

Introduction

To theorize is not to leave the material world behind and enter the domain of pure ideas where the lofty space of the mind makes objective reflection possible. Theorizing . . . is a material practice.

—Karen Barad (2008: 55)

Why write yet another theory book, especially at a time when Terry Eagleton, a prominent exponent of the genre, has declared that “the golden age of cultural theory is long past” (2003: 1)? Eagleton quickly qualifies his claim, stating that “[i]f theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever.” Further, because cultural theory has tended to ignore or dismiss religion, he argues that theorists must reflect systematically on its global visibility.

In my case, theorizing comes out of a practical need. This book grows out of my frustration in the classroom. Trying to engage students about the religious creativity, cross-fertilization, and fluidity that accompany globalization, particularly about the ways in which transnational immigrants transform both their countries of origin and settlement by generating hybrid identities, practices, and spaces, I have found that the dominant “canon” in religious studies is for the most part unhelpful. Emerging from Protestant Biblical hermeneutics, religious studies has tended to focus on the great sacred texts, or the theologies of the Niebuhrs, Barths, and Tillichs of the world, or the symbolic systems of various self-contained, territorialized cultures. Up until very recently, our discipline has taken for granted the view that religion is primarily “private and interior, not shamelessly public; mystical, not ritualistic; intellectually consistent and reasonable, not ambivalent and contradictory.” It is “transcendent, not present in things. Religion is concerned, tautologically, with religious matters, not with what Sartre has called the ‘equivocal givenness of experience’” (Orsi 1997: 6). This understanding of religion offers few resources to explore the constant movement, contestation, and hybridity involved in what has been called popular religion—religion as it is lived in the streets, workplaces, and

schools, for example, by poor Latino immigrants as they settle in small towns in North Carolina or Nebraska.

For these immigrants, what matters religiously is not high doctrine, but everyday existential problems that they often tackle through the practices, narratives, and material culture that they bring with them or that they encounter in their new homes in the United States. How can the heavily textual approaches that are still dominant in religious studies explore the full force of glossolalia, exorcism, and divine healing among Latino(a) Pentecostals and Charismatic Catholics? Or of *rasa*, the emotional flavor of dance or theatrical performances through which first-generation Hindu immigrants inculcate Hindu identity and culture to their children? Or the incorporation of the ancestor spirits among practitioners of African-based religions such as Santería or Candomblé, a phenomenon that blends sonic, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and kinetic dimensions ranging from drumming and dancing to preparing and sharing a communal meal? Is it fruitful to understand the intense devotion involved in the cult of the saints or Mary among Catholics, with its elaborate home altars, replete with icons brought from the homeland, and its pilgrimages to sacred sites, as nothing more than the enactment of a cultural text? What about what Elaine Peña (forthcoming: 37) calls “devotional labor,” the “moments of pain and discomfort—walking on blistering feet, proceeding on injured knees and cramped legs, with growling stomach and salty saliva, with too much light and too little sleep,” which *devotos* of the Virgin of Guadalupe endure every December as they embark on a long pilgrimage to visit the site of her apparition at Tepeyac? All these bodily investments and disciplines are crucial for the effectiveness, authenticity, and purifying power of the pilgrimage. Moreover, these investments and disciplines are not only interwoven with the production of sacred space but also with the dynamics of “class stratification among participants [in the pilgrimage], the institutional history of this particular tradition, and the ubiquitous commercial aspects of the ritual” (e.g., the vendors who sell food to the pilgrims along the way and those who provide lodging). And if the journey requires crossing the U.S. border, Latino(a) pilgrims will have to confront the power of a state that has deployed an array of devices and strategies to deter, render visible, capture, and manage “illegal” bodies. Even in this precarious situation, pilgrims will resist, praying to Juan Soldado to intercede and make them invisible to the border patrol.¹ Can an approach that focuses solely on representation and communication take into account of the diverse manifestations of this panoptical power and of the practices to resist it?

Taking note of the strongly embodied and pragmatic character of religion among immigrants, I wrote a piece arguing that post-1965 immigration, which has brought increasing numbers of Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans to

the United States, challenge us to de-provincialize the study of religion, to historicize and materialize it. Rather than simply approaching religion as private belief, imperfectly represented by “external” manifestations such as symbols, rituals, and institutions—an approach heavily shaped by the Protestant origins of the *Religionswissenschaft*—I called attention to the need to develop new perspectives that explored the transnational production, circulation, and consumption of religious goods, the fashioning and control of religious bodies, the constrained creativity involved in the emergence of hybrid religious identities, the relations of domination and resistance that mediate the formation of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the practices that make possible the creation of spaces of livelihood, which often dovetail with sacred landscapes, the ways in which religion enters physical and virtual flows and networks, including the global mass media and the Internet, and the close interplay between popular culture, popular religion, and consumer capitalism. Here I was simply echoing my colleague Vasudha Narayanan’s call to “decolonize” our methodologies and challenge “the privileging of the written text and beliefs by dominant, hegemonic cultures [that] has led to a marginalization of other ways of knowing, other sources of knowledge” (2003: 516). Such a decolonization will allow us to take seriously “dances, temples, cities, alternative medical therapies, and so on and appreciate the embodied ways in which knowledge was transmitted in pre-colonial cultures and still continues to be transmitted in many diasporic realms.”

My students were very sympathetic to my proposal. However, they kept asking me how the study of religion in the face of contemporary globalization is related to the literature they studied with me in “Method and Theory I,” which covers the “founding fathers” and other classics. What does Eliade’s notion of the sacred have to do with the study of the historical interplay between religion, power, and material life? Is this a case of incommensurable epistemologies? What, in any case, is the epistemology behind the call to historicize and materialize the study of religion?

This book is an attempt to answer these questions. It is an effort to explore the sources of a “materialist turn” in religious study that is already underway at the margins of the discipline. Recently, Ivan Strenski has paid tribute to a “relatively small troop of pioneering colleagues [who] have developed the field of the study of the materiality of religious life,” a troop that includes the likes of Colleen McDannell, Peter Brown, Caroline Walker Bynum, J. Z. Smith, and Thomas Kselman.² To this group of pioneers we may now add a growing number of scholars working on sacred space (Basso 1996; Chidester and Linenthal 1995; Gill 1998; Knott 2008; Lane 2001), architecture (Kieckhefer 2004; Kilde 2004 and 2008; J. Meyer 2001; Waghorne 2004), archaeology (Fogelin

2006; Gilchrist 1994; Insoll 2004), visual culture (Morgan 2005), embodiment (Csordas 1997 and 2004; Klima 2002; Griffith 2004; Laderman 1999), religious experience (S. Harvey 2006; Schmidt 2000; Taves 1999), performance and dance (Daniel 2005; McAlister 2002; Narayanan 2003), popular and material culture (Forbes and Mahan 2005; Chidester 2005; Schmidt 1995), transnational and diasporic religion (Johnson 2007; Tweed 1998; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003), lived religion (Hall 1997 Orsi 2005), and religion and cognitive science (Boyer 2001; Bulkeley 2008; Slingerland 2008a and b; Whitehouse 2004).³ Together these scholars are giving rise to powerful yet disperse currents spurring a materialist shift in religious studies.

My task in this book is to bring some of these currents into conversation with each other, not with the aim of normalizing diverse and innovative perspectives to religious materiality, but in an attempt to make explicit the implications of these localized efforts for the discipline of religious studies. To facilitate the conversation, I take a genealogical approach, which is simultaneously historical and epistemological. In undertaking this genealogy, I heed Robert Orsi's injunction to avoid falling into a "historiography of sameness that flattens out the contradictions, ironies, fissures, inconsistencies, existential dilemmas, cultural anomalies, and personal circumstances, as well as the religious perplexities, fantasies, fears, and desires, which have characterized the emergence of the study of religion" (Orsi 2008: 136). Thus, I show how there have always been insurgent materialist countercurrents within religious studies and philosophy that have short-circuited the temptation towards idealism, subjectivism, essentialism, and transcendence in religious studies. I then demonstrate how these countercurrents have now been reinvigorated by contemporary work in fields as varied as cultural and ethnic studies, feminist theory, phenomenological anthropology, neuroscience, evolution, ecology, and geography. The result of this revitalization is a flexible, non-reductive materialist framework to study religion.

The framework that I am proposing is not anti-reductive in the Eliadean sense. It is not opposed to reduction in the weak, pragmatic sense. I acknowledge from the outset that our embodiment and emplacement compel us to select, condense, name, break down, and categorize phenomena in order to be able to act effectively in the world. In that sense, no position is innocent, totally anti-reductive, and the best we can do is be self-reflexive, aware of the questions we ask and the localized yet rigorous rules and procedures that we strategically deploy to answer them in fruitful ways. What I oppose is reductionism in the strong, ontological sense, "reduction as nothing buttery" (Davis 2006: 35–52), a theory of knowledge that assumes that all phenomena can be reduced downward to smaller and smaller constitutive components, the behavior of

which can be totally determined. In strong reductionism, “the explanatory arrows always point downward,” such that “society is to be explained in terms of people, people in terms of organs, organs by cells, cells by biochemistry, biochemistry by chemistry, chemistry by physics. To put it even more crudely, [reductionism] is the view that in the end, all reality is nothing but whatever is ‘down there’ at the current base of physics: quarks or the famous strings of string theory, plus the interaction among those entities” (Kauffman 2008: 10–11). My framework is non-reductive because it highlights complexity, inter-level connectivity, emergence, situated knowledge, and relative indeterminacy and openness against monocausal, unidirectional, and totalizing explanatory schemes.

I call this framework materialist because it approaches religion as it is lived by human beings, not by angels.⁴ As Bruce Lincoln puts it in his now-famous “Theses on Method,” to study religion in all its historicity is “to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine” (1996: 225). In other words, a well-conceived materialism is not only humbly agnostic about the “supernatural” sources of religion, but it is interested in the conditions that made it possible for these sources to be recognized and felt as supernatural. This does not mean that scholars must disqualify the religious practitioners’ appeals to the supernatural as nothing more than delusions, false consciousness, maladaptive habits, pathologies, or even more benignly, social constructs. Thus, biologist Richard Dawkins’s positivist call to treat belief in the existence of God as a “scientific hypothesis about the universe,” which can be tested against the available evidence, is ultimately fruitless, more the source of polemics than of insights into the complex naturalistic dimensions of religion. As he himself puts it in chapter 4 of *The God Delusion*, it is not possible to rule out the supernatural entirely. Yet, “even if gods do exist, and reveal themselves to humans, the knowledge revealed will become known through ordinary cognitive and communicative processes which can and should be scientifically explained” (Pyysiäinen 2002: 5).

A scholar working within a non-reductive materialist framework, thus, begins with the acknowledgment that the practitioners’ appeals to the supernatural, god(s), the sacred, or the holy have powerful material consequences for how they build their identities, narratives, practices, and environments. Thus, it behooves scholars of religion to take seriously the native actor’s lived world and to explore the biological, social, and historical conditions that make religious experiences possible as well as the effects these experiences have on self, culture, and nature. Submerging ourselves in history and abandoning the

quest for essences and totalizing theories mean that we also have to relativize all approaches to religion, including (and perhaps especially) our own. There will always be a surplus to religion, as for any other realm of human activity, that even our most coherent and astute epistemologies will not capture.

Thus, my call to adopt a materialist framework is not part of a "quest for the holy grail of reductionism" that would make religious studies finally a science, clearly distinctive from theology (Cho and Squier 2008: 434–43). Materialism need not equal reductive physicalism or naive mechanicism. Indeed, I advance a sort of materialism that, while recognizing the material constraints and possibilities entailed by our being-in-the-world through our physical bodies, does not reduce all experiences and cultural productions to the dynamics of the brain, genes, or evolutionary biology. In that sense, the non-reductive materialism that I am proposing should not be confused with anthropologist Marvin Harris's cultural materialism, which posits that society's ideational and symbolic superstructures are unidirectionally determined by infrastructural material forces connected with reproduction or the production and distribution of food (Harris 2001). Harris's paradigmatic thesis that the complex rituals of human sacrifice among the Aztecs were nothing more than post facto rationalization by a priestly elite in response to protein deficiency has been proven to be not only simplistic but factually incorrect (Carrasco 1999; Read 1998).

Against vulgar or mechanistic materialism, I subscribe to a "cultural realism," which assumes that "the emergent world in which our cognizing competence takes form . . . is quite real, as real as the physical world from which it 'must' have evolved" (Margolis 2001: 3). Selves and culture are material in their own right. They acquire their distinctive materiality through social practices that mediate how we experience the world and our own embodiment. Because social practices give selves and culture a material density, identities and cultural artifacts also have causal efficacy. That is, they give rise to our life worlds through multilayered relations of reciprocal determination with other physical processes.

The cultural realism I defend certainly bears some resemblances to Durkheim's call to accept the reality of social facts, which are not mere by-products of the aggregate behavior of unencumbered individuals entering into contractual relations with each other. Cultural realism accepts the notion that, although social facts are the emergent result of the practices of individuals, they precede and transcend specific subjectivities, enabling, shaping, and delimiting the latter's activities. Nevertheless, I wish to go beyond Durkheim's tendency to equate social facts with collective representations, an idealist tendency that has been aggravated by Talcott Parsons's one-sided reading of the Durkheimian legacy. Cultural realism refers not only to shared meanings and values expressed

by public systems of symbols, but to spatiotemporal institutions and environments that regulate the behavior of bodies, as well as to embodied dispositions to act in certain ways and to the differential circulation of capital, commodities, and cultural artifacts in social fields laden with power.

Taking the subjective experiences of practitioners and methodological reflexivity and humility as points of departure does not give us license to insulate religion from our analytical tools, treating it as a "timeless nucleus," a self-contained reality with an unchanging core only accessible through a hermeneutics of recovery (Dubuisson 2003). As I said above, my call for a non-reductive perspective has no truck with Mircea Eliade's brand of anti-reductionism, which was heavily imbued with nostalgia for transhistorical origins and a desire for ontological foundations. Rather, the task of the scholar of religion is to study how embodiment and embeddedness in time and place enable and constrain diverse, flexible, yet patterned subjective experiences that come to be understood as religious. So, we begin from the first-person accounts of practitioners on the ground, painstakingly gathering all the claims of individual and collective transformation. Then we explore the complex interplay of phenomenological, sociocultural, and biological conditions that make these accounts possible and authoritative.

A good example of this careful balance between "emic" and "etic" approaches is the cutting-edge research on neurophenomenology, which takes introspective observations by religious practitioners as a point of departure and then contextualizes these first-person reports with brain imaging and other experimental methods in cognitive neurosciences (Harrinton and Zajonc 2003).⁵ Neurophenomenology has also begun to dialogue with anthropology, philosophy, and history to provide nuanced pictures of how coherent narratives of religious experience emerge out of the intricate interaction of biological and cultural dynamics (Laughlin and Throop 2006). These studies suggest that the integration of subjective experience depends upon how the architecture of our brain and our body schemas enable invention within the limits of ecology, culture, and society. Through the dynamics of neuroplasticity, culture, which is produced by embodied practice, shapes our brains and bodies (Bourdieu 1977). More specifically, culture offers embodied, and often pre-reflective, ways of sensing, knowing, moving, and doing (Depraz, Varela, and Vermersch 2003).

Thus, non-reductive materialism follows the injunction of anthropologist Talal Asad (2003: 36) that, as scholars, we

should shift our preoccupation with definitions of "the sacred" as an object of experience to the wider question of how a heterogeneous landscape of power

(moral, political, economic) is constituted, what disciplines (individual and collective) are necessary to it. This does not mean that "the sacred" must be regarded as a mask of power, but that we should look to what makes certain practices possible, desired, mandatory—including the everyday practices by which the subject's experience is disciplined.

For the scholar operating within materialist framework, the primary task is to study the logics of religious ways of being in the world and to elucidate how these logics are inextricably connected with other (nonreligious) ways of being in the world. The sort of materialism I would like to advance approaches religion as the open-ended product of the discursive and nondiscursive practices of embodied individuals, that is, individuals who exist in particular times and spaces. These individuals are embedded in nature and culture, and drawing from and conditioned by their ecological, biological, psychological, and socio-cultural resources, they construct multiple identities and practices, some of which come to be designated, often through contestation, as religious at particular junctures. In other words, a materialist approach is interested in the processes behind the naming and articulation of religion as relatively stable and patterned reality recognized by both insiders and outsiders.

In that sense, non-reductive materialism bears some affinities with perspectives that stress the fact that religion is a constructed category. For instance, I endorse Russell McCutcheon's critique of the discourse on *sui generis* religion, a critique that demonstrates how religion was manufactured by scholars as an autonomous reality, independent of the historical, social, and biological processes. In particular, I agree with McCutcheon's challenge to the "private affair tradition" in religious studies: religion understood subjective reality of a certain kind, "conceived as interior, personal, and utterly unique states and dispositions" (2003: 55) that cannot be properly analyzed through the tools of the social and natural sciences. Having its roots in Cartesian subjectivism, the private affair tradition has gone hand-in-hand with idealism and foundationalism, the search for unchanging essences, the "Platonic forms of religious life," behind the shifting world of history and external appearances. The result has been a dismissal or even a denigration of the materiality of religion, particularly of the entwinement between religion, the body, and society. Even a thinker of the caliber of Williams James, who had a materialist and pragmatist outlook, conducting seminal work on the relation between religion and neurology, ultimately fell prey to this subjectivism. He privileged the original personal experiences of the "pattern-setters," the founders and great mystics, as religion's true essence. While in James's eyes these experiences are authentic and ineffable in their intensity, directness, and spontaneity, theology (dogma) and religious

institutions are pale “second-hand” reifications, the extrinsic aspects of religion that are susceptible to rational treatment (James 1961: 42).

McCutcheon’s interest in challenging scholarship on *sui generis* religion, however, is more metatheoretical. The primary data for his analyses is the academic discourses on religion. He presents “a political theory of ‘religion,’” that is, a genealogy of the strategies that religion scholars have used to construct religion as an independent and legitimate object of study, advancing their own institutional interests and other nationalist and imperialist agendas without appearing to do so. Instead, I do theory for a more “therapeutic” purpose: to disentangle some of the epistemological knots that have characterized the discipline of religion as way to provide fallible yet effective tools to explore the rich and diverse everyday activities of situated actors who have come to identify what they do as religious.

Here I follow Wittgenstein’s view of philosophy not as the maiden of apodictic knowledge but as a cluster of language games that make possible the collaborative construction of viable and meaningful life-worlds. Along the same lines, like the so-called ordinary language philosophers (John Searle 1969 and J. L. Austin 1971), I am more interested in the ways in which common sense and public performance enable the production of our categories of knowledge, including the concept of religion. Thus, while I readily recognize that the concept of religion is a construct deeply implicated with colonialism and capitalism,⁶ I agree with Gustavo Benavides (2003) that “there is data for religion.” This data is the relatively stabilized and binding discourses, practices, and institutions co-created by religious practitioners, the scholars who study them, and the cultural producers at large. “The determination of what counts as religion is not the sole preserve of academics. The very term *religion* is contested and at stake in the discourses of popular culture” (Chidester 2005: 50). These discourses now circulate transnationally, so that “if religion was ever simply a homunculus alchemically concocted to our specifications within the scholar’s study, it has since escaped that room to hang out with people linked by a global system of communication, finance . . .” (Bell 2008: 122).

As I have suggested above, I call my framework non-reductive not because it assumes that religion has an irreducible, unchangeable essence that makes it an autonomous and distinct reality. Quite the contrary, non-reductive materialism explicitly avoids the temptations of foundationalism, the notion that it is possible and desirable to have a god’s-eye view of religion, to find its universal essence once and for all and, thus, to be able to reduce all religious manifestations across cultures and history to unchanging truths. The task is not to produce a fully naturalistic account of religion, as if this were possible. Instead, we must recognize that our knowledge is “situated,” emerging from our “location,

embodiment, and partial perspective" (Haraway 1991: 191). Moreover, our models of religion are always partial and fallible, since, as is the case for any other form of activity, religious practice is shaped by the complex interplay of social, biological, and psychological factors. Because these factors tend not to interact in linear and mechanical fashion, but rather enter into reciprocal relations of determination that may give rise to emergent effects, it is unwise to assume that we can arrive at totalizing understanding of what religion is. The shifting boundaries of what we call religion will continue to defy our most astute efforts to fix them once and for all. Yet, this "transcendence" does not have to rely on theological categories like the sacred, the holy, or the supernatural. It is rather anchored in the relative indeterminacy of our embodied existential condition (Csordas 1999 and 2004).

Such an indeterminacy does not mean that anything goes in the study of religion or that all approaches are equally fruitful (or ineffectual). A scholar of religion operating within a non-reductive materialist framework will try to craft the most robust, context-sensitive, nuanced, and self-reflexive account of particular religious practices. This account will in all likelihood be one among others, with which it will alternatively compete, cross-fertilize, or simply coexist. Perhaps time will tell whether one account can become dominant, showing that it can lead to ever-new insights and elaborations, while the other alternatives remain static in their explanatory power.⁷ Perhaps such evolutionary hope may not yield a clear "winner." More than likely, certain accounts will be effective in explaining and doing certain things, while others will exhibit different ranges of utility.⁸

To explore the materialist turn in religious study, I originally proposed to Oxford University Press a broad survey of current literature focusing on embodied and emplaced religion, ranging from practice-centered approaches influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, to those dealing with religious space and place, postcolonialism, virtual religion, commodity fetishism, and material and popular culture. The goal was to offer graduate students an accessible map of the evolving field. Nevertheless, I soon discovered that although a survey of this kind would be very useful to teach students about cutting-edge research in religious studies, it really would not answer the epistemological question posed by my students. In fact, work on material religion has hitherto tended to be very descriptive, showing how various religious spaces, performance, and objects have been used or function today (Arweck and Keenan 2006). Providing a detailed inventory of religious materiality is very important, given the longstanding neglect it has suffered. Nevertheless, it is time to begin to explore the larger implications of this multifaceted materialist phenomenology for the discipline of religion. How are the

insights generated by the materialist turn transforming the ways in which we view religion? Are we witnessing the emergence of a post-idealist, post-foundationalist, and post-subjectivist paradigm in the study of religion? What are the epistemological bases of this paradigm?

Moreover, my experience in the classroom told me that many graduate students today are afflicted by a bad case of "presentism." They very often have come across in one form or another thinkers like Michel Foucault or Judith Butler. Perhaps they have read a description of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* or maybe a couple of chapters of *Bodies that Matter* and assume that they then have a grasp of contemporary critical theory. These students, however, are far less conversant with the intellectual background in which current thinkers operate. As my esteemed colleague Shaya Isenberg once remarked: "they are driving without a rearview mirror." This problem is to a great extent our fault. As educators, we have too easily accepted the rhetoric of discontinuity and rupture, which is closely implicated with commercialization of academy, whereby we are driven to create the latest intellectual fad. It is one thing, however, to critique and avoid teleological readings of history and quite another to decontextualize the production of theory.

In light of this situation, I decided that a better strategy in the writing this book would be to focus on three key sites where some of the most innovative and potentially influential non-reductive materialist work in religion is taking place. This would allow me to map out in a fuller way the legacy of generalized neglect of all things material in the study of religion.

Arguably, the single most important site of contestation in the materialist turn is the body. "As material site, malleable substance, and shifting field of relations, the body is situated at the center of the production and consumption of religion and popular culture" (Chidester 2005: 25). This realization has generated increasing interest on embodiment among religion scholars. "Displacing earlier concerns with religious beliefs and doctrines, with inner experience and spirituality, this interest . . . signals a new engagement with materiality—perhaps a new materialism—in the study of religion and popular culture" (26).

The centrality of the body in a rematerialization of the study of religion is not surprising, given that it has long been at the heart of ongoing debates about the relation between spirit and matter. In telling the story of these debates, I recognize from the outset that there is no such thing as "The Body," an immutable universal and unitary substance under the shifting bustle of discourses about it. As Shildrick and Price (1999: 8) rightly argue: "there are only multiple bodies, marked not simply by sex, but by an infinite array of differences—race, class, sexuality, age, mobility status are those most commonly invoked—none of which is solely determinate." The polyvalence of embodiment is also evident

in religion. Barbara Holdrege (2008: 20), for example, refers to a "multilevel hierarchy of structurally correlated bodies corresponding to different orders of reality" in Hinduism. Thus, in Hindu traditions there are divine, cosmic, social, and physical bodies mediated by networked interactions through "processual bodies," include ritual, ascetic, purity, devotional, and Tantric bodies.

However, the multiplicity of concrete embodiments does not mean that there have not been hegemonic discourses and practices that have materialized the body in the West in powerfully normative ways. The story I want to tell is of these normative conceptions and their consequences for the study of religion. Thus, the first section of the book traces the ways in which modern religious studies reproduces the mind-body dualism and the denigration of the body that has been dominant in Western thought since Platonic idealism. I also show how despite this hegemonic flight from the body and aspects associated with it, such as history, practice, materiality, and situatedness, there were countertrends that sought to recover embodiment. Finally, I discuss three contemporary approaches that take embodiment seriously: materialist phenomenology, constructionist critical theory, and evolution and the cognitive sciences. I argue that, although these currents are often in conflict with one another, they offer crucial elements for the articulation of a flexible non-reductive materialist framework to study religion.

I begin by discussing phenomenology, since it is arguably the approach that has inherited and struggled against the contradictions of Cartesian dualism and subjectivism in the most explicit manner. Phenomenology has also been central in the development of the discipline of religious studies through the works of towering figures ranging from Rudolf Otto to Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade. As we shall see, the flight from the body and its situated practices in religious studies results from the appropriation of an idealist, subjectivist, and transcendentalist version of phenomenology that has failed to take seriously our embeddedness in the life-world, in the social and natural worlds as they are mediated through our historical practices. The contradictions of this idealist appropriation of phenomenology have been aggravated by modern hermeneutics (especially from Schleiermacher on), which, despite giving us indispensable insights into the situatedness of the process of interpretation and the materiality of texts, has tended to reduce all human activity to the production and transmission of meaning. The result has been a suffocating textualism that approaches religions as essentially systems of symbols, beliefs, narratives, and cosmologies, ignoring other important material dimensions of religious life. Thus, the task of these early chapters is to recover an alternative (thoroughly historicized, socialized, and naturalized) version of phenomenology and to hold textualism and its cousin discursive social constructionism in check.

In chapter 5, I offer a panoramic sketch of the evolution and claims of social constructionism, an approach that in the wake of the three masters of suspicion—Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud—has become hegemonic in cultural studies, the social sciences, and the humanities. In its focus on the material effects of discursive and nondiscursive practices, particular in the production of the sovereign subject, social constructionism has had a positive rematerializing effect on the study of religion. However, in the quest to indict all attempts at generalizing beyond localized perspectives as domineering metanarratives or essentialist thought, some postmodernist strands of social constructionism have engaged in an excessive semiotic reductionism. This reductionism—of the sort that claims that “there is nothing outside the text”—threatens to turn social constructionism into another version of idealism that glibly dismisses the embodied, sensorimotoric dimensions of religion.

Chapter 6 deals with recent works in “material feminism” that bring into productive dialogue social constructionist critiques of gender and sex with a renewed focus on the lived bodies of women and with efforts to build a robust feminist science studies. What emerges from this conversation is a dynamic, non-dualistic epistemology that views reality as the deployment of semiotic-material, natural-cultural practices. This epistemology breaks sharply with the notion of human uniqueness, which is at the heart of radical social constructionism, recognizing that being embodied means above all being embedded in, dependent on, and interconnected with the nonhuman world. This recognition, in turn, opens the way to bring into the study of religion debates in the natural sciences, particularly in evolution and the neurosciences.

I must confess that, given my background as a sociologist of religion, writing chapter 7 on religion, evolution, cognitive psychology, and the neurosciences was especially challenging. As a religion scholar trained in the social sciences, I have no trouble defending the material density of cultural practices and their role, for example, in constituting religious bodies as social artifacts. Rather, the problem lies in acknowledging the limits of social constructionism, asking with Ian Hacking (1999) about the kind of social constructionism that is best suited to deal with the complexity of religious life. In contrast, arguing for the need to take biology seriously in the study of religion, I always felt that I was about to succumb to essentialism and determinism. Yet, I believe that if we are really serious about materiality, social constructionism must confront “the stubbornness of the materiality of things” (Appadurai 2006: 21), including our bodies in their environments. Remaining ensconced safely in the anthropocentric cocoon of social constructionism and failing to confront the natural sciences in a truly cross-disciplinary dialogue only leaves the door open for simplistic and totalizing forms of reductionism.

At the end of chapter 7, I distinguish my non-reductive materialist epistemological framework from the recent thoughtful attempt by Edward Slingerland (2008a and b) to approach the humanities through the lens of cognitive science. According to him, humans “appear to be robots, all the way down, whether we like that idea or not” (Slingerland 2008a: 392). More specifically, he claims that religious experience and practices can be explained as complex emergent effects of lower-level neurobiological processes. As an alternative to this position, I argue that religious phenomena are not merely derivative; just like any sociocultural and phenomenological reality, they are also supervenient materialities, which exert downward determination. I fully accept the claim that the evolution of our brain has set broad limits for the fitness of religious categories. It helps explain why some of these categories (such as the notion of supernatural agents) are consistently found across ages and cultures. Nevertheless, within the dynamic parameters set by the evolution and the relative plasticity of neural networks, religious practices and beliefs exhibit great local and global variability and creativity, as a result of intricate, often non-teleological relations of codetermination among social, cultural, neurophysiological, and ecological dynamics. In turn, the outcomes of these relations of mutual determination set the conditions for the performance of new embodied religious experiences and practices. Put in other words, my appeal to cultural realism goes hand in hand with what cognitive scholars George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999: 89–117) call a non-dualist “embodied realism.” In contrast to “metaphysical realism,” which assumes that there is an independent world outside of our understanding that our minds can copy or mirror through concepts when we adopt the right philosophical method, embodied realism sees reality as emerging from our ongoing physical-cultural interactions with the environment. Our bodies and the environment in which we act “afford” each other, they make each other available. Our bodies, which have been shaped by the surrounding environment, which includes cultural artifacts of various kinds, allow us to perceive, transform, and accommodate to the environment.

The world, then, is not just language, the endless reference of texts to other texts, as some radical version of social constructionism would have it. Rather, “[w]hat we understand the world to be like is determined by many things: our sensory organs, our ability to move and manipulate objects, the detailed structure of our brain, our culture, and our interactions in our environment, at the very least. What we take to be true in a situation depends on our embodied understanding of the situation, which in turn is shaped by all these factors” (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 102).

The second site I address is practice, with all the attendant tensions between agency and structure, and between domination and resistance. As with my

rejection of "The Body" as a universal category, I readily acknowledge that "there is no unified practice approach" in the social sciences and humanities (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny 2001: 11). Again, my aim is not to offer a comprehensive account of the practice turn in contemporary theory. Instead, I am more interested tracing how and why the notion of practice has been consistently excluded from religious studies. Further, I would like to offer examples of approaches that have fruitfully brought practice back into the study of religion.

I begin in chapter 8 by tackling head on the textualism that has dominated the discipline of religion. By textualism, I do not just mean the focus on the great sacred texts produced by religious elites, but a kind of natural attitude, as phenomenologist Edmund Husserl would term it, a taken-for-granted approach to religious practices as if they were only texts, symbolic systems that scholars of religion must understand empathetically, decode through thick description, or endlessly postpone interpretively (as in the case of those influenced by deconstruction). As I state above, the "linguistic" and "hermeneutic" turns in the social sciences have been immensely fruitful, allowing us to critique reductive and simplistic positivisms and other forms of correspondence theories of truth, whereby we can access the world once and for all. However, this turn has itself become another form of theoretical totalization that does not allow us to explore practice in its multiple forms and expressions.

Anthropologist Thomas Csordas puts our predicament well when he declares that textualism in the humanities

has become, if you will, a hungry metaphor, swallowing all of culture to the point where it became possible and even convincing to hear the deconstructionist motto that there is nothing outside the text. It has come to the point where the text metaphor has virtually (indeed, in the sense of virtual reality) gobbled up the body itself—certainly we have all heard phrases like the "body as a text," "the inscription of culture on the body," "reading the body." I would go so far as to assert that for many contemporary scholars the text metaphor has ceased to be a metaphor at all and is taken quite literally. (1999: 146)

Thus, turning the tables on the hungry metaphor of textualism, I argue for an approach to texts as relatively stable "objectifications" of historical, social, and biophysically emplaced activity.

The final fault line that I examine is "emplacement," a rather inelegant term I use to examine the interplay between culture and nature in the diverse ways in which individuals and groups draw from religion to negotiate spaces and build places. As critical geographers such as Edward Soja, David Harvey, and

Doreen Massey tell us, space has been traditionally understood as an inert context, a bare stage where historical individuals act. They also tell us that this understanding fails to see how space is "agentic," how it is inextricably connected with time and how it enables and constraints our activities. Therefore, this section also contains a chapter on mobility, which draws from the concept of networks to make explicit how, particularly at a time when a great deal of the world is in motion, place-making is related to processes such as migration, diaspora, trade, pilgrimage, tourism, and mission. The notion of networks, which has been useful in connectionist and enactive approaches to cognition, allows me to return to the body. Here, the trope of networks allows me to bring in ecology to enrich our understanding of how our bodies are emplaced in "nature."

In the conclusion, I return to the notion of non-reductive materialism to discuss more fully the implications of this framework for the study of religion. I also show what remains to be done: a detailed exploration of how the materialist turn around the sites of embodiment, practice, and emplacement is connected with the interplay of religion, global capitalism, popular culture, mass media, virtuality, and the postcolonial condition. I hope to be able to address these topics in a second volume in the near future.

Although focusing on three key nodes in the materialist turn allows a more in-depth treatment, I caution readers that this is not a straightforward textbook covering the great figures who have defined the field or are now transforming it. I cannot, for example, claim that I offer exhaustive accounts of St. Augustine, Descartes, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Deleuze, or Bourdieu. Rather, I foreground aspects of their thinking that help us illuminate debates around the body, practice, and space/place/mobility. Although my aim was not to write a textbook, I have kept graduate students at the University of Florida very much in mind as I drafted the various chapters. Thus, I tried to give enough signposts for them to draw their own conclusions about the contours and stakes of the materialist turn in religious studies. With them in mind, I have also tried to bring abstract debates down to earth by providing examples in the various sections of how scholars are studying religion in new ways.

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