1 | Introduction

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Let us begin – outside the scope of this volume – with a concept, a metaphor, coined in the fields of social psychology and behavioural economics. The idea of 'anchoring' was introduced as a result of the study of how poorly the majority of people perform as intuitive statisticians: human beings tend to use any random number that has been offered to us when we need to make an estimate, and then stay too close to that as an anchor when making revisions.[1] If one applies this model to the exercise of historical understanding in dealing with a range of empirical data and with uncertainty in its interpretation, it is clear that scholarship must consistently rely on anchors – more or less random, usually in the form of a current *communis opinio*, inevitably grounded in initial premises, assumptions, prejudices or values – to establish the starting points for interpretation. And it is equally clear that interpretations inevitably are tied to the anchoring assumptions from which they are generated – a case of hugging close to the anchor. Obviously there are many respects in which such interpretive anchors are common-sense defences against potential rocks or shoals along the coast of scholarly travel (such as excess in speculation). But – especially when anchors are founded in starting points that may at a given time be collectively acceptable but are nonetheless fundamentally erroneous, wrongheaded, or immoral (such as that sound interpretations are possible only from scholars of certain races, a normative premise in Germany between 1933 and 1945) – then anchoring equally obviously prevents clear thought and restrains the scholarly boat from sailing the wide seas in search of truth, or in pursuit at least of new questions and answers.[2]

This volume is an interrogation of some of the more problematic restraining anchors that have been accumulated over the long history of

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[1] The classic paper is A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, 'Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases', *Science* 185 (1974) 1124–31. See also D. Kahneman, P. Slovic and A. Tversky (eds.), *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge, 1982); D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York, 2011) 119–28.

[2] For a less pessimistic account of anchoring and its application to Classical studies, see I. Sluiter, 'Anchoring Innovation: A Classical Research Agenda', *European Review* 25 (2016) 20–38.

the study of art and religion in the period of late antiquity – by which we mean, broadly speaking, the first millennium AD.[3] Its title, *Empires of Faith*, genuflects to the five-year research project whose members have produced the chapters of this book. It also describes the imperial world of the first millennium in which Eurasia from China to Western Europe was largely dominated by empires, which came and went, as well as the rise of the scriptural religions, known as the world religions today, and their visual cultures, all of which acquired their distinctive forms over the course of the period. At the same time, crucially, the title describes the two modern anchors that stand in the way of studying the art and religious culture of late antiquity, and are also the basis of that study. I mean the imperial systems within which Western scholarship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was founded (alongside their colonial enterprises and their post-colonial aftermaths during the twentieth century) as well as the deep nexus of ancestral thinking about faith rooted in early modern Christian debates between Catholics and Protestants that have informed all academic approaches to the study of religion (and its art) since the Reformation, not only by Western scholars and administrators but also by native scholars from countries like India, China, Persia or the Ottoman Empire, when they wrote or thought in the European languages.

One of the findings of our work is that not only are these anchors constraining, but they are also broadly incompatible – so that the assumptions that guide the study of Mediterranean polytheism (for instance) or early Christian art have very little in common, and even less in common with those that have guided scholarship largely written in the European languages or ascribing to European scholarly rules in relation to say Persian or Arab or Indian art.

The study of art in late antiquity – and the long history of its study – has been constrained by three fundamental anchors: religious, political and

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[3] In 1999, a very distinguished trio, G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar, put the dates of AD 250 to 800 as the book-ends of their major synopsis of scholarship on late antiquity. See G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), vii–ix. For good reasons (especially to include Islam), Garth Fowden has expanded the scope to the whole first millennium AD, taken broadly: See G. Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad* (Princeton, 2014) 3–5. The *Empires of Faith* project, although initially working with c. 200–800, eventually moved to Fowden's model, despite the inevitable Christiano-centrism of the starting point (for instance in our exhibition: see J. Elsner, S. Lenk et al., *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions* (Oxford, 2017)). In part this is because one needs to accommodate the culture of Mediterranean polytheism at the early end and allow for the development of Abbasid visual culture into at least the ninth century at the later end.

evidential. First, religious. Late antiquity is the period in which almost all the world's major surviving religions came into being or underwent significant transformation, including the acquisition of visual forms of communication and self-definition that have persisted to this day. This was a time when some of the dominant religious models of Eurasian antiquity from east of Iran westwards to the Mediterranean and North Africa, became extinct: the plethora of pagan cults that comprised the religious fabric of the Roman Empire collectively and swiftly died; Zoroastrianism lost its hegemony in Persia as the Sasanian state lost power, but it managed to survive. One may list Christianity, Islam, and the Mahayana forms of Buddhism as new religions in the late antique period. On the other hand, Judaism, the range of Indian religions that we now call Hinduism, and early (or Theravada) Buddhism are religions that witnessed major change during the first millennium, including the rise of characteristic iconographies. Modern practitioners of those religions are, perhaps unsurprisingly, heavily invested in them in a variety of ways; adherents of other faiths or those who have left their own often have feelings that are still more charged. There is therefore no doubt that their study – and the study of their art – cannot be separated from complex issues of polemic, apologetic, ancestral idealization, and various forms of critical condemnation from contemporary opponents. It is not surprising that these apologetics and polemics have come to crystallize around canonical monuments and major artistic masterpieces from the past, since these have acquired ancestral significance for modernity. They have become the embodiments of essential modern religious and national identities, vested at moments of origin or significant historical transformation. The problems caused by ideological investment in issues guided by religious faith (and its resistance) are huge and their history is very long; standing aside from them is all but impossible. But we can at least be aware of the problem and – in some forensic detail – of the way it has played out and continues to do so, both across the range of current religions and cultures of Asia and Europe and across the history of scholarship on their pasts in late antiquity. Religion remains one of the determining factors of modernity and postmodern identity in lived experience in the world today.

The second constraint – which I have called political – derives from the historical moment when scholarly interest in late antiquity, both in relation to the West and to the arts of Asia, came to its first fruition under the imperial apogee of European powers in the later nineteenth century. These imperial powers controlled territories whose inhabitants represented ancient and non-Christian cultures – for instance British India, Muslim

Albania within the Habsburg Empire, the Islamic world of French North Africa, and Russian expansion into Central and East Asia. There was, at the same time, the persistent presence of the Ottoman Empire to the immediate east of Europe, and beyond it Persia. In combination, these made a potent case for European self-definition by superior alterity and the insistence on difference from the foreign other, on the part of the Christian European powers. Among the colonized, in some cases, native or nationalistic positions appropriated the language of hegemonic imperial discourses in the East – whether in the dominions of the Ottoman Empire, itself independent of the European powers, or in the European colonies and conquests of India, the Far East and Africa. But the imperial discourses could also be resisted with alternative anti-colonialist and postcolonialist narratives about religion, ethnicity and nationhood, constructed in direct contradiction to standard European accounts, for instance in the thesis of a timeless and primordial Hinduism that has never been subject to historical change despite the long history of political and social transformation in the subcontinent of India, as discussed by Robert Bracey in Chapter 10. At the same time, the positivistic confidence of Western scholarship, well funded by imperial coffers and founded on a rigorous philological command, coupled with the rise of a vibrant archaeological and anthropological drive in precisely this moment of the late nineteenth century, bred a range of brilliant academic ventures. These ventures formed the basis of modern scholarly disciplines, including art history. Of course, the colonialist and imperial impetus – the urge to see foreign natives as primitive and in need of Western civilization – and the search for Orientalist primitive origins (notably Aryanism) are urges just as ideological, prejudiced and incapable of objectivity as the claims of religious polemic and apologetics. Particularly complex in matters of religion is the native attempt in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to reinterpret ancient religions, like Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, in terms that made them more palatable to European ways of thinking and more like the normative Christianities promulgated by Western powers and Western missionaries; in many cases this involved fundamental transformation of ancient and traditional religious practice.[4]

Third, evidence. We look at what we have. But surviving visual and material-cultural data about the archaeological past depends on the vagaries and fashion of excavation. A great deal more excavation has been

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[4] See esp. K. Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and its Modern-Era Suppression* (Hong Kong, 2013) for an excellent account of Thailand, Cambodia and Sri Lanka.

conducted in the Mediterranean world than in Africa or Asia (and often for very pragmatic and sane reasons to do with the safety of those doing the excavating in complex contemporary political and military situations). Moreover, far more artefactual material survives from religious contexts – whether local or regional or even more widely spread within an imperial system – when the religions represented were largely hegemonic and their adherents held the power to control representation than in contexts where religions were marginal, subaltern or even deliberately incognito. Jewish or Manichaean art in late antiquity – both hugely important not only in themselves but because they were disseminated over very wide distances – extending eastwards well into Asia and west into Europe, are good examples of relatively poor artefactual survival by contrast with the arts of religions supported by imperial or royal patronage, like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or the Indian cults which have become categorized as Hinduism in the modern era. An outstanding example of the evidential anchor and the way it has skewed understanding is Christian art. There are innumerable studies of every aspect of Christian art in the areas where early Christianity was hegemonic and backed by the state – not only in Europe and Byzantium but in regions of Africa and Asia such as Ethiopia, Georgia and Armenia, all with distinctive forms of the religion and distinctive styles of Christian art. But there has been very little study of the art of non-hegemonic or subaltern Christianity as it spread in late antiquity within the Sasanian empire,[5] along the Silk Road and as far as the Tang capital of Chang'an, where a surviving stele (in Chinese style and language but with some Syriac) was erected in 781.[6] And there has been absolutely no discussion of the differences between the hegemonic and subaltern forms of this faith, or its visual kinds of representation, let alone any comparison between them. In part this is because what we know of

[5] On formerly hegemonic Christian sites under Islam, for discussion of churches after the Arab conquest, see R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantium to Islamic Rule* (Princeton, 1995) 112–38 and on iconoclasm, 180–219.

[6] See e.g. P. Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou* (Paris, 1996) 5–170; J. Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity: The Tang Christian Monument and Other Documents* (Strathfield, NSW, Australia, 2014) 7–44 (history of research), 144–258 (text and translation), 359–75. For the monument, see *Treasures Engraved on the Steles: Art of Calligraphy in the Xi'an Beilin Museum* (Xi'an, 2015) no. 65, 162–5. Also E. Hunter, 'The Persian Contribution to Christianity in China', in D. Winkler and L. Tang (eds.), *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syrian Christianity in China and Central Asia* (Berlin, 2009) 71–85 and L. Tang, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and its Literature in Chinese* (Frankfurt, 2004) esp. 145–204 for Dunhuang texts in translation.

Christian art, east of the Syrian plain, is very poorly documented, excavated and reported.

The problem facing this book is two-fold. First, it must clarify and undermine the untenable biases of the stories we have learned, inherited and retold, and which we too often continue to tell. These are interesting and important in their own right – formulated to construct cultural norms and identities in modernity through a kind of ancestral mythology about selective events and objects from the past. But they are mainly ideological fantasies, even if sometimes sustained by a formidable scholarly apparatus. Second, we need to begin to forge a new basis, within the context of a globalized world, where the range of cultural phenomena around art and religion in late antiquity can be treated with equivalence and a degree of dispassion, in such a way as to throw some comparative light on a range of broadly related phenomena at the junction between antiquity and the medieval world. That dispassion can of course only represent a current and contemporary position, which will in its turn be susceptible to critique from a different place or a later time. This second goal, a large project for a generation, is beyond the scope of this volume. But to begin the process of achieving it requires a long hard look at the difficulties of comparing incommensurate narratives of self and other, mainly constructed by European scholars, but often developed in colonial and post-colonial contexts by scholars from within the cultures on which they were working. The assumptions underlying these narratives – especially about religions whose scholars are also believers – were frequently designed to make the objects of their study unique or exceptional and in any case so special that they cannot be compared with others. To clarify the range of apologetics and polemics embedded as axiomatic starting points in modern scholarship is a formidable task, and we have attempted in this book at least to begin that process.

1. Religion

A fundamental issue is that the history of the study of religions[7] in late antiquity has been a history of comparison with ideal models of early

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[7] This volume cannot enter the complexity of debate about what 'religion' is, what the 'world religions' are, how local religions differ from ones with universal claims and so forth. For recent thought on a number of these issues, see T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993); D. Dubuisson, *The Western*

Christianity; but at the same time, that Christianity is seen to be unique and hence incomparable, at least in the minds of the scholars concerned.[8] All the varieties of pre-Christian religions, as well as the varieties of early Christianities, belong to a conceptual frame of complex apologetics developed by Christian theology over several centuries, whereby Christianity is unique (or absolute, or 'wholly other') by contrast with other cults that effectively belong in a dustbin of superstitions and misconceived fantasies.[9] This apologetic – effectively a self-serving story of the emergence of Christian hegemony – is highly complex. Most significant is the implication in much of the scholarship that what is unique about Christianity is a kind of Protestant purity, so that the degeneracies of the pagan mystery cults are in fact a cypher for Catholic practices and beliefs by contrast with the purity of Reform.[10] What appears as a conceptual and historical argument about late antiquity – and the historical origins of Christianity – is in fact an internal post-Reformation Christian polemic about Protestant claims to salvation.

The responses of non-Christian religions to the power of missionary activity and imperial hegemony led to significant movements in the nineteenth century towards Reformed models of religious self-conception through comparison. In nineteenth-century India, as Rachel Wood discusses in Chapter 9, Parsi Zoroastrians created a reformulated model of their religion that emphasized monotheism and Scripture as opposed to ritual and sacerdotal interventions, downplaying for example the significance of fire worship.[11] Similarly, Islamic reformers, like the Egyptian Muhammed 'Abduh, as discussed by Nadia Ali in Chapter 13, working in the late Ottoman era under the influence of European thinking, attempted to create a modern, rational Islam anchored in Scripture, characterized by aniconic piety, with regulated doctrines and stripped of

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Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology (Baltimore, 2003; original French, 1998); T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, 2005); G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, 2013).

[8] See especially J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1990).

[9] Uniqueness: Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 37–46, 52–3, 116–17.

[10] On the Protestant model, see Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 13–26, 39–40, 44–5, 95–6, 114–15, 143.

[11] See D. F. Karaka, *The Parsees: Their History, Manners, Customs, and Religion* (London, 1858); D. Naoroji, *The Parsee Religion* (London, 1861) and D. Naoroji, *The Manners and Customs of the Parsis* (London, 1864); for discussion see e.g. M. Ringer, *Pious Citizens: Reforming Zoroastrianism in India and Iran* (New York, 2011) and R. Wood, Chapter 9 this volume.

superstition, myth and magic.[12] In the British domains of Ceylon and Burma, and also in the neighbouring Theravada Buddhist countries of Thailand and Cambodia, significant reform movements – in response to rationalist models of religion purveyed by Christian missionaries– attempted to stamp out 'old practices', rituals and forms of meditation as superstitious.[13] In all these cases, born of a colonial-era response to Western power, the dynamic of a unique, original and scriptural purity by contrast with decadent ritual practices that was modelled on the Protestant version of the fight between Catholicism and Reform, had potent and significant influence in the creation of modern models of these religions.

From our point of view here, in dealing with art and material culture in relation to religion, the Protestant perspective is one that relegates all forms of visual and material religion to a secondary (or corrupt) position beside Scripture.[14] Since part of the fight between Catholic and Protestant was precisely about whether early Christianity was a pure scriptural faith, aniconic in practice and free of the idolatrous threats of imagery,[15]

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[12] See N. Ali, Chapter 13 this volume with bibliography.

[13] See Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation*, 18–45, 107–42.

[14] One critique of J. Z. Smith's work in relation to late antiquity would go on these lines: while accepting the incisive analytic thrust of his argument, it needs extending in a number of ways. Despite his focus on the early Church, Smith makes hardly any mention whatever of its visual imagery (which was rich and copious). Moreover, Smith's account is led by an acute nose for (and a deep resistance to) Protestant apologetics in writing about religion. These inevitably target Roman Catholicism as the 'pagan' enemy; but in doing so they oversimplify the complexity of the early Church. There is at least as powerful an Orthodox apologetic (both Greek and – in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – Russian) which is neither Catholic nor Protestant but inevitably focused on early Christianity (see Maria Lidova's Chapter 6 in this volume). And beyond Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, there are numerous positions in the Eastern, so-called Miaphysite, churches that add further nuance. Whether the concern is ritual practices or images (such as the rise of the icon) or early philosophical theology, when one turns to the first centuries of Christianity and especially early Christian art, the fight between modern Christianities must be at the very least triangulated to include Orthodox positions and apologetics at war with Protestants and Catholics. What all these Christianities have in common is the need to trace ancestry and confront the early period (including its art) in late antiquity as central to their enterprise, and especially the self-differentiation of Christianity from the other religions of the Graeco-Roman environment, including Judaism.

[15] For a Protestant view of early Christian aniconism see E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* (Leipzig, 1899) chapter 2; H. Koch, *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen* (Göttingen, 1917); W. Elliger, *Die Stellung der alten Christen zu den Bildern in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig, 1930); W. Elliger, *Zur Entstehung und frühen Entwicklung der altchristlichen Bildkunst* (Leipzig, 1934); E. Bevan, *Holy Images: An Inquiry into Idolatry and Image-Worship in Ancient Paganism and in Christianity* (London, 1940). This position, established on the basis of a (selective) series of

one needs to incorporate the question of images (which would ultimately translate in the eighth century into the problems of Byzantine iconoclasm)[16] as a central aspect of the issue. Any exclusion of images, or any exclusive focus on texts (both ubiquitous strategies in the scholarship), are effectively indebted to a fix about what should be the relevant evidence that was established in the arguments between Reformation and Counter-Reformation.[17] While it is true that all surviving world religions are in fact scriptural, they differ significantly about whether they have one defining sacred canon (as in the Abrahamic religions, for example) or many (as in the religions of India), and of course they disagree within themselves as to what precisely fits within the authoritative canon and what should be excluded as potentially heterodox or even heretical. But all in fact use images and decorated buildings, and many religions (from ancient polytheism to modern local cults in Africa, Australasia and the Amazon) put visual practices and rituals around images ahead of any use of texts.

texts, was accepted by a generation of art historians such as E. Kitzinger 'The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954) 84–150, esp. 88–9 and T. Klauser in a series of articles under the general title 'Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst' published in the 1950s and 1960s in volumes 1–10 of the *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum.* See the discussion by H. Feld, *De Ikonoklasmus des Westens* (Leiden, 1990) 2–6 and P. C. Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (Oxford, 1994) 7–10. For an attack on excessive Protestant investments in the aniconism of the early Church, see M. C. Murray, 'Art and the Early Church', *Journal of Theological Studies* 28 (1977) 305–45; Sister Charles Murray, *Rebirth and Afterlife: A Study in the Transmutation of Some Pagan Imagery in Early Christian Funerary Art* (Oxford, 1981); M. Miles, *Image as Insight* (Boston, 1985) 43–8; Finney, *Invisible God*; R. M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London, 2000) 8–31.

[16] See for instance the discussions of Kitzinger, 'The Cult of Images'; N. Baynes, 'Idolatry and the Early Church', in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1960) 116–43; M. Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of An Idea* (New York, 1992); A. Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago, 2000) 11–146; J. Bremmer, 'Iconoclast, Iconoclastic and Iconoclasm: Notes towards a Genealogy', *Church History and Religious Culture* 88 (2008) 1–17; J. Elsner, 'Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium', *The Art Bulletin* 94 (2012) 369–95.

[17] That is, Smith's book effectively subscribes to a (Protestant-derived) text-centred model of what religion is. Other models are possible – for instance as espoused by the periodical *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* (first published in 2005). For programmatic statements, see e.g. D. Goa, D. Morgan, C. Paine and S. B. Plate, 'Editorial', *Material Religion* 1 (2005) 4–8, esp. 6 and B. Meyer, D. Morgan, C. Paine and S. B. Plate, 'The Origin and Mission of *Material Religion*', *Religion* 40 (2010) 207–11. For some extensive discussion e.g. D. Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, 1998); D. Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (California, 2005); D. Morgan (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London, 2010); S. Promey, *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven, 2014).

The uses of religious comparativism to insist on uniqueness (something that cannot be compared because it is so special, so *sui generis*, as to be incomparable) are a fundamental and repeated problem relevant well beyond Christianity to all forms of apologetic in any and every religion.[18] Moreover, even if they are not written by overtly religious scholars, the logic of uniqueness has come to determine accounts of Islam, Hinduism and Judaism – whether as religions or as identities within various forms of post-colonial nationalism. This has extended to the arts that have come to embody national or religious cultures. Hence, for instance, accounts of early Islamic visual culture – allowing the dismissal of certain elements as syncretistic or excessively Hellenistic, and mimicking a Protestant emphasis on aniconism against figural representation – easily shift from the description of actualities to the prescription of an ideal, essential or characteristic nature of Islamic art (even when that is an exaggeration or simply untrue). The (absurd) generalization of a field like Islamic art – covering well over 1,000 years and an extraordinary geographic spread across much of southern Europe, all North Africa, and most of western and Central Asia, as well as the Middle East – alongside the emphasis on certain assumed uniquely characteristic qualities (such as decorative aniconism) allows the exclusion of much (such as the iconic) and the invention of hierarchies of normativity that may have very little historical or material reality except in scholarly dogma.[19] The same has been true of Jewish art, about which a fantasy of aniconism is often repeated, against the overwhelming archaeological evidence of dozens of synagogue floors with all kinds of imagery discovered over the last 100 years. Versions of the uniqueness theme are just as powerful in accounts of Zoroastrian and Indian (particularly Hindu) arts, in contexts both of hegemonic and of subaltern politics in relation to religious identity.

The bottom line here – and it is methodologically central to any non-apologetic attempt to use comparison – is that *comparative work must compare equals*. One element of the comparison cannot be unique, special, or exceptional by contrast with the others, or what one does is not comparative but merely a rhetorical performance of the dismissal of all the non-unique instances (chosen for that purpose) which one sets against

[18] Smith's model of the study of Christianity as a form of apologetic is designed to confront the roots of contemporary Christian theology as it reflects on Christian origins. It was never intended as an account of religion in general.

[19] See e.g. F. B. Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art', in E. Mansfield (ed.), *Making Art History* (London, 2007) 31–53.