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On the Aesthetics of Interpreting Religious Life

Daniel Gold[*] *[drg4@cornell.edu]*

Abstract

This essay uses the domain of aesthetics to compare the study of religion with religion itself. Because writers on religion often attempt to communicate the depth they see in their materials, their enterprise can be comparable to that of artists. The aesthetics they characteristically employ derives from some dynamics of intellect and imagination that emerge from thinking about religious life.

Resumo

Este ensaio faz uso de idéias da estética para comparar o estudo da religião com a própria religião. Os que escrevem sobre religião muitas vezes tentam comunicar a profundidade que vêem em seus materiais. Neste sentido, a sua empresa pode ser comparável com a dos artistas. A estética que geralmente empregam deriva de certas dinâmicas do intelecto e da imaginação que emergem do pensamento sobre a vida religiosa.

Because historians of religion often seem to share little else than a fascination with the human depth of the material they study, the aesthetics of their writing may be more central to the institutional coherence of their field than many of them realize. What most of all engages their attention as a group are products of religious imagination - rituals and myths, human histories and historical dramas - all of which demand perceptive interpretation to be appreciated beyond specialist fields. Appraising one another's interpretations, further, they give due value to clarity in argument but find arguments *perceptive* to the extent that they appear to penetrate the imaginative depth of religious worlds. Like artists, then, writers whose aim is to interpret religious traditions are likely to find professional success to the extent that they make the depth they see in their material visible to others.

How do interpreters of religious life make manage this artistic feat? Depth of vision in writing on religion seems to take shape when a wide perspective is brought home through a sharp

* DANIEL GOLD is Professor of South Asian Religions at Cornell University and the author of *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religions: Modern Fascinations*.

focus. A wide perspective demands not only a broad theoretical point of view but also some felt sensitivity to the human dimensions of the religious materials at hand. A sharp focus can then offer a vivid example that makes the theoretical point clearly while engaging the reader's imagination enough to make the point seem humanly significant. The dynamic of the interplay between the reader's analytic and imaginative engagement with interpretive writing is, of course, determined by a number of variables, including the scope of the material and the universality of the story told: Do we hone in on one example or compare several? Are we trying primarily to characterize a tradition delimited by time and place or are we suggesting something general about the way religious traditions work? In all cases, however, it seems to be the interplay between the analytic and the imaginative itself that provides the aesthetic force. To understand the power of this interplay, we can turn to Kant's aesthetics of the sublime - explored by many scholars in the last decades[1] - and to its particular significance for scholars of religion.

The sublime, according to Kant, in contrast to the beautiful -- which "concerns the form" of a necessarily "bounded" object -- presents "*unboundedness*" (Kant's italics).[2] Effective interpretion of religious life, I think, offers readers some graspable sense of "unboundedness" by portraying others' religious worlds through a distinctive aesthetic dynamic of the type Kant describes. In writing on religion, the evocation of "unboundedness" is regularly possible because religion itself characteristically concerns significant life-boundaries, their ruptures, and dissolutions: people's recognition of their own mortality and that of those close to them; the dynamics through which individuals lose their limited sense of self in larger religious groups; most generally, the ways in which human beings come to terms with their own finitude in the face of forces that they cannot control.

Like those moderns of many stripes disengaged from traditional religions but lately drawn to the sublime, interpreters of religious life have been struck by the ways in which particular objects in the world can present that sense of the boundless historically offered by religious traditions. But the latter also often still retain a fondness for the idea, at least, of religion -- which makes the objects in the world that occupy them become religious traditions themselves, now taken as human phenomena. Instead of seeing these traditions as revealing

1 See, for example, J.-F. LYOTARD, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* and L. POLAND, The Idea of the Holy and the History of the Sublime. In: *Journal of Religion* 72 (1992): 175-97.

2 I. KANT, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 23:225, p. 98.

a transcendent meaning in any traditional sense, they tend to find in them a profound play of human limits. Kant's aesthetics can help us understand how this play of limits, when presented effectively, can affect a reader's own sense of finitude.

Aesthetic response, for Kant, is located in the interrelationship between two kinds of human psychological faculties: imagination, which appeals to our senses; and the faculties of the intellect -- understanding *(Verstand)*, and reason *(Vernunft)*. Aesthetic experience arises when these two broad kinds of faculties -- imaginative and intellectual -- find themselves in free flowing engagement around some perceived object. Beauty derives from the play of imagination with "understanding," which for Kant entails here not discursive thought but concepts of form -- the shapes in a painting, say, that together may freely combine into differently nuanced images. The sublime, by contrast, derives from a play of the imagination with reason itself, which includes ideas and logical reckoning.[3]

It is the mutual engagement of logical argument and imaginative vision that, I think, gives most interpretive writing on religion its characteristic appeal. Together, the two may produce in the reader the gasp that occurs when reason, playing (often hard and long) with ambiguous religious images, finally grasps what may be a coherent meaning behind them. The crux of the sublime for Kant, however, is not in that gasp of recognition, but in a moment of profound bewilderment that may precede it -- in a tempest just before the calm. And the products of religious imagination, often created in response to acute paradox, may evoke that moment of bewilderment in a very powerful way.

Crucial to any high aesthetic response, according to Kant, is that the engagement between the imaginative and intellectual faculties really be free, without predetermined ends. In the case of the sublime, that freedom is shattering: imagination and reason enter into a dynamic that seems to go beyond the limits of either: reason cannot conceive all that imagination suggests; imagination cannot present to itself all that reason says is possible. But the intensity of the engagement is also stimulating: pushed to their limits and beyond, reason is at once exhilarated and exhausted, imagination stretched and then suddenly relaxed. It is in the moment occurring when our cognitive powers are thus pressed beyond their capacities that Kant locates the characteristic experience of the sublime. This is, to be sure, a temporary experience. Eventually we recover, "coming to our (imaginative) senses" and "finding our

3 Ibid., 26:256, p. 113.

(rational) wits" -- perhaps also uttering a gasp of new understanding as we do so. Providing a momentary peak, the experience of the sublime can appear as a kind of revelation that makes things seem different from before.

As the loss of an accustomed sense of self followed by a realization of continuing existence, the experience of the sublime is comparable to a religious experience. Engaged together, reason and imagination have played with the limits of an individual's perception, still leaving him or her whole, but perhaps a little changed. This results in the feelings characteristically evoked by the sublime: wonder, awe, seriousness, respect -- not the more characteristically delightful feelings evoked by the beautiful. "The beautiful charms us," wrote Kant in his first published work on aesthetics, while "the sublime moves us."[4] Interpretive writers move their readers by engaging their intellects and imaginations together around problems of religious life. Ideally, their data provide imaginative roots and a basis for focus, and their analyses offer intellectual breadth and sharp insight.

The dynamics through which authors bring their data and analysis together are peculiar to different types of materials and authorial sensibilities; indeed, there is a sense that each piece of interpretive writing, as an aesthetic object, is unique. To be sure, not all works regularly take readers to that moment of imaginative overload where Kant located the crux of sublime experience; but then again, religious materials don't generally take most people who revere them to the extreme of experience, either. But as do many theological treatises and metaphysical maps for people involved in traditions, much interpretive writing does in fact manage to bring reason and imagination together into extended and vigorous play -- if not always to dizzying heights, sometimes with a sense of overpowering depth. Just as religious traditions remain broadly compelling through some conjunction of vivid representation and believable narrative, not the occasional mystical flash, what is crucial for aesthetically effective writing, I believe, is less the transitory sublime moment than the sustained maintenance of *both* imaginative pull *and* rational acuity. When no suggestive imagination is evoked, we will not respond to a religiohistorical object as profound; without rational sharpness, we will not see it as clearly true. In the first case we come up with an arid accounting, with a subject not just dead and on the table but detached from its dreams and history, too; in the second we are left with an airy presentation, "mere" phenomenology at its

4 I. KANT, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, cited by Pluhar in his translation of I. KANT, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 98, note 4.

worst. Writing on religion is aesthetically powerful, I think, to the extent that imaginative and rational factors are both fully present, vital, and integral in their own terms.[5] And if the two really are separately coherent, they are in fact likely to come together in a way that is not predetermined, to play together freely in a way that can potentially elicit a Kantian sublime.

The particular play of psychological faculties Kant identified as the sublime, moreover, can help dignify interpretive writers' much maligned attraction to the exotic. For the sublime demands imagination in interaction with intellectualized reason, not simply with the ordered perception demanded by the beautiful. True, like readers of travelers' reports -- and *National Enquirer* articles -- serious students of religion are regularly fascinated by the apparently inexplicable customs of others. But the active presence of reasoned analysis differentiates the religiohistorical sublime of interpretive writing from the cheap thrills of the popular exotic. The popular exotic merely titillates the imagination, but doesn't seriously engage it with analytic thought. Bizarre examples are presented, but they aren't seriously explained: "strange but true!" Interpretive writers, by contrast, try to put their strange examples into reasoned perspective.

Indeed, when stories presented to us are bizarre to the point of unbelievablity, the result seems to be not an aesthetic of the sublime, but one closer to what Tzvetan Todorov analyses as "the fantastic."[6] Todorov defines fantastic narratives as those in which *apparently* supernatural events intrude into the everyday world. The "apparently" here is important. For Todorov locates the fantastic *between* the "uncanny" -- where all that seems mysterious can be reduced to a totally rational explanation -- and the "marvelous", where supernatural beings really do appear in this world. By presenting ambivalent perspectives, the fantastic keeps us in doubt as to whether the apparently supernatural occurrences really are so. A successful tale of the fantastic never reaches a resolution; and since reason is finally not quite sure of what the imaginative representation is, it can't really manage to penetrate it. The two poles of reason and imagination tantalize each another but don't come together decisively enough for a judgment to be made.

5 For an earlier formulation of this thesis see D. GOLD, The Paradox in Writing on Religion. In: *Harvard Theological Review* 83, no. 3 (1990): 321-32.

6 T. TODOROV, *The Fantastic*.

Interpretive writing on religion, by contrast, ideally brings the two poles together with some decisiveness. In so doing, moreover, it leads us to a definite perspective, if not always a definitive statement about religious life. This means that for the aesthetics of religiohistorical writing to work, the reader must see its analytic pole as grounded in some sense of objective reality. Our aesthetic of interpreting religious life thus necessarily relies on some version of a science of religion: to move us, our intellect must grasp a proposition perceived as somehow true. Examining the aesthetics of writing on religion along these lines then eventually leads us to questions of truth, objectivity, and knowledge.[7]

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7 On questions of truth and objectivity in this religiohistorical aesthetics, see D. GOLD, *Aesthetics and Analysis in Writing on Religion*, chs. 6-7.