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Introduction: Aesthetics and Affects of Power in the Context of Religion

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In May 2022, we held a workshop at the University of Erfurt on aesthetics and affects of power in the context of religion. The idea was to create a forum for exchange on *how* to approach social-cultural-religious power dynamics in their embodied and material dimensions, and *how* to explore *how* religion participates in the formation of subjects through aesthetics and affects. This special issue continues the discussion. The editorial contextualizes the special issue's theme within various academic discourses. It shortly introduces the key concepts "power" and "aesthetics and affects" as well as the different contributions.

Introduction

In May 2022, we held a workshop at the University of Erfurt on the aesthetics and affects of power in the context of religion. The idea was to create a forum for exchange on how to approach social-cultural-religious power dynamics in their embodied and material dimensions. We invited an exchange of theories, examples, but also practice in the form of a performative input that combined sensory perception and affective experience with an academic "digestion," a textual output. With our workshop, we were not trying to do something new, but we were aiming for something innovative: We pooled expertise from different fields of the study of religion, as well as design and performance art, to draw attention to what we perceived as a discursive gap between the recognition of the importance of embodied processes, of aesthetics and affect, in social and cul-

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tural power dynamics and the actual practice of thematizing aesthetics and affect in research and writing about power. This special issue continues our discussions of how religion, as a social and cultural discourse or dispositif, is part of social and cultural power dynamics and how religious practices as techniques of power and sites of power relations, participate in the formation of subjects through aesthetics and affects. It is interesting to note that the topic of religion and power has been rather neglected in recent years, at least as an explicit research topic (Edwards 2019).

Scholars of religion and humanities and social sciences in general now seem to agree that the interrelationship between power and religion (and any other area of a given culture) can only be understood with a focus on the "body" and the "material" (see Turner 2012). These ideas are related to several poststructuralists or "neostructuralists" for whom the body is an important part of a social and cultural matrix of power. New materialists have contributed significantly to this discussion by suggesting that not only is the human body part of power structures, but that nonhuman materialities occupy a similarly significant and active role in the power game, and that the human body itself should be understood as inseparable from its nonhuman environment (see Haraway 2003; Barad 2007; Bennett 2010). In the study of religion, the study of material religion has contributed to this discussion; it takes bodies, materialities, and material and embodied practices seriously for the social and cultural contextualization of religion (see Narayanan 2020; *Material Religion* 2023). Inspired by philosophy and the natural sciences, the notion of "embodiment" in particular has also found its way into religious studies and has become an indispensable component of those who study the effects of religious practices on individuals (see Koch and Wilkens 2020; Covington-Ward and Jouili 2021). Aesthetics of Religion—and this brings us to the topic of this issue—has aimed to specify the interrelationship between the subject and their social and cultural environment by focusing attention on the senses as the interface between environment and body (see Grieser and Johnston 2017). This makes the senses the site where power meets the body, is embodied, and manifests itself bodily; aesthetics, in the sense of *aísthēsis*, denotes the process. The emphasis on the senses also shows in sensory studies, sensory anthropology, and sensory-oriented publications (see Harvey and Hughes 2018; *The Senses and Society* 2023). Interdisciplinary fields such as multimodality emerged, addressing social and cultural dynamics and "visual, aural, embodied, material, and spatial aspects of interaction and environments, and the relationships between these"

(*Multimodality & Society* 2024). Meanwhile, studies of religious affects aim to specify the intertwining of the subject with their social and cultural environment by focusing attention on affects and emotions as materializations of social and cultural dynamics (see Schaefer 2015, 1–18). Thus, affects and emotions become techniques of power as well as manifestations and modes of power.

Key term I: power

In the context of this special issue, we enter the discussion from a relational and processual understanding of power. We understand power in relation to discourses and practices of and about religion, as well as to the study of religion. However, we also limit our interest to the material and embodied, the aesthetic and affective *how* of social and cultural power dynamics. We are interested in power as a participatory, dynamic, and performative process—a process of social and cultural impact. Power is associated with the subjection and subjectification of individuals, the formation of subjects, and their social and cultural capacities. So, what can be a possible definition of power that we work with? We move beyond the power definition of Max Weber (1922) for whom power is the ability of a particular entity, be it an institution or an individual, to effect change—an idea shared, with individual nuances, of course, by Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, and others (Whelan 2019, 43). Instead, we stay with Michel Foucault's ideas on power.

Foucault emphasizes the relational nature of power and speaks of "power relations." For Foucault, power refers to the act of "acting upon the action" of someone. Power affects the possibilities of action; the "mode of action." Power therefore presupposes that partners in power relations are potentially "free" to choose from a variety of action possibilities, especially in their reaction to being subjected (Foucault 1983). Power relations affect "bodies," by materializing themselves through certain political and strategic "techniques," thus endowing bodies with certain social and cultural capacities (Foucault 1995, 26). Power "comes from everywhere," "comes from below"; it cannot be "localized," "it is permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing" and it stands for a "complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault 1978, 93). Power is produced by and in dispositifs of heterogenous agents who are informed by and inform existing knowledge discourses and who carry out strategic control, disciplining, and subjection (Foucault 1980, 194). Though social and cultural participation, we become part of and partici-

pate in certain power environments and allow them to shape us as subjects. According to Foucault, however, the encompassing embeddedness of the subjects in power relations does not mean that there is no possibility for change (Foucault in Deleuze and Foucault 1972, 5).

To analyse power, Foucault argues, we need to ask the right questions: "'How?' not in the sense of 'How does it manifest itself?' but 'How is it exercised?' and 'What happens when individuals exert (as we say) power over others?" (Foucault 1983) Thus, we need to focus on specific power practices, and we need to focus on the relational outcomes of power relations, on the complex social and cultural effects of power relations. Foucault's understanding of power invites us to take an empirical perspective, to take a detailed look at the "techniques of power" that materialize certain modes of power in bodies (see Foucault 1995). These include capacities and communication and subjects as output, and thus the complex social situations and social mechanisms of power, which are not always linguistic.

It is necessary to highlight another feature of power: its performative character, of which Judith Butler reminds us: "Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency" (Butler 1997, 2). And: "In each case, power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (Butler 1997, 3). This in turn means that "the subject is the modality of power that turns on itself; the subject is the effect of power in recoil" (Butler 1997, 6). The subject is shaped by power, power constitutes the subject's agency, and it "reiterates" that power (Butler 1997, 16), but at the same time the subject transgresses the conditions of power by which it is shaped (Butler 1997, 17)—"the paradox of subjectivation" (Butler 1993, 15). The performative nature of power makes it possible to grasp the ongoing social and cultural relevance of power in its enactment—where enactment can even potentially be a negation or resistance.

With this special issue, we agree with Foucault and Butler that it is crucial to consider phenomena in their materialization, in the manner or process of their embodiment and subsequent re-enactment, because this is where power relations become effective. In doing so, we continue on a path we share with scholars such as Yolanda Covington-Ward (2016) who aims at "privileging gesture and bodies in studies of religion and power" and elaborates the framework of "performative encounters." To take this

a step further, we are also very interested in how to address a body level, embodied processes, and the exercise of power in implicit bodily dimensions, as in the work of Rebecca Seligman (2014).

Key term II: Aesthetics and affects

The question arises as to why we focus on "aesthetics and affects" and not simply on "embodied and material dimensions" of power, especially when, for example, aesthetics and affects are and remain Western concepts and aspirations, whether associated with the ancient Greek philosophers, Alexander Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant—as in the case of aesthetics—or Baruch de Spinoza, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari or Silvan Tomkins and others—as in the case of affects. We can give two different answers to these questions, one political and one theoretical and methodological.

The *political* answer is related to highlighting aesthetics and affects as techniques and domains of subjection, and thus as techniques and domains that must be addressed in order to undermine or counteract power dynamics such as the prevailing colonialist domination, structures, and mechanisms that lead to oppression, exclusion, and suffering. A group of decolonial thinkers[1] have pointed to the crucial role of "control over the senses and perception" within the "modern/colonial project" and responded to it with their project "Decolonial AestheSis." They speak of a "canon" and a "normativity" of "modern aesThetics" "that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aestheSis, of sensing and perceiving" (Mignolo and Vázquez 2013; see also Reckwitz 2019). They aim at "the liberation of sensing and sensibilities trapped by modernity and its darker side: coloniality" (Lockward *et al.*, n.d.). In "Love as the Practice of Freedom" (1994, 243–250), bell hooks speaks of the affect love as a "practice" for ending domination—"alter[ing] our motivation away from the alleviation of our own suffering, and toward the care and concern for others" (Monahan 2011, 105). We link to these political positions because we recognize that in order to understand social and cultural power dynamics we need to look at sensory and bodily dimensions and how they become subjected and shaped, and historicize and contextualize them; we recognize

1. The members of the group are Alanna Lockward, Rolando Vázquez, Teresa María Díaz Nerio, Marina Grzinic, Tanja Ostojic, Dalida María Benfield, Raúl Moarquech Ferrera Balanquet, Pedro Lasch, Nelson Maldonado Torres, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu, Miguel Rojas Sotelo, and Walter Mignolo.

the historical dimensions of power politics and how they remain relevant in the bodies of those subjected – ourselves included; and we recognize the need to accurately name and verbalize these dimensions so as not to transfigure them as something ineffable.

The *theoretical and methodological* answer is related to the importance of aesthetics and affects for the study of religion and power. Aesthetics and affects can be understood as embodied processes, relations, or dynamics between society, culture, and religion in any form and individuals. Aesthetics emphasizes the relationship between sensory stimulation, sensory perception, and the impact of sensory stimulation on cognition and behaviour, as sensory input is experienced, interpreted, and re-acted to by the individual (Grieser and Johnston 2017). Affects can be understood as the materialization of relations between social entities that result in changes of state for those involved. While some emphasize that affects are relations (Slaby and Mühlhoff 2019), others emphasize that affects are experienced, non-linguistic bodily states, such as emotions or feelings that relate affecting and affected (Fuchs and Koch 2014; see also Schaefer 2015, 23; Johnston 2020, 21). Affects are always relationships, they are "about" something, material or non-material, they are "attached" to something (Ahmed 2015, 7; Sedgwick 2003, 19), but at the same time, even in our approach, they can only be meaningful when they are embodied, when they are experienced and subsequently performed as emotions (Schaefer 2015, 32).

Aesthetics and affects of power have been the focus of scholarship for some time. A particular focus has been placed on (a) *aesthetic* and (b) *affective formations* related to social and cultural power dynamics. (a) Birgit Meyer (2015), for example, focuses on "aesthetic formations," a social and interrelated production of sensation and perception, and the distribution of sensations across social groups (Meyer 2015, 15). Meyer refers to a social and cultural aesthetic formation as a "sensory fabric with specific sensations, sensibilities, and ways of making sense." (Meyer 2015, 4). Meyer and others like David Morgan (2016) or David Chidester (2008) share the idea that senses or sensations are no individual and solemnly subjective matter but created in social entanglements. (b) Donovan Schaefer writes: "Affect theory maps the deeper embodied formations by which power makes bodies move." Sara Ahmed's work focuses on affective formations as "affective economies." Ahmed views affects as emotions, as politics and techniques of power, and as indispensable in subjectification and social and cultural performance (Ahmed 2015, 12). Ahmed writes: "In such affec-

tive economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed 2004, 119). Emotions are social rather than individual because they usually result not from individual experiences, "impressions," but from collective discourses that define which emotion is associated with which social entity (Ahmed 2015, 8)—emotions are "nonresident" (Ahmed 2004, 119). "Affective communities" emerge that share affective formations, but this does not necessarily mean that emotions are shared; affective formations and individual emotions may differ (Ahmed 2010, 38–45). We add to this discussion a specific focus on the *how* of aesthetics and affects of power and their formations in the context of religion by tracing the materialization of power relations in aesthetics and affects in different settings.

The contributions

The most experimental contribution of the special issue is a conversation that brings together two scholars of religion, both ethnographers in different fields (Lina Aschenbrenner and Gerrit Lange), and an artist-researcher (Micaela Terk). They ultimately revolve—after discussing the basic theoretical issues—around questions that primarily concern our own practice as researchers: Is it possible to understand one's practice as embodied and infused with power? How does the encounter with people and their practices affect the researcher's body, and how can this individual and transformative experience in turn be reflected and communicated? What is the impact of the media, for example, in producing documentary movie sessions, but also in the writing and publication of results with a specific audience in mind? A central question that is also relevant for the following contributions, even if not always voiced, is: Is the always affected body a medium of subversion and resistance or can it only perform ever new constellations of power?

A first answer to this very question can be found in Jessica Albrecht's contribution. In her broad empirical study, Albrecht provides fascinating insight into the religious and gender identities of girls attending Christian and Buddhist girls' schools in contemporary Sri Lanka. Both types of schools enroll female students from three different religions: Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. The girls interviewed tell the researcher how they construct their "identities" in this multi-religious and gender-segregated environment. Albrecht succeeds in understanding the complex situation by using "intersectionality" and "identity frames" (Judith Butler) to show

how affects are "the glue between intersecting identity frames." The discursive "othering" is confirmed by affective experiences (such as singing, praying together or separately, the school uniform), but also counteracted by the effects of intersectionality, for example, when Buddhist girls enjoy singing Christian songs in the school choir. Of course, girls are socialized into the power structures and especially the gender rules of a middle-class life in a country with its specific political structures, which affect the way these schools practice multireligious education.

Lina Aschenbrenner and Maike Neufend both deal with the phenomenon of what Aschenbrenner calls "neo-spirituality," but in very different cultural contexts and socio-political situations and within a different theoretical framework. "Spiritual lifestyles" (Neufend) seem to offer particularly aesthetic and body-related "techniques for the production of neoliberal consumer subjects," whether in Germany and Israel (Aschenbrenner) or in Beirut (Neufend). The focus of Aschenbrenner's contribution is the question of the material, physical "body" as a site for negotiating power relations. Bodies are always affected in processes of sensory perception, especially by other bodies. In this way, the effects of power also become visible through a focus on aesthetics, while a focus on power, in turn, helps to access implicit body knowledge processes. Aschenbrenner shows how the embodied experiences of the participants respond to constellations of power, including those not explicitly specified by the ritual setting. For example, many participants in the secular bodily practice of Gaga dance report that they owe their transcendent experience to their connection to the teacher, even though the teacher does not claim any particular power in the sense of religious authority.

The situation is quite different in the Sufi gatherings in private homes in Beirut, Neufend's example, where a spiritual teacher, the sheikh, is actually at the centre. Theoretically, Neufend draws inspiration from Goffman's symbolic interactionism and Merleau-Ponty's concept of "intercorporéité." Neufend shows that the close, even physical, connection and touch between the participants of the gatherings (sensual sociality), legitimized by the Sufi tradition, serves to highlight the power position of the sheikh, who must not be touched. The bodies of the audience and the sheikh can thus be described as being on different levels of interaction. Furthermore, Neufend analyses the affective relationship of a woman who hosts the observed gatherings at her apartment, which the woman describes in an interview as a kind of skin that protects and shields the inhabitants and guests from the violence of war and a potentially hostile neighbourhood. In this way, Neufend makes

both the space and the political, economic, and social situation part of the analysis of affect and power in these gatherings. At the same time, she notes a very particular use of a private-public space for community-care and self-care through a "socio-spatial interaction order" produced by a representation of affects interwoven with power structures.

The emergence of modern states is accompanied by revolutions, wars, and patriotism, and all this is inconceivable without rituals that emotionally affect their "subjects" through aesthetic and symbolic enactments. Modern nation states see themselves as secular, but religion in implicit or explicit form plays an important role in such celebrations. Hannah Griese's contribution deals with an example from this important field. Hannah Griese analyses the 2018 Israeli Independence Day "Torch Lighting Ceremony," a patriotic commemoration that can be described as a multisensory ritual involving the swearing of new soldiers, speeches, dance performances, music, and, as a climax, the lighting of twelve torches symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. Drawing on theories of ritual (Catherine Bell) and the materiality of religion (Birgit Meyer and archaeologist Nicole Boivin), Griese directs our attention to the materiality of symbols, a materiality that naturally affects the bodies of participants through aesthetics, allowing them to experience "a particular version of national identity" that is also linked to a transcendent sphere through its religious dimensions.

The contributions in this special issue can all be understood as experimental assemblages. The complex key concepts are applied to various case studies but are also further developed and questioned in the analysis of the cases, with a focus on bodies, senses, aesthetics, and materiality. The scholars involved come from very different backgrounds, but what they have in common is a desire not only to understand their case studies, but also to further explore theoretical questions about the interplay of power, religion, affect, and aesthetics. In all of the contributions, a particular view of "religion" emerges almost incidentally, conceiving religion as one of many cultural practices (enabling bodies to become "subjects") that establish an individual or collective connection to a non-empirical sphere. What the "non-empirical" is in a given society and political situation, however, is produced and negotiated in very different but always performative ways. "Religion" in this sense can thus occur both explicitly and implicitly. All contributions aim to understand the role that aesthetics, affects and emotions, and materiality play in this process, and the ways in which power relations and the production of the transcendent are intertwined.

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