
Body, Society, and Subjectivity in Religious Studies

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Attention to bodies has transformed the study of religion in the past thirty years, aiding the effort to overcome the discipline's Protestant biases by shifting interest from beliefs to practices. And yet much of this work has unwittingly perpetuated an individualist notion of the religious subject. Although religionists are now well aware that bodies cannot be studied apart from the social forces that shape them, all too often the religious subject stands alone in a crowd, participating in communal rituals, subject to religious authorities and disciplinary practices, but oddly detached from intimate relationships. In this article, I first argue that the turn to the body was motivated by what it appeared to reject: theoretical questions about subjectivity. I then seek to challenge prevailing trends by arguing that these same theoretical insights should now prod us to attend to the import of intimacy and personal relationships.

IN 1967, when Peter Brown wrote his celebrated biography of Augustine of Hippo, he presumed that intimate relationships were as important as church politics and theological debates. In his *Confessions*, Augustine could not be bothered to name the mother of his son, but relationships were otherwise the key to everything he deemed important

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in his life. Admiration for a wise mentor convinced him that Christianity was not contemptible; his mother's faith catalyzed his own; and the death of a friend convinced him that only love for an eternal being could bring lasting happiness. In Brown's rendering, this was more than an observation akin to sociologist Rodney Stark's argument that personal connections determine religious affiliations. Instead, Brown took his cue from Augustine's assertion that intense interactions with intimate others "set our minds on fire" (*Confessions* 1991: IV.13). Relationships provoke love and hate, peace and violence, and activity and passivity. Thus it is—or so Brown assumed in his biography *Augustine of Hippo*—impossible to understand the religious subject apart from the crucible of this subject's relationships with other people and divine beings.

Twenty years later, Brown published a very different kind of study about Augustine and other early Christian leaders. *Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988) appeared amidst a flood of books about the religious body, including notable studies about Aztec, Tamil, Japanese, medieval European, and ancient Mediterranean societies.¹ Yet Brown's pithy main title can serve to represent them all, for it proclaims what became a truism in religious studies: the religious subject is best studied as an amalgamation of body and society. Not everyone has marched under this banner. Religion lists from academic publishers are still filled with traditional biographies, intellectual and institutional histories, and works of theology, ethics, and philosophy. The *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (JAAR)'s special issue on the future of religious studies (March 2006) largely ignored praxis and embodiment in essays about the problem of history, the place of theology in religious studies, and the vexed relationship between scholars and their subjects. Similarly, the call for papers for the centennial issue of JAAR solicited work on interdisciplinarity, globalization, Islam, science, and the resurgence of interest in religion in other disciplines and outside the academy. Missing altogether from this list was a request for work addressing the body, gender, emotions, or praxis—indeed anything comprising the forms of subjectivity in religious life.

This is surprising because, whether measured by intellectual energy or the sheer volume of books, articles, and conferences in the past three decades, work on the body and social power has transformed religious studies. This attention to body and society corrected the Protestant-style

¹See Sullivan (1990) and the sources he cites: Malamoud and Vernant (1986), Camporesi (1988), Rouselle (1988), Daniel (1984), Austin (1988), Schipper (1982), and Yuasa (1987).

tendency to equate religion with interiority and belief, and encouraged religionists to think about materiality, sex, and gender as theoretical categories rather than facts on the ground.

Less often appreciated is that the impetus for this turn to body and society was the desire to better understand subjectivity, and that the most consequential result has been a fundamental change in the way many religionists now think about the religious subject. Above all, this scholarly trend in religious studies strongly undermined the assumption that the object of the religionist's inquiry is (and should be) a freely volitional subject. Over the past three decades, many a conference session and graduate seminar has foundered on the rocky shores of debates about agency and ethics. Scholars who were more interested in external than internal experiences—in how people are conditioned by religious rituals or asceticism, for example—could be (and often were) accused of denying their subjects' agency or of sanctioning oppression. At their best, however, these debates prompted religionists interested in embodiment and practice to craft new theories of subjectivity, insisting that it no longer be defined in terms of meaning and intentionality, but through the signifying practices of language and action. For many, subjectivity consequently came to be understood as something that exceeds both subject and society (in the sense that neither has full or conscious control over what one thinks or how one acts), and the binary of freedom and determinism gave way to a more nuanced dynamic of activity and constraint.

These are salutary developments. Unwittingly, however, these same developments perpetuated a version of the individualism they discredited. Most importantly, studies about what bodies do and why practices matter made questions about intimate relationships—about interpersonal commitments and conflicts—seem like the preoccupations of a bygone era. In other words, attention to practice, performance, authorizing discourse, and subjectifying power has focused attention on the subject in relation to society but not on the relational subject, formed and enacted through sustained affiliations and intense encounters. From this vantage point—which is, I believe, where many religious studies scholars stand today—the filial and familial relationships that Brown explored so carefully seem more like an occasion for eloquence than theory. Not quaint, exactly, but not essential either.

Yet these sorts of relationships can extend and deepen what we have learned from recent work on religious subjectivity. These relations are readily available for study through claims about desirable or reprehensible affiliations; through personal accounts of what a given relationship impedes and enables; through conflicts and

accusations; and through appeals to human and divine friends, foes, and family. Our scholarly turn to embodiment has undermined simplistic notions of rational choice, along with the assumption that liberty entails autonomy, or that virtue requires solitary self-formation. Still, all too often in our work, the religious subject stands alone in a crowd. Yes, we find that subject participating in communal rituals, subject to religious authorities and disciplinary practices, a pious supplicant or abject lover of the divine. But few studies of religion track this subject as a participant in intimate relationships, defined by the problems and pleasures of kinship, friendship, patronage, marriage, and other relationships less easily named. In our quest to better understand subjectivity, we have isolated the subject.

In what follows, I try to understand this current scholarly disinterest in ordinary relationships by analyzing what the difference between *Augustine of Hippo* and *Body and Society* represents: the move to study social praxis and power rather than relational meaning-making. I then advocate for recent work that brings relationality back into play without relinquishing all that has been learned from the study of body and society. It is my contention that religionists, who know well that divine-human relationships can be as potent as human-human affiliations, are well positioned to appreciate that there is no subjectivity without intersubjectivity and no religious subject without socially defined and subjectively meaningful relationships. Relationships enact meaning. Consequently, the study of relationships and relationality offers one route around the impasse of debates about whether to investigate practices rather than beliefs, social norms in place of idiosyncratic voices, or action instead of meaning. What follows is thus both an appreciative critique—designed to demonstrate that the turn to body and society is inextricable from ethical and philosophical claims about subjectivity—and a recommendation about where to go from here.

THE STUDY OF BODY AND SOCIETY

In a 1981 interview with the *New York Review of Books*, Michel Foucault reported that “Prof. Brown stated to me that what we have to understand is why it is that sexuality became, in Christian culture, the seismograph of our subjectivity” (May 28, 1981). Foucault had already published the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (1978), surveying the Victorian era to the present, and concentrating on power and knowledge and how “sexuality” came into being, formed by particular

fields of knowledge and systems of power that regulate its practice (1990: 4). Foucault's understanding of power as simultaneously productive and repressive was enormously influential, but he recalibrated his approach after writing volume 1 to focus on the subject or technologies of the self. He thus shifted attention away from the formations of sciences (*savoirs*) and systems of power that regulate the practice of sexuality in order to investigate how particular normative discourses and practices shape subjectivity. Foucault was especially interested in how individuals came to see themselves as "subjects of desire," a phenomenon he attributed to Christianity and the classical Greek and Roman cultures that influenced Christian practices and theology.² This shift to the subject did not entail less attention to practices, but was instead, as Foucault put it in the introduction to volume 2, a way of analyzing how practices enabled individuals "to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire" (1985: 5). The study of sexuality was thereby melded to the study of asceticism and to religious practices and ideas, all in service to unfolding a particular understanding of a historically specific, religiously conditioned subjectivity.

Foucault's interest in subjectivity could seem ironic, even perverse, since his analysis of discourse and power refuted the notion of subjects as conscious producers of meaning. In the academy, Foucault represented not only the death of the author but also, and even more consequentially for religionists, the death of the subject. As a result, many who were interested in the body largely ignored or directly rejected Foucault and the causal link between desire, sex, and subjectivity he argued for, in favor of a more capacious exploration of embodiment. Sarah Coakley's edited volume *Religion and the Body* (1997), for example, emphasized the sheer diversity of religious apprehensions of, and directives for, the body. This collection, begun at a 1987 conference at Lancaster University, juxtaposes theoretical essays on the social theory, anthropology, and philosophy of the body with tradition-specific articles on the body in eastern Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, Taoism, Japanese religion, and Sufi literature, to show that the body occupies a different place in each religious imaginary. Diversity is not the only point, however, for almost all the essays describe how religious systems presume that practices produce belief rather than the other way

²Note, as Elizabeth Clark points out, the absence of attention to Jewish sources (1988: 622n6). Daniel Boyarin wrote *Carnal Israel* explicitly in response to Peter Brown's call for a careful study of Jewish sexual practices and attitudes (1991: 553n6).

around, and all traditions discussed show intense interest in the individual body “as locus both of potential sanctification and of defilement” (1997: 9). This collection thus endorses the lesson, echoed in many contemporary works, that studying the body will convince scholars of religion that praxis—formative bodily actions—define the religious subject.

Caroline Walker Bynum’s influential work on embodiment argued even more explicitly that physicality is the foundation of subjectivity. In the introduction to *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (1991), Bynum argued that her awareness of bodily reality differentiated her from historians influenced by Clifford Geertz’s symbolic anthropology or by the cultural constructivist approaches of Foucault, Peter Brown, and Thomas Laqueur: “Such approaches are surely in the background of my own essays. But my point is in some ways an altogether simpler one. However we construct it and whatever it stands for to us, body is what we’ve got” (19). The body’s “intractable physicality” must be at the heart of any study, and theory does not help us understand the body. Instead, the body determines the usefulness of any theory. In Bynum’s implacable terms, “we know we are more than culture. We are body. And as body we die” (20). The body that gives pleasure and pain also limits what humans can experience. Even more strongly, this approach affirms that the body is coincident with identity, selfhood, and being. This point is reiterated in work by a wide variety of religious studies scholars. For example, Gabriel Marcel’s apposite line, “I am my body” is at the heart of Meredith McGuire’s 1989 presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. Similarly, the introduction to the aptly titled *The Self as Body in Asian Theory and Practice* affirms that the body “is what I am as well as something I have” (McGuire 1990: 285, citing Marcel 1952: 315; Kasulis 1993: xi).

The philosophical complexity of claims about the link between body and subjectivity notwithstanding, these examples demonstrate how the individual body became a point of orientation for scholars buffeted by cultural relativism. This means, as Bynum explains, that the body trumps gender or any other socially defined norm. Gender must be considered in any history of “attitudes and behaviors” because it is not “merely” a biological given, “understood by experiencing subjects” but is instead “created . . . because of the categories in which it is conceptualized.” Yet Bynum concludes that gender is not primary because there is “a duality in the Western tradition more profound even than gender; a tension between body as locus of pain and limitation, and body as locus not merely of pleasure but of personhood itself” (19). If

the body is what we have got, in other words, this means that we are our bodies.

This conflation of subjectivity and embodiment inspired many studies, including important work on the religious senses, asceticism, and sexual practices (e.g., Boyarin 1993; Biale 1992; Wolfson 1994; Brakke 1995; Harvey 2006). It has been supported by (and is arguably one of the reasons for) renewed interest in cognitive science and neuroscience, and how chemistry and biology influence religious experiences (LaFleur 1998; Taves 2009). In place of a religious subject defined primarily by beliefs or theological commitments, many of these studies offered a bodily subject shaped and changed by religious practices but also, by dint of physicality, resistant to social conditioning. In this respect, the body functioned as culture once did for many in the humanities, as an implicit universal understood through its diverse instantiations. Bodies trained into stillness, executing choreographed liturgies, perceiving rotting flesh as the sweet fragrance of sanctity, pierced or cut to mark exclusion or initiation; these and other religious phenomena confirm that bodies are malleable and transformable even as they underscore that the body is inescapable.

In this context, Foucault who set out to explain the link between sexuality and subjectivity faded from view to be replaced by Foucault the patron saint of bodily practices or technologies of the self. This Foucault was readily invoked alongside Pierre Bourdieu, whose sociological notion of *habitus* directed scholars to analyze how individual behaviors manifested social structures and norms (1977). Michel De Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) became popular for much the same reason, because its examination of how cultural "users" adopt and personalize cultural norms seemed compatible with Foucault, even as it provided a kind of hermeneutic counterpart to Bourdieu's sociological theory.

New developments in ritual studies likewise insisted on the precedence of praxis and seldom made subjectivity itself an explicit object of study. Catherine Bell's theories of ritual were particularly effective in encouraging historians and anthropologists of religion to dispense with the idea that ritual should be studied as the creation of an intentional actor or the performance of a meaningful script. Bell cites Foucault, but her work is informed primarily by "practice" theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and, closer to home, the liturgical innovations in contemporary religious communities and the antihermeneutic studies of ritual by J. Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln. Consequently, Bell deemphasized not only subjective meaning but also theories of signification, for she sought instead "to deal with action as action"—not a reflection of

subjective meaning or intent (cf., Bell 1992, 1998: 207). Bell's work thus demonstrates how many of the studies produced in the wake of Foucault—including studies explicitly indebted to Foucault—either presumed that the self is the body or otherwise avoided his project of rethinking subjectivity.

THE STUDY OF SUBJECTIVITY

Cultural anthropology, by contrast, encouraged the belief that practices gave scholars access to subjective dispositions or what Clifford Geertz famously described as “moods and motivations” (1973: 90). As Talal Asad made clear when he assailed Geertz's canonical definition of religion in 1993, this was a foundational premise of much of the anthropologically influenced work on religious practices that had enlivened religious studies throughout the previous decade. In the 1970s and 1980s, Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), together with Mary Douglas' interpretations of symbols (1966, 1970) and Victor Turner's ritual studies (1969), gave the study of popular religion theoretical heft and excitement. Cultural anthropology thus provided a much-needed alternative when religionists began to repudiate Mircea Eliade, one of the founders of the field, in wave after wave of antiuniversalist critique. Instead of analyzing Eliade's cosmologies (albeit cosmologies concretely expressed through myths, rites, social structures, building plans, and sacred/profane distinctions), religionists began to theorize about how people make meaning by defining and maintaining purity, ritualizing order and disorder, and using symbols to imbue their subjective dispositions and conceptions of themselves and the world with what Clifford Geertz described as a powerful “aura of factuality” (1973: 119). Cultural anthropology thereby demonstrated that the study of practices enabled a sophisticated analysis of religious subjects.

Of course, interest in religious rites and practices was not in itself new. Nor did anthropology provide the only alternative to Eliade's version of *History of Religion*: before Eliade there was Durkheim, and before Durkheim the colonizing Europeans who, as J. Z. Smith reminds us, judged the (ir)religiosity of the indigenous people they encountered in terms not just of beliefs but norms of behavior (1998: 270). European studies of “folk” religion, and the Marxist claim that Protestantism was an “early bourgeois revolution,” promoted the study of popular religion, including ceremonies, rituals, and communal behaviors, among historians of religion in Europe and the Americas (Ginzburg, Ladurie, Brady, Scribner). Karen McCarthy Brown's ethnographic study *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (1991) became a touchstone for many

interested in how religionists should analyze worldviews that seem radically different than the scholar's. Hindu studies in the 1990s included an award-winning analysis of pilgrimage and a book that forcefully argued that Hinduism was better understood through tantric practices rather than canonical texts and myths (Haberman 1994; White 1996). The study of Buddhism was transformed by Gregory Schopen's argument, first made in 1975 but not widely disseminated until the 1990s, that scholars should attend to archeological evidence and the legal, economic, and institutional preoccupations in canonical texts in order, as he put it, to get at what people do rather than what people say (1997). The full impact of this interest is confirmed by the popularity of the series from Princeton University Press edited by Donald Lopez, widely known as the "In Practice" books, inaugurated in 1995 with *Religions of India in Practice* and still publishing, with sixteen volumes to date.

A new name and explicit methodological mandate for the study of bodily practices came from Americanists, who described their approach as lived religion. Disseminated through a conference at Harvard in 1994 (funded by the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment as part of an effort to encourage the study of "daily life"), and through the published volume of conference papers entitled *Lived Religion in America* (1997), this approach broke with the study of popular religion by declaring the primacy of meaning. In his programmatic introduction, David Hall insisted that the most important innovation was not to redress the imbalance between popular and elite or to study actions rather than ideas, but to better study religion as culture, which he aligned with meaning-making activity.

Attributing this approach to Victor Turner as much as Clifford Geertz, Hall hailed Robert Orsi's 1985 book, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, as a model, and described what he identified as its "long, central chapter" on "The Meanings of the Devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street" as "the single most important example of this way of doing history—that is, of explicating the multiple, overlapping, even contradictory meanings embodied in a symbolic figure" (x). Orsi himself identified the distinctiveness of his approach in his original introduction to *Madonna of 115th Street*, when he critiqued the conventional study of popular religion for its tendency to describe practices without exploring how the people imbued these practices with meaning. Orsi proposed instead to study not just "sacred rituals, practices, symbols, prayers, and faith of the people," but also "the totality of their ultimate values, their most deeply held ethical convictions, their efforts to order their reality, their cosmology" (xvii). Simply put, he concluded, religion means

“what matters” and the final two chapters of the book are devoted to interpreting the meaning and content of what Orsi called a “theology of the streets.” Theology, in other words, is what can be gleaned from practices, and practices provide the evidence we need to understand how people orient themselves in the world.

But this search for meaning is precisely what Asad challenged in his critique of Geertz’s definition of religion. Asad argued that Geertz insisted “on the primacy of meaning without regard to the processes by which meanings are constructed” (43). Asad emphasized that he was evaluating Geertz’s definition of religion rather than the whole of Geertz’s work, and Geertz clearly focused on power dynamics and politics in many of his studies. Nevertheless, Asad’s critique was a full-throated protest against anthropology as symbolic analysis and interpretation of meaning. Religious symbols, Asad argued, cannot be known without regard to the socially produced disciplinary practices that secure these meanings. Asad’s mode of analyzing materiality and subjectivity—shaped in the 1970s by the combination of structuralism and expressivism he found in Voloshinov’s *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, by Foucault’s analysis of power and disciplinary practices, and by Marcel Mauss’ study of bodily movement and *habitus*—convinced him that scholars should leave aside the quest to understand symbols and meaning, and instead analyze authoritative discourses and the materiality of the body (Scott and Hirschkind 2006: 269). Asad illustrated his point that symbols and actions do not “work” unless they are authorized—that there is no truth, in other words, without power—by citing Peter Brown’s description of how the Donatist controversy persuaded Augustine that *disciplina* (“an active process of corrective punishment”) was essential to the apprehension of truth. Medieval Christian monasticism and judicial torture provided Asad with two other examples of disciplinary practices designed to create obedient wills.³ And yet it is striking how Brown’s early work in biography, a traditional genre seemingly concerned above all with personality and meaning, became a crucial reference point for a theory that directly opposed all that biography has been thought to represent. As this suggests, the theoretical convictions that made relationships seem insignificant could be informed by work that takes relationships to be a primary object of study.

Asad’s method of studying formative practices rather than representations of the body was not widely disseminated among

³Asad wrote these two chapters in the early 1980s, but both appeared initially in *Economy and Society* and were not known to most scholars of religion before the publication of *Genealogies of Religion* in 1993.

scholars of religion until *Genealogies of Religion* appeared in 1993. But in challenging Geertz, Asad did not cause a new rift so much as he clarified the contours of a divide. On the one side stood religionists sympathetic to Foucault and amenable to Asad's argument that symbols and actions were not interpretive nuts to be cracked, filled with psychological meaning inside, but manifestations of social relations that authorize some and repress others. On the other side were those influenced by cultural anthropology, which fit well with a hermeneutic approach to religion championed, notably, by Paul Ricoeur. Scholars who studied lived religion and religion and the body tended to stand with the latter, but debates about power and its effect on the religious subject continued apace, because their topics ensured that these same scholars were attentive to practices and social and material contexts. This was, in other words, a deep and significant theoretical rift, but not one that could keep the two sides apart.

THEORIES OF SUBJECTIVITY

Asad's intervention was important in religious studies because it contributed to a move already underway to think about how the focus on bodily practices and discipline, rituals, and authorizing discourses might produce new theories about the religious subject. The strongest push to think about this theoretically rather than just methodologically came from feminists who studied religious systems or practices that accentuated the importance of obedience and submission. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) was a transformative text for many scholars, and the link between her gender project and the question of subjectivity is seen most clearly in light of her first book, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* (1987), which told a philosophical story about how the Hegelian subject, constituted through desire, was transformed over the course of the twentieth century from the emblem of reason's triumph to the impetus for ceaseless rupture, both within the self and between the self and the world. The focus of *Subjects of Desire* is philosophical, but the epigraph, from "Esthétique du Mal" by Wallace Stevens, expresses the elusive relationship between physicality and thought that made Brown's subsequent work so provocative and important: "The greatest poverty is not to live/ in a physical world, to feel that one's desire/Is too difficult to tell from despair" (Stevens 1997: 286). Physicality enables interpretation, but the one cannot be separated from the other. Here again, as with Foucault, the stakes—at least initially—are clear: to study what it means to live

in a physical world is to study what it means to live. Our bodies, our selves.

As an extension of her work on Georg Hegel, Butler's *Gender Trouble* turned the old feminist slogan, "anatomy is not destiny," into a philosophical argument by implacably countering any universalist notion of "women's experience" or "natural" sexual difference. In place of anatomically determined identities, Butler explained, there is gender, the learned performance of norms and also, inevitably and inextricably, the slippage that ensures many performances fit culturally mandated molds just barely or not at all. For some critics, this was a book that abandoned the body, either by rendering it a puppet in the hands of discourse or by imagining it as ethereal, a "style of the flesh." But sympathetic readers found release from the binaries and universalities that seemed to have a stranglehold on feminist theory, and a powerful tool for analyzing the body as a signifying practice rather than as an "intractable" physical fact. For many religionists, *Gender Trouble* clarified that work on embodiment, ritualization, performance, and praxis was necessarily and rightly about subjectivity, and it suggested that this work had just begun.

This project—of thinking about how the study of religious subjects might be transformed by gender theory—was done primarily by scholars working on mysticism, possession, monasticism, and eroticism. These scholars appealed to Butler and feminist philosophers including Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Elizabeth Grosz, among others, to understand bodily experiences marked by extremes of ecstasy, violence, disciplinary practices, self-repudiation, and receptivity. In the process, they recast the theoretical terms of the debates about agency and subjectivity in light of their sources' preoccupation with submission, humility, and abnegation.

Amy Hollywood's work has been vital in this regard. Her early work on medieval Christian mysticism, for example, troubled gender categories by challenging the presumption that women's mystical experiences were more physical than those of their male counterparts (1995). In subsequent studies, she elaborated a philosophy of embodied subjectivity by demonstrating how experiences and beliefs are constituted and transformed through practices, and religious practices in particular (2002a, 2002b, 2004a). In addition to exploring how female mystics' self-abnegation can be understood in line with Foucault's argument that subordination creates the possibility for action, she has maintained that scholars need to confront the challenge posed by the mystic who explains that it is not she but God who speaks through her. The invocation of God is regularly interpreted as a self-authorizing strategy

for otherwise disempowered women, but Hollywood has argued that other interpretive possibilities might come into view if we thought more expansively about supernatural agency and what it entails for human beings (2004b).

Related work includes Mary Keller's study of possession in Zimbabwe, Malaysia, and elsewhere, which argues that possessed women around the world are imputed with agency precisely because they so visibly embody receptivity rather than self-reliance. Keller invokes Asad to explain that in these cases, agency does not reside in individual subjectivities, but in interrelationships of bodies and systems of power (2002). In a special issue of *Journal of Religion*, the early modernist Ulrike Strasser draws on Butler to argue that the monastic emphasis on voluntary obedience made early modern European monks and nuns "prototypes of the modern subject" (2004: 553). Classic studies in Elizabeth Castelli's reader, *Women, Gender, Religion*, include Mieke Bal's (2001) analysis of Eve's subject construction in Genesis; Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's investigation of "Shabhano," a divorced Muslim woman whose subjectivity was repeatedly deferred and displaced in the aftermath of her appeal to a secular court for financial support from her husband; and Joy Dixon's study of how Theosophy framed the struggle to define subjectivity and personhood as a conflict between sexuality and religion (2001).

In the most sustained and explicit intervention, Saba Mahmood's (2005) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* argues that the piety of women in the mosque movement in present-day Cairo, Egypt, undermines the idea of subjectivity altogether. Echoing Asad, Mahmood insists that the pious practices she studies are not important for "what they mean" but for "what they do." Women in the mosque movement seek to transform themselves by donning more modest dress and more concealing veils, by praying frequently, by attending all-female mosque sessions where they are exhorted to adhere to Qur'anic exemplars and to act in conformity with the will of Allah. "The kind of agency I am exploring here does not belong to the women themselves," Mahmood explains, "but is a product of the historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located" (32). This is much the same conclusion Asad draws in his article about medieval Christian monasticism, and the practices and goals of the mosque movement will seem familiar to anyone who has studied women in conservative religious movements.

Yet Mahmood's book, which has been widely reviewed, discussed, and taught in religious studies venues, further argues that the women in piety movements are engaged in "ethical self-formation" that discourages

the choice and self-reflexivity usually associated with the term ethics. And she explicitly repudiates the feminist imperative, deeply informed by liberal political theory, to discern dissent and subversion amidst repression. The scholarly project that Mahmood rejects is succinctly endorsed in the subtitle of R. Marie Griffith's work on contemporary Christian women: *God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (1997). Griffith's work demonstrates that even seemingly submissive women are making choices and exercising power because submission can itself be an empowering strategy. Mahmood, by contrast, contends that women who cultivate quiescence disturb traditional notions of autonomous agency. Even more consequentially for feminist scholars and others interested in subjectivity, Mahmood contends that women committed to traditional forms of piety invalidate the bedrock feminist conviction that submission should be resisted and that independence is the sine qua non of happiness.⁴ What is at stake in these studies of praxis is, in other words, the question of meaning.

CONCLUSION: NEW APPROACHES AND THE RELATIONAL SUBJECT

In the work by Hollywood, Mahmood, and others, we can see how the turn to body and society, ritual and practice, and lived religion converged with postmodern theology and critical theory. Hollywood, for example, is working out ideas gleaned from Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, and others who figure prominently in postmodern theology, and Mahmood is deeply influenced by Foucault as well as Asad. This convergence was crucial because it demonstrated that what we study when we study the religious subject is not a free and autonomous being, but instead what is often called the split subject, a creation of forces and desires that escape conscious control. This attention to subjectivity is a crucial and uniquely fruitful (though overlooked) alternative to the approach that seems a more obvious extension of body and society studies, namely the so-called new materialism.

For example, in describing *Critical Terms in Religious Studies* (1998) as a manifesto for the new materialism, David Chidester contends that

⁴In *Lived Religion*, Robert Orsi similarly dissents from the injunction to find "liberatory possibilities" in all religious practices and systems. Unlike Mahmood, however, who argues that this betrays a liberal bias, Orsi worries that interest in subversion blinds scholars to the fact that "movements of opposition" may at the same time be "idioms of discipline" (1997: 15). To think outside this liberation/oppression dichotomy, however, we would have to ask ourselves the question posed by Amy Hollywood: "Are there ends other than emancipation to which we must attend in our desire to understand, explain, and promote the flourishing of women's lives?" (2004b: 528).

“belief, experience, inner states, and spirituality are out.” Instead, most of the authors in *Critical Terms* “implicitly recast religion as a category for analyzing materiality” by being “attentive to the body, the senses, gender, sexuality, location, exchange, power relations, and other material conditions” (2000: 374). However, much of the work done in the decade since proves the insufficiency of the attentiveness Chidester praises and demonstrates why new materialism cannot stand alone. Shorn of Marxism, materialism has no framework for assessing the relationship between subjectivity and society or for theorizing what people believe, what they experience, or how they feel.

Some scholars have responded by turning to science, as the trajectory of Ann Taves’ work makes clear, moving from an analysis of the debate between religion and psychology in her 1999 book, *Fits, Trances, and Vision: Explaining Experience and Experiencing Religion from Wesley to James*, to her recent work, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, which demonstrates how neuroscience, among other things, might help us overcome what Robert Orsi calls the “otiose boundary between ‘inner’ experience and ‘outer’ environment that so bedevils religious studies” (Taves 2009). Recent interest in political theology, promoted as much by scholars outside religious studies (many of them European) as by those from within the field, might well be described as correcting new materialism, insofar as it represents the attempt to provide new theories about social power (De Vries and Sullivan 2006; Žižek et al. 2005; Gregory 2008). Because this work remains focused on the social dynamics of politics or the abstractions of theology, however, the better alternative involves forging ahead on the path broken by the scholars described in the previous section. In her work on Hegel, Judith Butler observes that in the work of Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Foucault, “desire comes to signify the impossibility of the coherent subject itself” (1987: 6). The studies by feminist scholars of religion described above, which explore the subjective effects of asceticism, mystical encounters, and religious practices that cultivate humility, reveal that religion amply exposes this very impossibility.

Yet across all these studies, the split and fragmented subject is still more often studied in relation to society, the material world, social norms, and physical constraints and conditioning than as part of a relational dynamic, in the context of intimate and influential relationships such as friendship, marriage, parenting, kinship and others based on dependence, care, and the claim of enduring or intensely experienced affiliation. On this point, it is telling that in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, De Vries (2008) illustrates the limits of new materialism by citing works on metaphysics and natural theology but fails to mention studies

of intimacy or intersubjectivity. Although he borrows from Emmanuel Levinas to define religion as “nothing more (and nothing less) than the ‘curvature of social space,’” most of the forty-plus essays in his collection start with the fact that the subject is socially conditioned. This means that they do not explore *how* subjects come to be and it ensures, yet again, that the dynamics of private relationships, formative as they are of subjectivity, seem insignificant. A notable exception is Veena Das’ “If This Be Magic . . . : Excursions into Contemporary Hindu Lives,” a richly psychological analysis of the

extremely complex network of relations in which the desire of the person (man or woman), the desire of the deity, the evidence of *mantras* as either semantic or phonetic strings, and the hidden meaning and use of objects can simultaneously actualize and reveal a particular relation to the divine as the devotee comes to comprehend it. (2008: 260)

Das’ attention to what she calls the “grammar of relatedness,” especially the adherent’s relation to the divine, provides a crucial corrective to the prevailing mode of analyzing ritual as performative.

Relationality may not loom large for those interested in materialism or ritual studies, or even yet in theoretical work on subjectivity. In recent years, it has, however, garnered some intellectual cachet in fields other than religious studies, primarily under the rubrics of sociability and intimacy. Historians in particular have used the former category to good effect to correct the limitations of political history, by studying the link between social transformation and self-orientation (see above all Knott 2009). Intimacy was the subject of an award-winning issue of *Critical Inquiry* (1998), subsequently published as a stand-alone volume (2000), edited by cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant. The aim, according to Berlant, is to understand how the public sphere is influenced by personal affect. This cannot be understood apart from personal affiliations and relationships. With essays by scholars of philosophy, literature, cultural studies, history, anthropology, art history, and political science, Berlant’s edited volume analyzes the power dynamics of discourse and how aspirations to shared narratives and emancipating forms of love endure, even as they are undone by neglect, violence, and recurring assertions of failure. Intimacy is important, in other words, because although it most often reiterates convention, it can also be the space for imagining or enacting alternatives.

In another example, the grand resources of psychoanalysis are on display in Adam Phillips’s and Leo Bersani’s *Intimacies* (2008), where

the co-authors argue that self-love is a powerful and destructive force, not easily manipulated by rational directives or the hegemony of public discourse or disciplinary practices. And the impressive capacity of queer theory to expose different relational possibilities is showcased in Tim Dean's recent work, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009), which argues that dangerous gay male sex reveals something otherwise difficult to see about the allure of personal vulnerability and how it might motivate group formation and action.

Recent work in anthropology has begun to theorize intimacy and meaning again, after decades when theoretical work focused instead on social structures and bodily practices. In a study of contemporary Christians in the Philippines, for example, Fenella Cannell argues that the people she studies present an alternative to the widespread tendency to understand identity either as a form of being or as a cumulative result of one's action, because for her subjects identity is instead relationally constructed ("conducted through the making and remaking of potentially transformative relationships with others" and, in particular, "through the making of asymmetric relations with human and supernatural superiors" [1999: 248]). Elizabeth Povinelli's work, *Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (2006), explores the ties of kinship and friendship that she, an anthropologist, forged with indigenous people in Australia and with people in the United States who identify with or as radical faeries. This study demonstrates how forms of intimacy in these communities interact with, but do not simply replicate, the modes of freedom and constraint that governance systems encourage or impose.

The focus on intimacy and intimate relationships in the studies discussed above corrects the tendency in body and society studies to focus on disciplinary practices and discursive control. The study of intimate relationships between people who claim one another as family, friends, parents, children, lovers, or dependents deepens the study of power by showing how power is relationally internalized, enacted, and transformed, and by exploring the multiple ways that the desire manifest in these relational exchanges can elude conscious control and social containment, with destructive and formative consequences for individuals and society alike.

In religious studies, however, relatively few have as yet followed the call in Robert Orsi's most recent book, *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005), to think of religion as relationship. In this work, Orsi disavows the quest for meaning that animates the study of lived religion, and repudiates the still-common scholarly notion that religion is "a medium for explaining, understanding, and modeling reality." Instead of describing the alternative with the vocabulary of lived religion,

ritualization, or embodiment—all categories strongly associated with his earlier work—he invokes the encompassing notion of relationships. “All cultural idioms,” he observes, “are intersubjective, including and especially religious ones,” and religion is best understood as a “network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together” (2005: 2). These human–divine relationships involve all the complexities of human–human relationships, including realities of power, social diversity, and the “impress of history” (2005: 3). Thus the study of religion necessarily involves understanding how people configure themselves in intimate relationships such as friendship, marriage, kinship alliances, or erotic unions.

This attention to relationships brings the study of body and society back to its roots. Before Peter Brown and Michel Foucault embarked on their study of sexuality—motivated, as they explained, not by the desire to understand regulatory systems but in the quest to understand the formation of subjectivity—there was Brown’s study of the power of intimate relationships in *Augustine of Hippo*, a book that Michel Foucault knew almost by heart (Eribon 1991: 313). The study of religious relationships will come of age when the theoretical excitement that made studies of the body, sex, gender, and disciplinary practices an occasion to expand our understanding of subjectivity might now inspire a similarly intense interest in patronage, kinship, friendship, parenting, and marriage—social configurations that structure personal human–divine as well as human–human relationships.

This may sound like a call for religionists to repudiate all that has been learned about social power in order to nestle in the sheltering embrace of personal experiences. Relationship, as Orsi observes, is a friendly word (2005: 4). As such, it seems to invite superficial analysis. To counter this misplaced fear of simplicity or naiveté, we could invoke Marx’s maxim that “the human essence is the ensemble of social relations” (1978: 145). Or recall Derrida’s study of the politics of friendship, which showed how a tradition of friendship stretching from Aristotle and Cicero to the French Revolution spawned democracy and how friendship, understood as a voluntary, exclusivist relationship, is thus a crucial resource for thinking about the competing demands of universality and particularity that continue to bedevil politics today (1997). A case has been made that recent interest in the politics of love fails to acknowledge the long history of love’s exclusions or to recognize the fact that those counted as enemies rather than neighbors or friends have little reason to believe love is a good basis for politics (Nirenberg 2008). Yet the problem is optimism about love’s transformative powers, not the attention to love in itself. So too, relationship seems like a

friendly word only insofar as the scholar's ear inclines toward friendly relationships, avoiding the unequal distribution of resources, the injustices, conflicts, aversions, repugnance, and rejection that relationships also entail. To study relationships, even intimate, intense, and enduring relationships, is to study not only love but also hate, not only growth but also loss, and not only nurturance but also violence.

"Let's face it," Judith Butler says. "We are undone by each other." If, as she says, we are bodies with necessarily porous boundaries, connected always to something other than and outside of ourselves, if sexuality is a mode of orientation toward others, and if we are entities formed in part through primary relations of dependency and attachment, we are relational beings, impossible to understand apart from the dynamics of relationality (Butler 2004: 19–33). Martha Nussbaum's 1990 work, *Love's Knowledge*, provided an unparalleled argument that literary sources were essential to moral philosophy precisely because they enabled a nuanced analysis of relationality. More recently, relationality has been invoked to explain how the relationship with a saint could both heal *and* deepen the wounds in a twentieth-century family (Orsi 2005); to demonstrate that a mystic's intimate encounters with God expose the ambiguities of bodily existence and gendered identity (Hollywood 2002a); to assess the ambivalent Catholic identity and nationalism exposed in a novelist's description of the complex relationship between characters (Fessenden 2007); or even to explore religion as the matrix of the real and the possible, a creative play of differences that Mark Taylor calls relationalism (Taylor 2007: 40). Amy Hungerford's bid to revive interest in religion and literature focuses on relationality in the texts she studies in order to argue that religion is above all a form of kinship, a mode of overcoming differences and forging commonality (cf., Furey 2010; Hungerford 2010).

What makes religious relationships—relationships construed in relation to divine as well as human beings—especially intriguing is the particular nuance and intensity of the way they combine the extraordinary and the ordinary, the normative and the transcendent. Studies focused on personal relationships can expose the complexity of how body, society, and subjectivity interact through an intimate, relational process of internalization, transformation, affirmation, and rejection. To advocate, as I do here, that the study of personal relationships ought to be central to the study of religion is to affirm the concern with subjectivity that originally motivated interest in body and society and to contend that this particular constellation of interests over the past thirty years has set the stage for exciting new studies of how religion is itself produced in and through intense, sustained relationships.

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