

INTRODUCTION

The Participatory Turn in Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies

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DO WE REALLY need another “turn” in academia and the study of religion? After all, it seems that when one or another turn has been proposed—whether linguistic, interpretive, narrative, pragmatic, or postcolonial—scholars often presented it as a kind of epistemic rupture with the past, a revolutionary paradigmatic shift that would drastically change the way the phenomena studied in their disciplines are to be approached. Whereas claims of epistemic rupture may sound pretentious today, we think that the route of creative scholarship is more like a winding road than a straight highway, and that certain turns are therefore unavoidable if genuine or substantial progress is to be made in any discipline.

Having said this, we do not think of *The Participatory Turn* as a radical break with either the past or the present, but rather as an attempt to name, articulate, and strengthen an emerging academic ethos capable of coherently weaving together a number of the most challenging and robust trends in contemporary Religious Studies. Among these trends and themes we have selected the postcolonial reevaluation of emic epistemologies, the postmodern emphasis on embodied and gendered subjectivity, the feminist recovery of the sensuous and the erotic in religious inquiry and experience, the pragmatic emphasis on transformation and antirepresentationalism, the renewed interest in the study of lived spirituality, the resacralization of language, the question of metaphysical truth in religion, and the irreducibility of religious pluralism. If we choose to present our formulation of this growing academic sensibility as a turn, it is only because we believe that, taken together, these trends issue a serious challenge to the currently prevalent cultural-linguistic

paradigm in the study of religion. With this in mind, *The Participatory Turn* presents a pluralistic vision of spirituality that accepts the formative role of contextual and linguistic factors in religious phenomena, while simultaneously recognizing the importance, and at times even centrality, of nonlinguistic variables (e.g., somatic, imaginal, energetic, contemplative, and so on) in shaping religious experiences and meanings, and affirming the ontological value and creative impact of spiritual worlds and realities. In other words, we are aiming at a critical, metaphysically thick, and religiously relevant sensibility within the academic study of religion. We believe that this articulation is neither a return to previous epistemological structures nor a drastic rupture from them, but rather reflects the ongoing project of a creative fusion of past, present, and perhaps future horizons that integrates certain traditional religious claims with modern standards of critical inquiry and postmodern epistemological insights about the cocreated nature of human knowledge.

But before introducing the general contours of such a participatory understanding of religious inquiry and experience, it may be important to situate the “participatory turn” in the context of the development of the field of Religious Studies in general, and in relation to the linguistic paradigm in particular. By exploring various challenges to the linguistic turn, we are able to see the need to move beyond what Jürgen Habermas calls the “linguistification of the sacred,” while at the same time adumbrating the shape of the participatory turn. This rather controversialist approach is intentional. We are not seeking to build a participatory sensibility from the ground up, as if it were one of the great systems of nineteenth-century philosophy, but are instead discovering its contours in the give and take of arguments in the midst of which we (in the field of Religious Studies) already find ourselves. Let us begin then with a brief exposition of the nature and possible limitations of the linguistic paradigm.

THE IMPACT OF THE LINGUISTIC TURN ON RELIGIOUS STUDIES

One could make the case that twentieth-century Western philosophical thinking—beginning with the work of thinkers as diverse as Bertrand Russell, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, or Gottlob Frege—was characterized by an ever-increasing interest in the study of language. The “linguistic turn” in philosophy shifted the focus of inquiry from the inner representations and innate categories of a Cartesian-Kantian subject to the analysis of the elements of language, such as semantics, speech-acts, conditions for a theory of meaning, the relationship between words and world affairs, and so forth.¹ Developing the ideas of the late Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, and others, a growing number of scholars boldly asserted that classical

philosophical puzzles were “nothing but” problems of language that could be either resolved or dissolved through a variety of linguistic analyses and reconstructions.² In this new philosophical environment, linguistic signs were no longer regarded as mediating factors between the “subjective” representations of a Cartesian ego and the “objective” world, but rather as the primary locus of any plausible cognitive meaning and epistemic justification.³ In other words, philosophy after the linguistic turn considered *public* language—instead of *private* representations, concepts, or ideas—the true interface between the knowing subject and the world, thereby allegedly overcoming the epistemological skepticism of modern philosophy after Immanuel Kant’s critical revolution.⁴ As Barbara Fultner points out, after the linguistic turn, the “philosophy of language . . . becomes the ‘successor discipline’ to epistemology and metaphysics.”⁵

Before the linguistic turn, and in the wake of the Enlightenment critique of metaphysics, religious scholars following Friedrich Schleiermacher sought to defend the autonomy and validity of religion by freeing religious experience from its premodern (and at that time dubious) metaphysical anchors.⁶ Whether animated by idealist, phenomenological, or comparativist sensibilities, these modernist scholars tended to enthrone a supposedly autonomous, universal, and often disembodied and masculinized Cartesian subjectivity as both the agent and the locus of any genuine and reliable religious inquiry. Several decades of exploration, definition, and reduction of religion in terms of a core religious “human experience” followed, with religion being variously understood as “the feeling of absolute dependence” (Schleiermacher) or the subjective consciousness of “the eternal” (Nygren), “the holy” and “the numinous” (Otto), “the sacred” (Eliade), or “the ultimate concern” (Tillich).⁷ Modern Religious Studies were thus shaped by epistemological assumptions and concerns emerging from what Habermas calls “the philosophy of the subject,” that is, the philosophy that takes consciousness to be primary in the search for epistemic certainty.⁸ As Walter H. Capps aptly puts it, the modern quest for a “first principle” or *sui generis* element in religion was guided by a “Cartesian temper with a Kantian conceptual framework.”⁹ This fundamentally modern project in the study of religion was drastically brought to an end by the linguistic turn.

The impact of the linguistic turn on Religious Studies was profound and far-reaching. The linguistic reconstruction of philosophy influenced generations of religious scholars, and the significance of public language over private experience in the study of religion was forcefully asserted from a variety of angles and with different emphases for decades.¹⁰ Methodologically, embracing the linguistic turn in Religious Studies entails abandoning all efforts to assess the epistemic status of private consciousness or suprasensible experiences of the real, the sacred, or the holy. More positively, it involves approaching the study of religion as the examination of both public religious

languages and the relationship of such languages to either the sensible world or to other elements of the linguistic framework. Such strategies are employed, for example, in the study of parables and myths, scriptures and canons, doctrines and creeds, rituals and religious behaviors, sacred texts and narratives, religious symbols and metaphors, and so forth. A narrativist understanding of religion, Gavin Flood explains, requires that “rather than subjectivity (belief, cognition, inner states and religious experiences) language and culture, the realm of signs become the locus of inquiry.”¹¹ In the study of mysticism, for example, this paradigm shift is visible in the reframing of its focus from “mystical experience” to “mystical language” (Katz), mystical “meaning events” (Sells), “mystical expressions” (Idel), or in the proposal that mysticism is just “a kind of writing” (Cupitt).¹² Since language was now recognized as not only *expressive* but also *constitutive* of human experience, the ultimate referents of religious discourse were not to be sought in special intuitions or states of consciousness, but in the rich communicative interactions religious practitioners have in an always already linguistically structured world. The post-modern theologian Mark C. Taylor puts it this way: “Far from existing prior to and independent of any inquiry, the very phenomenon of religion is constituted by local discursive practices.”¹³

Although the shapes of the linguistic turn in Religious Studies are extremely diverse, it may be helpful to distinguish three major, nonmutually exclusive families of approaches: analytic, interpretive, and postmodern.¹⁴ First, the *analytic* branch of the linguistic turn stems from the influence of a number of Anglo-American thinkers—such as Russell, G. E. Moore, A. J. Ayer, or John L. Austin—who strove to achieve conceptual clarification of obscure philosophical problems through the analysis of language.¹⁵ Whether concerned with formal reconstructions of language or the identification of metaphysical pseudoproblems originated by its ordinary use, many twentieth-century philosophers of religion turned to the tools of analytic philosophy in order to advance, critique, and deepen religious understanding.¹⁶ Among the most important trends in the analytic study of religion, we should mention here the early debates about the verifiability and falsifiability of religious doctrines, the search for the rational foundations of religious beliefs, the theological reinterpretation of Nietzsche’s “death of God” as a linguistic affair, the Wittgensteinian account of religions as “language games,” the reformed antifoundationalist epistemology in theology, and the understanding of religions as “conceptual frameworks.”¹⁷ More recently, analytic philosophy of religion has focused on the epistemology of religious experience and the problem of reference in religious knowledge.¹⁸ Within analytic circles, we can also situate John Hick’s pluralistic philosophy of religion and the work of a number of process theologians with analytical dispositions such as David A. Pailin.¹⁹

Second, the pervasiveness of *interpretive* approaches in contemporary Religious Studies bears witness to the critical influence of the hermeneutic tradition in the twentieth century—especially of the works of Schleiermacher, Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans-Georg Gadamer.²⁰ In contrast to the analytic agendas of linguistic clarification and exploration of the rationality of religious beliefs, a hermeneutic philosophy of religion focuses on the study of religious meanings and symbols, the interpretation of sacred scriptures and revelation, the hermeneutical dimension of translation, scriptural exegesis and (creative) “isogesis,” discourse theory in Religious Studies, the relationship between religious experience and its interpretation, and issues raised by the challenges of cross-cultural hermeneutics, among other areas of inquiry.²¹ From a hermeneutical standpoint, religious experiences have been framed as “interpretative accounts” (Proudfoot), religious traditions as “textual communities” (Holdrege) or “living hermeneutic processes” (Vroom), and religions as “comprehensive interpretive frameworks” (Lindbeck).²²

Despite the rich diversity of hermeneutic orientations and sensibilities in the academic study of religion²³—e.g., phenomenological, comparativist, constructivist, historicist, and so forth—most interpretive writers stress both the contextuality and plurality of religious meanings and worlds.²⁴ To illustrate the variety of hermeneutic approaches, and with no wish to suggest that the following list is exhaustive or representative, we mention here Mircea Eliade’s early plea for a “creative hermeneutics,” Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s development of a “critical feminist hermeneutics,” Raimundo Panikkar’s proposal of a “diatopical hermeneutics” for interreligious encounters, Sandra M. Schneiders’s influential hermeneutic approach to the study of spirituality, David Tracy’s interpretive theology, Jeffrey J. Kripal’s articulation of a “mystical hermeneutics” or understanding of hermeneutic practice as mystical, and Jeffrey R. Timm’s and Donald S. Lopez’s revaluations of traditional interpretive approaches.²⁵

Third, within the rubric *postmodern* we are locating a number of critical discourses such as those emerging from poststructuralism, Derridean deconstruction, gender studies, postcolonialism, and ethnic studies. Most of these approaches emerged in the late 1970s rather independently and it would be surely a mistake to conflate them, but they all share a commitment to listening to the subjective experience of “the Other” (i.e., the marginal “nonsubjects” of modernity, such as women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, or colonized peoples), as well as to reversing and overcoming traditional hierarchical dualisms such as sacred/profane, God/world, male/female, civilized/primitive, transcendent/immanent, presence/absence, one/many, light/darkness, spirit/body, and so forth. For poststructuralism and deconstruction, we think above all of Thomas Altizer’s theology of the “death of God,” Jean-Luc Marion’s “God without Being,” Taylor’s deconstructive *a/theology*, John D. Caputo’s Derridean “religion without religion,” Don Cupitt’s “mysticism of

secondariness,” and Tomoko Masuzawa’s painstaking deconstruction of theories of religion.²⁶ For the gendering of Religious Studies, one can consult, among other works, Grace Jantzen’s, Pamela Sue Anderson’s, and Sarah Coakley’s feminist critiques of analytic philosophy of religion, Amy Hollywood’s and Beverly J. Lanzetta’s revisions of the study of mysticism from the perspective of female experience, or the excellent collection of essays on the impact of feminist methods on the study of religion compiled by Arvind Sharma.²⁷ And for postcolonial studies, we isolate as a representative sample the works of Richard King on Hinduism and mysticism, Donald S. Lopez on Buddhism, David Chidester on indigenous African religions, Michael Tausig on shamanism, and Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan on the meeting of feminism and postcolonialism.²⁸ We could also situate here the increasing proliferation of critical analyses that show how foundational categories of the discipline of Religious Studies (such as “religion,” “world religions,” or “Hinduism”) are analytically vacuous or the product of modern European colonial interests and Christian theological agendas—a line of work brilliantly developed by authors such as Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, Timothy Fitzgerald, Daniel Dubuisson, and Masuzawa, among others.²⁹ Finally, at the interface of postmodern theory and hermeneutics, a growing number of scholars are today providing deconstructions and critical genealogies of diverse religious figures, trends, and schools. This tendency can be illustrated, for example, by reference to the Foucauldian studies of Hugh B. Urban on Tantra, Bernard Faure’s critical analyses of Buddhist attitudes toward gender and sexuality, and Kripal’s controversial study on the homoerotic nature of Sri Ramakrishna’s spirituality.³⁰

Despite the significant differences among them, what is common to analytic, interpretive, and postmodern approaches can be explained in terms of their insistence that the study of religion should focus on the examination of the “signs” and “meanings” attached to religious texts, worldviews, and practices.³¹ After the linguistic turn, the object of Religious Studies is no longer the elucidation of the origin, nature, or ontological implications of religious experience, but the analysis, interpretation, or critical deconstruction and reconstruction of the textual, the linguistic, and the symbolic. In this light, the shift from a “philosophy of consciousness” to a “philosophy of the sign” in Religious Studies can be seen as advancing the linguistification of the sacred, with which Habermas characterizes the modern era.³² To “linguistify” the sacred means to subvert its transcendental authority in the Heavens and bring the legitimization of its cognitive and normative claims down to Earth, that is, to the intersubjective space constituted by communicative exchanges among rational human beings. In the disenchanted world of post/modernity, the sacred has been detranscendentalized, relativized, contextualized, and diversified but, most fundamentally, assimilated to linguistic expression. In contemporary religious matters, as Cupitt writes, “language goes all the way down.”³³

BEYOND THE LINGUISTIC TURN

As Thomas Kuhn pointed out, any conceptual revolution both addresses the limitations of the previous paradigm and raises new questions and challenges. Some of these challenges can be answered within the new revolutionary paradigmatic structure, but the effective resolution of other more recalcitrant problems will require surpassing even the new paradigm.³⁴ There is no reason to believe that the linguistic turn should be an exception. Here we want to isolate a number of increasingly significant themes and trends in both Religious Studies and the academy at large which, taken together, may suggest the need to go beyond the limits of the linguistic paradigm. Specifically, our discussion focuses on the following seven areas: (1) the postcolonial revaluation of emic epistemological frameworks; (2) the postmodern and feminist emphasis on embodiment and sacred immanence; (3) the resacralization of language; (4) the “pragmatic turn” in contemporary philosophy; (5) the renewed interest in the study of lived spirituality; (6) the question of religious truth in postmetaphysical thinking; and (7) the irreducibility of religious pluralism.

THE REVALUATION OF EMIC EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Recent developments in postmodern theory, cross-cultural hermeneutics, and postcolonial studies have raised caution among scholars regarding the potential pitfalls and ideological implications of privileging Western epistemological frameworks in the assessment of religious, and especially non-Western, truth claims. First of all, the postmodern critique of the Western scientific/philosophical metanarrative as “onto-theological” suggests that Western epistemologies deserve to be treated today with the same sort of critical suspicion with which modernist scholars previously regarded religion.³⁵ As Gianni Vattimo points out, “It is (only) because metaphysical meta-narratives have been dissolved that philosophy has rediscovered the plausibility of religion and can consequently approach the religious need of common consciousness independently of the framework of the Enlightenment critique.”³⁶ Secondly, the recognition of a variety of culturally specific criteria that determine what counts as valid knowledge leads many contemporary interpretive writers to regard the long-assumed epistemic superiority of critical rationality simply as one more element in the modern Western narrative, whose ultimately axiomatic status belies its claim to supremacy. In this light, for example, Flood recommends considering scholarly (outsider) and traditional (insider) accounts of religion as legitimate competing narratives, and argues that in this contest neither side can claim epistemological privilege on a priori grounds.³⁷ Finally, postcolonial studies have exposed and denounced the connection between the supposed cognitive superiority of the West and colonialism, imperialism, and the political domination of non-Western cultures.³⁸

Moreover, since no clear asymmetry between Western and non-Western epistemologies can be categorically established, avoiding ethnocentrism requires that we abandon the belief that the currently fashionable Western epistemology should be the preferred framework to assess all cognitive claims.

One of the unifying threads in these criticisms is the recognition of a multiplicity of valid ways of knowing and the consequent challenge to the very idea of universal reason now exposed as being (conveniently) shaped by the assumptions of the Enlightenment project—a challenge issued by feminists decades ago. This awareness animates contemporary postmodern, feminist, and postcolonial critiques of Western epistemology as disembodied, rationalistic, and cognicentric. Taken together, these developments have led many to a revalorization of alternative emic epistemologies and categories in the study of religion. More specifically, it is increasingly claimed that looking at our intellectual concerns against and through the background of non-Western frameworks may not only serve as a wholesome corrective for our inevitable cultural biases, but may also bring fresh perspectives on unsolved problems and debated questions.

In *Orientalism and Religion*, for example, King argues that certain Buddhist and Hindu “constructivist” epistemic viewpoints—such as those of Dignaga, Dharmakirti, Kamasila, and Bhartrhari—effectively challenge Steven T. Katz’s assertion that accepting the culturally mediated nature of the contemplative path entails the impossibility of nonconceptual, unmediated mystical experiences.³⁹ As King explains, these contemplative Asian epistemologists hold that a nonconceptual access to reality may actually require the prior use of conceptual tools.⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Robert K. C. Forman points out that the Yogacara Buddhist epistemologist Paramartha, while recognizing the linguistically constituted nature of ordinary experience and knowledge, claims that the goal of meditative practice is precisely to dismantle such constructive mechanisms and lead the practitioner to an unconditioned insight into the nature of reality.⁴¹ Of course, the introduction of these emic frameworks into the contemporary debate about the nature of mysticism does not settle the contested issues. Rather, it simply *but crucially* highlights the fact that Western epistemologies (such as the neo-Kantian one endorsed by Katz) may not be the last arbiters in the assessment of religious knowledge claims, and in particular of those emerging from long-term contemplative practice. As King cautiously states: “My point is not that Western scholars should necessarily accept the emic perspectives over which they are claiming the authority to speak, but rather that they at least entertain the possibility that such perspectives are a legitimate stance to adopt and engage them in constructive debate.”⁴²

A related development is the proposal to apply emic categories in the study of religion. Consider, for example, Benson Saler’s suggestion that scholarship can benefit from the use of folk categories (such as the Hindu *dharma*)

as tools of anthropological analysis: “While anthropologists normally devote much attention to native categories in ethnographies of the peoples who utilize them, the time has come, I think, to borrow selectively from such categories and experiment with them as transcultural tools.”⁴³ Donald Rothberg makes a related case in the context of spiritual inquiry:

To interpret spiritual approaches through categories like “data,” “evidence,” “verification,” “method,” “confirmation,” and “intersubjectivity” may be to enthrone these categories as somehow the hallmarks of knowledge as such, even if the categories are expanded in meaning from their current western usage. But might not a profound encounter with practices of spiritual inquiry lead to considering carefully the meaning of other comparable categories (e.g. *dhyana*, *vichara*, *theoria*, *gnosis*, or *contemplatio*) and perhaps to developing understandings of inquiry in which such spiritual categories are primary or central when we speak of knowledge? To assume that the categories of current western epistemology are adequate for interpreting spiritual approaches is to prejudge the results of such an encounter, which might well lead to significant changes in these categories.⁴⁴

Expressing a similar sensibility, Peter Ochs writes that Religious Studies will remain colonialist insofar as they “tend to remove ‘religious phenomena’ from the contexts of their societal embodiments and resituate them within conceptual universes of our own designing.”⁴⁵ What these and others scholars are persuasively arguing is that importing the language and epistemic categories emerging from Western scientific and philosophical traditions to analyze and account for the validity of knowledge claims from all cultures, ways of knowing, and domains of reality is highly questionable. Most religious and spiritual endeavors, we should stress here, are aimed not so much at describing or explaining human nature and the world, but at engaging and transforming them in creative and participatory ways, and may therefore call for different validity standards than those emerging from the rationalistic study of the natural world.⁴⁶

To add fuel to this fire, an increasing number of Western scholars are today “coming out” as spiritual practitioners, rendering the modern disciplinary divide between Religious Studies and Theology more dubious than ever.⁴⁷ The fact that many of these scholars display *both* religious commitments *and* critical perspectives on traditional religious beliefs reinforces the dissolution of strict modernist dichotomies such as insider/outsider, emic/etic, engaged/detached, theological/scholarly, confessional/academic, or caretaker/critic.⁴⁸

Participatory thinkers hold that openness to the potential heuristic value and even validity of alternative epistemic frameworks does not necessarily ensnare us in relativistic dilemmas. In our attempt to rise above the inevitable biases of our perspective, we should not fall into a vulgar relativism incapable of offering grounds for qualitative distinctions or transcultural

judgments. This can be avoided, we believe, by evaluating all knowledge claims—etic and emic, insider and outsider, rational and transrational, naturalistic and supernaturalistic—through *validity standards of both dominant and marginal Western and non-Western epistemologies in whatever measure may be appropriate according to the context of the inquiry and the type of knowledge claims*. One of the most vital tasks for those of us who accept this approach is the clarification of the relationship between epistemological frameworks (objectivist, constructivist, hermeneutic, pragmatist, and so on), contexts of inquiry (scientific, religious, artistic, psychological, and so on), and ways of knowing (rational, contemplative, aesthetic, moral, imaginal, somatic, and so on).

In any event, we propose that the dividing line between sound and weak scholarship should not be traced between Western and non-Western epistemologies—or even between naturalistic and supernaturalistic claims—but between approaches that lead to *radically empirical intersubjectively testable outcomes and/or discernible pragmatic consequences* and those which do not. The “and/or” of the previous sentence is fundamental, particularly in the context of religious inquiry. On the one hand, it may be plausible to consider intersubjective consensus a central epistemic standard in the context of what we might call, paraphrasing Kuhn, a single tradition’s “*normal*” *spiritual inquiry*, in which spiritual practice is managed by a prevailing spiritual paradigm and something akin to a correspondence theory of truth is operative (for example, between practitioners’ insights and the tradition’s mapped “stages of the path”). On the other hand, however, it should be obvious that intersubjective agreement is probably an inappropriate test not only *among traditions* (which bring forth different and often incompatible spiritual insights), but also in periods of “*revolutionary*” *spiritual inquiry* within one tradition, in which anomalies in relation to accepted doctrines arise and new paradigms of spiritual understanding are developed (for example, it is likely that neither the Buddha’s enlightenment nor the claims of the more radical Christian mystics could have been intersubjectively corroborated in their respective times and contexts). In the latter cases, the search for more pragmatic avenues to legitimize spiritual knowledge claims becomes imperative.⁴⁹

The challenge raised by the reevaluation of emic epistemologies to the linguistic and social-scientific paradigms in the study of religion should be obvious. In contrast to the textual and/or naturalistic account of religion held by these approaches, many of these emic perspectives regard extralinguistic variables (e.g., supernatural entities, spiritual energies, archetypal principles, etc.) as both constitutive elements and real referents of religious knowledge and experience. As mentioned above, many of these perspectives are not naively ignorant of the linguistically and conceptually mediated nature of human knowledge. And yet, they vigorously defend that ordinary cognitive constructive mechanisms and associated epistemologies are overcome in certain special noetic states, such as those emerging from meditative, visionary,

ecstatic, and contemplative practice. Contrary to the hegemonic claims of the linguistic paradigm, then, it is becoming increasingly plausible that epistemological frameworks that take into account a wider—and perhaps *deeper*—engagement with human faculties (not only discursive reason, but also intuition, imagination, somatic knowing, empathic discernment, moral awareness, aesthetic sensibility, meditation, and contemplation) may be critical in the assessment of many religious knowledge claims.

SACRED IMMANENCE AND THE RETURN OF THE SENSUOUS BODY

Postmodern and postcolonial thinkers are neither the first nor the only ones denouncing the ideological and epistemologically dubious nature of the Western metanarrative. Feminists have questioned the professed neutrality and objectivism of Western science and philosophy for decades, showing how androcentric and rationalistic biases make these cognitive enterprises not only one-sided, but also oppressive of women and other marginal populations.⁵⁰ In the study of religion, one of the main targets of postmodern and feminist critical analyses are transcendentalist and essentialist accounts of the divine or ultimate reality associated with traditional theologies. Whereas postmodern thinkers consider these views symptomatic of the Western allegiance to an oppressive “metaphysics of presence,” feminists see them as products of patriarchal ideologies that tend to deny or, at any rate, undervalue the spiritual dimensions of nature, embodiment, and women. These critical perspectives have inspired the contemporary revival of human faculties and the exploration of facets of reality often overlooked in the modern study of religion, in particular: sacred immanence and the spiritual quality of nature; female experience and feminine ways of knowing; the centrality of the body in religious practice and experience; the role of empathy, the erotic, and emotion in religious knowledge; and the connection between the sexual and the mystical.⁵¹

In a recent study on radical (postmodern) theologies, for example, Richard Griggs concludes that “[a]ll of them seem to emphasize the immanence of the divine. . . .”⁵² This stress on the immanent is tangible, Griggs continues, in Mary Daly’s insistence that spiritual liberation lies in fully inhabiting “the Realm of Wild Reality,” Taylor’s understanding of language as the “divine milieu,” Ursula Goodenough’s religious naturalism and plea for the worship of nature, David Crosby’s consideration of nature as “metaphysically ultimate,” Sallie McFague’s view of “the world as God’s body,” or Naomi Goldenberg’s theology of the immanent Goddess, among other similar proposals. In addition to Taylor’s *a/theology*, which is “in large measure, a critique of the notion of the transcendent God,”⁵³ sacred immanence is also the mark of a number of postmodern proposals influenced by the writings of Jacques Derrida, such as Caputo’s or Cupitt’s. Discussing Walter Lowe’s work,

for example, Caputo asks, “Who is the God who comes after metaphysics? Not a God of infinite distance from earth and flesh, but the infinite freedom to make God immanent, in-the-finite, incarnate.”⁵⁴

This affirmation of the immanence of the sacred often comes together with a plea for the resacralization of everyday life, and in particular, of sensuality and the body. In contrast to its previously marginal status, “the body” has become a key hermeneutic category in the study of religion.⁵⁵ The last two decades of religious scholarship have produced an astonishing number of studies on perceptions, representations, and uses (and abuses) of the body in religious practice; for example, on embodied spiritual potentials and transformative energies; the essential role of bodily postures and movements in religious experience and ritual practice; the mythical, symbolic, and metaphorical dimensions of the body; and critical appraisals of many historical spiritual practices and understandings as “disembodied.”⁵⁶ Attuned to the *Zeitgeist*, Kripal gives voice to the new centrality of the body in Religious Studies: “If there is a universal in the history of religions, it is the human body and its physiological shaping of religious practice and experience.”⁵⁷

The body has also emerged as a reinvigorated site of knowledge, analysis, and investigation in the anthropology of religion (e.g., Paul Stoller’s fascinating participatory research on Songhay sorcery and spirit possession) as well as a fruitful comparative category in cross-cultural studies (e.g., Anne Hunt Overzee’s excellent study of body symbolism in Teilhard de Chardin and Rāmānuja).⁵⁸ Of related interest are a number of explorations of Eastern views on the body.⁵⁹ Showing how Asian views on the body can shed new light on Western perennial questions, for example, Yuasa Yasuo suggests that the unity of the mind/body complex is not a problem to be solved through rational inquiry, but an existential fruit to be achieved through conscious self-cultivation (*shugyo*).⁶⁰

Moving away from the debate about its universal or contextual nature, the contemporary study of mysticism is gradually recentering itself not only on the textual and the historical, but also on the position of the body and its sexual and erotic energies in mystical endeavors. In his innovative analysis of the mystico-erotic experiences of scholars of mysticism, for example, Kripal speaks about the erotic as “a radical dialecticism between human sexuality and the possible ontological ground(s) of mystical experience.”⁶¹ For Kripal, the body and its sexual drives can influence and even constitute not only mystical phenomena, but also the very scholarly approaches employed in their study. Even the ancient mystics’ ascetic control of sexuality, far from being considered merely repressive, is today reframed as a kind of eroticism capable of transforming desire into religious discourse and discernment.⁶² The relationship between embodiment and the mystical has also been analyzed from different feminist angles. Jantzen discusses the political and patriarchal dimensions of the devaluation of the somatic and the erotic in the history of

Christian mysticism, Hollywood explains how corporeal and erotic mystical modes historically associated with women have been denigrated and even pathologized, and Lanzetta offers a meditated consideration of women's bodies as "mystical texts" and sexuality as an area of "women's reclamation of holiness."⁶³ The trend toward integrating the spiritual into the physical, as well as celebrating the religious significance of sexuality and the immanence of the divine, is also at the heart of the so-called "body theologies" developed in the last two decades. According to James Nelson, "body theology" is not so much a theological reflection on the body but rather "nothing less than our attempts to reflect on body experience as revelatory of God."⁶⁴

This feminist and postmodern turn to embodied subjectivity should not be confused with a return to former decontextualized, apolitical, and "crypto-theological" phenomenological approaches to religion.⁶⁵ On the contrary, postmodern feminism replaces a masculinized, discarnate, and supposedly universal and autonomous *Cartesian mental ego* with a gendered, embodied, situated, and participatory *intersubjective self* as the agent engaged in religious pursuits.

Even more relevant for our present concerns, *the body of contemporary scholarship is no longer "dissolving into language."*⁶⁶ Listen, for example, to Lisa Isherwood and Elisabeth Stuart's caveat: "What must be guarded against all costs is the disappearance of the real, lived, laughing, suffering, birthing and dying body underneath the philosophical and theological meaning it is called to bear."⁶⁷ Furthermore, in contrast to the received view of religious experience and meaning as linguistically determined, as well as received accounts of the body as a kind of objectifiable text, many scholars argue today for a more intricate and reciprocal relationship between language and embodied experience: *Prelinguistic and translinguistic embodied/erotic experience may significantly shape the visionary imagination, spiritual experience, and language of the religious practitioner, the mystic, and even the scholar of religion.*

It is noteworthy that this still minority but increasingly accepted understanding receives support from important trends in modern cognitive science, which strongly challenge the linguistic determination of human experience and thought usually taken for granted after the linguistic turn.⁶⁸ In *The Body in the Mind*, Mark Johnson presents compelling evidence from the cognitive sciences suggesting that linguistic metaphors and categories, as well as the very structure of human thinking, emerge from the rich embodied interactions of the human organism with the environment (for example, the concept of "balance" is rooted in our prelinguistic physical sense of being balanced).⁶⁹ Interestingly, Johnson adds that this account calls for a recognition of the creative role of imagination as the epistemic bridge between embodied experience and mental conceptualization.⁷⁰ As should be obvious, the bodily basis of cognition for which Johnson, George Lakoff, and many others argue raises at least two serious challenges to the linguistic paradigm. First, it questions the linguistic

sources of symbolic cognition and meaning defended by interpretive and post-modern thinking, resituating such origins in the imaginal elaboration of embodied experience. And second, it challenges the representational paradigm of cognition embraced by analytic philosophy⁷¹—a challenge that is central to the pragmatic turn in contemporary philosophy, to which we now turn.

THE PRAGMATIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

Among the most important events in contemporary philosophy has been the recovery of American philosophical pragmatism, what William Egginton and Mike Sandbothe call the “pragmatic turn.”⁷² Dismissed after World War II as an overly optimistic episode in the history of philosophy, the pragmatists have been rediscovered as incisive thinkers who anticipate and, in certain respects, surpass the postmodern problematics we more readily associate with philosophers such as Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. Pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey are especially attractive today because of their decisive refusal of foundationalism and their rejection of the epistemological paradigm of representation, both of which are central aspects of the participatory turn, as well.

One of pragmatism’s chief insights—shared not only by the American originators of the movement but also by subsequent sympathizers such as the late Wittgenstein and Habermas—is that linguistic behaviour is a kind of action and its validity is vouchsafed inasmuch as it achieves desired communicative ends.⁷³ This pragmatist thesis, rooted in the dual abandonment of foundationalism and representationalism, issues a severe challenge to the linguistic turn for it suggests that language needs to be understood in terms of action, and action puts us in touch with the world of events, of ontology beyond just semantics, of transformation beyond mere interpretation. For the pragmatist, truth is an achievement word. To say that the assertion “that *P*” is true is rather like saying that a particular strategy proves true; that *P* is true if it works, in the same way that Odysseus’s strategy is true if Troy finally falls.

For the pragmatist, the truth of a proposition, idea, belief, or hunch is not determined by a detached gaze simply surveying and marking the world “as it is,” but is rather tested and proved through the fire of action. James repeatedly suggests the following maxim as a guide for pragmatism: “Grant an idea or belief to be true, what concrete difference will its being true make in any one’s actual life?” The upshot of James’s maxim is the ruin of any lingering philosophical foundationalism that would build systems upon clear, distinct, indubitable ideas. Rather than building upon secure foundations, pragmatist philosophy always begins in the midst of things, colored by sentiments, events, and human needs, a philosophy subject to constant revision and to new demands. Foundationalism, with roots in Locke and Descartes, by contrast, is closely allied to the epistemological strategy of representation. Put

simply, representationalism is, as James characterizes it, “the popular notion . . . that a true idea must copy its reality.”⁷⁴ Representationalist philosophy, what Richard Rorty calls “the mind as the mirror of nature,” sets itself the task of discriminating between those ideas that actually represent the world and those ideas that simply pretend to do so. By identifying these privileged representations, the philosopher provides a foundation upon which all beliefs worthy of the honorific “true knowledge” will stand. The representationalist’s mirror is a very different thing than the pragmatist’s action. As James comments, “[The] great assumption of the intellectualists [foundationalists] is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you’ve got your true idea of anything, there’s an end of the matter. You’re in possession; you *know*. . . . Epistemologically you are in stable equilibrium.”⁷⁵ By contrast, James and his fellow pragmatists hold that “[t]he truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process. . . .”⁷⁶ From the outset, the pragmatists rejected the foundationalist strategies so characteristic of modern philosophy and so Robert Cummings Neville is right to see them as pioneering “the highroad around modernism.”⁷⁷

Antifoundationalism is central to the work of Rorty, the neopragmatist who may be most responsible for the contemporary pragmatic turn. Rorty inherited antifoundationalism from respectable analytic sources that include Wilfrid Sellars’s campaign against the “myth of the given,” Willard V. O. Quine’s critique of the two dogmas of empiricism (analyticity and sense data) and his consequent turn toward holism, and Donald Davidson’s overturning of the scheme-content distinction. In Rorty’s hands, the critique of foundationalism leads to the abandonment of ontology, a kind of provocative deflationary pragmatism, rooted especially in a particular reading of James and Dewey, which sees knowledge as a toolbox for the democratically oriented transformation of society and reality.⁷⁸ Rorty’s, however, is not the only viable pragmatism making rounds in the academy. There are also those, such as Christopher Hookway, Ochs, and Frank M. Oppenheim, who in diverse ways contend for a wider, more robust pragmatism. This realist pragmatism, rooted especially in Peirce and the late Josiah Royce, also sees knowledge as properly crafted by human knowers for the transformation of society and the nurturance of “beloved communities,” but sees this effective knowledge in realist rather than nominalist terms. Indeed, despite his pragmatist rejection of foundationalism, Peirce considered nominalism to be among the chief specters that his philosophy was designed to exorcise. A pragmatic nonfoundationalist account of knowledge need not evacuate the world of intrinsic intelligibility or worth. In Peirce’s thought, nonfoundationalism is an integral part of a complex theory that sees the entire universe as shot through with a real intelligibility and dignity (inherent goodness), intelligibility and dignity that do not need the guarantee of a foundationalist *cogito*. Anti- or nonfoundationalism, it turns out, is

capable of multiple iterations—the relativism and nihilism of certain avant-garde antifoundationalists is only one extreme within a spectrum that also affords religious opportunities, a space to value and entertain claims about the sacred, and the possibility that creativity and generosity may in fact be the ultimate, though dubitable, constituents of the universe.

At this point, readers familiar with contemporary neopragmatism may balk. All of this mysticism hardly sits well with the dominant naturalism in neopragmatic philosophy. After all, what has the neopragmatism of Quine, Putnam, and Rorty to do with Religious Studies in general and the participatory turn in particular? Indeed, it is true that the pragmatic turn is often associated with a kind of militant secularism or aggressive atheism, at worst, or an ambivalent tolerance of religious belief, at best, and that contemporary pragmatists such as Rorty and Michael Eldridge have done little to amend this view.⁷⁹ However, recent work (particularly that which appeals to the Peirce-Royce axis of “Cambridge pragmatism” as opposed to the James-Dewey axis of “instrumentalist pragmatism”) has explored the immense fruitfulness of pragmatist approaches in religion and spirituality.⁸⁰ Moreover, as Richard J. Bernstein notes, not only Peirce and Royce, but also James and even Dewey “all repudiated ‘aggressive atheism.’ In differing ways, each of them took the religious life seriously and made vital contributions to understanding what it means.”⁸¹ The more nuanced historiography of American pragmatism emerging today locates its roots in explicitly religious thinkers as diverse as Jonathan Edwards, on the one hand, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, on the other. Although it was once fashionable to drive a wedge between the pragmatists’ concern to address religious questions (think of James in the *Varieties*, Peirce’s “Neglected Argument,” or even Dewey’s *Art as Experience*) and their work on pragmatism as such, contemporary historians increasingly recognize the constitutive role that religious questions played in the development and articulation of classical pragmatism.⁸² Religious themes were not marginal to the founding generation of pragmatists but central to each philosopher in his own way: James’s fascination with individual spiritual experience and the paranormal, Peirce and Royce’s interest in community as a spiritual locus, and Dewey’s nature-based religious sentiment. The religious fecundity of pragmatism is not only an interesting episode in the history of philosophy but continues today. In the contemporary academy, Cornel West and others call for a renewal of “prophetic pragmatism,” a pragmatism deployed in concert with its religious roots for the betterment and correction of societal injustices.⁸³ Pragmatism plays a similarly aleatory role in providing guidance to the ecumenical dialogical practice of Scriptural Reasoning that seeks to open a critical communicative space for robust relations between Muslims, Jews, and Christians.⁸⁴ In the field of Religious Studies proper, diverse pragmatist approaches continue to play an important role in the more philosophical considerations of mysticism.⁸⁵

How, then, do the participatory turn and pragmatism jointly challenge the sufficiency of the linguistic turn? Whereas certain forms of the linguistic turn may also abandon foundationalism, both pragmatists and participatory thinkers go farther in their more radical recognition of the simultaneously interpretive and ontological element in all acts of human knowing. Interpretation does not exhaust being, but invites us into the adventure of ontological transformation and relation. As Sanbothe writes, a focus on transformation (e.g., as a goal of philosophical inquiry) is perhaps the central feature in the pragmatic challenge or “twist” to the linguistic turn:

The pragmatic twist of the linguistic turn can be understood as transformative. . . . Philosophy is then no longer understood as the methodological analysis of present states of affairs or existing linguistic structures. Instead it is comprehended and carried out as a transformative activity that experimentally works toward changes in common-sense in order to develop new knowledge practices.⁸⁶

This is not an abandonment of the linguistic turn, but a deepening of it. Signs and texts are not only human artifacts, but beings thick with their own creational weight. The pragmatism of Peirce and Royce sees the entire world as an interlocking, relational (“synechistic”) sphere of signs. Creatures are not simply sign-bearing or sign-interpreting but signs themselves. The universe is semiotic and, therefore, demands interpretation at every level. As Peirce writes:

It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact the entire universe—not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as “the truth”—that all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.⁸⁷

Neither Peirce nor Royce reduced this pansemiosis to language and by refusing to do so they arguably afforded human language a greater nobility than contemporary linguistifications of reality and the sacred. If there is nothing beyond the text, as Derrida holds, or if we have to keep silence about whatever exceeds our language, as Wittgenstein thinks, then the play of language itself either begins to look vacuous or betokens a linguistic idealism hardly distinguishable from nihilism. However, if semiotics is ontological and thus exceeds the human languages that are its endlessly varying echoes, then language itself is “saved,” as Owen Barfield might say.

Rather than conceiving semantics in terms of epistemology and demanding that our languages impossibly represent a wholly nonlinguistic reality, participatory thought considers that Peirce and Royce made the right move

by attaching semiotics not primarily to epistemology but to ontology. Communicative acts and semiotic exchanges take place, first and foremost, in the sphere of the real, the ontological, a realm of signifying bodies and events upon which the subtlety of human cognition and language may supervene. Truth expressed in language is not, therefore, of a different order than the truth that simply is the processes of the world. Rather than an internal mirroring of an external realm, our language is an event that can resonate more or less with the events of the world. This allows for theories of truth as relational, endlessly hermeneutic happenings, and even for a nonrepresentationalist correspondence theory that discerns the true in a real ontological proportion between being and intelligibility. Such discernment is not a static intellectualist grasping of the “way things are,” but the intuiting through body and mind of an aesthetic fit, a musical harmony, or an occult sympathy between knowing and being. In our epistemic acts, we do not passively register being on an internal screen, but rather participate in the dynamic elevation, transformation, and fulfillment of both the knower and the known through the inauguration of a new relationship.

In accord with the later thought of Peirce and Royce, participatory approaches see the adventure of knowing as ultimately a form of openness to the gifted, unanticipated, and even beguiling disclosures that are mediated to us from ontologically thick events through our own cultural, linguistic, and embodied productions. Truth—even truth about the *mystery* out of which everything arises⁸⁸—is indeed “made” through our actions, inquiries, and processes of validation and, yet, this truth is not thereby simply a secular, nominalist product but rather participates in successive disclosures of a sacred reality.⁸⁹ Moreover, our properly human constructions of truth involve us in the dangerous business of affirmation—truth elicits our commitment and investment, which is to say truth-making requires the risk of participation and issues in transformation.⁹⁰ We give expression to truth not by representing inwardly an outward reality, but through our creative responses in word and deed to the pressure of a transcendent and immanent mystery and the creation it continually bestows. A pragmatist approach to spiritual questions is not merely analytic or interpretive but is rather self-implicating, critical, and transformative—three characteristics that help push the pragmatic theorist beyond the confines of the linguistic turn.

THE RESACRALIZATION OF LANGUAGE

Going beyond the linguistic turn need not mean leaving language behind, but can rather point us in a direction that accords even greater importance to language—as, for example, when we recognize a self-overcoming or even transcendent drive within language. Indeed, most religious traditions—such as Kabbalah, Hinduism, and Sufism—uphold the sacred nature of their scriptural languages. What this means is that religious tongues are taken as the

expression or the embodiment of divine intentions, possessing therefore a different ontic status than secular languages. In these traditions, the idea of revelation is perforce connected to the sacralization of language. Because such texts are taken to participate in the tongues of angels, as it were, they can offer privileged revelations and ultimate truths about the origin, meaning, and purpose of reality. In some cases, these texts are regarded as ontologically primordial—i.e., they are said to have played a central role in the creation of the world and, therefore, to not have been humanly produced.⁹¹ The Vedas and the Torah, for instance, are not traditionally regarded as human artifacts but are instead taken as “multileveled cosmic realities” or “cosmological principles” that mirror or embody the deepest structure of reality and/or the divine.⁹² In theosophical Kabbalah, Moshe Idel writes, “language reflects the inner structure of the divine realm, the sefirotic system of divine powers.”⁹³ In this context, textual exegesis naturally becomes a religious imperative of the utmost spiritual and revelatory significance.

Despite the adamant Enlightenment rejection of the cognitive value and authority of religious texts, the sacredness of religious language is gradually resurfacing in the contemporary study of religion. We have already referred to the process of the linguistification of the sacred brought about by modernity and the linguistic turn. As Habermas notes, such linguistification has even reshaped our notions of the divine: “The idea of God is transformed [*aufgehoben*] into a concept of a *Logos* . . . ‘God’ becomes the name for a communicative structure that forces men, on pain of a loss of their humanity, to go beyond their accidental, empirical nature to encounter one another *indirectly*, that is, across an objective something that they themselves are not.”⁹⁴ What neither Habermas nor other modern thinkers could have expected, however, is that the transference of religious meanings onto language is leading today to a renewed and perhaps disconcerting reevaluation of the sacred dimensions of religious language (and, indeed, of human language *per se*).⁹⁵ The linguistification of the sacred is paving the way for a resacralization of language.

This tendency is evident in discursive sites as diverse as Taylor’s understanding of language as the “divine milieu,” Cupitt’s view of mysticism as “a kind of writing,” and Kripal’s suggestion that the hermeneutic study of mystical texts constitutes a genuinely mystical path. In his discussion of postmodern theologies, Grigg suggests that the death of God as a transcendental signifier (i.e., a transcendent divine consciousness, ground, or reality) requires that God becomes the Word now embodied in scripture.⁹⁶ In other words, much postmodern theology replaces the metaphysical God by a non-substantialist divine milieu whose essential dynamism is the free play of language. In this light, the evolution of premodern to modern to postmodern thinking in religion can be seen to have shifted its focus first from God to word and then, shockingly, from word to Word-as-God. The detranscendentalization of religion gives way to the consecration of immanent language.

The postmodern (re-)sacralization of language is not a tidy affair but instead explodes in many directions releasing a series of diverse strategies for overcoming reductionist linguistification. Among the most common of such strategies are the deconstructionist projects of those such as Cupitt and Taylor, who discover a kind of divinity in the sheer unencumbered *différance* of language itself. Such maneuvers restore sacrality to language but arguably do so at a high cost: the nominalism of many deconstructive efforts threatens to cut resacralized languages off from the body, the depths of spiritual experience, the natural world, and mundane human history.

Alternatively, a number of approaches to the postcritical transfiguration of language do not seek to untether language from the natural world, but instead see language as all the more sacred precisely to the degree that they discover it as all the more natural. Early on, thinkers such as Giambattista Vico, Johann Georg Hamann, Johann Herder, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge pioneered an overcoming of modernity through a deepening regard for language as expressive of a profound naturalism. It is not language as a free play alone that deserves to be called sacred, but instead language as constitutive of human thought and inherently expressive of a sacred creation to which humanity and culture likewise belong.

This alternative tradition continues to be an important source for a participatory overcoming of linguistification through a rediscovery of language's most profound springs. Language-wielding humanity stands in what Barfield calls a "directionally creator" relationship to the world. Language does perhaps unleash a kind of divinity, as Cupitt and Taylor recognize, but our creative and even divine linguistic powers are not divorced from a weighty materialism that alone allows our language to ever emerge. In our poetic powers, we do not leave the world behind but create after the manner that nature herself creates. "The world, like Dionysus, is torn to pieces by pure intellect," writes Barfield, "but the Poet is Zeus; he has swallowed the heart of the world; and he can reproduce it in a living body."⁹⁷ Participatory approaches to language see human poiesis as a creative manifestation of life or the spirit in the human realm—a swallowing the heart of the world—and they thus radically overcome the modern split between language and ontology. We suggest that it is in the particularities and constraints of nature, culture, and history that language becomes truly revelatory, a stance that affirms the immanence of the mystery without in any way repudiating its transcendence.

THE RENEWED INTEREST IN THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

Any sensitive observer of North American and European culture will have noted the explosion of the use of the word *spirituality* in recent decades. On bookshelves and in the broadcast media, in places of worship and places of learning, in the workplace as well as at vacation destinations there is an