# Book Reviews

**Göran Larsson:** *Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, 223pp.

*Muslims and the New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates* can be seen as a contribution to the ongoing scholarly debate about religion and the new media, and the question of whether new technologies *transform* religion. Rather than singularly examining Islamic responses to one medium, Larsson examines Islamic scholars' responses to the introduction of a number of media: print, images, motion pictures, telephone and the internet. Each medium is assigned a chapter. In this fashion, Larsson aims to introduce readers to a longer line of history, and Islamic arguments pro and contra media that were all at some time novel.

Larsson analyses a range of Islamic perspectives that highlight both the 'possibilities' and 'the problems' associated with each media. In this manner, Larsson is able to demonstrate that the media are not considered good or bad *per se*, but rather that the focus is on how the medium is used in constructive or destructive ways. Here, Larsson includes in his analysis the backdrop of that particular historical moment. For instance, oral transmission of Islamic knowledge was considered by many *ulama* as a better guarantee for transmission of knowledge than mass print. However, adopting printing of Islamic scripture would minimize the mistakes that were likely to occur if European printers unfamiliar with the scripture and language were responsible for mass distribution.

Another interesting aspect of the author's analysis is that he is able to highlight how Islamic scholars' skeptic response to new media often anchors around a worry that their own expertise might be sidestepped, and their concern that 'ordinary' Muslims do not have the necessary qualifications to disseminate Islamic knowledge and interpretations of the scripture. This comparative exercise thus also illustrates how very similar Islamic arguments are recycled across time, space, and media, which is an interesting contribution in the wider scholarly debate about whether there really is anything substantially 'new' about religion online. That said, it is an ambitious project that seeks to discuss Islamic scholarly responses across media in all time and space. While Larsson has worked through an impressive amount of primary and secondary sources, with a project of this magnitude comes the danger of the analysis only touching the surface, and lacking depth, a danger the author himself appears to be aware of.

For the most part, Larsson succeeds in providing a broad and useful outline of *ulama* responses to media. For readers unfamiliar with earlier works that deal with each of the media separately, this book is a good introduction to these debates. One of the strengths of Larsson's approach is that he wishes to avoid a

monolithic description of Islam, and to demonstrate that on any given topic there are numerous Islamic positions. In this, I believe he has succeeded. I also think Larsson's overview is a good introduction to students and readers wishing for an introduction and overview of Islamic thinking and reasoning. In a similar vein, the discussion of *ahl al ra'y* and *ahl al hadith*, scholarly positions that place emphasis on independent reasoning or on traditions of the Prophet respectively, is both interesting and insightful.

The author also employs a typology of Islamic positions drawing on Tariq Ramadan, which is useful for analytical purposes, although here I wish Larsson could have clarified how the 'salafists' in Ramadan's typology, exemplified by modernist reformist thinkers such as Abduh, differ from the 'salafists' we hear of in contemporary debates in the Middle East today.

The author is certainly not oblivious to the need for contextualization of his analysis. Indeed, throughout the book Larsson has consistently made efforts to add a few lines of context, so as not to skew the view. I believe the focus on context is interlinked with Larsson's declared goal of wishing to avoid 'mono-causal descriptions' such as 'technology transformed media'; and on the whole, I consider Larsson successful in living up to this aim. However, with so vast a study, it is perhaps inevitable that the contextualization may at times fall short. In the attempt to cover so much, Larsson

must rely on a number of secondary sources, or at the very least, is unable to delve into each example in depth. This can at times pose challenges to the analysis. For instance, while Larsson argues that the study of online religion merits from both online and offline research, his own analysis of Islam Online and fatwas appears to fall short of these ideals, perhaps as a result of relying on secondary literature.

In his discussion of the Islamic website Islam Online, Larsson argues that online fatwas are being transformed. The argument, drawing on Oliver Roy, is that online fatwas are becoming 'less individualized' and more 'deterritorialized' than their classical counterparts. Here, Larsson argues that the Islam Online muftis are disseminating fatwas to questioners in a variety of geographical localities, which he takes as evidence of deterritorialization. In a similar vein, Larsson posits that online fatwas no longer represent an individualized service, but rather are written in a generic fashion that can apply to multiple readers and contexts. These two factors Larsson sees as indicators of online fatwas placing less emphasis on the specific background and context of the *individual* questioner than was traditionally the case.

While I too believe that online fatwas are not identical to classic face-to-face fatwas, I question Larsson's conclusions, which he repeats in the book's conclusions chapter. Based on my extensive knowledge of Islam Online as an organization,

following seven moths of (offline) fieldwork amongst their employees, I will attempt to substantiate my critique. While I recognize the goal of answering a user's queries in a fashion that will benefit users other than the questioner, in my understanding, the one does not exclude the other. Rather, the answers to fatwas and other forms of counseling produced by Islam Online sought to simultaneously address the individual grievances of the questioner, while at the same time formulating general content that could be of use to other users in other contexts. Moreover, I assume that the fatwa service, like the other counseling services on the website, required users to fill out a form with a number of background details providing the scholar with 'context', which has parallels to the classical practise of fatwa. It was also common practise amongst Islam Online counselors to request more information from the questioner, if the counselors felt they lacked important background information in order to answer the questioner's query in satisfactory manner. There may well have been a similar praxis in Islam Online's fatwa section. It is also my understanding that the location of the questioner plays a very large role in the selection of which scholar is to answer the question: the goal is to select a scholar who is familiar with the local context of the questioner.

In my reading, these additional layers of contextualization modify Larsson's conclusions. Against this backdrop, I believe that Larsson's discussion and conclusions about online fatwas illustrate how a preoccupation with newness and transformations in the media may nonetheless inform his analysis, even if unintentionally. Or, alternatively, it could be argued that Larsson's analysis and conclusions about online fatwas point to the fact that his use of multiple cases that span time, space, and media, while certainly the book's strength, also constitute one of its weaknesses.

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**Robert Glenn Howard:** *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet.* New York: New York University Press, 2011, 213pp.

The rise of religious fundamentalism has been recognized in Western cultures as one of the trends which have questioned the relevance of the simplistic secularization thesis. Nevertheless, the question of fundamentalist forms of religions is not simple either, but we should rather talk about 'fundamentalisms' in the plural. In his book *Digital Jesus*, Robert Glenn Howard focuses on diverse ways of understanding Christian fundamentalism that is inspired by early Christianity and biblical prophecies of the End Times but, simultaneously, integrates flexibly into present-day life. The study illuminates changes in the (re-) positioning of religion in today's

world, and Howard's book can thus be read as a fascinating example of 'post-secular religiosity'.

Another theme that links the present study into the current debates on religion as an integral part of modern culture, and has been occupying scholars of religion more and more during the current decade, is the complex relationship between religion and digital communication technologies. Howard provides the reader with a detailed history of the development of the Internet technology and the various different types of communicative sites and languages that have provided an operating environment also for promoting religious interests. The rapid development of digital technologies is having a growing impact also on contemporary religious practices throughout the world. The impact of mediatization and digitalization on contemporary religious life has already been widely discussed in academic debates. However, even though religion has deployed many different forms of digital media to serve its own ends, religious life has also undoubtedly been altered by the media. In Christianity, it has become an important means for spreading the message and for creating an alternative sense of community, as well as serving as a platform for new doctrinal interpretations.

*Digital Jesus* is first and foremost an ethnographic study, where the interwoven themes of modern vernacular Christian fundamentalism and social media in the Internet are analyzed. Howard's research is based on a time span of more than 10 years of observations and research work on the development of religious communication on the World Wide Web. He illustrates his ethnography by going back to his first e-mail contacts with the fundamentalist community and personal meetings and interviews with active bloggers.

A short but informative historical review is given over the Christian roots of the concept 'fundamentalism' in the beginning of the 20th century. As Howard points out, Christian fundamentalism has only a short institutional history, but nevertheless is powerfully alive at the vernacular level, relying on early Christianity for its model. As an analytic term, Howard defines 'fundamentalism' in his ethnographic data on the basis of the core beliefs expressed in the online discussions that he has analyzed: a belief in biblical literalism, a belief in the experience of spiritual rebirth, a belief in the need to evangelize, and a belief in the End Times interpretation of biblical prophecy. The surveys of Christian fundamentalism and of its relation to the study of lived religion and popular and folk religions are most educating.

The usable concept of 'vernacular religion' was first introduced in the study of folk religion in the 1990s. Howard goes thoroughly through the history and even etymology of the term 'vernacular', and gives credit to those who actually have adopted the concepts in use within the scientific study of religion and

folkloristics. He goes on to point out how this concept, originally associated with languages, can be used in the context of new themes, in this case fundamentalist Christianity, which has usually been thought of rather as the most rigid and collectivistic form of religion. Howard introduces 'vernacular Christian fundamentalism' as a new religious movement that updates conservative principles at the individual level, but holds strictly to the idea of biblical literalism.

Howard also discusses the power of ritual in community formation. *Ritualized deliberation*, meaning the argumentation and discussion that follow certain formulaic patterns referring to biblical legitimacy, opens up new opportunities for believers to express their ideas through the social media. Furthermore, the virtual community provides fellowship that does not require denominational participation accompanied by social obligations. However, as Howard points out, this movement takes shape only as long as its believers use the Internet to engage in the biblically referred lay debate that they believe generates a church that exists only on the Internet.

The active participants in fundamentalist Christian communications in the social media are defined by Howard as a *virtual ekklesia*. The Internet functions as a place for believers to get together whenever they feel like sharing, rejecting the need for institutional religion and a location for regular services. It is a forum for idiosyncratic ways of being a believer and a platform for constructing personal agency within a community that exists only as long as it exists in the minds of its members. It is an imagined community based on shared special knowledge. Thus, in *Digital Jesus*, both the definition of a religious movement, and the question of membership, are reconsidered: whose knowledge, experience and authority is, in the end, relevant for legitimating an individual's membership?

Through the vast material referenced here, which the author is well familiar with, he discusses insightfully the themes of agency and authority within religious communication. As he points out, individual members of this network use the Internet to create a 'dispersed vernacular authority that enforces their ideology': Dispersed and vernacular in the sense that the bloggers' argumentation is authorized exclusively by their personal experience of encountering the divine, the Holy Spirit, and the Christian conversion experience of 'rebirth'. An interesting point concerning the strategies of agency is the way these participants in the social media communicate: While some bloggers use their personal experience as providing unquestionable legitimacy for their arguments, others use the social media in a more consultative way.

All the same, the fundamentalist tendency of harmonizing, which is an attempt to adjust seeming inconsistencies to an assumed homogeneous biblical reality, is obvious in

ritual deliberation within the virtual ekklesia, when the apocalyptic prophesies of the End Times are linked to political conflicts, terrorist attacks and to technical security threats in the media. For example, the End Time discourse, accompanied by the 'millennial fever' with worries about computer bugs, etc., was quite feverish on the Web at the turn of the century. Thus, mythical apocalyptic threats were given modern forms in the digital context.

An issue that is quite challenging to deal with objectively when studying fundamentalist or conservative Christianity, for example, many forms of Pentecostal-Charismatic and Evangelical activities, is the question of the overt intolerance of the insiders towards those who do not share the same world view. Fundamentalist attitudes on homosexuality and abortion, for instance, as well as on liberal theology or a non-Christian way of life in general in mainstream society, are typically very narrow. Howard analyzes the fundamentalist intolerance on Christian participatory media sites as protecting the truth of one's own apocalyptic reality. As he summarizes, 'network communication enables [fundamentalists] to cordon off their beliefs from criticism and enact discourse that portrays any resistance from outside as proof both of their alienation and their righteousness' (p. 18). Even so, a confusing element of dissent can be observed in fundamentalist attitudes towards the Jews. On the one hand, in conservative Christian think-

ing, there is a long history of anti-Semitism with conspiracy theories; on the other hand, there are active pro-Israel movements that take the nation-state Israel as predicted in Revelations as one of the precursors to the End Times.

*Digital Jesus* opens up a fresh and welcome perspective on the anthropology of Christianity and on religion in the everyday life of today's virtual world, and shows how flexibly religion, even in its fundamentalist forms, can adapt to personal idiosyncratic interest, social interaction and technological innovations. A delighting aspect throughout Robert Glenn Howard's study is the strong folkloristic touch, taking religious tradition as an ongoing process in interaction with the secular sphere of life.

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**Gordon Lynch:** *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 181pp.

In his book Gordon Lynch (re-) sketches a field of study, sociology of the sacred, which is the study of multiple sacred forms in the modern world. Sociology of the sacred overlaps with the study of religion, but also other than religious forms of sacred are included as objects of study. To Lynch, the sacred is 'defined by what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims

over the meanings and conduct of social life' (p. 29).

The sacred however has a shadow side, as it can also justify immoral behavior. Sociology of the sacred can help us live with both the light and the shadow of the sacred by nurturing the critical capacity to reflect on the effects of one's sacred commitments. The sociologist of the sacred thus becomes a therapist, who does not consider the negative aspects of sacred forms as inauthentic, but acknowledges that in a pluralist society difference and moral conflict are part of the social order, as formulated in Chantal Mouffe's 'agonistic pluralism'. This means that people holding different opinions should be seen not as enemies, but as adversaries.

Lynch's view of the sacred is based on later developments of Émile Durkheim's approach, and he draws a lot from the works of Edward Shils, Roberts N. Bellah and Jeffrey C. Alexander. In the first chapter he distinguishes this approach to the sacred, which he calls 'cultural sociological', from ontological approaches, which 'conceive of the sacred in terms of fundamental structures within the person or the cosmos itself' (p.10), and are represented by Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. The cultural sociological approach does not postulate actual referents for sacred forms, but acknowledges that people take sacred things to be realities that have normative claims over their lives.

Although Talcott Parsons mediated Durkheim to American sociology, and was a co-worker with Shils and a teacher of Bellah, he is not as important to Lynch's approach as later Durkheimians, who reacted against his systemic approach, which was also a reason for a wider rejection of Durkheim's cultural sociological approach in the 1970s. Lynch also distinguishes a cultural sociological approach from those followers of Durkheim who emphasize the 'impure' aspect of the sacred: Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, who were interested in transgression of taboo or exceeding constraint, and Victor Turner, who was interested in anti-structure. Lynch sides with Shils, Bellah and Alexander, and shares their interest in the 'pure' sacred, although he acknowledges that this position and its alternatives deserve ongoing discussion. For him, attention to what is culturally normative provides a more fruitful way of examining how these structures emerge. However, it could be asked whether it would be possible to examine the 'pure' and 'impure' in relation to each other, rather than separately?

Lynch re-reads Durkheim on the basis of two basic criticisms: firstly, the sacred as reality-constituting should be seen not only in relation to the profane, as Durkheim did, but also to the mundane, where the profane becomes the evil that threatens the sacred, and the mundane the logics, practices and spaces of everyday life. Secondly, Durkheim should not be read as a social ontologist, but formations of the sacred should be seen as contingent historical formations.

In the second chapter Lynch reviews the works of Shils, Bellah and Alexander. They acknowledged the historical contingence of sacred forms, but also recognized that the sacred can be used in morally ambiguous ways (the shadow side of the sacred), and that there can exist simultaneously multiple sacred forms. Against this background, the role of a sociologist of the sacred becomes somewhat similar to a therapist, who uses his/her cultural explanations to find 'narrative homes' that make sense of cultural meanings by relating them to social structures and processes, and providing ways of reflection, thus making possible more constructive ways of living in a society.

The following two chapters are focused on cases in which sacred forms come into conflict. The first case is the Irish industrial school system during the twentieth century, in which abuse and neglect of children was systemic. These residential schools were run by Catholic orders, and the pupils were 'children who were destitute, neglected, at risk of turning to crime or moral corruption, or guilty of misdemeanors' (p. 57). These children mostly came from a poor working-class background. The symbolic legitimation for the school system and its abusiveness came from a sacred form of the Catholic Irish Nation. In this context, children exposed to immoral conditions were considered 'moral dirt', and moral correction was a means to protect the nation from the threat of pollution that they

presented. Although the industrial school system was criticized on the basis of universal children's rights and childcare (another sacred form), it was not dissolved until the 1990s. Lynch uses this to demonstrate the point that when multiple sacred forms co-exist, they often have a hierarchical relationship, and the hierarchies can shift. He explains the maintenance and change of these hierarchies with cultural logics, but also with individual agents, and their access to social spaces (e.g. to the media) and power (e.g. celebrity priest vs. politician).

In the second case, Lynch demonstrates how the public media constitute *the* institutional structure within which sacred forms are experienced, reproduced and contested in late modern societies. Although many studies have shown that the media can clarify social conflicts, and that audiences may be disenchanted and cynical towards the representation of sacred forms, people can also form moral communities around sacred forms presented in the media. In 2009, the BBC refused to air the UN's Disaster Emergency Committee's humanitarian response to conflict between Israel and Palestine, during which more than 1387 Palestinians and thirteen Israelis were killed following the Israeli military operation 'Cast Lead'. This refusal was based on the fear of not being impartial, and led to wide criticism.

In this case the sacred form of care for children played a central role, as the suffering and death of

children in Gaza became an important part of the Western media coverage of the conflict. To those identifying with Israel, this coverage caused cognitive dissonance; for many others, the BBC's decision felt shameful. The concern over impartiality and the failure to communicate a breach of sacred form led to a loss of moral force for the BBC.

In the fifth chapter, Living with the Light and Shadow of the Sacred, Lynch presents his program for the sociology of the sacred, which is not only about studying sacred forms, but, as the name of the chapter suggests, also about working as a pedagogue or a therapist who helps people to live with multiple and often competing forms of the sacred. Lynch begins with the thought experiment of a society without the sacred, to find out how we would live without the sacred, and concludes that evilness is also possible through mundane, non-sacred structures. To the question whether we can live without the sacred, his answer is no. Although some parts of social life are possible without it, it is only with reference to sacred forms that 'meaningful and moral foundations and boundaries of human society are made known' (p. 128).

Lynch's formulation of 'sacred order' becomes quite close to concepts of *discourse* or *ideology* in other disciplinary terms, and the 'hierarchy of sacred orders' to the concept of *hegemony*. The question that therefore arises is whether sociology's view of the sacred has anything distinctive to offer? How

does the idea of 'multiple competing sacred orders' differ from a view that recognizes multiple competing discourses or ideologies?

Lynch draws from Durkheim and Mauss' *Primitive classification*, in which systems of classification and human meaning-making are seen to be based on sensory-emotional processes, and cognitive representations are seen to be of a second order. This, in my opinion, is what makes sociology of the sacred something more than the analysis of discourses or ideologies.

Durkheim and Mauss also think that the systems of classification are built around fundamental concepts that organize relations with other concepts, and thus are '*sacred*'. From this, Lynch concludes that sacred forms 'access absolute realities that are morally compelling, in relation to which other aspects of social and cultural experience must be understood' (p. 126). Social life becomes possible through the symbolic reference points of these shared, absolute realities: Social order is fundamentally constituted on the mundane level, but mundane life is always 'subject to critique with reference to absolute, non-contingent realities' (p. 127). This is where Lynch comes closest to Bellah's view on civil religion, which is the ideal form of living according to national ideals, although he points out that Bellah's view works in a transcendent framework. One should, however, keep in mind that the mundane reality of everyday life can also act as a critique of those sacred forms that

are considered hypocritical – even without attaching to a competing sacred form.

Lynch acknowledges multiple sacred forms that are shifting, and he points out that the sacred, the mundane and the profane should be always seen in relation to each other, and as hierarchy-forming. However, he names explicitly only a few forms as sacred forms. One can read between the lines that for example commitment to the policies of the state of Israel is a competing sacred form in the BBC Gaza appeal case, but this raises the question: What can be considered as a sacred form? For Lynch, are only those formations which are held sacred by most westerners sacred forms, or do the hierarchies of the sacred continue to the micro-level? And if they do, is the absoluteness of realities held sacred then relative, so that something can be held sacred in a certain context, but when something sacred is held to be less sacred than something else, it then becomes mundane? This also raises the question whether sacred forms should be studied as continuous over time, or should their situationally shifting character also be taken into account, as was originally pointed out by Arnold van Gennep in the context of rituals?

Lynch's emphasis on the norm-constructive view of sacred forms can also be questioned. One example that Lynch mentions himself is the 9/11 attacks. He discusses Jeffrey Alexander's interpretation of the attack: Al-Qaeda attacked symbols of American economic, political and military might, but the attack left the sacred core of American society untouched. However, one could argue that World Trade Center was not sacred before the terrorist attacks. One could go even further and claim that the attack created a sacred form of War on Terrorism, whose symbol Ground Zero became, not something that 'remained untouched', but revitalized. The answer of course depends on the initial view, but would it be more fruitful to see sacred-mundane-profane relations forming in interaction, so that the profane can also be seen to sacralize the mundane, or at least to re-articulate existing sacred forms into new ones?

*The Sacred in the Modern World* is inspiring reading, and I recommend it to anyone interested in new perspectives on late-modern societies, but especially for those working in the fields of religious studies, sociology, media studies and political science. Although Lynch's book might leave cold those interested in the 'impure' aspects, or spatial dimensions of the sacred, it works as an introductory text for the American branch of Durkheimian cultural sociology, and its case studies provide plentiful new insights. Continuing the rehabilitation of the sacred as an academic concept is a worthy task indeed.

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**Armin W. Geertz & Jeppe Sinding Jensen (eds):** *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture: Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative*. London: Equinox, 2011, 336pp.

In the 1950s, the foundations of scientific psychology were shaken by a 'cognitive revolution'. Since then, the cognitive paradigm has slowly but surely spread to other branches of the humanities and social sciences. Today, we have cognitive linguistics, cognitive anthropology, cognitive study of literature and, of course, cognitive science of religion.

Despite having an MA in psychology, I have always felt a little uneasy with much of cognitive research. I have two main reasons for my wariness: overuse of the computer metaphor, and an enclosed view of the human mind. Regarding cognitive research within the humanities, I might also add a third problem to the list: The humanities have traditionally been strong in analyzing meanings. Memory, reasoning, perception and other cognitive operations, however, are not meaningful in the sense that words or symbols are. How, then, should one study cognition in the humanities?

Let us begin with the overuse of the computer metaphor: One primary reason behind the cognitive revolution was the advent of information technology, and ever since, the vocabulary of cognitive science has been largely derived from computer science. The cognitive science of religion has been no exception, with terms such as 'modules' or 'mechanisms' being widely used to describe human psychic functioning.

Cognitive scientists generally acknowledge that the computer metaphor is no more than that, a metaphor, and should not be taken literally. Metaphors are far from innocent, however. The human mind resembles a computer in some respects, and in others is quite different. Nevertheless, if the mind is only described in terms of computer science, it is quite easy to extend the metaphor too far and presuppose similarities that are not justified by research findings. As the famous Maslow's Hammer states, 'If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.'

Another troubling feature of much cognitivism, an enclosed view of the human mind, is probably related to the overuse of computer metaphor. Scholars often seem to understand the human mind as akin to a computer in that the mind is represented as an enclosed entity that receives information from the outside world, processes it and then acts accordingly. In many situations, however, it is difficult to draw a line between an individual psyche and its context. Put shortly, much of what is commonly understood as individual psychic functioning is, in fact, social (cf. the works of Lev Vygotsky). Moreover, by emphasizing the computational processes of the human mind, the cognitive approaches have often disregarded the role of the affective in human psychic functioning.

Luckily, there are signs of these biases being slowly overcome. The publication of the volume *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture* is one such promising sign. As the name suggests, the book concentrates on the linkages between religion, narrative and cognition. More specifically, it discusses narrative as a cognitive faculty that can be used to explain religious phenomena.

The first half of the book provides a general overview of the relationship between narrative and human cognition. This section also contains the five articles that the editors refer to as the 'heart' of their book. A central theme in all of them is the development (both ontogenetic and phylogenetic) of human cognition: Terrence W. Deacon and Merlin Donald both discuss the evolution of language, whereas Chris Sinha investigates the development of the personal and social imaginary. Rukmini Bhaya Nair explores a range of topics related to evolution, emotion and narrative. Ilkka Pyysiäinen, in contrast, concentrates on a somewhat more focused topic and explores the belief-enhancing effect of religious ritual.

Given the name of the volume, it is worth noting that the articles by Deacon and Donald are actually neither about narrative nor about religion. Their main topic is the evolution of language in general, and they hardly touch upon religion or narrativity. Despite both of the two articles being of great importance and interest, they would be better suited to a volume of evolutionary linguistics than one of the study of religion.

In contrast to the overview articles in the first half of the book, the second half of the book contains case studies. The issues studied range from the parables of Jesus and the Exodus narrative to astrology and syncretism. The Icelandic Ásatrú, Georgian Orthodox icons, Indian epics and the ancestor myths of Indigenous Australians are also among the topics discussed. The articles are not defined by any single theoretical framework, but instead they employ a wide spectrum of approaches. Besides different cognitive approaches, ideas and theories from semiotics, anthropology, social psychology and literary criticism are also used. This marked interdisciplinarity gives the volume a multifaceted, if somewhat fragmentary, flavor.

A common thread that runs through the book is the idea of distributed cognition—that is, the idea of cognition as something that is not bound to an individual brain. Our cognitive abilities depend not only on our individual psyches but also on those of the people around us, our cultural traditions and even our material surroundings. We can, for example, improve our thinking by writing or drawing. Remembering would be a lot more difficult if we could not rely on computers and books.

Issues such as these are brought forward in the book, thus opening up the enclosed view of human mind. Furthermore, I am happy to note that the volume is also rela-

tively free from the excessive use of the computer metaphor. These positive developments may well reflect a more general turn in cognitive science to cognitive neuroscience or even to such new approaches as affective neuroscience and social neuroscience. Indeed, the volume contains several articles which explicitly incorporate findings from social psychology, emotion research, etc., into the study of human cognition. Tom Sjöblom's article, for example, discusses the role of emotions for religious narratives, while Kirstine Munk's article employs socialization theories.

Now we come to my third concern about the cognitive science of religion: Research in the humanities is typically interpretive in nature and tends to focus on meanings that people produce and use. Cognitive operations such as memory or reasoning, however, are not meaningful in the sense that words or pictures are. Memory is a vehicle of meanings, but it is not meaningful in itself. As a result, the interpretive methods that are traditionally employed in humanities do not easily lend themselves to the study of human cognition. In contrast to such idiographic approaches, a nomothetic framework is required.

A problem with many of the case studies presented in *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture* is that they are neither nomothetic nor idiographic. Actually, they appear to have no distinct methodology at all. They do not employ methods that psychologists use for making gen-

eralizations about human psychic functioning, nor do they utilize the intricate strategies of textual interpretation developed in the humanities. What they do instead is develop interesting hypotheses and thought experiments. However, without verification by means of experimental testing or other nomothetic approaches, it is difficult to assess these hypotheses.

Thus, although *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture* avoids some of the major pitfalls of much cognitivism, my third concern about cognitive science of religion still remains. All in all, the research findings presented in the book are interesting hypotheses but not yet tested facts. Time will show if such hypotheses will be backed up with stronger evidence. I, for one, certainly hope so.

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**Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (eds):** *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion.* London: Routledge, 2011, 543pp.

Within comparative religion the discussion about methods has been in its infancy. International monographs, edited anthologies and journal articles have focused more on content-related and theoretical issues, rather than methods. As the editors of *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* state, their book is unique in

that, as far as is known, it is the first method manual in religious studies published in English.

Although issues of method have discussed relatively little in the international context, this does not necessarily mean that they have been ignored at the national level. In comparative religion in Finland, for example, issues of method have been prominent both in teaching and in many publications for the last 15 years or so. The teaching of methods has been established both at Bachelor's and at Master's level, and there have been several Finnish publications addressing methods and methodological issues, covering many of the same methods and questions as the book at hand. Furthermore, Finnish researchers have introduced and developed methods which are not brought up in the book. A good example is the use of rhetorical analysis, an internationally known and recognized method in for example social psychology, political studies and linguistics. Among methods analyzing language use, it would have been good to introduce rhetorical analysis in the handbook, especially since the article about discourse analysis – another method frequently utilized in the Finnish context – does not discuss the rhetorical means of the texts.

The book is divided into three sections, the first of which deals with methodological issues, the second with methods, and the third with different research materials. In total this massive, well over 500-page book includes 33 articles. Within each section, the articles are presented in alphabetical order, which may not have been the best solution: in Part II, in particular, which covers research methods, grouping the methods as instruments for collecting and for analyzing data respectively (or, alternatively, as quantitative and qualitative methods), for example, would have been pedagogically preferable, and would have helped the reader to better discern the variety of methods. The solution adopted is understandable, however, in that some of the methods presented in the section (such as in the articles 'History', 'Hermeneutics' or 'Phenomenology') address a (theoretical) approach or point of view rather than an actual method, so that placing them in either of the categories mentioned above would have been a challenge. Likewise, if you use the book as the editors suggest and select the method or methods of interest and read the related articles, the alphabetical order is fairly functional.

If, however – for whatever reason – you read the book in order from the beginning to the end, after the last article ('Visual culture') you are left with mixed feelings. Perhaps some kind of summarizing or concluding chapter would have been good anyway. Either here, or alternatively in the Introduction, it would have been useful to reflect more closely on the ways in which concepts such as ontology, epistemology, methodology, theory and method relate to each other. As it is,

these are discussed here and there in different articles with no possibility to build up an overall view of the connections between them. When discussing the methods and how to choose them, understanding these connections is of great importance for students.

The articles are constructed so that each article begins with a summary of the main topics, and after the bibliography there is both a list of additional reading and a glossary of key concepts associated with the method. These lists and concepts will be particularly useful when preparing methodology teaching. The chapter summaries, in turn, give the reader at their best a good overall picture of the content of the article. At their worst they come close to truisms, as in the chapter 'Epistemology': 'Theories of knowledge are relevant to the study of religion' (p. 40). They may also be unintelligible for readers unfamiliar with the method in question, as in the chapter 'Factor analysis': 'When multiple factors are extracted, they should be rotated. If they are relatively uncorrelated, varimax is the best rotation, which forces factors to be uncorrelated' (p. 204).

'The Introduction' by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler discusses the issues related to the general planning and executing of research. These issues include the research design, the relationship between qualitative and quantitative methods, the measurement of reliability, validity and generalizability, and triangulation. The chapter is illustrative and informative, and the themes it introduces are good starting points when planning the teaching of methods in comparative religion.

The first part of the book presents a range of issues related to research methodology, such as comparison, epistemological questions, and research ethics. It also introduces feminist methodology, and the construction of a research design. The article about comparison written by one of the editors, Michael Stausberg, is essential reading for all interested in elementary premises and presumptions in religious studies. It both introduces and analyzes the debate around the comparative approach, and presents newer applications of the comparative perspective. The article is well structured and informative, including plenty of 'boxes', which summarize the basic ideas of the article.

Part II contains 22 articles that present both the elementary methods widely used in comparative religion (such as content analysis, participant observation and surveys and questionnaires), and methods that are less known (but possibly on the increase) in our subject field, such as experimental methods and network analysis. As mentioned above, this section also includes chapters that introduce wider methodological approaches, such as the articles on 'Hermeneutics' and 'Phenomenology', and an article on 'Document analysis' which introduces various textual materials that are utilized in comparative religion.

A better position for that article would perhaps have been in Part III, 'Materials'.

There is substantial variation in the intelligibility and the degree of difficulty of the articles, considering that – according to the introductory text at the back cover of the book – the book is 'designed to enable non-specialists and students […] to understand the variety of research methods used in the field'. For example, for those not familiar with the basic presumptions of the methods introduced in the articles 'Facet theory methods' and 'Factor analysis', those methods may remain rather obscure, whereas others, such as the article by Justin L. Barrett on experimental methods, succeed in demystifying often quite difficult concepts with the help of illustrative examples selected from experimental research by Barrett and other researchers.

Another example of a clear and well-constructed article is 'Interviewing', by Anna Davidson Bremborg. It introduces the epistemological premises of the interviewing method, different forms of interviews, basic questions concerning the collecting and selection of data (such as the question of data saturation and various ways to document the interview), and analysis and report writing. Further, the article discusses the potential limitations of interviewing methods (such as the question of generalizability), and ethical issues relating, for example, to the anonymity of the interviewee. The article is an illustrative and

snappy overview of one of the fundamental methods in comparative religion.

Part III examines the various research materials that are typically utilized in comparative religion, such as auditory materials, the Internet, and material and visual culture, both as wider objects of study in themselves, and as sources of material. Furthermore, this section includes a chapter on 'Spatial methods', which instead of presenting research data, introduces an approach that examines sacred space from a range of perspectives ('mapping religions', for example). The Internet is an interesting object of study in comparative religion, since it raises questions in a new way about the social nature of religion and religious experience, for example. The article by Douglas E. Cowan coherently discusses these questions and critically examines the Internet research tradition, still in its infancy. The article also covers various ways to approach Internet materials, and the pitfalls and ethical issues of Internet research.

All in all, the present work is a most welcome handbook, both for students and for those who design method and methodology teaching in comparative religion. Many of the articles, and their additional reading lists, can directly be used in the preparation and implementation of method courses. Furthermore, many articles provide very good introductions and overviews of the method they discuss. Some articles, however, have not been thought through in

terms of being understandable to the readers not familiar with the method beforehand. Likewise, the alphabetical arrangement of the articles may not have been the best possible solution. As a whole, however, the book is eye-opening reading for all interested in the methodology, research materials, and, in particular, methods in comparative religion.

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