, was explicitly designed around a Twitter hashtag. When the editors of *Critical Ethnic Studies* launched a "Citation Practices Challenge" in April 2015, they asked scholars to "Make a vow and make it public. Trace what happens in your work" using the #citationchallenge hashtag.

Despite the religious language in my last example—my first book was on pilgrimage, so how can I ignore calls to make a vow?—scholars of religion have rarely proposed their own such challenges. From what I can find, this conversation is most developed, although hardly mainstream, among feminist-inspired scholars in Jewish studies, theology, and biblical studies who identify it as an ethical and intellectual imperative. Working in Islamic studies, Kecia Ali (2019) is also notable for her efforts to foreground this conversation, especially with respect to women's scholarship. She cites Jewish studies scholar Sarah Imhoff, who points out that the ratio of female scholars cited in religious studies is much lower than one would assume based on records from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which over a 20-year period shows that

women were awarded nearly 40 percent of PhDs in religion-related fields in the United States (Imhoff, in Ali et al. 2020).

In *Christian Globalism at Home*, I thought more about citation than I had in previous projects. It was a sign of the times, as I researched and wrote the book from 2012 to 2018 just as the discussion around citational politics was picking up in fields adjacent to religious studies. But it was also a sign of my growing distance from my PhD. Scholars often track the number of times they are cited or publish as a sign of professional advancement (despite the acknowledged problems with such measurements). Upon reflection, I think we can also reverse that equation to ask how our own use of citations changes over our careers. In my case, my first book, *Walking Where Jesus Walked* (Kaell 2014), emerged directly from my doctoral thesis and was published just three years later. At that stage, as with many students (or recent students), my scholarly community was comparatively narrow. I still thought of my audience mainly as my supervisors. Did I cite the classic authors they would expect to see? Did I show that I had mastered the literature I had covered in coursework and examinations? While my second project still required that I master the literature on the subject at hand, I began to think more strategically about citations as a tool to position myself as part of the multiple fields within which I had begun to publish. The result was that I wrote a more interdisciplinary book, anchored in citations I hoped could offer some basis for a common discussion.

Following the press guidelines, I used endnotes rather than in-text citations, which meant significantly limiting the number of scholars named in the text itself. In choosing whom to highlight in that manner, I most often turned to citations that I assumed would be commonly enough known across fields to provide shared frames of reference. Based on my reading about citational politics, another goal was to cite women and people of color in an ongoing effort to expand the scholarly conversation. I did not explicitly tally the results as I was writing, but I can step back now and use my manuscript as a case study. I will focus on the introduction, where citations are most concentrated. It ran just over eighteen pages, with 64 endnotes, many of which include more than one citation. These notes include 83 separate studies across a number of fields, by scholars who are junior, senior, and classical (i.e., from the early to mid-twentieth century). I have analyzed them only according to gender: 45 works by men are cited and 36 by women (44 percent).<sup>1</sup> However, in the text itself, I name just 14 individuals. In order of appearance, they are Arjun Appadurai, Benedict Anderson, Simon Coleman, Anna Tsing, Karen Ho, Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Saba Mahmood, Timothy Morton, Georg Simmel, Michel de Certeau, Lauren Berlant, and Susan Sontag. Nine men and five women (36 percent). This citational record is likely average, or even high, in religious studies.<sup>2</sup> The balance also shifts if we eliminate the ‘classical’ scholars: Anderson, Mauss, Bourdieu, Foucault, Simmel, Certeau, and Sontag. Six of them are white European men; Sontag, a white American woman, is the exception. Of the seven more recent scholars, four are women and four are people of color. All of them are senior—even ‘superstar’—scholars in their respective fields.

Citations are a way to converse with other scholars in our writing, but also in our departments. Indeed, citations serve an especially critical role in interdisciplinary departments, like religious studies, which routinely bring together faculty who have been trained in multiple fields and sub-fields. In our meetings, my colleagues and I would inquire about each other’s work, making links through the scholars we had read in common. In the department’s foundational courses that faculty members shared, such as theory and methods, we had to negotiate which scholars seemed to represent the field of religious studies. As I found in my writing, one of the simplest ways to craft these shared citational networks is to push back into the past. Without discussing it explicitly, my colleagues and I assumed that probably we had all read classics like Durkheim, Otto, Freud, and Foucault. Through these citations, we created a sense of mutual

recognition, and as a result they often anchored our conversations and our shared syllabi. A similar dynamic operated when we cited the superstar scholars I noted above—those theorists who are cited just about everywhere and create cross-disciplinary bridges as a result, such as Saba Mahmood, Judith Butler, and Bruno Latour.

Thus, citation serves a key role in fostering relations across disciplines, yet this strategy often means narrowing whom we cite to the most well-known scholars, precisely because we expect their names to be widely known. In my writing, it means that classical scholars—and therefore primarily men from Europe or European backgrounds—retain a prominent place in the text itself (seven of my fourteen in-text citations). In my experience, this pattern is even more pronounced in the usually subconscious negotiations at a departmental level. The obvious drawback is that focusing on ‘classical’ scholars or ‘superstars’ rewards those who are already rich in citations with yet more exposure. Ali (2019) emphasizes how with each citation we make a choice to augment the scholarly authority of some and thereby diminish the authority of others. It is only in reflecting on my work now that I realize how often I opted to move junior scholars’ names to the notes while keeping names I thought would be better known in the text. The irony is that my own citational practices are not especially beneficial for my work, as a still quite junior female professor, or for my students who are emerging scholars, or for many of my closest peers in the academy. Using my own system, our names would be the first to be tucked away in the endnotes and excluded from the text.

The tension is evident. The politics of citation emphasizes the need—even the ethical imperative—to include less cited scholars, especially women and people of color. I include junior scholars in that category too. Yet the exigency of interdisciplinary dialogue shows the value of citing classical and superstar scholars (who, admittedly, may be more diverse). In any case, work by junior or lesser-known scholars is less valued. While it does not resolve the tension, we can mitigate it by becoming more aware of the choices we make. It means being aware not only of the names we cite but how we do so. Which citations are printed in-text versus in the notes? Which ones do we write on PowerPoint slides and in what font size? Which ones appear as “required” versus “recommended” on syllabi? Asking such questions is not so different from the “poststructuralist antireductionism” (Goldschmidt 2009: 550) already familiar to scholars of religion, which demands that we attend to the construction of religion as an analytical category. In a similar vein, we can become more conscious of how citations are a constructed scholarly edifice that significantly impacts how we relate to other scholars and to our subject matter.

## Disruption

In the decade since I graduated with a PhD, another methodological and conceptual shift has gained traction: the addition of secularism and non-religion within the traditional purview of Religious Studies departments (Lee 2012) and professional associations (e.g., the American Academy of Religion now has a Secularism and Secularity Unit).<sup>3</sup> One factor driving the shift is demographic data showing that a growing number of people in Europe and North America self-identify as having no religion. Another influence is almost certainly the broader push to critique the normative categories I noted above: as scholars deconstructed religion, they opened conceptual space for non-religion. Just what this field of study means, however, is still being negotiated. The first *Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, edited by sociologist Phil Zuckerman and philosopher John R. Shook (2017) to complement the previous year’s *Handbook of the Study of Religion*, defines its scope as including “unorthodoxy, blasphemy, apostasy, irreligion, religious criticism, agnosticism, atheism, naturalism, earth-centered-isms, humanism (and trans- and posthumanisms), rationalism,



skepticism, scientism, modernism, human rights causes, liberalism, and various kinds of church-state separation all around the world.” Clearly, secularism is a many-headed beast.

While I do not situate my work in this loosely defined field, my newest project is pushing me closer to its borders because it integrates what might be thought of as scientism, agnosticism, and naturalism. In this reflection, I trace a rough line to that project, showing how conceptions of religion as something outside of church and as a set of relations influenced my thinking during graduate school. These ideas were later reshaped as I encountered studies about societal power structures, secularism, and multi-species relations. My goal in this section is to show various disruptions to my own thinking about religion as a category that flesh out some of the methodological and disciplinary factors discussed above.

As an undergraduate student in the early 2000s, I first encountered the study of religion in courses on biblical texts (in religious studies) and rituals (in anthropology). Both types of courses emphasized objects and events that one could point to and say with satisfaction, “*There is religion.*” As my interest in the topic grew, I began to make saint cards to earn some extra cash. Montreal, where I lived at the time (and returned to as a professor), is marked by Catholic saint names on streets, parks, schools, and public buildings. My cards told the stories of these saints—the bloodier and more sensational, the better. I sold them in bars where tourists picked them up as a lark, I presume. Without realizing it at the time, I believe those cards helped me articulate something I was only beginning to comprehend: religion defined broadly—and more particularly religions associated with a historic majority—is not confined to the Bible or rituals performed at set times. It subtly structures ways of thinking and moving through the world such that I, a non-Christian, internalized Catholic stories and modes of memory-making via everyday interactions in supposedly non-religious places like a local park or residential street. My card-making career, such as it was, ended in 2004, and within a few years, I had begun a PhD where I first encountered scholars of religion who articulated these ideas for me. Tracy Fessenden (2007) framed Protestantism in the United States as a non-specific structuring concept in literature and law. John Modern (2011) argued that secularism was shaped by nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Matthew Engelke (2012) identified ‘ambient’ Protestantism in shopping malls and coffee shops.

My PhD project about pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine was, at first glance, typical for a study of religion. Pilgrimage is a classic topic in social scientific studies of religion. In the early twentieth century, Robert Hertz (1913), a student of Durkheim and Mauss, wrote an ethnographic account of Catholic pilgrimage in the Alps. As a second-year PhD student, I likely chose the topic at least partly because I viewed it as a properly religious thing to study, but I also remember being intrigued because it allowed me to find Christianity outside of church. Sociologists and anthropologists have often conducted studies of religion by situating themselves in a church. If they have a more quantitative bent, they may count the number of attendees or code themes from sermons. If they work qualitatively, they may live in the household of a pastor and embed themselves in congregational life. One of my initial questions was why prospective pilgrims would choose to go even when such trips were unaffiliated with their own church (at the time, pilgrimage companies were starting to draw people online instead of through traditional church networks). I was also interested in the private companies that ran the trips: were they ‘religious’ or not? Ultimately, the study became an education for me in how even putatively traditional religious practices can be expressed in ways that are lay-led, fluid, and commercialized. I developed these themes more fully in my next project about NGOs that run child sponsorship programs. As noted above, I dug deeper into the organizational mechanisms that, at first glance, seem something other than religion—statistics, audit reports, and bureaucratic infrastructure.

My understanding of religion outside of church was also supported by another, to paraphrase Andreas Bandak and Daniella Kuzmanovic (2015), rung on my epistemological ladder: the work of Robert Orsi on ‘lived Catholicism’. I embarked upon a PhD to work with Orsi, a foremost expert on US Catholicism, since I thought I wanted to study Catholic sainthood (recall those saint cards I made). In the end, I left the study of saints but had learned an enormously valuable lesson: religion is a form of relation between humans and transcendent beings. As I think of my graduate studies now, one of Orsi’s essays stands out for me. Just before I began fieldwork, Orsi (2008: 12) published a short piece titled “Abundant History” in which he begins by recounting his conversation with a gas station attendant in Ireland who told him that when the Virgin Mary appeared at Cork, “the transcendent broke into time.” Based on my notes, I was deeply struck by how a transcendent being could ‘break into time’ so that it surprised believers and, from their perspective, exerted its own form of agency. It seems obvious to me today, but it was new to me then (judging by the star and exclamation point with which I decorated Orsi’s text). Such events were also Christianity ‘beyond’ church: the transcendent was just as likely to ‘break in’ during a tourist trip or at a kitchen table as in front of the ‘real presence’ defined theologically (say, in the presence of the Catholic Eucharist). Thinking alongside Orsi’s work, today I usually describe religion as a shifting set of everyday relations between humans and other-than-human presences.<sup>4</sup> In my field sites, it encompasses the absent/present discussed above.

Over the last decade, this definition of religion-as-relation has begun to pose challenges for me as I have tried more pointedly to balance my descriptions of experience-near perspectives with explanations of complex societal structures (Meyer 2010: 754–755). While I was always aware that power is at stake, I have begun to think about this topic in more concrete terms. In part, this shift reflects a larger trend in the study of US religion. Orsi’s trajectory is indicative: his earliest work explored power in the intimate spaces of the Italian American family (Orsi 1985), while his recent work attends more closely to the role of Catholic institutional power regarding sex abuse (Orsi 2019). Both emphases are needed in the study of religion. My attention to structural power inequities also arose out of my project on large bureaucratic NGOs that traffic in images of racialized children. Putting my work on religion into conversation with theorists in other fields, I was better able to analyze issues such as the role of race in Christian sponsorship. In that case, for example, I drew on Jasbir Puar’s (2007: 200) idea of the “capacity for capacity” at the heart of biopolitical constructions of whiteness and Sara Ahmed’s (2010: xviii) writing on producing “happy diversity” documents. These citations were useful as a common frame of reference for interdisciplinary dialogue, in the terms I discussed above. For my purposes, they also helped explain why sponsors were drawn to images of children of color yet could not, on an individual basis, express why it was so. My conclusion was that, first, along with Puar (2007: 200), we should think of whiteness as encompassing a broad set of assumptions about the “capacity to give life, sustain life, and promote life” through economic prosperity, innovation, and ‘civilization’. Sponsors collapsed these qualities together to view themselves as people who regenerated and sustained others. Yet the idea was incomplete without the religious element: as Christians, they viewed their capacity for capacity on a global scale as a direct result of their relationship with a global Deity who was the only truly life-sustaining force. The ‘happy diversity’ imagery that resulted shows racialized children from many places doing things that US people recognize as Christian, such as decorating a Christmas tree or praying at the supper table. Whether or not these practices reflect local Christian customs, their purpose is to show sponsors a diverse yet familiar Christian world that expresses their God’s global reach.

A flow chart of my changing conception of religion over the last two decades might run something like the following: expanded view of religion beyond church → emphasis on religion as a set of relations rather than (or along with) theological processes → balance between an

experience-near view of those relations and structural systems of power. These components, along with a turn to the secular in studies of religion, have prompted my most recent project, which is still in its early stages and is currently titled “Disruption: Spiritual and Ecological Change on Low-Lying Coasts.” Disruption—also the title of this section—referred initially to how the project tracks disruptive weather patterns, notably hurricanes, in North Carolina’s Outer Banks, a set of low-lying barrier islands that are affected by rising water levels due to climate change. But in the context of writing this piece, I am aware that the word signals a further disruption—or productive destabilization—in my own thinking about religion.

The population of the Outer Banks includes long-standing, mainly Christian inhabitants, both white and (some) African-American, as well as new residents, notably retirees who buy beachfront property and scientists and engineers who track ecological shifts. Non-human inhabitants include small mammals and deer, 175 species of birds, hundreds of coastal marine species, plant life, insects, and microbes. I am curious about how weather events “mingle and bind” (Ingold 2017: 36) across this ecosystem. And I am just as curious about whether I can push myself, methodologically speaking, to write multiple species and relations into my work. My goal is to refine previous work on religion, climate change, and weather-related events that so often surveys US Christians about whether they ‘believe’ in climate change or asks how churches help with reconstruction after a storm.

This project takes my scholarship into new territory. It builds on my long-standing interest in religious affects and places, topics that are central in pilgrimage studies, and puts it into conversation with literature that is new to me: studies of multi-species relations (Tsing 2015; van Dooren 2016) and cross-disciplinary studies of atmospheres (Anderson 2009; Böhme 1993; McCormack 2018). Returning to the new studies on secularism that I noted at the outset of this section, it is in part thanks to their deconstructive work that I expanded my own view of religion to encompass the secular yet ‘enchanted’ world as portrayed in studies of new materialisms, which overlap with work on multi-species and atmospheres.<sup>5</sup> Multi-species studies that emphasize human-nonhuman connections open up the possibility to think more expansively about interconnections across an ecological spectrum. Authors in this field are not opposed to thinking spirits into this mix, generally through ‘cosmo-ecological’ studies that emphasize historical or indigenous worldviews. This approach, derived in part from well-known anthropologies of ‘cosmological perspectivism’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998), reflects how indigenous cosmologies often stress bio-interdependence, including in North America (Marino 2015; Nelson 2017). From my perspective, however, it does not go far enough since it often assumes that spirits are absent in other American or European contexts (e.g., Despret and Meuret 2016).

Most studies of atmospheres are even more resolutely secular in orientation, yet they provide a potentially useful theoretical tool in their emphasis on indeterminacy. Indeed, scholars argue that it is precisely this quality that helps pinpoint embodied habits, pressures, and “rhythms of concern” related to “simple and, at the same time, incredibly complex things, such as: the air is getting a little bit warmer. So is the water” (Jackson and Fannin 2011: 435). In my project, atmosphere refers literally to the particles that create turbulent weather events along the coast, but also to the disruptions and attachments that come from living in this world. Adding the conceptual tools I have gleaned from my work on religion, I am asking whether for Christians who live in these areas, weather-related events might reconfigure their attachments to each other, other living creatures, physical land, and built structures, as well as other-than-human presences, such as God, Jesus, or ghosts. Do these presences recede or proliferate during storms? What if I include what is visible to the human eye and what is less easily seen, from microbes and parasites at the micro-scale to gods and spirits at the macro? Stretching my work to include other species is new to me, and in the process I will be learning from scholars who have pioneered cosmo-ecological approaches in other contexts.

Although multi-species approaches to ecology try to decenter human activities, key scholars in this field also emphasize the necessity of taking scientific and economic processes into account (Moore 2015; Tsing 2015; van Dooren 2016: 3). It brings me back to a question I have considered before, namely, how to include complex human infrastructures in my work. To exclude them would be to deny the power dynamics at play when, for example, scientific experts or real estate developers shape policy on the coast. For this reason, it was important to me to expand my view of my (human) subjects beyond the Christians with whom I normally work. My intention is to include Christians in the Outer Banks, along with resident scientists and engineers. All these people are deeply attuned to seasonal disruptions and feel their effects. Yet they often assume that they have nothing in common because scientists view the beach and climate change in ways that are opposed to, or at least misunderstood, by locals. To work these various groups into my study, I am redefining religion once again as encompassing luck, chance, and agency. Doing so may show the parallel ways these communities respond to the ecological stresses around them through shifting ideas about fortune and the future. This broad take on ‘religion’ corresponds with how studies of secularism and non-religion are redefining religious studies. In conversation with multi-species studies, it also opens the possibility to ask how humans interact with the movement of wind, water, and soil to become part of “webs of lively exchange” (van Dooren 2016: 14) that are capacious enough to include transcendent beings.

### Terms of Engagement

I began this article by recounting an exchange with an acquaintance. Let me end it with a different conversation, more particular in nature. In my quest to learn more about disruptive weather on North Carolina’s coast, I recently spoke with an atmospheric scientist. She told me that she thinks about space differently than most people she knows: she maps things cartographically in her mind, zooming up above individuals to think about networks. Yet she watches rain drops and pictures the particles that comprise them. She also told me that she has felt “God moments” when she has flown into the eye of a hurricane to measure its speed or when she has watched real-time storm data pour in simultaneously on multiple computer screens. I am still not sure what to make of her responses, but they will certainly help to reshape the category of religion in my work, yet again.

Both conversations—with an acquaintance and a scientist—are sites of exchange that productively bring our guild’s definitions of religion under scrutiny. In some cases, our invented categories may seem too narrow for our interlocutors; in others, they may seem too expansive. Whatever the case, interactions with those outside our guild can, and should, make the familiar strange. We benefit from seeing our familiar terms of engagement made strange by the scrutiny (or confusion) of others. Similar kinds of helpful confusions may arise in conversation with academics beyond the study of religion and even in conversation with colleagues in Religious Studies departments, as we try to find cross-disciplinary ways to communicate shared interests. The category of religion is a moving target—for scholars and for the people with whom we work. It is to our benefit to conceive of our subject matter in creative and ever-shifting ways.

These reflections have tried to capture some of this ‘shiftingness’ through a close reading of my own commitments as a scholar over the last ten or so years. I have emphasized, first, the usefulness of a temporal approach that takes into account both personal and political contexts. At a personal level, I can identify quite marked shifts as I moved from my PhD into my first job and through my first two book projects. One reason is undoubtedly the jump between defining a project at the graduate level and becoming a junior scholar who is no longer so explicitly

hemmed in by the (real or imagined) expectations of one's supervisors. Another key factor is the impact of broader political contexts, particularly in the first formative years of a career, and how this inflects scholarly conversations. In my case, scholarship adjacent to mine has pushed me to think in more explicit terms about the politics of citation and structural power in institutional contexts.

This set of reflections mobilizes questions concerning the concept of religion, along with definitional issues related to methodological and disciplinary norms. These factors—how we define our area of study, how we engage in conversation with other scholars, and how we gather and analyze our data—make religion observable, and even thinkable, in particular ways. While the reflections herein clearly represent my specific social location, the larger point is that we, as scholars, can surely benefit from remaining conscious of this process and even from stepping back, every once and a while, to take stock of how our categorizations and methodologies have evolved in creative and perhaps unexpected ways.

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**NOTES**

1. Two more citations are multi-authored works that include men and women (in both cases, two men and one woman). I did not include non-binary scholars since it was not clear who might self-identify as such (e.g., Berlant wrote the pieces I cite while identifying as ‘she’ but more recently identifies as ‘they’). I counted only scholarly sources (including theses), not primary ones, and counted each name once.
2. This is based on Ali’s more in-depth data. Her own citational record shows that she cites women about 30 percent of the time. Obviously, different fields will tend toward different ratios (one would imagine these numbers would look different in a piece of scholarship about gender or race). It is also well documented that, on average, women cite other women more often than men do. Ali documented her analysis on Twitter: [https://twitter.com/kecia\\_ali/status/1031218273893982208](https://twitter.com/kecia_ali/status/1031218273893982208) (accessed 7 July 2021).
3. Each year, new networks and journals emerge. Among other examples, the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) was founded in the US in 2005 and the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN) in the UK in 2008. Together, these societies inaugurated an interdisciplinary journal, *Secularism and Nonreligion*, in 2012. Another journal, *Secular Studies*, was launched by Brill in 2019. In the meantime, Oxford University Press published in 2017 the first *Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, edited by Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook.
4. I use ‘other-than’ since such presences are not necessarily *more* than human, although among the Christian with whom I work they often are—God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit are certainly more than human. Nevertheless, I wanted a term that could include presences considered still human (albeit not of the material, living sort), such as ghosts or ancestors.
5. The word ‘enchanted’ is ubiquitous in new materialist and multi-species studies (e.g., Bennett 2001; Myers 2015), yet it is reframed in resolutely secular terms. Nevertheless, scholars of religion have (perhaps as a result) been drawn to work in this vein (including Kaell 2017). A good discussion about enchantment in this literature and its connection to religious studies can be found in Beaman (2021).

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