

INTRODUCTION

One stubborn issue in the study of religion is that of location. The question is where do you locate the meaning of the phenomenon you have chosen to explore? Puzzled by this question, you quite reasonably might wonder what your options are. Let me propose that you have two. Indeed, the entire history of the study of religion seems to have divided itself into two camps on this issue: one side holds that meaning is found “elsewhere,” removed from the context that produced the phenomena in the first place – while the other side insists that meaning remains anchored at the original site, and thus the place that holds a phenomenon up for us to consider is also its site of meaning. The first position I will simply call that of the *reductionist*, someone who deftly jumps the chasm separating the phenomena from the disciplined thinking that will supply distance, perspective, and ultimately meaning. The other, here perhaps awkwardly named the *non-reductionist* camp, insists on the uniqueness of each phenomenon, and distrusts relocation to an abstract, detached, and perhaps even obfuscating realm of meaning. So, reduction as I’m using it here isn’t an interpretation that lessens the significance of phenomena. On the contrary, we might say that reduction actually seeks to expand or fully unfold the relevance of data, reaching wider understanding thanks to extensive conceptual structures that stand apart from those particulars. In contrast, the non-reductive forgoes such gestures, confident that either an internal logic or a self-sustaining structure simply awaits the eye of a careful observer. The seesaw between these two positions, like any good game, is

never resolved fully in favor of one player over the other. In fact, this whole debate is significant not because one side will overcome the other, but rather together their conflict is the stage upon which a greater struggle is being waged. It is a struggle with an anxiety about the entire study of religion, with each side representing the unease of the other. I will return to this below, but first let us turn our attention to one camp, that of reduction, and its side of this seesaw.

In a recent book on material culture, Barry Flood defends his use of outsider or “etic” categories – most importantly his version of cultural *translation* – across the various religious and historical boundaries his research explores. His aim is to defend the reductionism inherent in making the history of religions speak to us today. For Flood, the specter of anachronism looms large, at least in the minds of his imagined critics, for whom he is writing. By accounting for iconoclasm and architecture as the material vehicles for ninth-century Muslim–Hindu encounter, through a narrative of translation, Flood worries he is open to charges of anachronism. He concedes that Muslims and Hindus of this period would not recognize themselves in his model; that is to say, these actors would never define themselves as “translators” of culture, as he is calling them. And yet Flood’s approach is surely a sound one. His position is based on two claims, the second perhaps stronger than the first. Flood begins by pointing out that he is writing to his contemporaries, modern historians, and not to the participants in the original events. The implication is that the stories one community tells itself are not interchangeable with those of other communities. More precisely, for us as modern historians a description of the movement of objects and ideas across religious boundaries, usefully framed in terms of translation theory, makes perfect sense. A second observation Flood makes about his reductive gesture is one relating to the very nature of the study of history. He warns that his critics’ accusation of anachronism and interventionism “obscures the historicity of history,” deflecting attention from the formative prejudices and commitments that underlie any practice of history writing – his own included.¹ Flood’s modeling might not be found in the self-conception of the Hindus and Muslims he is describing, but defending his approach to his fellow historians makes clear his own prejudices, and locates his work within the wider modern debates on what makes for good history writing. This reduction then is an opening beyond a simple account of events of the past: for Flood historiography is as much at stake as are the facts of the history of tenth-century Sind.

On the other side of the seesaw we find the complimentary position I’ve been calling the non-reductive. This is an approach that locates meaning in the immediate vicinity of, or even within, the object. From this perspective, the moment in history at which the object appears is singular, never to be repeated in quite the same way. A phenomenon is not – or at least very little emphasis is

placed on it being – part of a wider pattern. No two dots on a graph are identical, even if line that purports to tell their story seems to connect them. This orientation to the local and the immediate, grounds the non-reductive in the logic of the object it addresses. Meaning inheres in the local and the particular, waiting to be unveiled by the neutral and receptive eye of the researcher. Description in its own right makes the significance of a phenomenon explicit, with no call for abstractions or comparisons. Descriptive histories, told ostensibly from the insider's perspective within the religious tradition, constitute such a form of reading. When abstractions are proposed, they are unique to the examples at hand, remaining untranslatable or incomparable to other phenomena. One critique of this approach challenges the assumptions made here about the self-apparent nature of the phenomena that come to be understood. In other words, the question is raised as to how these natural contours, these structures, themselves arise. The non-reductive technique must assume an entire array of concepts, usually theological, before it can allow its object to speak. If the concepts are not to be located elsewhere, as is the case with reductive readings, then they must emerge from this encounter with the phenomena.

These concepts then, if we are to share them with the objects before us, must be unchanging and fixed abstractions. If we are to explore the Middle East non-reductively we will need an unchanging concept of say, the Orient. Or if we are to let religious texts “speak for themselves,” we will need to share with them, for example, a conception of subject voice. Since our relationship with the object is limited to this bare equation of viewer and the viewed, there is little place for contestation or relativizing the concepts that are to be put in play. Further in relation to the study of religion, the implications of non-reduction are significant. Russell McCutcheon makes the connection between what he calls the *sui generis* category and a fully non-reductive approach to religion. In other words, the perspective that assumes utterly unique attributes for a religious phenomenon implies that religion itself is unexplainable, irreducible, and untranslatable into any other register. The implications here are several, not the least of which is the foreclosing of the humanistic study of religion, whether it be of the reductive or the non-reductive variety.²

The non-reductive camp is a large one, but its exact boundaries are not well marked. Here meaning is inconceivable beyond the parameters associated with the object itself. This perspective is most commonly identified with the work of Mircea Eliade, and perennialists such as Henry Corbin. As historians of religion, these scholars were committed to better knowing religious phenomena by locating them within their chronologies and their social contexts, yet those contexts would never become the determining engines of meaning. In these scholars' analysis, religious phenomena require religiously coherent interpretations and explanations. Eliade reasoned that due to their essential

uniqueness, religious phenomena belong to a category of their own. Attempting to explain them as if they were another sort of phenomenon – for example, a cultural product – would only disfigure them beyond recognition. Although he does not use theological terminology, Eliade often speaks of religious phenomena in ways that isolate them from other kinds of phenomena. For example, he tells us that objects are worshiped because they have “become *sacred*, the *ganz andere*.”³ He uses the latter phrase, meaning the *wholly other*, to underline their independent standing. Elsewhere, we are told explicitly that humanistic and social scientific accounts of religious phenomena are simply “false” because they miss “the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred.”⁴ In the same spirit, Corbin would write in the introduction to his monumental *En Islam iranien* that he has sought in his encounter with any religious phenomenon to allow it to “show itself.” Historical considerations are important for Corbin, but on condition they not impose an “alien category or consideration” upon the phenomena we are exploring.⁵

If the point of playing on a seesaw isn’t to overpower one’s opponent – after all, it’s a game that takes two – then the goal is to find a balance. While there are many ways to conceive of such a balance, let me underline one proposal. The anthropologist and theorist of religion Talal Asad switches easily between reductive and non-reductive positions. In his now famous critique of Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion, Asad points to the short comings of a universally valid descriptor for any cultural phenomenon. Asad at this point is defending the non-reductive. Geertz had claimed that religion was best seen as a system of symbols that convincingly advanced a cosmic order within a human perspective.⁶ Asad’s objection is that the crucial local histories behind these authoritative systems cannot be accounted for in such a definition. Surely the triumph of every symbolic system, or religion, is simply the last chapter in a long story of contention and conflict with rival systems. To say in essence as Geertz does that “religion is the system in place” is an erasure of the forces and struggles that made it what it is. Surely, Asad argues, knowing these local and historically anchored conditions, and how they contributed to the rise of the object under study, is essential to any profound grasp of religion. His corrective then, is to anchor the study of religion in the heterogeneous elements that have been uniquely put into play in each case. Following Michel Foucault’s distrust of historical continuity and genealogy, Asad aims to recover the local interests and forces at play that have been hidden by narratives of the inevitable and the comprehensive. He distrusts the anthropological tendency to translate across cultural spheres.⁷ And yet Asad will elsewhere tilt the other way. That is to say, at times this non-reductive posture will be the target of his criticism. On the question of the role of politics in religious formations, Asad is quick to object to those who would seek to insulate religion from secular

power.⁸ The story of religion then is to be told in terms that exceed its own accounting and its own language.

The need for such a balancing act should not surprise us. For Asad there is clearly a utility in shifting between perspectives and critiques. My point here is that although they are irreconcilable with one another, the reductive and the non-reductive may be usefully employed in succession or in parallel. Another insightful analysis – offered by McCutcheon – wonders if the reduction/non-reduction divide reflects a difference in content.⁹ That is to say, these two perspectives address separate types of phenomena, with reduction speaking to complex social situations, and non-reduction focusing on disembodied experiences and states of being. This proposal awaits further exploration and indeed validation. Elsewhere McCutcheon nuances the category, distinguishing between two dimensions of reduction. One he calls *metaphysical reduction*, which is employed by Eliade, Marx, and Freud when they identify an essence behind their religious data.¹⁰ McCutcheon's second dimension is the *methodological reduction*, which is the understanding produced through the interpretive lenses brought to bear by the researcher.

Wayne Proudfoot proposes another balancing model. His contribution redefines the reductive camp, splitting it into two independent procedures. Here reduction at the *descriptive* level – which would consist of a failure to contextualize a religious phenomenon in a way the subject would recognize it – is seen as problematic. A description should reflect the object in its context. To this, Proudfoot juxtaposes what he calls *explanatory reduction* (similar to the *methodological reduction* we just saw). In Proudfoot's eyes this kind of reduction is proper procedure. It offers explanations of a phenomenon that would not be shared by the subject, and might not be acceptable to her at all. In essence the proposal here is for non-reduction in description, and reduction in explanation.¹¹

As I suggested earlier, the real significance of these debates is not one side prevailing, but rather it is a deeper anxiety that the objects of religion may be lost. As an academic discipline, the study of religion labors under a fear that its very object of study may elude it – or worse, may cease to exist the moment it is located under the scholarly gaze. As the brief survey above has made clear, there are clearly two sides to the seesaw, yet these poles are not mutually exclusive, and more than one model has been proposed in which both sides may be meaningfully embraced. Yet no matter how this tension is resolved, an anxiety persists for religionists, and it is as follows. The reductionist position can be seen as denaturing the religious object, and threatening to relocate it to an alien scholarly or disciplinary narrative. In this scenario, the study of religion then becomes a discourse on things like literature, social institutions, or politics. Thus, the object of study is lost, and the rationale for the entire discipline vanishes. Further, this anxiety is actually shared by the

reductionist – but in a mirrored way – claiming that the non-reductive approach also loses the object of study, but does so by isolating it from wider regimes of meaning making. In other words, by preserving it, we are making it inaccessible.¹² Both positions are committed to the study of religion, yet both fear the other perspective threatens the very object of study.

As useful as my seesaw image might be as a descriptive device, its utility is clearly limited. Not only do reductionists and non-reductionists not line up cleanly on either side, but the analysis at play is also more complex. A simplistic model that contrasts description with interpretation – with the former supposedly self-apparent and mechanical, and the latter abstracting and purely conceptual – has largely been abandoned in our field. Theories of reading, for example, have overturned this account by pointing to the preconceived notions (from the text, or about the text) that are required to even begin the process of reading. In other words, the so-called abstracting that we think occurs after an encounter with a text, in reality must be in play before we start the very act of reading. And further, to complete the *hermeneutic circle*, the abstract meaning making that reading gives rise to is recalibrated and repeated in new instantiations at each reading of a text. In light of these insights, the argument goes, interpretation is not outside or after our contact with the object, and description is not mechanical, unchanging, or innocent. I rehearse this quick aside on hermeneutics not to suggest that religion can be accounted for as strategies of reading or language, but rather to claim that the reductionist and non-reductionist positions are mutually sustaining strategies for managing the anxiety of a threatened object of study. I say mutually sustaining since although they begin from different starting points, they can either be used in an alternating procedure, or as we have also seen, divided into further interrelated categories, as Asad, Proudfoot, Segal, and others have shown us.

BEAUTY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In parallel to the anxiety that religion might disappear into unintelligibility or slip away into an alien discourse, another threat looms over the objects and images of religion. These objects have been obscured by two prominent mechanisms that we unthinkingly rely on every day. The first is the mechanism of signification, and the second that of representation. Both are familiar to us as techniques for getting at the meaning of the objects we encounter. In instances of signification, we interrogate the object for a “real” meaning that we assume lies somewhere behind it. We are confident in this operation’s efficacy, thanks to a necessary link that we can trace back to what is signified. We experience a remarkable leap from the sensorially tangible figure, image, or object, to a metaphysical realm of significance and meaning. The sign serves

as the stepping-stone to where we really want to go; our aim is the signified, and the signifier is the path that gets us there. In the first half of the twentieth century this system was worked out in the context of language and culture theory. Building on the insights of Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss developed theories around this structure, connecting the individual to the all-important signified meaning. For example, we might think of a hand gesture, which is meaningless until placed within its cultural context. Interpreting a gesture within its wider culture is hardly a technique we need to defend; we do this all the time. De Saussure's model of the mutually constituting relationship between overarching language and unique utterance is clearly behind much of the modeling here. The specific signifiers (the words, the gestures, the objects) are themselves the product of the wider meaning-making culture or system. However, priority is clearly given to the move from the signifier to the signified. Structuralism is, after all, about the *meaning* of signs, not the signifying objects. Post-structuralism is suspicious of this model, and has offered many criticisms, but for our purposes it will suffice to simply note one issue. Briefly, the concern is that the signifying dynamic of structuralism erases the object, relegating it to a vehicle for servicing the more valued goal, that of the signified. We rush past the signifier, intent on reaching the hidden meaning; a maneuver that not only blinds us to the object, but also denies those particular objects their significance, depth, and standing.

Much in line with this process that at once enlightens and obscures – significance is attained while its indicator is pushed aside – stands another common mechanism, that of representation. While there are several ways to characterize the process of representation, they all suffer from the tendency to erase the object. Representations communicate by making the absent referent present to the viewer. For example, consider that a picture of a dog is not about paint or canvas, but is about a dog who sits elsewhere, if not in the next room then perhaps in history, or our imagination. If we talk about the content of such a picture, we address either the evoked dog herself or the rendering of her likeness, whether it's an accurate, or charming, or stylized rendering, for example. But whether we are concerned with the accuracy of the picture, or we want to discuss the interpretive gesture of the artist in the rendering, we continue to look past the object itself. We see through the representation, as if looking out a window, to something beyond. Our goal lies elsewhere. A common if naïve compliment for a representation is to declare that it's "just like the real thing." So just as the signifier effaced itself by deflecting our inquiry onward onto the signified, in the practice of representation, the image, as it stands before us in its uniqueness and material immediacy, quickly disappears as we look toward the distant subject being represented.

These practices of representation and sign reading, however, are not exhaustive of the full communication that is at play. Despite their service as

“stepping-stones” or “windows,” these objects may be engaged more fully in their own right – in fact, some artworks began to force this reconsideration several decades ago. This turn to the object or image itself was given the dramatic name “The End of Art.” In truth, it wasn’t so much an end of art *per se*, but rather as Arthur Danto put it, the end of beauty as a defining element of an artwork.¹³ With the appearance of non-representational art and abstraction, what most aesthetics had assumed was an essential marker of art, beautiful representation, suddenly fell away. Modern art was not beautiful, at least in the conventional sense, and yet it was clearly art. The ancient equation of beauty with the careful representation of well-proportioned, morally uplifting forms, had been overthrown by the history of artworks themselves. Now a Jackson Pollock drip painting could become a masterpiece, overturning the common, as well as the philosophical, assumptions about representation and beauty, and opening a framework in which to consider the immediacy of the art object itself.

Several new avenues for rethinking and redefining beauty, aesthetics, and art, have been opened up with the fall of the old paradigm. According to Susan Buck-Morss we may consider aesthetic experience simply the affecting of our senses. She wants to move past the focus on artworks, and widen out the field of encounter with objects. Picking up on Heidegger’s claim that an object’s “thingness” becomes clear to us only once its utility is negated – think of the new light in which we consider a tool once it is broken, or the artistic use of ready-mades – she proposes a redefinition of beauty that extends far beyond its old conception. For Buck-Morss any cultural object or aspect of nature, beyond objects traditionally defined as art, can be taken as beautiful in the sense that they are experienced as a materiality that resists instrumentalization.¹⁴

In an echo of the “End of Art” idea – but at a distance from aesthetics – Talal Asad has argued for a similar reconsideration and turn toward the object. In a discussion of cultural structures, the relationship between signifiers themselves can usefully be interrogated for interrelations, before the process of signification steers our consideration off to the realm of cultural systems. In other words, Asad wants to make room for the particular instantiations within a full vision of culture. Following in this direction, Webb Keane proposes that the particular and the historical be preserved along with the universalizing language of religion.¹⁵ This is also an important re-anchoring of the objects, bodies, and signifiers within their cultural systems of meaning.

I will move to consider more fully the neglected object below, but before I do, allow me to caution against replacing one misconception with another. The danger in turning to the object is one of overcompensating and overreaching. To turn to the object then should not entail isolating it from its cultural, historical, and ideological contexts. My complaint earlier was that the

signifier deflects attention from itself; such deflections, however, are important functions that must be attended to in our full encounter with the object. In other words, while signification and representation do present a challenge to the consideration of the particular object, those particulars are never usefully considered in isolation from what they evoke, represent, or signify. The objects before us could never stand utterly on their own anyway. Adorno pushed back against such a narrow reduction of the experience of art when he placed aesthetic experience squarely within aesthetic language. An individual encounters the artwork not as a blank slate upon which she records her immediate experience, but rather via a developed language of art. It is thanks to this vast discourse around art that not only can artworks be located, but that they can be experienced at all. Adorno expands on this two-dimensional nature of experience, in which artworks require what they are not, their social other, in order to fully be themselves. He frames this it out saying, “. . . art on the one hand confronts society anonymously, and, on the other hand, is itself social, defin(ing) the law of its experience . . . Its inner construction requires, in however mediated a fashion, what is itself not art.”¹⁶ Here he wants to recognize the importance of the individual’s experience, while insisting that it is simultaneously anchored within, and limited by, the social understandings available at that moment of encounter.

Another proposal to avoid the dead end of isolated relativism was advanced much earlier by Kant. His strategy did not evoke the historically situated “language of art” that Adorno would point to, but rather Kant held that the individual encounter with an artwork was an experience that at heart was available to all of us. Yes, in each instance the aesthetic experience belongs to the individual, but that experience is the same one anyone else *would have* in that situation of encounter. When individuals push past their intervening desires, prejudices, and interests, they get to a subjective experience that is universally available to all. In pulling away from our interests and desires (Kant actually calls this a “disinterested” posture) we get to our truly subjective experience. Surprisingly, this subjectivity is not the product of an individual’s whim or fancy, but instead anchors this experience in a shared human framework.¹⁷ We shall see that later thinkers will return to Kant’s disinterestedness claim, but for the moment I will simply note its function, in parallel to Adorno’s position above, in rescuing our experience of objects and images from any individualistic relativism.

The point that emerges from these reflections runs counter to the way we usually think about images and objects. The typical account has us encountering an object, taking it in through our sense perception, which our reflective minds subsequently consider. In other words, we see the object, and then begin to think about it. Intuitively this feels right, but further critical reflection troubles this story. One strong objection, voiced best by Adorno, simply claims

that objects would be imperceptible if approached before any mental reflection had taken place.¹⁸ Thus, reflection can't be placed above or after the sensuous encounter. We must already possess a conceptual apparatus within which to locate the object. To begin to consider an object, we need sensory data, which itself can only begin to register with us once we can locate it in relation to ideas. Turning to religious objects then, we must bring an understanding of religion generally, including the specific tradition at hand, to identify the object, and begin to interpret the encounter. Reasoned reflection and concepts are not simply built over perception, coming after our innocent encounters as a *tabula rasa*, but somehow all of these components are in a reciprocal interplay. Scholars have taken various positions on this interplay between the immediate sensorium and reflective or conceptual procedures. We will explore some of these approaches shortly, but first we must turn to some of the key insights around "aesthetics," and their disputed utility in helping us think about objects, images, and religion.

In a basic accounting, we can identify two central concerns in this area. The first, actually known as *aisthesis* is a category defining itself against abstract ideas; it is simply a concern with the stimuli of the senses, individually or in concert. Aristotle took these procedures to be key generators of experience.¹⁹ The word "aesthetics" appears in the mid eighteenth century, coined by A. G. Baumgarten, and is often taken to be a corrective to the harsh mind-body division that Descartes had formalized a century earlier. The rise of science, with its commitment to natural laws and the universal function of the "scientific method" made a receptive environment for the privileging of ideas and concepts. Baumgarten returned to a concern with the senses, in particular as they could serve as data for discerning the principles of beauty. He wanted to build on the senses rather than the intellect.²⁰ The second concern of aesthetics builds upon this project of recovery of the senses, but anchors itself more deeply in the relationship of the sensory to the conceptual. This formulation was articulated by Kant, and is key to modern thinking in aesthetics. Kant's central insight was not to recognize that ideas and sensory data were somehow connected; it was rather that sensory experience of particular objects is not fully reducible to the ideas that are at play with those experiences. Kant's aesthetics integrates the data of the senses, our impressions through them, the ideas behind them (and subsequently altered by them), while reserving space for the experience of the work that stands outside of these rational accountings. The aesthetic communication includes ideas and concepts, but crucially it also requires real and immediate objects for an encounter. Aesthetic experience is not "in the eye of the beholder," in the sense that it arises from whimsy or caprice. In your encounter with a particular artwork, the communication that is not reducible to ideas, is essentially the same as what I will discover in my