

Mediation, practice, and *aisthesis*: towards a culturalist approach to religion in the Post-Secular

Mediación, práctica y *aisthesis*: por una aproximación culturalista a la religión en la era post-secular

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Abstract: The approach to contemporary articulations of religion is still problematic within the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies. Nevertheless, given the interdisciplinary aspiration of the latter, an amalgamation of research coming from the fields of philosophy, anthropology, and psychology of religion must find a proper place within any culturalist approach to religion. In this article, we lay out a set of semantics drawing from current research around religion and culture, with the goal of posing and answering the questions of why, how, and where to tackle religion in contemporary cultural forms. Overcoming classical tensions between the religious and the secular self, as well as the analyzer and the analyzed subject, we will detach our approach from any theological inquiry. However, by adhering to a broader understanding of the concepts of mediation and practice, we will also attempt to circumvent ideology-based obstacles that often surface in the study of the myriad ways in which contemporary authors navigate religion.

Keywords: religion; cultural studies; post-secular; aesthetics; anthropology of religion.

Resumen: La aproximación académica a las articulaciones religiosas contemporáneas es todavía problemática en los campos de la crítica literaria y los estudios culturales. No obstante, dada a aspiración interdisciplinar de estos últimos, una amalgama de investigaciones provenientes de los campos de la filosofía, la antropología y la psicología de la religión debe encontrar un espacio propio dentro de cualquier aproximación culturalista a la religión. En este artículo, propondremos una semántica que bebe de investigaciones actuales sobre la religión y la cultura, con el objetivo de proponer y dar respuesta a las preguntas de por qué, cómo y dónde estudiar el fenómeno

religioso en las producciones culturales contemporáneas. En un intento por superar las tensiones clásicas entre el yo religioso y el yo secular, así como las tensiones propias del sujeto analizador y el analizado, desvincularemos nuestra aproximación de una investigación teológica. Sin embargo, al adherirnos a una comprensión más amplia de los conceptos de mediación y práctica, intentaremos superar obstáculos de tipo ideológico que suelen surgir en el estudio de las innumerables maneras en las que autores contemporáneos navegan su aspiración religiosa.

Palabras clave: religión; estudios culturales; post-secular; estética; antropología de la religión.

1. WHY RELIGION?

Discussing religious phenomena is still for many an atavism within the Humanities and, especially, within the field of cultural studies. Furthermore, the question which follows is usually ‘how’: how to approach religion in the 21st century? Certainly, ‘why’ and ‘how’ are cardinal questions that arise when trying to discuss religion, especially outside of the field of theology. As suggested by the chronological order of the questions, the ‘why’ precedes the ‘how’, and it involves a less methodological approach which might tend to arouse suspicions when trying to determine whether there might be a religious interest for the part of the scholar discussing topics related to religious phenomena. Some might think that dealing with such a topic might necessarily involve the expression of a certain religious agenda. As Gorski notes, this goes hand in hand with the fact that “most social scientists have now moved to a position of ‘somewhere beyond belief.’” (Gorski 2012, 5)

Nevertheless, many reactions which still arise in academia when discussing religion and ritual in the contemporary world transcend the mere lack of interest on the topic. They can be considered examples of a secularist approach which has always reigned in the field of cultural studies and which tends to challenge the importance of considering the articulation of religion in modern times, even considering the discussion of such a topic not only as uninteresting, but also as futile. Many might consider religion a mere atavism which is generally highly problematized by scholars who reject the possibilities of studying the many ways in which religion can be articulated in the Post-Secular; thus, impoverishing the study and understanding of social life.

The apparently conscious rejection of religion which usually takes place within cultural studies might find its inception in an excessive adherence to Freudian psychoanalysis which somehow still permeates, perhaps unconsciously, the predisposition to tackle topics related to religion within cultural studies. Freud, indeed, did not consider that psychoanalysis and

religion could be reconcilable, ergo the lack of a religious presence in any kind of criticism which adheres to this Freudian postulate. Nevertheless, this disregard of religion is perhaps more strongly based on the fact that cultural studies was, as Morgan notes, “shaped [...] by British Marxist thought.” (Morgan 2008, 4) Both of these factors are, in one way or another, related to a prominent post-structuralist criticism on culture. Nonetheless, these kinds of approaches which could be considered post-structuralist in nature, can also serve us to find a proper space for the discussion of religion in modern times; for they can enable us to understand religion as a set of cultural processes where meaning and identity develop and consolidate.

2. HOW RELIGION?

2. 1. Religion as *culture*, culture as *media*

The birth of this so-called culturalist approach that we use as a theoretical framework in our study of religion can be, as Morgan notes, traced to the publication of “A Culturalist Approach to Communication” by James Carey in 1975 (Morgan 2008, 3). Carey bridged the notion of communication with that of religion through the understanding of communication as “transmission” and as “ritual”, two concepts whose origins are religious. Drawn upon John Dewey’s works, Carey notes that the goal of communication extends beyond the mere diffusion of information, it is precisely the creation and construction of meaning, that is, a “meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control or container for human action.” (1989, 18) Although many of the concepts and premises used within this theoretical framework can be seen as having a Marxist pedigree, branding them as Marxist would be inaccurate, as they amalgamate different theoretical approaches.

The reflection upon the false prediction of the *Gott-ist-tot-Theologie* is thought to be the starting point from which these scholars study a religious Renaissance in a world under—or, rather, after—modern secularism. Religion has not only flourished in its more fundamentalist forms but also in new religious movements which naturally use new media as their central way for expansion. On September 27th, 2019, one of America’s most famous rappers, Kanye West, put out his album “Jesus is King” where a strong criticism against abortion and pornography is portrayed. West, who had been organizing gospel services for the last year, now promotes his new album on radio, TV, and social media, moved by a clear Christian conviction. His album

debuted number one on the Billboard 200 albums chart, and the 11 songs the album contains have stayed for weeks on the top-50 globally. This album, which does not contain any explicit language, is the prelude to a musical-documentary West is preparing for 2020. The singers who have partaken in this project promised West not to engage in premarital sex during the filming. One can only imagine how many subjects West is willing to reach and convert with his Christian verses in an age where some scholars—whose interests pivot around culture and society—still doubt if we can consider it the Post-Secular.

In recent years, however, the understanding of media transcends the conception of it as mere vehicles for communication. As Horsfield notes, media must be understood as “sites where construction, negotiation, and reconstruction of cultural meaning takes place in an ongoing process of maintenance and change of cultural structures, relationships, meanings and values.” (Morgan 2008, 113) The idea is to understand human interaction in itself as constantly mediated, that is, as the arena where a continuous creation of meaning takes place. This creation of meaning *creates* reality, but as Zito notes, there is a reciprocal relationship: “[Mediation is] the construction of social reality where people are constantly engaged in producing the material world around them, even as they are, in turn, produced by it.” (Zito 2008, 726)

The beginning of this more cultural perspective on communication constitutes a premise for many scholars who, from 1990 onwards, have established themselves as pioneers in the study of religion within cultural studies. The nature of this approach does not encompass a genealogical study of religion: the Marxist epistemology present in this culturalist approach to religion is precisely the study of religious crystallizations in light of its contemporary performances. Moreover, although a Foucauldian influence is easy to perceive in the understanding of the power relations originated in ritual, our way of approaching this subject matter, given its non-genealogical nature, does not attempt to surpass the discourse itself and deconstruct the concept until we are left with a supposed elucidation of its own discursive impossibility, which is a recurrent Foucauldian tendency. Rather than starting off by a prescriptive account of what religion or culture is, this culturalist approach to which we adhere has opened the door to discussions around the meaning of these and other concepts related to religious expression.

The work of Clifford Geertz needs to be taken into special consideration, for he contributed to the discussion on the study of religion by referring to its cultural dimension. Noting the problematics which stem from the reference to culture, Geertz argues that this concept must not be

understood as a floating signifier: “it [culture] denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.” (Geertz 1973, 89) Culture can indeed be an ambiguous concept; a concept used strategically to define certain social forms or to appeal to certain common practices. Zito proposes to understand culture through three phases: “culture as meaning, culture beyond meaning as practice, and finally, culture in terms of mediation.” (Morgan 2008, 70) Understood in these terms, culture and religion can share a similar description: they both provide believers with a matrix of meaning-making and mediated rituals—a system of symbols—which ultimately attempts to explain the world around and provides an ethical view of it.

Later in the discussion, Stewart Hoover stressed the meaning-making function of religion as an essential part of it and Martín-Barbero would introduce the crucial concept of “mediation”: *meaning-making is always mediated*. Media, consequently, cannot just be understood as the mere physical vehicle. Instead, we must view media “as the physical and mental space of interaction between the person producing the message within a particular media form, the media form itself, and what the person who receives the communication does with it.” (Horsfield in Morgan 2008, 119) Including this last step in a mediated process—that is, the consequences that media have on the receiver—lets us discern one of the most conventional conceptions of ritual as the consequence of an already established belief. It is under this broader conception of media through which we can depart from a strict structuralist view of culture and religion as something static and stable, and, instead, start understanding it as a series of processes. We can say, then, quoting Hoover, that religion, media, and culture “occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in modernity.” (Hoover 2006, 9)

2. 2. Religion-culture-media as *meaning* and *practice*

Following this approach, the creation of meaning is considered one of the main functions of religion and culture and—in this sense—the definition of religion which Geertz provides, contains the different phases that make up the religious experience. Per Geertz, religion is: “(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of

existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” (Geertz 1973, 90) This understanding of religion as a “set of symbols” provides us with a properly delimited concept of what it is we are studying when tackling religion, as it—furthermore—fits perfectly within a phenomenological approach. For symbols can be interpreted, as well as the ground to which they lead; a *locus* where mediation, power, and meaning can be analyzed and discussed.

It is at this point of the conversion when the contribution of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu casts plenty of light upon the question regarding the prerequisites of religious adherence, given the attention he especially gives to ritual in his work *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (2000). By studying different social rituals among the Kabyle, Bourdieu challenges the idea that belief precedes practice and concludes by saying that, in social rituals, there is a constant negotiation of dominance and honor. More than understanding practice as the enactment of a prefabricated set of cultural and religious values, practice must be understood as the arena where several aspects of culture are challenged, defined, and redefined; thus—rather than recreating meaning and value—*creating* meaning and value. A crucial distinction between the partaker who adheres to this set of power structures and the critical ritual partaker is perhaps the level of self-awareness in ritual activity. If the ritual partaker rejects the idea that belief precedes practice, the religious dynamics are completely subverted; not because they bespeak another form of religious expression, but because they bespeak another level of religious understanding, and hence, of religious self-awareness.

Practice results, then, in another concept which needs to be expanded in order to explain religious-cultural phenomena. Originally a concept with a Marxist pedigree, practice is usually understood as the praxis of a self-conscious observer. In the context of this culturalist approach to religion, it is pivotal to be able to discern different ways in which a subject can perform religion or simply *be* religious:

Conventionally speaking, a ‘practicing’ Christian, Buddhist, or Jew is one who cultivates her or his religious identity not only as a question of intellectual assent or accident of birth but in daily or weekly customary actions such as going to church, mediation, or observing holy days. Interestingly, however, we rarely speak of “practiced” Christians, Buddhists, or Jews as we would of a “practiced liar,” implying that the

job of cultivating religious identity is never done.” (Klassen in Morgan 2008, 137)

Meyer has also casted plenty of light upon the question of community formation by coining the terms “aesthetic formations”, “practice of mediation”, and “sensational form”. According to Meyer’s understanding of religion, this is “a practice of mediation that organizes the relationship between experiencing subjects and the transcendental via particular sensation forms.” (Meyer 2006, 18) It is precisely by reflecting upon the concept of practice how we may begin to start discerning several different ways of being religious and practicing religion, ultimately reflecting upon what constitutes a believer or an observer, how religious identities can still be found in authors who do not consider themselves religious and, lastly, the role and influence of religious mediation in the construction of identity. As Klassen suggests, the question of practice as the necessary conclusion of belief is challenged. Would it be possible, then, to talk about a practicing believer and a practiced one? Does belief precede practice? Or does practice mediate between practitioner and ontological truth, thus creating—rather than recreating—meaning and community identity?

2. 3. *Aisthesis*: a more encompassing notion of the religious experience

By paying more attention to “the role played by things, media, and the body in actual processes of community making” (Meyer 2009, 6), Meyer rejects the Kantian conception of aesthetics which has predominated from the 18th century onwards. Kant developed a conception of the beautiful understood as an aesthetic delight which plays upon itself and generates a kind of bound and purposeful way of being. The experience of *das Schöne* is necessarily a disinterested one, that is, it lacks a private condition that could potentially individualize *das Urteil*. A simultaneously universal and subjective judgment that departs from a *Sinnen-Geschmack*, the judgment of the ‘agreeable’, a judgment that is conditioned by a sense of pleasure produced by the object. Instead, *das Schöne* is experienced through a previous reflection (*Reflexions-Geschmack*). It is the product of a universalizable cognitive state, not a judgment produced by a conditioned pleasure.

The Aristotelian concept of *aisthesis* proves to be a more enveloping notion that is not limited to the realm of the experience of the beautiful in art, but which, instead, designates the physical or bodily ability to experience objects in the world through all our five senses, combining all of them and

creating a matrix of sensorial experiences which responds to a more holistic sensorial experience of the world around us. As Meyer and Verrips (2008) note, there are several reasons why Aristotelian *aisthesis* became progressively less relevant throughout the history of thought. From a certain point onwards, aesthetics became exclusively a term related to the beautiful and the philosophy of art. Kant's aesthetic theory is regarded by scholars who try to understand the constitution of communities through an Aristotelian approach as a reductionist view of aesthetics; for it disregards the experience derived from other senses and the active role of the aesthetic experiencer. This is especially hindering in the study of ritual and the religious experience, as it disdains the role of all other senses within the aesthetic experience where communities—that is, aesthetic formations—are generated.

Neo-Kantian aesthetics—consequently—has only focused on the art that would fit the characteristics of high culture, not only perpetuating distinctions between high and low art but also disregarding the kind of imagery meant to be consumed by the masses. This split between high and low art suffered a process of secularization during the Enlightenment, by which art created by religious inspiration or portraying religious-related images was relegated to the category of low art. Pleading then for a reconsideration of aesthetics not only entails a reconsideration of the role of the body (in terms of the role of all the other senses in the formation of community as well as in the religious creation and recreation of aesthetic formations) but also a reconsideration of the role of religious art or religiously-inspired imagery, something which has been regarded as low and uninteresting within the context of Kantian and Neo-Kantian aesthetics.

The concept of aesthetic formations coined by Meyer means, therefore, retrieving a forgotten conception of the aesthetic experience, while it, at the same time, surpasses a traditional understanding of the ritual experience. Through the use of this concept, Meyer understands a *communitas* as a formation which is always constituting and reconstituting itself, and such constitution is possible through mediation, where all senses partake; thus, making us reconsider the categorization of the *communitas* as an aesthetic formation, rather than a pre-imagined community. This reconsideration of the notion of *aisthesis* evinces the importance that Meyer gives to the embodiment of imaginations. They are crucial in order for them to be interiorized as ontological truths, as she notes: “Imaginations, though articulated and formed through media and thus “produced”, appear as situated beyond mediation exactly because they can be—literally—incorporated and embodied, thus invoking and perpetuating shared experiences, emotions, and

affects that are anchored in, as well as triggered by, a taken-for-granted lifeworld, a world of, indeed, *common sense*.” (Meyer 2009, 7)

The pivotal role of mediation in the religious experience has been claimed by Dutch philosopher Hent De Vries (2001). Following José Casanova’s (1994) reconsideration of the role of religion in the modern world, De Vries pleads for a reevaluation of the importance of religion in cultural analysis, to understand religion as a means for cultural inquiry. What all these scholars share is precisely the overcoming of a secularizing rhetoric that ignores the revival of religion in modern contexts. By understanding the conjunction ‘religion and media’ as a pleonasm, Stolow brings to light the role of mediation in religion. Mediation is not understood as a constitutive part of religion (“religion and media”), Mediation—media—is religion (“religion as media”):

‘Religion’ can only be manifested through some process of mediation. Throughout history in myriad forms, communication with and about ‘the sacred’ has always been enacted through written texts, ritual gestures, images and icons, architecture, music, incense, special garments, saintly relics and other objects of veneration, markings upon flesh, wagging tongues and other body parts. It is only through such media that it is at all possible to proclaim one’s faith, mark one’s affiliation, receive spiritual gifts or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body. (Stolow 2005, 125)

3. WHERE RELIGION?

3. 1. Self-writing

The hierarchical structure which is established between observer and observed subject in any anthropological, sociological or psychological approach to religion is impossible to transcend in the academic discussion around religion. This relationship between the scholar and the practitioner has been subject to analysis for many decades now, not only in order to tackle the perspective of the practitioner who feels observed but also the perspective of the scholar. Practice, however, acquires a new nuance once the practitioner turns self-aware. As a result, we may find that such an individual is able to bridge both perspectives. This is why the realm of self-writing, that is, of autobiographical writing, provides us with the arena where a study of religion

might dissipate classical dichotomies which are to be found in any academic approach to religion. For as Hoover notes, “[modern] audiences are self-conscious about their practices, and this self-consciousness plays an important role in modern identity formation.” (Hoover in Morgan 2008, 39)

The discussion of religious aspirations can take place—within the context of self-writing—in authors who even consider themselves agnostic. The study of the various and intricate ways in which authors who do not strictly adhere to the category of believer navigate religion provides us with a *sui generis* case-study. Through the study of the religious dimension of these *a priori* non-religious texts, we can achieve an understanding of religion and ritual which can contribute to the synthesis of the religious-secular or believer-atheist dialectic; thus shedding plenty of light on the question of what the limits of the religious sphere are, who is to be considered religious, and how.

Accordingly, a further challenge concerning the discussion around the presence of religion in the Post-Secular is established by the agnosticism which many authors profess in their self-writing projects. A second reading is therefore necessary in order to refer to religion as—under the mantra of a self-adscription to agnosticism—few scholars might even consider the religious references included in self-writing and the crucial role they play in the shaping of one’s identity. Therefore, we need to bear in mind two challenges if we aim to discuss contemporary religious expressions. First, a theoretical background like the one we have laid out needs to be reinforced in order to delimit a particular semantics that would help us to theorize upon religious phenomena; especially in authors who find it appropriate to tackle religious experiences in their self-writing projects, even when these religious experiences are not nested into a wider religious observance. Second, this reading needs to depart from traditional conceptions of religious practice, giving space therefore to alternative readings which would highlight religious mediation as a place for meaning-making and identity construction and negotiation. This way we could ultimately challenge the idea that belief precedes practice and distance ourselves from theological readings of religious phenomena.

Entering the discussion on whether a post-metaphysical and a post-religious culture might be desirable, as many contemporary—analytic and continental—thinkers defend, has nothing to do with the synchronic study of culture. In this regard, we highlight the fact that the religious dimension portrayed in contemporary cultural forms illustrates cultural archetypes and is, thus, worthy of analysis for anyone whose interest pivots around cultural studies. We can naturally argue that, specifically in the context of self-writing, a certain type of rhetoric—always religious in origin—will find its way

through in self-writing even when operating in apparently non-religious spheres. With this idea we would adhere to the continuity narrative, which although usually quoted as originated by Weber or Schmitt, we would also tackle from a psychological point of view in the works of Carl Gustav Jung.

The idea of continuity can also provide the space to discuss the idea of how religious instincts secularize, thus constituting new “religious” needs—if we understand the structuring of any set of totalizing secular axioms as the secularized evolution of an initial set of religious axioms. Following Schmitt’s ideas on continuity, it is not hard to see how politics become the arena where many religious concepts are secularized. From the point of view of literary criticism, we can also second the idea that the type of rhetoric historically used in self-writing, for example, evinces an evolution from the religiously sacred to the *secularly sacred*. This has also contributed to challenging the limits of the religious and the secular and it has lately been much considered by scholars from both political theory and literary studies.

Nevertheless, adhering to a culturalist approach to religion can be especially helpful in the study of authors for whom theological questions simply do not find a proper space in their self-writing projects. Many post-Shoah Jewish thinkers, like moral philosopher Susan Neiman, have at some point adhered to a Neo-Kantian Jewish tradition which would perhaps relegate ontological and teleological questions concerning God; questions which in the context of Neo-Kantian philosophy are understood as being beyond human conceptual capability. Within this paradigm, nevertheless, a feeling of reverence, of humility, towards some kind of Absolute is regarded as a beneficial moral source; hence the refusal to deny the human transcendental tendency and the cognitive states it bestirs. The culturalist approach we have decided to follow in order to understand the religious experience of contemporary authors, can, in principle, find a logical conjunction with this Neo-Kantian approach to religion. What this shows is that in order to understand a contemporary religious dimension, much of the time a second reading is necessary; a reading which will necessarily go beyond traditional approaches to religion.

3. 2. Dominance and honor

The last challenge we will find if we aim to look for religion in the realm of contemporary self-writing can even be brought to light by self-writers themselves. In many accounts, an initially inclusive ritual can abruptly become an exclusive one in the works of many contemporary self-writers who

show some kind of religious curiosity in the context of traditional forms of religions. The intricate question of power, dominance, and honor is one we need to bear in mind, for it can tendentially totalize contemporary approaches to religion which draw from post-structuralist thought. In this regard, and naturally following the work of Foucault, authors like Catherine Bell have pointed out that ritualization has a specific response on the body and its movements through which domination is established: “Ritual activity is not the ‘instrument’ of more basic purposes, such as power, politics, or social control, which are usually seen as existing before or outside the activities of the rite. [...] Ritual practices are themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations.” (Bell 2009, 196)

The approach with which many self-writers tackle the problematics of subjectivity lays bare the failure which takes place when negotiating power relations within the hierarchies of traditional forms of religion. In this way, many self-writers exemplify the use of ritual, on the one hand, as a potentially inclusive cultural system as well as the arena where subversive alterities are excluded, bringing into words ethnological aspects which are discussed at a theoretical level by scholars like Meyer or Bell. This is the last step which anyone whose interest pivots around approaching religion from a cultural studies framework must bear in mind. An excessive academic emphasis on dominance and power whenever the question of religion is discussed might produce certain myopia and prevent us from analyzing other aspects regarding community formation, cooperation, and the restructuring of the self-concept; aspects which bespeak needs many self-writers show when reflecting upon religion and ritual, even when they do so coming from a nonmilitant agnosticism.

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