

Connecting concepts, creating worlds

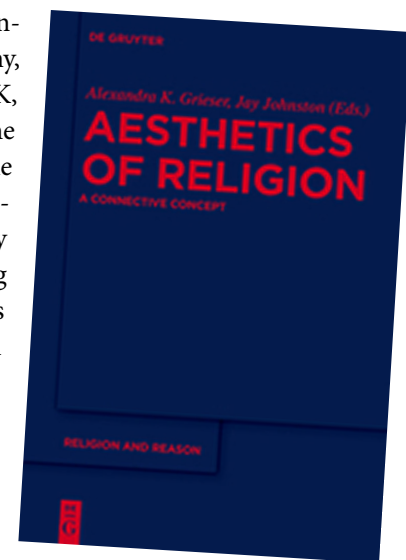
Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept, eds. Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston, *Religion and Reason*, 58 (Berlin and Boston, de Gruyter, 2017), 350 pp.

Academic collaboration is an intriguing enterprise. When done well, the dialogue that results from creative interplay among colleagues who share not only a subject area but also enthusiasm for the topic around which the exchange has been organized, can push the participants in new and challenging directions – and can also allow the topic itself to emerge in unexpected and rewarding ways. In all true dialogue, the result of openness to the voice of the other as well as to the subject under analysis, engaging in active listening, exhibiting respect for the contributions of the partners in the conversations, and attention to the to-and-fro, back-and-forth dynamics of the interactions among participants as well as the content of their individual world-views is the emergence of a new claim to truth.

Aesthetics of Religion is the result of such a productive collaboration. Jay Johnston and Alexandra Grieser were fellow researchers at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands who shared an interest in using aesthetics as what they consider a ‘connective concept’ for the academic study of religion. Their collaboration, in association with the German Association for the Study of Religion and with representatives from several European universities, contributed to the development of an international, wide-ranging conference on the theme, which met at Groningen in 2013. The book is a happy result of that collaboration.

It is fortunate that the term ‘connective concept’ (Preface, p. V) has been chosen as a descriptor of

the intent of the book. The contributors represent Germany, Denmark, Ireland and the UK, Switzerland, Australia, the Netherlands, and the US. The editorial device of addressing ‘religion/s’ is supported by investigations of topics ranging from the religious behaviours of pilgrims along a spiritual journey in Turkey, to the worship of ‘petromorphic gods’ in Hinduism, to an embodied spirituality found among Brazilian neo-Pentecostals, to a study of prayer as a product of *aisthesis* and guided practice in Therese of Avila’s *Vida*. The contributors to the project do not operate out of a modernist/Cartesian dichotomy that limits ‘religion’ to the analysis of texts, doctrines, and institutions and resolves the mind/body dilemma squarely in the precinct of mind alone. Indeed, a major contribution of the book is the consistent attention it presents to religion as specific practices, rather than to a universal, dogmatic, hegemonic, positivistic claim to truth. Throughout the volume, ‘religion’ is analysed as – and where – it is practised. An emphasis throughout the book is upon ‘embodied’ religious practices within discrete spiritual and/or ‘religious’ communities, rather than upon the exegetical mastering of ‘sacred texts’ or consistency with orthodox statements of faith. There is an ethnographic quality to many of the studies found here, with an attention to the witness of particular communities of faith attempting to feel the truth of their faith/s in the midst of their daily practices and communal rituals.



There is, likewise, an attention to re-defining what it means to address the *aesthetic* present here. The book and its contributors move beyond the modern understanding of *aisthesis* as the ‘normative’ intellectual study of beauty and the development of standards for all-things-art towards ‘an epistemological concept that denote[s] *sensory perception*, but also refer[s] to the larger process of how human beings make sense of their environment and of themselves through their senses’ (1). The editors insist that they are attempting to present an ‘aesthetics of religion,’ rather than describing a ‘religious aesthetics.’ The approach to aesthetics represented in the book is what Manuel A. Vasquez calls an ‘ecological aesthetics of religion, a relational, situated, and non-reductive materialist approach to “religion in the flesh”’ (429).

A consistent critique of both the philosophical/theological traditions concerning aesthetics and the ‘Protestant hegemony’ of modern theology is that both have privileged intellectual approaches to religion/s as well as expressing a preference *for* intellectual forms of religion (5). The editors propose that, ‘[a]n Aesthetics of Religion ... can help to integrate modernity’s blind spot for “religion” in this crucial endeavor, and can also assist in finding new and forgotten pathways that link the two together’ (41). The contributors demonstrate a variety of ways that a revised understanding of aesthetics can recover religion’s lost (or, at least, misplaced) attention to a ‘lived’ sense of the Holy through both perception and the senses. S. Brent Plate echoes what many of the authors in the volume also address: ‘What I am attempting to demonstrate here is that the study of religious history can be rethought through aesthetic means, that religious life itself is a product of syntheses and clashes between natural aesthetics and artificial aesthetics’ (474). Plate’s own chapter traces a creative synthesis between art and technology represented by the construction of the Erie Canal in the nineteenth century and the development of new spiritual movements, from the evangelistic fervor of Charles G. Finney to the creation of the Oneida community and the beginnings of Mormonism, that shared with the massive construction project a new sense of time, space, and humanity’s relationship with nature (472–81).

The ‘connective concept’ that drives the arguments in the book makes an effective point that ‘sensory practices are not merely *expressions* of beliefs and doctrines; rather, religion/s *consist* of sensory practice and ... this includes reading and writing as

much as dancing and singing, feeling pain as well as comfort or building and inhabiting architecture’ (3). Far from falling into yet another building of dichotomies – this time slanted towards the senses and the emotions, rather than the mind and doctrines – the authors have engaged in solid academic analyses of religious practices made meaningful and transformative *because* they are experienced aesthetically. Niklaus Largier discusses an approach to Christian Scripture as ‘bodily practice’ that allows one to experience a sensual and affective cognition that operates at a level different from the exegetical tradition of biblical studies (147–60). Similarly, Laura Feldt calls attention to ways of reading a common biblical text like Exodus 7–11 that do not limit the analysis to what the text says *about* religion, but draw attention to questions about how a text may have been experienced, received, or imagined within a community constituted by these stories (121–43). Annette Wilke’s chapter studies the centrality of ‘sound’ and the role of the ‘sonic absolute’ in Sanskrit Buddhism, which she sees embodied in simple sounds, like *mantras*, and in modal music (323–46). Alexandra Grieser presents a detailed analysis of the findings of the perceptual qualities of ‘blue brains’ within research on brain function and the question of collective imagination that can be experienced both within the body and transcending the body. Her studies of the functions of the brain present an ‘aesthetics of knowledge’ that claims that all forms of knowledge are ‘connected’ to aesthetic forms (237–70). The studies that have been published here are diverse in topic and methodology. However, each reinforces the central contribution of the conference and, ultimately, the book: ‘it is apparent that the authors view aesthetics as an opportunity to address different aspects of understanding religion that have usually not been related to each other’ (41).

Aesthetics of Religion represents a significant re-visioning of how the academic study of religion/s can be transformed by reading the religious experience and its related enterprise through the lens of aesthetics. Such an approach gives all appearances of accomplishing the very ‘connective concept’ advocated in this fine book. ■

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