Relocating Religion(s)—Museality as a Critical Term for the Aesthetics of Religion: Introduction

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In this special issue we seek to study the multiple interfaces of religion and museal spaces as part of the European history of religion from the perspective of the aesthetics of religion by exploring the heuristic value of the key term museality. First formulated in the pioneering article of Hubert Cancik and Hubert Mohr, aesthetics of religion aims at a multi-paradigmatic perspective generating new analytical angles and bringing neglected aspects of religious traditions into focus. Based on Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s notion of aisthesis, the emerging academic field focuses its new analytic approach on the interplay between modes of sensuous forms of perception.

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3) This new field of study traces its roots to eighteenth century philosophical discussions of aisthesis by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1717–1762) as means of sensual and often synaesthetic knowing and draws on semiotics and symbol theories. For a historical account of the notion of aisthesis see Susanne Lanwerd, Religionsästhetik: Studien zum Verhältnis von Symbol und Sinnlichkeit (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002).
(including embodied knowledge as well as culturally distinct notions of beauty and the sublime), symbolic communication, material religion and the media of communication.

In Germany, aesthetics of religion as a field arose within the context of the cultural turn in the academic study of religion (Religionswissenschaft). Besides the work of Cancik/Mohr it is indebted to the work of the annual “Visible Religion,” edited by Hans G. Kippenberg during the 1980s. The emerging field aesthetics of religion has since taken up currently discussed somatic, performative, spatial, and iconic turns within cultural and media studies, while at the same time also opening up—although not uncontested—avenues towards natural sciences such as cognitive theory, neurology, physiology, and psychology in its quest for qualitative and quantitative analytical approaches to sensuous and somatic knowing. This movement within the field is balanced against the established tradition of (cultural) semiotics and its analysis of the construction of symbolic and embodied meaning. With its broad grounding in various current cultural theories and its rising self-reflexivity vis-à-vis contested analytical tools, aesthetics of religion can bundle these to open up a vista of new perspectives, questions, and research objects within the field of somatic experience, symbolic communication, sensuous knowing, and media of personal and public religiosity. In its fundamental rethinking of textual approaches in the study of religions, aesthetics of religion is beginning to offer new paradigmatic interpretations of religious vitality as opposed to current theories of secularisation in Europe. It may also advance to be a central theoretical body in post-phenomenological times in the study of religions.

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5) Jürgen Mohn, in his 2004 article, advocates the emerging field of aesthetics of religion as a new leading paradigm in the academic study of religion (Religionswissenschaft). In Mohn’s view, it is charged with replacing the phenomenological approaches to ensure the identity of the study of religion as an independent discipline. Cf. Jürgen Mohn, “Von der Religionsphänomenologie zur Religionsästhetik: Neue Ansätze einer systematischen Religionswissenschaft,” Münchner Theologische Zeitschrift 55 (2004), 300–309.