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AVOIDING THE  
TYRANNY OF  
MORPHOLOGY; OR,  
WHY COMPARE?

I am a student of Christianity in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries whose recent scholarly work has focused on northern Germany. But I spent five weeks in India in fall 2009, hoping to immerse myself as far as possible in Hindu religious culture. As a medievalist, I expected some comparisons to the European Middle Ages to emerge. Two years later, while I was discussing this with a distinguished historian of modern Europe, she suddenly turned to me and asked: “What do you get out of this? I don’t understand what you’re learning about the Western Middle Ages that you didn’t already know.” That turns out to be a profound question. It challenged me to think harder than I had done before about making comparisons. This article is an effort to provide a provisional and partly autobiographical answer to the question, what do scholars of religion do when they compare things, and why do they do it?

In 1928 at the Sixth International Congress of Historical Sciences, the medievalist Marc Bloch made a plea for comparative history. But as John Elliott has pointed out recently in his elegant little book *History in the Mak-*

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ing, the plea was pretty much ignored for more than fifty years.<sup>1</sup> Historians had other things on their minds for much of the twentieth century. It seems to me, however, that comparisons crop up more frequently now in European Studies, in large part owing to the pressure we all feel to globalize either spatially or temporally—that is, to study world cultures or write “deep” (also called “big”) history.<sup>2</sup> References to other cultures, even when they are only what scholars have called “soft” or “asymmetrical” comparisons or illuminating asides,<sup>3</sup> can help us claim that we are attuned to the challenges of adjusting our teaching and our scholarship to what we rather blindly used to refer to as “the rest of the world.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the academic study of history, comparison has long been at the heart of a number of social science fields, in which sociologists and economists—especially those of a somewhat earlier generation such as Shmuel Eisenstadt, Barrington Moore, Douglas North, Robert Bellah, and Charles Tilly—have sought to ferret out large-scale developmental trends. Such generalizing studies have been useful to humanists in posing research agendas to be pursued or hypotheses to be tested.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, efforts to establish uni-

<sup>1</sup> John H. Elliott, *History in the Making* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 168. George M. Fredrickson, “The Status of Comparative History,” in *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 35, emphasizes how little comparative history has been done by American historians.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hunt, “Globalization and Time,” in *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, ed. Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 199–215. See also the first three essays in Benjamin Z. Kedar, ed., *Explorations in Comparative History* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2009). For a perceptive critique of the recent turn to “deep” or neurohistory, see Ruth Leys, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (2011): 434–72.

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Kocka, “Comparative History: Methodology and Ethos,” in Kedar, *Explorations*, 33. Kocka’s “asymmetrical” is Kedar’s “soft” comparison—i.e., study that “focus[es] on one entity but widen[s] a historian’s horizons by having recourse to secondary literature pertaining to another entity . . . so as to gain a wider perspective, think up new questions and elicit insights” (Kedar, *Explorations*, vi).

<sup>4</sup> Even such contrasts can be effective in warding off facile generalizations about human development or underlining the point of a complex analysis. I give two examples. When Patricia Crone, writing in *Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, explains the contrast between the effects of conversion to Islam in the Arab empire and those of conversion to Christianity in the French and British empires, the comparison becomes shorthand for explaining the difference between imamate and nation-state. When Peter Brown, in *Through the Eye of a Needle*, discusses the paradoxical implications of “detachment” in late antique Christianity, he uses the parallel to Chinese Buddhist ideas to suggest that in both cases detachment provided escape from and justification for the social and religious use of wealth. See Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 16, 170; Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 462–63, 523.

<sup>5</sup> On this, see Elliott, *History in the Making*. For an example of historical work that responds to the models of economists without succumbing to them, see Jessica L. Goldberg’s treatment of Avner Greif in *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and*

versal developmental patterns (as in, e.g., recent discussions of the “axial age” in the history of religions) have not appealed to most humanists, and to consider them further would take me too far afield from my inquiry here.<sup>6</sup>

Ever since the 1960s, however, humanists have been fascinated by the sort of comparisons cultural anthropologists have undertaken, although they have been wary—as anthropologists themselves have been wary—of any tendency either to essentialize cultures in defining their differences or to universalize cultural responses, institutions, or phenomena as a basis for finding similarity. Moreover, there are humanistic fields such as comparative literature or comparative religion whose very titles incorporate comparison. Recent theoretical discussion in these fields and in other areas of the humanities such as literary criticism and art history has been skeptical of any universalizing conclusions, tending rather to assume that the point of comparison should be to elucidate difference. Perceived similarities—whether formal, structural, phenomenological, or functional—are often suspected of being either an imposition (even if a subconscious one) by Western cultures on non-Western ones or a result of superficial perceptions.

Sometimes the very suspicion of similarity has become theoretically useful. Art historians, for example, are currently fascinated by the category of “pseudomorphism”—that is, things that have “formal similarities where there is no similarity of artistic intent.”<sup>7</sup> The point of such an analytical category is to jar the viewer into new response by the stimulus of unexpected—or false—analogy. Indeed, the stimulus is based in a realization that, as Donald Judd put it, “a lot of things look alike, but they are not necessarily very much alike.”<sup>8</sup>

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*Their Business World*, Cambridge Studies in Economic History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12–14 and passim.

<sup>6</sup> On the “axial age,” see Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Glen W. Bowersock, “A Different Turning Point for Mankind?” *New York Review of Books* 60, no. 8 (2013): 56–58.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of this, see Amy Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone, 2012), 10–11. Earlier discussions of the phenomenon of pseudomorphism that put the issue on the table but treat it differently are Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture: Four Lectures on Its Changing Aspects from Ancient Egypt to Bernini*, ed. H. W. Janson (New York: Abrams, 1992), 26–27; and Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Split Representation in the Art of Asia and America,” in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Schoepf (New York: Basic, 1963), 245–68. The point of the false similarity, as Powell sees it, is to stimulate the interpreter to ask new questions by decontextualizing the objects. To Panofsky and Lévi-Strauss, the point is to ask why the parallels or analogies occur. In considering this, I have been influenced by the contribution of Yve-Alain Bois to the workshop “Postcontextualism” (see acknowledgment note above).

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Powell, *Depositions*, 11, from Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 163. To Panofsky, pseudomorphism is a process: “the emergence of a form A, morphologically analogous to, or even identical with, a form B, yet entirely unrelated to it from a genetic point of view” (*Tomb Sculpture*, 26–27).

In literary circles, recent consideration of figures of speech, especially of metaphor, has focused on the effect achieved by the difference of the things compared. In such discussion, metaphor is understood to emphasize what is absent as much as what is present in the comparandum, and the two terms of the analogy are understood to pull against each other, illuminating through tension and difference.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps aware of such trends and in any case conditioned by their inevitably specialized and narrowly focused initial training, cultural historians have tended to distrust perceived similarities, despite their newfound desire to expand their activity as professionals in “deep” or global directions. The American historian George Fredrickson, in the introduction to his essay collection *The Comparative Imagination*, has even queried whether comparison is possible in the humanities given what he sees as postmodernism’s stress on “the particular and unique.”<sup>10</sup>

Anglophone religionists have been particularly concerned to stress difference, even incommensurability, between religious practices and traditions. Finding it difficult to escape from the worry that their subject matter is inevitably and insidiously inflected by Western Protestant assumptions, they try to avoid universalizing categories such as “secularization” or “religion” itself, fearing that whatever they discover, it is somehow their modern Protestant or post-Protestant selves. For example, in a fine volume on religion and materiality published in 2010, much of which deals with non-Western topics, David Morgan considers it necessary to open his introduction with a lengthy and anxious survey of discussions, mostly from the 1970s, of why the Christian concept of “belief” is inappropriate.<sup>11</sup> Recent treatment of devotional movements within Hinduism has asked repeatedly whether the category of “devotion” (*bhakti*) is a Western and universalizing importation—a colonial creation that mirrors only modern British researchers and not Indian history.<sup>12</sup> With his characteristic poetic intensity, Indologist David Shulman puts what

<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400–circa 1204* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 109–10, has some useful remarks on various literary theorists of metaphor. See also James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief*, with a new introduction (New York: Picador, 2010), 51–52 and 109.

<sup>10</sup> Fredrickson, *Comparative Imagination*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1–6. See also Sam Gill, “The Academic Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 4 (1994): 965–75; Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: Material Religion—How Things Matter,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 3; and Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2–3.

<sup>12</sup> John Stratton Hawley, *The Bhakti Movement: From Where? Since When?* India International Centre Occasional Publication 10 (Delhi: India International Centre, 2009).

seems to be the current scholarly goal thus: “what is at stake is singularity. One pares away likeness and is, with a little luck, left with the unique.”<sup>13</sup>

The theoretical discussions I have just mentioned are quite diverse; I do not imply that they focus on the same issue. Nonetheless, there seems to lurk behind them an assumption that the comparanda with which one starts are in some way given or obvious. Thus, the important move is ferreting out and delineating difference. Similarity is either an obvious parallelism or a sort of trick or illusion; the goal is to move beyond it. One starts with two red squares or two female idols, two mystics or two terms in a poetic phrase (“love” and “red, red rose,” to take a banal example). The challenge is to say why the squares or the idols are not the same, how the mystics’ experiences are in some way different (because of a factor such as theology or gender), or how the poet achieves appropriate tension by juxtaposing incommensurate or dissimilar things. Find the “look-alikes,” whether they are pseudomorphic or not; exploring the similarities will jar one into the difference one is looking for.

Even more than their fellow humanists, scholars in religious studies have tended to assume that finding the “likes” is the easy part. The question, “how do you know where to start?” is seldom raised. If you are interested in women and religion, compare goddess figures; if you are interested in idolatry or iconoclasm, compare idols. Depending on your question, the choice of comparanda would appear to follow quite easily.<sup>14</sup> But choosing comparanda is more complicated, it seems to me, than it initially appears. Unless we are careful, it may be circular, on the one hand, or unproductive, on the other. If we choose statues of idols to compare, we will find differences in them qua statues; if we choose female mystics, we will find them different qua mystics. Conversely, if we compare a hand painted by Rembrandt with a hand calling the reader to attention in the margin of a medieval manuscript, we will find them different but not different qua hands or qua “art” or perhaps qua any other interesting category; the comparison may thus be a waste of time. In such moves, we

<sup>13</sup> David Shulman, *Spring, Heat, Rains: A South Indian Diary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 196.

<sup>14</sup> Elliott, *History in the Making*, 176, comments: “Can apples and oranges usefully be compared? They may be incomparable where matters of taste are concerned, but nevertheless there are obvious points of comparison when it comes to examining their relative nutritional value, or the methods and cost of production. This would give some point to their comparison, whereas there is little to be gained from a comparison of apples and electric light bulbs, even if there may be rough similarities of size, shape and weight.” But if one were interested in surfaces and light refraction, one might well compare apples and light bulbs. Moreover why choose apples and oranges for nutrition or apples and light bulbs for refraction? To say simply that it depends on the question does not seem to go far enough. Wendy Doniger in *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, rev. ed. with a new preface, Columbia Classics in Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), acknowledges this problem when she asserts that all choices for comparison are arbitrary. But even if the comparanda are arbitrary, she argues, one still learns something from the comparison.

may have assumed an answer not because of the variety of the material before us but by the way we have posed the question. We have assumed that statues are crucial to religious representation, that mysticism is a central factor in female devotional experience, or that four fingers and a thumb are the important aspect of a certain shape drawn on a surface. But is this the best way to explore religious presence or devotional response or hands?

I do not mean by this to argue that we can escape from building some assumptions about answers into our questions. That is how research proceeds. But I want to argue that, as my historian colleague suggested about my forays into Indian history, the issue of comparison is more difficult than we usually admit. Even before we come to delineating differences, we need to think far more carefully than we often have about the likenesses we start with. Morphology or similitude—that is, “looking like”—may not be the best basis for a comparative study that must, in the final analysis, consider both similarity and difference to be problematic if it is to illuminate either side of a comparison.<sup>15</sup> The tyranny of morphology—whether pseudo or not—has operated too long in comparative study.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, morphology is not the only category that has operated tyrannically to obscure more subtle questions. Gender, function, and even some vague sense of “psychological need” have also been taken as obvious, and hence unexamined, points of departure. For example, comparing possessed women or apotropaic objects can seem a natural move, needing no methodological justification, yet in differing cultural contexts, it may be far from obvious whether a given phenomenon should be denominated “spirit possession” or a given object an “amulet.” My discussion here focuses on the problem that a concentration on morphology, shape, or similitude can entail, but I am not arguing that we should reject comparison, even formal comparison. Rather, I argue both for making explicit the grounds—formal, functional, structural, psychological, cognitive, or devotional—of any comparison drawn and for admitting that the choice of a starting point in any study that juxtaposes two objects, phenomena, events, or developments is complicated and needs more explicit consideration than it is usually given.

<sup>15</sup> Of course the idea of pseudomorphism may get around this problem by proposing, first, that looking like something else may trigger a deeper probing into what the thing is exactly because it is not what it looks like and, second, that formal similarities between things that are not the same may also trigger more sophisticated interpretations. Nonetheless, the problem of how we know that two things are “like” remains. However convinced one might be by Panofsky’s explanation of the different processes by which Punic and medieval tomb sculptures came to be, one might not see as much similarity as he does between the two cases of three-dimensional figures on tombs; see Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, 52, 54.

<sup>16</sup> I owe the phrase “the tyranny of morphology” to Christopher Heuer and thank him for it. I thank him also for the opportunity to discuss these issues with his class at Princeton in spring 2013.

In the remainder of this article, I wish to explore three examples that demonstrate various approaches to choosing comparanda.<sup>17</sup> The first example makes an obvious choice of things to compare—one that has often been made by students of comparative religion. It takes statues of female sacred figures that not only “look alike” but also seem to behave similarly and moves in the conventional way to argue for difference. My point here is that the difference we discover may be so radical as to suggest that we did not choose the proper similarity to start with. The second considers a Western medieval devotional object that is frequently interpreted by modern viewers as a sexual body part but that raises acutely the question whether this modern interpretation is a case of “pseudomorphism.” I compare this image, understood against its medieval background, to a Hindu devotional statue not because the Western and non-Western images are like each other but because, taken in their religious contexts, they raise similar issues. The two cases push us to ask what it means to think one sees morphological “likeness” and to ruminate on how misleading it can be to assume, without sophisticated knowledge of context, that shapes or forms are either like or unlike. The third example returns to consider, at least in part, the material of the first. I now juxtapose Hindu and Christian devotional objects in order to show that things morphologically similar are not necessarily similar in phenomenological or religious impact; there may, however, be comparanda that are not morphologically similar, the exploration of which can push our understanding of objects to a deeper level than do either of the first two cases. In other words, what literary scholars find in metaphor—that is, morphological unlikes juxtaposed to illuminate while pulling against each other—may be a more useful way of probing the meaning of things than simply either exploring or rejecting morphological or pseudomorphological similarity. But we must be able to say why those particular comparanda are chosen in the first place.

I begin with processions of images, a phenomenon often explored by students of religion and one on which I bring my own Indian trip to bear. In his now-classic study, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, Robert Orsi describes the festival of Our Lady of Mount Carmel as practiced in the middle of the last century in New York City’s East Harlem.<sup>18</sup> As he explains, a colorful replica, which looks nothing like the church’s primary statue of the Madonna, was used in most years for the outdoor procession. On the 100th anniversary of the church’s founding, which Orsi himself attended, the Madonna herself—that is, the statue that usually resides in a niche over the main altar—came out into

<sup>17</sup> All three cases are examples of what Kedar calls “soft” comparison. See Kedar, *Explorations*, vi.

<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

the streets. On all festivals dedicated to her, however, Mary of Mount Carmel is present, whether she or a replica processes. She is carried up and down every block in Italian Harlem, and considerable effort is exerted to make sure each street is covered. Penitents walk at the rear of the procession. The devout, among whom women are especially numerous, laugh, cry, sing, and reach out to touch the statue's robes. Once the tour of Harlem is completed, the Madonna is greeted with fireworks, and when she returns to the church, gifts of money, gold, candles, and ex-votos are laid at her feet in thanksgiving for miracles worked, evils and adversities overcome. The female divine, pure and yet a mother, enacts, says Orsi, a paradoxical "psychodrame" of disintegration and reintegration, of the suffering of exile and the victory of return.<sup>19</sup>

In her recent study of reliquaries, *Strange Beauty*, art historian Cynthia Hahn describes a similar festival at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in the Camargue in the south of France, which she attended in October 2003. After a sermon and a series of prayers and hymns, two large carved and painted female figures in a small boat are carried from the church where they usually reside above and behind the main altar to a nearby beach and held above the waves, after which, escorted by the crowd of worshippers, they are returned to the church. The festival commemorates the miraculous arrival from the Holy Land, in a boat without sail or oars, of the saints Mary Jacobus and Mary Salome, relatives of the Virgin Mary, who were supposedly present with her at the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Most scholarly considerations of such practices use anthropological models, especially those of Victor and Edith Turner, to stress the way in which processions move adherents from ordinary time through moments of special encounter with the power of an "other," thereby creating communities and reinforcing boundaries.<sup>21</sup> Recently they also tend to employ theories, such as those of Alfred Gell, that see such images as "living pictures" or agents, not symbols or signs pointing to an "other" but themselves presences; they suggest as well that the processions are not so much ritual reenactments of partic-

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>20</sup> Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 145–47. Online searches produce many other examples of present-day Catholic veneration of female statues, paraded through streets or countryside, decorated by enthusiastic adherents with flowers, jewelry, money, and so forth, and returned again to their niches. The procession of the Madonna delle Grazie through Boston's North End on July 8, 2012, is only one such case of Mary's enthusiastic adherents and her costly adornments. See <http://northendwaterfront.com/2012/07/madonna-delle-grazie-2012-procession-through-bostons-north-end-photos/>. And for another example, see <http://northendwaterfront.com/2012/08/madonna-della-cava-2012-feast-sunday-procession-photos/>. Note that each of these Marys is particular, with her own feast day and personality, yet each is the Virgin Mary with her full power to bring rewards and accept petitions.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Joseph Sciorra, "'We Go Where the Italians Live': Religious Processions as Ethnic and Territorial Markers in a Multi-Ethnic Brooklyn Neighborhood," in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert Orsi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 310–40.

ular moments in a sacred story (although there may be hints of this) as participations in the immediate and palpable power of holy figures.<sup>22</sup>

When I attended the festival of Durga Puja (the word *puja* means “the ritual of worship”) in Varanasi in October 2009, much of what I experienced seemed parallel to Catholic saints-day processions.<sup>23</sup> At the height of the festival, statues of the ten-armed goddess Durga, mother of Shiva’s children and warrior against the buffalo demon, were carried through the streets on litters borne on the backs of men or on flatbed trucks; music, often from boom boxes, blared; faces focused so intensely on the goddess herself that, although squeezed in among thousands of men (and they were mostly men), I felt not so much out of place as invisible.<sup>24</sup> Gorgeously clothed with jewels, flowers, and gauzy draperies, like Madonnas paraded today in Harlem or in Boston’s North End, and bearing the same sort of bright, fixed, plastic smile, Durga made her way through the streets of Varanasi down to the river Ganga. And Durga Puja was ushered in over several days, as was the festival of the Madonna of 115th Street, by the preparation of special foods and the setting up of booths for festival-related goods. Images of Durga, constructed from river clay by artisans in special rites, were painted and adorned with clothes and jewels and worshipped with dance, flowers, and song in the temporary temples or *pandals* made for them and found on hundreds of street corners for days before the final ritual procession.<sup>25</sup>

Such rites can be analyzed with many of the same anthropological theories that scholars use to discuss Catholic rituals in North America or Europe. Warrior yet mother, Durga can seem to encapsulate the paradox of the fierce and the gentle, of that which both divides and defends community, in ways that parallel the Madonna of 115th Street as understood by Robert Orsi. Religious processions in Varanasi as in Harlem or Provence can be understood to move adherents through the liminal space theorized by the Turners. Both the hundreds of Durgas in Varanasi and the Marys in Boston, New York, or Provence are each fully a holy presence, although usually not in a generalized way.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Hahn, *Strange Beauty*, 145–47.

<sup>23</sup> Annual temple ceremonies, in which the image is taken from the temple and paraded through the village, would provide an even closer parallel to the festivals of Catholic saints. But I did not see such festivals in India in 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Rachel Fell McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 197–99, points out that Puja festivals have traditionally been male dominated, although the celebrations appeal to both sexes.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, 1–5, for the process of awakening the goddess.

<sup>26</sup> One must be careful not to push analytical categories too hard in asking “Who is there?” Some of the participants in Catholic festivals would say that Mary herself is present; others would insist that this Mary is their particular Mary and that other places have other Marys. For similar Hindu reactions, see n. 31 below.

The Marys are specific Marys (the Mary of Mount Carmel or the Madonna delle Grazie of Boston's North End)—instantiations of specific appearances of Our Lady more than of Mary herself—just as Indian temple statues are often not so much Ganesha or Hanuman, for example, as a specific aspect of Ganesha or Hanuman tied to a particular geographical place. Thus both Durga in Varanasi and Our Lady of Mount Carmel are examples of the complex way in which part is whole in many religions, whether one expresses this in the technical phrase “the distinctive devotional logic of presence” or as what I have elsewhere called the “concomitant habit of mind.”<sup>27</sup> Each is an example of what many scholars these days, in the current enthusiasm for “materiality” or “thing theory,” characterize as the living power of images or the agency of objects.<sup>28</sup> The words of J. P. Waghorne, describing Hindu images and temples, could equally well be used by current students of Western images. Waghorne says that images, “freed from their status as inanimate things,” thus gain “power to transform and to re-create their creators.”<sup>29</sup> In similar words, Byzantine historian Glenn Peers argues that a separation of object and presence is an illusion: “a reading of late antique animism would view all objects as potentially communicative subjects. This . . . is a relational position: that is, all human and material things relate in transformative and productive ways, and they do so . . . as equal participants.”<sup>30</sup>

And yet there are not only hundreds of small differences between Durga Puja and summer festivals of the Virgin Mary; there is a large and glaring one. The Marys leave their churches and return to them; even Mary Jacobus and Mary Salome in the Camargue, whose miraculous arrival by water is celebrated hundreds of years later, merely visit the ocean before returning to their niche over the altar. But Durga, made from the clay of the river Ganga, returns to the sacred waters.<sup>31</sup> The hundreds of Durgas I saw traveling to the river in

<sup>27</sup> Orsi, *Madonna of 115th Street*, xvi; and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone, 2011), 208–15.

<sup>28</sup> For bibliography on this, see Caroline W. Bynum, “The Sacrality of Things: An Inquiry into Divine Materiality in the Christian Middle Ages,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 78 (2013): 3–18, esp. nn. 1–2, <http://itq.sagepub.com/content/78/1/3>. And see also Alain Dierkens, Gil Bartoleyns, and Thomas Golsenne, eds., *La performance des images*, Problèmes d'histoire des religions 19 (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Joanne Punzo Waghorne, “The Hindu Gods in a Split-Level World: The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Suburban Washington, D.C.,” in Orsi, *Gods of the City*, 128.

<sup>30</sup> Glenn Peers, “Object Relations: Theorizing the Late Antique Viewer,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 988. Peers's and Waghorne's way of looking at religious objects is currently very widespread and tends to be applied across cultures. For a nuanced critique of this, see Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 94–102.

<sup>31</sup> McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing*, 4, says that priests invite the goddess to leave before the images are immersed. But her description on page 5 of women bidding farewell to the goddess and offering her sweets before she goes to the river suggests that it is not clear whether she really departs.

Varanasi were, at the end of the festival, thrown in. When I journeyed the next day on the river, I saw plasticized body parts, bits of gauzy clothing, bright faces, and fingernails floating and disintegrating in the water. One cannot imagine throwing the Madonna of Mt. Carmel into the Hudson River or the two Marys of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer into the ocean. However much the Marys of Catholic worship may represent the paradox of fertility and purity, they do not come from or return to mud.

Although a number of Hindu festivals take statues from temples in ritual performance and return them thereto in what seems parallel to Western Christian processions, in certain crucial Hindu festivals, such as the Durga Puja I attended, the goddess figure returns to the organic world from which she arose. As David Shulman puts it, describing another goddess festival that takes place in Andhra Pradesh over many months:

Twice a year, the goddess Paidi Talli, "Golden Mother," has her festival. . . . Like other goddesses, Paidi Talli undergoes a natural, annual cycle. In May she emerges—as a spark in the hands of one of her devotees—from the turbid water of the Big Lake. She is then carried, latent, in mud drawn from the lake, to her main temple. . . . There she will incubate and ferment, infusing a series of clay and metal pots with her essence, for some three months. Afterward these pots, a full form of the goddess, will make the rounds . . . preparing the city for her arrival in yet another form. In early October, she comes in a dream to her chief priest and informs him that she is "growing" as a tree in such-and-such a grove. . . . This tree will be worshiped, recognized as Paidi Talli, and gently uprooted.<sup>32</sup>

Or, as Linda Hess explains, describing the annual dramatic performance of the ancient Ramayana story: "The belief that God is everywhere— . . . that God is in you and me or a stone, that God has physical and mental attributes, that he takes on those attributes to make himself accessible to his devotees—is . . . broadly inculcated and deeply imbibed. . . . 'Symbolic' is too flat a word for this type of consciousness. . . . In this universe . . . God enters the shape of Ramchandra, Ramchandra enters the body of the boy, . . . the earth enters the form of a cow."<sup>33</sup>

Western Christian imagery is, of course, often organic; the doctrine of creation underlines God's making of and love for the world. Theologians such as Bonaventure and charismatic reformers such as Francis of Assisi saw God's footprints in the entire created world. Francis, as is well known, preached to birds and wolves and, as is less well known, argued that it would be appropri-

<sup>32</sup> Shulman, *Spring, Heat, Rains*, 78; see also 93, 97.

<sup>33</sup> Linda Hess, "An Open-Air Ramayana: Ramlila, the Audience Experience," in *The Life of Hinduism*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 115–39, quote at 131.

ate to smear the walls of the church with meat on Christmas so that the very building would feast.<sup>34</sup> In the late thirteenth century, the nun Mechtild of Hackeborn saw a vision in which the vestments of a priest who was celebrating mass were covered with every blade and twig, every hair and scale, of the flora and fauna of the universe; her sister nun who recorded the vision glossed it as showing that “the smallest details of the creation are reflected in the holy Trinity by means of the humanity of Christ, because it is from the same earth that produced them that Christ drew his humanity.”<sup>35</sup>

But the divine is not in the physical in Western piety in the same way in which it is in the world to the authors of Hindu devotional poetry. Exploring transcendence as well as immanence, the Vishnaivite saint and poet Nammālvār (dates uncertain but probably fifth to ninth century CE) writes:

Great one, who became all things,  
starting with the primal elements:  
wind, fire, water, sky and earth.  
Great one, wondrous one,  
you are in all things  
as butter lies hidden in fresh milk.<sup>36</sup>

Such metamorphosis of the divine into the natural does not play the same role in Western medieval images. The Marys of Catholic worship do not manifest themselves as, or transform into, trees as Paidi Talli does. However complex the Christian iconography of the Tree of Jesse may be, with various male relatives of Jesus and the Virgin Mary depicted on its branches, one cannot imagine the Madonna herself as a tree. The Tree of Jesse is a genealogical diagram presented in pictures.

Thus, the parallel between the Hindu goddess and the Catholic saint, although their processions can each be elaborated with anthropological or “thing” theory, turns out to be relatively superficial. However much we may be confronted in both cases with an intense presence of something we can call power, general theories of “living pictures” or even of “liminality” do not take us very far when wood, mud, paint, and the female form occur in such different specific contexts and carry with them such different penumbra. Once one

<sup>34</sup> Thomas of Celano, “Second Life of Francis,” in *Legendae S. Francisci Assisiensis saeculis XIII et XIV conscriptae*, Analecta franciscana, sive Chronica aliaque varia documenta ad historiam Fratrum minorum spectantia 10, fascicule 2 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1926), 244.

<sup>35</sup> Mechtild of Hackeborn, *Sanctae Mechtildis virginis ordinis sancti Benedicti Liber specialis gratiae*, bk. 4, chap. 3, in *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*, ed. the monks of Solesmes, vol. 2 (Paris: Oudin, 1877), 260.

<sup>36</sup> Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39.

begins to allow the singularity to emerge, as Shulman puts it, one finds vastly divergent assumptions about the world.

I am not arguing, at this point, that comparing image processions is useless. Indeed, as I hope I have made clear, the comparison of Durga and Maria has taken me some distance toward understanding two more structural and phenomenological questions: that is, Where does supernatural power reside? And what conceptions of the material world condition what we might call religious presence? I return to these questions in my final example below, which argues for different, more subtly chosen comparanda. But in the meantime I take a detour to consider morphology a little further. For perhaps one should reject formal similarity far more radically than I have done so far. Perhaps Durga and Maria are only cases of pseudomorphism: female forms venerated in religious ritual but not really “very much alike.” If so, our task would be to probe whether the religious shapes we think we see are in fact either similar or, in any meaningful way, different. Why do the apparent look-alikes look alike? And does it matter that they do? But this poses the deeper question raised by the concept of “pseudomorphism” itself. We can posit formal similarity in order to query it, but how do we know that something, even falsely or misleadingly, “looks like” something else? Do the shapes in fact look alike?

We can, of course, use categories from cognitive psychology: “red” is a certain wave length; an oval or mandorla is a shape that makes a certain portion of the brain light up on a scan; an outline of a circle with dots for eyes is recognized as a human face by a test group of babies.<sup>37</sup> But the last example immediately makes it apparent that such categories are ambiguous. For any meaningful kind of humanistic inquiry, such a drawn circle is irrelevant—neither “like” nor “unlike” a human face. I do not want here to plunge into current discussion about the general validity of the cognitive turn in humanistic scholarship but merely to suggest that it hardly suffices, at this point in the development of research, to tell us how we identify similarity.<sup>38</sup> Even if the juxtaposition of things that are only spuriously alike can stimulate new interpretive moves for us and make us see in strange and radical ways, there must still be some reason why we start with the pairs we start with.<sup>39</sup> The category of “look-alikes”—even false look-alikes—is more complicated and more contextually conditioned than we tend to assume.

<sup>37</sup> R. L. Fantz, “Pattern Vision in Newborn Infants,” *Science*, n.s., 140, no. 3564 (1963): 296–97.

<sup>38</sup> For examples of such discussion, see Leys, “The Turn to Affect”; and James Laidlaw, “A Well-Disposed Social Anthropologist’s Problems with the ‘Cognitive Science of Religion,’” in *Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science*, ed. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2007), 211–46.

<sup>39</sup> To some art historians, the pseudomorph’s capacity to connect the disparate and to mislead is critically useful. See Powell, *Depositions*, 10–11; Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, 26–27, 52, and 54; and my discussion of the issue in n. 15 above.

To illustrate this, I wish to consider a Western medieval devotional image that has drawn much attention in recent years. I see it as raising in acute form the question whether we can ever be sure we know that something “looks like”—even falsely looks like—something else. Once I have explored this image in its Western context, I turn to a Hindu one that raises, in its Indian context, similar issues. Thus, my comparison here is not a direct East-West comparison but rather, one might say, “relational” or “proportional.” I consider two images, understanding each as a formal structure and considering it in comparison to other possibly “similar” forms that occur in its own context; I question how far we can go in either case in assuming what the original image “looks like.” I then suggest that there may be a productive comparison not between the two images per se but between the ways in which each is embedded in, and raises questions about, its own cultural context. As a mathematician might say,  $A:B::A':B'$ . The comparison here is not between  $A$  and  $A'$  but between the two relationships.<sup>40</sup> All this will be a good deal clearer in the examples that follow than it is in this abstract description.

The Western image I wish to consider is the side wound of Christ, venerated in the high Middle Ages as part of devotion to the five wounds inflicted on Christ in the crucifixion (two in the hands, two in the feet, one in the right side) but increasingly in the fifteenth century revered alone—in both iconography and devotional text—as a special entry into Christ’s body as refuge, love, and salvation.<sup>41</sup> In some manuscript illuminations, woodcuts, and prayers, the side wound appears in isolation as a large oval shape. Sometimes it is treated as an exact measure (called a length) that gives the actual size of the wound or that, multiplied (usually by forty), gives the length of Christ’s body; sometimes it is placed horizontally and appears to be a mouth, speaking accusation. But sometimes the oval is placed vertically and has reminded modern viewers of a vagina with labia, giving rise to elaborate feminist or queer interpretations of the image as erotic or gendered. My question is what do we make of this supposed look-alike, which is not in any simple way glossed on the images as erotic or sexual or female? Before we reject or embrace the similarity, we have to ask: Are these things similar? As Silke Tammen has pointed out, the vertically placed side wound is a mandorla and can be seen as an opening in Christ’s tunic, thus evoking medieval theories of sight as penetration and echoing the associations in many religious traditions of the mandorla with meditation.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> This is in fact the kind of analysis both Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, and Lévi-Strauss, “Split Representation,” argued for.

<sup>41</sup> For more analysis of side wound devotion and further references, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 93–101, 195–208.

<sup>42</sup> Silke Tammen, “Blick und Wunde—Blick und Form: Zur Deutungsproblematik der Seitenwunde Christi in der spätmittelalterlichen Buchmalerei,” in *Bild und Körper im Mittelalter*,

Does the wound really look like a vagina, or is this only a case of pseudomorphism? How do we decide?

There are a number of medieval texts that do associate Jesus's body with the female body as lactating, conceiving, and giving birth. Salvation is understood in poetry and biblical exegesis as nestling within the bowels or side of the Savior, and in some especially theologically acute writers, it is glossed as being born from him. The most explicit textual identification of the side wound with vagina or womb is as container and source of life, and direct visual identification is most obvious in objects such as birthing girdles that use the wound as an amulet against difficult childbirth. Such girdles—thin strips of vellum bearing an image of the wound with drops of blood—were bound around the stomach of a woman in labor to ease her pain and were believed to have the apotropaic quality of inducing a similar slit, the vagina, to open.

But what about the erotic overtones? Beyond modern, decontextualized, psychoanalytic responses, is there any contextualized reason for seeing the image as erotic or sexual rather than, or in addition to, maternal or physiological? The answer is yes, and in two very different senses.

First, we must note that by the high Middle Ages, responses to the wounds and blood of Christ were elaborately and explicitly erotic both in a sense we might call polymorphous—that is, distributed over the entire body—and as genitally focused. It is impossible not to see sexual overtones in the homey and erotic images of the popular fourteenth-century Middle English treatise *A Talkyng of the Loue of God*: “I leap at Him swiftly as a greyhound at a hart. . . . I suck the blood from his feet. . . . I embrace and I kiss, as if I was mad. I roll and suck I do not know how long. And when I am sated, I want yet more. Then I feel that blood in my imagination as it were bodily warm on my lips and the flesh on his feet . . . so soft and so sweet to kiss.”<sup>43</sup> A much commented on passage in the probably somewhat earlier *Prickyng of Love* complicates the physiological image of conceiving and birthing in a way that is not so much feminizing as eroticizing and gender bending. The images of wounds as doorways in the *Prickyng of Love* are almost all of entry, sometimes implicitly sexual. Christ opens doors and windows so that the soul (which in a clearly erotic passage becomes the lance that pierced Christ's side) may enter and remain within in the “tabernacle” of the body; to be born is to be cast forth from paradise, a poor substitute for remaining ecstatically within the body of God.<sup>44</sup>

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ed. Kristin Marek, Raphaële Preisinger, Marius Rimmele, and Katrin Kärcher (Munich: Fink, 2006), 85–114. And see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 361 n. 54.

<sup>43</sup> M. Salvina Westra, ed. and trans., *A Talkyng of the Loue of God: Edited from MS. Vernon (Bodleian 3938) and Collated with MS. Simeon (Brit. Mus. Add. 22283)* . . . (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1950), 61.

<sup>44</sup> Harold Kane, ed., *The Prickyng of Love*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 92.10, 2 vols. (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universität Salzburg, 1983), vol. 1, chap. 1, 9–14.

This is textual imagery. But there is visual evidence as well.<sup>45</sup> Surviving examples of apparently quite popular objects that appear to mock both Holy Wound piety and relic devotion suggest that the sexual and fetishizing overtones were apparent to contemporaries. A little lead badge, cast about 1400 and now in the Cluny Museum in Paris (one other example, from Rotterdam, is known), shows three penises carrying a vagina in procession, just as reliquaries of holy arms, feet, and ribs were carried (and are still carried) in the sort of saints' day processions I discussed above. When placed in the context in which it certainly belongs—that of other insignia mocking the delights and temptations of pilgrimage and the sexual transgressions of the clergy—the little badge seems to parody contemporary piety. Visual parallels between it and vertical mandorla-shaped images of the side wound are striking. For example, the isolated and apparently swollen wound in one of the Bohun Books of Hours (Pommersfelden, Graf von Schönborn Schlossbibliothek MS 348 [2934], fol. 9v), lifted upward in resurrection by angels as if it were the body of Christ, bears a striking resemblance to the little vagina borne by penises in the badge now at Cluny. The bawdy and misogynist implications of such insignia (even suggesting rape fantasy) complicate our response to the very different and yet similar visual images of Christ's wound understood as the whole Christ, violated—even captured—by the lance at the crucifixion for the salvation of sinners. More than pseudomorphism, there is a complex dialogue of likeness and unlikeness here between slit, wound, mandorla, and vagina that leads us to query what sort of relationship between body part and whole body is implied by such veneration.<sup>46</sup>

If one moves from this to a consideration of the cylindrical-shaped Shiva linga revered in Shaivite Hinduism, similar issues arise. The question of what the linga is—like the question of what we see when we see the wound of Christ—is a complicated one. There has been much heated dispute between Western and Hindu scholars over many decades about what one sees when one sees the linga, whether clothed in worship with cloths and flowers or unclothed. The basic meaning of the word “linga” is sign, distinguishing mark, and symbol (with no sexual referent), and Sanskrit texts describe the object as an endless pillar representing the entire universe, as cosmic energy, or as Shiva's phallus, lost and recovered. In certain representations (and some of these are among the most ancient), it is depicted as an erect penis, with the physiological details carefully carved, and it is often paired with the yoni (which can be understood as the vulva). But there are also aniconic lingas:

<sup>45</sup> On these badges, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 200–208 and the notes there. Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages: Discovering the Real Medieval World* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton, 2002), 248–51, sees the images as apotropaic rather than parodic.

<sup>46</sup> I pursue the point about parts and whole in *Christian Materiality*, 195–216. For examples of the images, see plates 30, 31, 44, 45, 46, and 47.

found stone objects that bear little resemblance to a body part, cylindrical-shaped hills, and ice lingas formed like stalagmites by dripping and freezing water.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, when decorated and clothed in ritual, the linga has a different, less physiological appearance, and there are examples in which it is combined with the face or the full figure of the god in ways that either enhance or obscure its apparent phallic detail.<sup>48</sup> The linga does not go out in procession, suggesting in its immobility that it is a root, a core, a font of worship.

Clearly the question of pseudomorphism arises once again. Although some lingas appear, especially to Western eyes, to be erect penises, the perception has produced such outrage in certain quarters that general descriptions, such as those in encyclopedias, have been reluctant to elaborate the parallel.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, texts associate the object with the ascetic as well as the erotic Shiva—the Lord of the Dance (Nataraja) who dances both the dance of passion and the dance that destroys the universe. In a well-known myth about the origins of linga worship quoted here from the Brahmanda Purana, Vishnu speaks:

Once upon a time . . . I lay . . . alone, with all the creatures in my belly. Then, all of a sudden, I saw the four-headed Brahma, who said to me, “Who are you? . . . I am the maker of the worlds.” I said to him: “I am the maker of the worlds, and also the one who destroys them, again and again.” As the two of us were talking together in this way, each wishing to get the better of the other, we were amazed to see a flame arising in the north. Its brilliance and power made us cup our hands in reverence and bow to it. The flame grew, and Brahma and I ran up to it. It broke through heaven and earth, and in the middle of the flame we saw a linga, blazing with light. . . .

Then Brahma said to me: “Quickly, go down and find the bottom of this linga. I will go until I see its top.” I agreed. I kept going down for a thousand years, but I did not reach the bottom of the linga, nor did Brahma find its top. We turned back and met again, amazed and frightened; we paid homage to Shiva, saying, “You create the worlds and destroy them.”<sup>50</sup>

As in the case of the wound in Christ’s side so in the case of the Shiva linga, context is all important to understanding. We may think the sexual con-

<sup>47</sup> Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 20–21.

<sup>48</sup> See Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 22 (for an image of the Gudimallam Linga) and 259 (for discussion), and “God’s Body; or, The *Lingam* Made Flesh: Conflicts over the Representation of Shiva,” in *On Hinduism* (New Delhi: Aleph, 2013), 192–206. For other images, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingam>.

<sup>49</sup> An *Encyclopedia Britannica* article currently online states: “The lingam is distinctively aniconic. . . . Whatever phallic symbolism might have been attached to such structures was largely absent after the Gupta period (early 4th to late 6th century CE)” (see <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/342336/lingam>). There are, however, lingas from later periods that will appear to many viewers to have phallic features. See, e.g., a linga from the Metropolitan Museum of Art: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1994.510>. On the controversy over interpretation of the linga, see Doniger, “God’s Body,” 192–206.

<sup>50</sup> Doniger, *The Hindus*, 385.

notations of the linga more apparent than those of Christ's wound, but even if we see an erect penis in the linga, we do not really see what is there unless we encounter it in both its textual and its ritual setting. Like the wound of Christ, the linga is generative as well as erotic in its sexual connotations. To really see this stone cylinder, we must see it decorated with flowers, cloths, and ghee (clarified butter) and revered in hymn and prayer as font of both life and destruction. Yet to say that the phallus and the linga are merely pseudomorphic also makes it impossible to see. If we encounter only stone or ice, cloth or flowers, we fail to see the fertility and the power.

Like the wound of Christ, the Shiva linga raises complex questions about the complete presence of god in what appears to be a fragment (a fragment that sometimes even visually becomes the whole) and about physiological images (both like and not like a body part) as anthropomorphizing the sacred. These are issues to which I will return. My point here has not been to compare Christ's wound with Shiva's linga but rather to raise apropos both devotional objects the question of pseudomorphism and context. The comparison I draw is, as I said above, relational. I suggest that the problem raised by the linga in its context is analogous to the problem raised by the side wound in its. The parallel is between the relations of objects to their context, not between the objects themselves. Thus both cases complicate notions of sameness. Querying how we might ascertain that certain forms are isomorphic or pseudomorphic is a way of underlining my argument that the fundamental problem of comparison for humanists is not finding the differences that learning and research will inevitably discover; it is understanding what it means to start with two "similar." Is morphology the place to start?

With this question, I return to the comparison of Durga and Maria with which I began. I want now not merely to suggest that comparing images is not necessarily the right comparison; I want to explore what sort of comparison we might put in its place. I suggest that what we should ask is not "how is image in one culture like or not like image in another culture?" but rather "where (in what place, object, or person) do religious presence and power reside?" In other words, the ground of comparison becomes phenomenological or structural or "representational" (in the sense of re-presenting or making present).<sup>51</sup> Rather than assuming that we should begin our exploration of pres-

<sup>51</sup> I realize that each of these terms and hence of the complexities of the approaches to which they refer could be the subject of a separate paper. Much of the literature on presence simply starts by asking about it, however (see, e.g., Waghorne, "The Hindu Gods"; Peers, "Object Relations"; Dierkens, Bartoleyns, and Golsenne, *La performance*), so I do not undertake to define terms such as "phenomenological" or "structural" or "religious" here. The difference between choosing look-alikes and choosing things that in some way bring "the Other" into relation with the ordinary is, for my purposes in this article, sufficiently clear. For some further considerations, see Beate Pongratz-Leisten, "A New Agenda for the Study of the Rise of Monotheism," in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism*, ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011),

ence with what scholars have tended to denominate “images,” I propose that we start with the question, where is the power? In what does it appear or adhere? But before I propose and explore what I take to be the better comparison, I should consider a bit further recent work on images.

As I pointed out above, a number of Western historians have recently drawn parallels between the “lives” of Indian and Western images and have used non-Western understandings to provide arguments for taking Christian images as animate presences, possessing an agency, both frightening and empowering, that shapes their adherents.<sup>52</sup> As David Freedberg puts it: “By means of the proper rites, the deity is induced to inhabit a piece of inanimate [*sic*] matter. Then it becomes an object suitable for worship and capable of bestowing help . . . a receptacle for [the] god. This is what happens in Hinduism, on the West Coast of Africa, and among the Maori in New Zealand. It is also what happens in the case of the main monotheistic religions.” Calling the ceremony a “consecration rite,” Freedberg remarks: “It is significant that many [such] rites involve the last stages of completing an image and bringing it to life.”<sup>53</sup> Scholars have recently struggled with a variety of concepts, such as “distributive agency” and “representation,” to express what is happening in these ceremonies, but whatever refinement of terminology they use, they stress that the power of an “Other” is here emerging in the material object we call an image.<sup>54</sup>

For Freedberg and for many other scholars, the eye-opening ritual in Buddhism, Hinduism, and ancient China has provided a paradigm.<sup>55</sup> In fact, the Indian example makes it clear that the process is lengthier and more labile than a focus on providing eyes suggests. Indian images come to life in a series of rites or processes, from the initial selection of appropriate material for carving (e.g., wood from a male tree for a male god) to awakening by the chiseling or painting in of eyes. Although the image is “made” by those who carve and anoint it, the god is latently present, lying, as Nammālvar put it, like “butter . . . in fresh milk.” The image is then bathed, dressed, and adorned with unguents, and the devotee both recognizes and is recognized, locking eyes

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21–22; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., Peers, “Object Relations”; Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft, eds., *Idol Anxiety* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 1–2; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>53</sup> Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 84.

<sup>54</sup> On “distributive agency,” see Pongratz-Leisten, “New Agenda.” On “representation,” see Gell, *Art and Agency*.

<sup>55</sup> On the eye-opening ceremony, see Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 33–37; Stephen P. Huyler, “The Experience: Approaching God,” in Hawley and Narayanan, *Life of Hinduism*, 33–41; and Doniger, *The Hindus*, 352. Mouth-opening is also paradigmatic in some accounts. See Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft, *Idol Anxiety*, 1–2; and Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 82–84.

with the god (*darshan*).<sup>56</sup> Presence depends on the lengthy process of handling the god and on the expectation, which itself must be prepared, of the devotee.

Recent discussions of the parallels between Western and non-Western images have helpfully complicated earlier descriptions of the art of the European Middle Ages. Standard textbook accounts long gave two reasons for the Christian acceptance of images after the end of the Iconoclastic Controversy in the ninth century: first, that Christ, because God and human, can be depicted in his human form and, second (as theorized by John of Damascus and Thomas Aquinas, among others), that images point to the divine but do not instantiate it. They are not God but merely trigger a devotional turn toward God. But as comparative work has suggested, much about this account is misleading or incorrect, not least because it takes the words of a few theorists to describe the practice of a wide range of European Christians, who often behaved as if statues, mosaics, and wall paintings were themselves sacred presences.<sup>57</sup> Nor does the traditional account adequately describe the intense presence—the “is”-ness—of the images that were attacked in the sixteenth-century reformations or reined in by the final decrees of the Council of Trent. Thus, it has been crucial for historians to jettison formulations that see Western images as simply triggers of devotion, inducements to something beyond or other than the images.

Nonetheless, much of the recent study of Christianity seems to me to aduce the wrong Western/non-Western comparisons. Not only is it misleading to compare Durga and Mary as if their processions were parallel; it seems misleading to assume that we will probe the nature of sacred presence most deeply if we compare statues. As I explained above, much recent work is predicated on the assumption that comparanda are, and should be, morphological. Indeed in all this work scholars have tended to treat the really interesting parallel as that of anthropomorphic image to anthropomorphic image; the starting point is thus “look-alikes,” especially human “look-alikes.” Implicated in this is the use, especially by art historians, of the term “image” (*imago*) to designate what has come in the West to be considered “art,” although historically the term refers to figures of speech and ontological relationships as well. Yet surely what we should be comparing is “presences”—that is, objects or places in which the holy is understood to be encounter-able, palpable, “there.” We should ask not “what looks like a god?” but “where is the power, phenomenologically, structurally, religiously?”

<sup>56</sup> Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 39; Hess, “Open-Air Ramayana,” 128–29; Huyler, “Experience,” 36; and McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing*, 1–5, 103–9.

<sup>57</sup> On the complexity of how Catholic Christians (and by implication adherents in other religions) view images, see Koerner, *Reformation of the Image*, 94–102.

Asking the question this way leads to a very different set of comparanda between Hindu and Christian piety. The most intense devotion to representations of the holy did not, in the Western Christian tradition, accrue around images at all but around relics (pieces of holy matter that became central to cult) and around sacraments and sacramentals (materials, such as water, oil, rings, staves, and bread, that conveyed a power they did not “depict,” in the sense of having similitude to, but rather “represented,” in the sense of making present).<sup>58</sup> Relics and Eucharist—neither of them anthropomorphic or perhaps even iconic in any simple sense—were more central to the Western Christian sense of sacred presence than were images and can be analyzed as more precise parallels to Hindu rituals of inducing the god or goddess in matter. The foot of St. Margaret was St. Margaret in a way a statue of her was not; the bread and wine of the Eucharist were Christ, a more telling parallel than any crucifix (even a moving or speaking one) to the presence of Vishnu or Shiva in statue, milk, or wood.

Suppose then that we take as comparanda Hindu images of gods and goddesses (both iconic and aniconic), on the one hand, and the Christian Eucharist, on the other.<sup>59</sup> The Hindu material immediately suggests two issues. First, in what sort of material does god emerge? Second, how is this emergence effected or realized? Is it found or induced? Thus, the parallel I now draw between Hinduism and Christianity—the deep parallel of religious presence—leads, I argue, to better questions, and the questions lead in turn to more apposite and illuminating understandings of difference. In considering these issues, however, my point is not so much to provide specific answers even for Western material as to suggest why these are better questions than those raised by simply accepting or rejecting morphological similarity.

If we consider the material locus of the divine in the Christian Middle Ages in light of these questions, we see anew the strangeness of the Christian ideas

<sup>58</sup> Julia Smith has stressed how often relics in the early Middle Ages were not body parts or even materials that had touched bodies but other sorts of noniconic material that was holy (e.g., stones or earth from the Holy Land). See Julia M. H. Smith, “Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West, c. 700–1200,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 181 (2012): 143–67. For bibliography on relics, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 333 n. 19, 359 n. 40. On sacramentals, the classic work is Adolph Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1909).

<sup>59</sup> I leave aside relics in this discussion, for they raise a different set of issues, although related ones. Christian relics are not divine but do reveal the power of God in the saints. Their power is what C. S. Pierce would call indexical (they are physically related to a saint by being a piece of his or her body or by having touched a place of holiness), not iconic or symbolic (they neither look like nor stand for the saint, the Holy Land, etc.). They can often be understood as “consecrated”—not so much made holy as recognized to be holy—by the process of translation from cemetery to altar in the early Middle Ages or, after ca. 1200, by the saint’s canonization. But many cannot be understood as consecrated so much as found and employed.

of “real presence” (that Christ is literally present in the elements on the altar after consecration) and “transubstantiation” (that the “substance”—i.e., the nature—of the bread and wine are transformed into Christ’s flesh and blood, although the outward appearance or “accidents” remain unchanged). In so incarnational a religion (i.e., one whose theology stresses the coming of God into a human being), it is odd that the focal point of revelation and agency is food. So much recent discussion of late medieval piety has been devoted to the new and insistent emphasis on Christ’s physical humanity that we sometimes neglect to notice that the same period saw an equally insistent emphasis on the literal presence of the incarnate God in the basic foodstuff of the Mediterranean diet—bread and wine—and a radical increase of miracles in which this holy food animated itself by bleeding, levitating, or glowing and was preserved, still visibly as foodstuff (although altered foodstuff), to provide a locus of pilgrimage. Yet bread and wine, even miraculously altered to a red-spotted wafer or a vessel of viscous liquid, are not in any simple sense “like” the figure of Christ seen on crucifixes, pietàs, or wall paintings.<sup>60</sup>

To emphasize the nonanthropomorphism of consecrated bread and wine is not to argue that there are no anthropomorphic elements in devotion to the Eucharistic species, just as a move to complicate our understanding of the Shiva linga is not to deny anthropomorphic references in texts and images relating to it. Christian theologians spent much time elaborating the symbolism of the Eucharistic elements in ways that underlined it as flesh and blood, however hidden as such. Moreover, the period from 1100 on in the medieval West saw increasing claims to visions or physical transformations in which the host, and sometimes the wine of the chalice, appeared as the infant or the adult Christ. Such visionary experiences and miraculous eruptions were fraught with more anxiety, however, than scholars often recognize. When miraculously transformed matter was thought to endure as blood-like or flesh-like or even as reflecting a human face or body (as, e.g., on the wine-spotted corporal at Walldürn), it induced at least as much anxiety over how to revere or preserve it as pride in its possession.<sup>61</sup> Even when overlaid with visions of the human

<sup>60</sup> One might pursue further a comparison of the way divine presence in Christianity and Hinduism relates to food. Although the Christian Eucharist is visually food, when it metamorphoses miraculously to assert itself as God’s presence it sometimes becomes flesh. The Hindu image (whether anthropomorphic or not) is visually the god, but in miracle it sometimes becomes or exudes food, such as honey or milk; it is also itself fed or anointed with milk and butter. See Richard H. Davis, ed., *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), esp. 18.

<sup>61</sup> On these points, see Bynum, “The Sacrality of Things,” and “The Animation and Agency of Holy Food: Bread and Wine as Material Divine in the European Middle Ages,” in *The Materiality of Divine Agency in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten and Karen Sonik (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming). On the miraculous corporal at Walldürn, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 109–11, and [http://www.therealpresence.org/eucharst/mir/english\\_pdf/Walldurn.pdf](http://www.therealpresence.org/eucharst/mir/english_pdf/Walldurn.pdf).

Christ or eruptions of flesh and blood, the Christian Eucharist was not in any simple sense anthropomorphic.

Much recent theoretical work on divine materiality raises the question of the anthropomorphism or iconicity of religious objects and argues that those that are closest to the human form are most apt to be the locus of the holy and to come alive for the faithful either in ritual or by miraculous self-assertion. Research on robots has established what is known as the “uncanny valley effect”—that is, the fact that people today can be demonstrated to respond differently to humanoid or humanlike figures, on the one hand, and machines or clearly inanimate objects, on the other. Some cognitive scientists have even argued that anthropomorphism is a necessary stage in the evolution of religion.<sup>62</sup> Art historians and literary scholars have sometimes used this sort of research to assume a Pygmalion effect in religious art—that is, a tendency to privilege the human figure, or what approaches to the human figure, as a locus of the divine.

There are, however, problems with this approach. Scholars of Buddhism have objected to the assumption that a distinction between animate and inanimate is somehow “natural” or basic to human response, rather than culturally conditioned.<sup>63</sup> And neither in India nor in the ancient Near East is the anthropomorphic always the place where the divine arrives.<sup>64</sup> Whether the Shiva linga is anthropomorphic (a human body part) or even iconic (in some way “like” power or fertility) is a question that depends on the particular object, on viewer response, and on ritual setting. Some scholars even suggest that Durga is present at her ceremony not so much in the clay figures as in the nine plants

<sup>62</sup> Stewart Guthrie, “A Cognitive Theory of Religion,” *Current Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (1980): 181–94, and *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 103–12; Justin L. Barrett and Frank C. Keil, “Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts,” *Cognitive Psychology* 31 (1996): 219–47; Jerome Groopman, “Medical Dispatch: Robots That Care,” *New Yorker*, November 2, 2009. On such explanations, see the perceptive critique by Laidlaw, “A Well-Disposed Social Anthropologist’s Problems with the ‘Cognitive Science of Religion.’” Guthrie, who sees anthropomorphism as the origin of religion, tends to argue in a circle. Defining religion as that which relates to gods or spirits, he excludes, by definition, experiences and phenomena that are not anthropomorphic. This definition is a problem especially for Buddhism. See also Justin L. Barrett and Rebekah A. Richert, “Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children’s God Concepts,” *Review of Religious Research* 44, no. 3 (2003): 300–312, which suggests that children can conceive of God in both anthropomorphic and nonanthropomorphic ways.

<sup>63</sup> Robert H. Sharf, “Is Nirvāna the Same as Insentience? Chinese Struggles with an Indian Buddhist Ideal,” in *India in the Chinese Imagination: Buddhism and the Formation of Medieval Chinese Culture*, ed. John Kieschnick and Meir Shahar, Asian Interactions and Comparisons (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 131–60.

<sup>64</sup> In fact, nonanthropomorphic objects are important loci of the divine in Hinduism, and, significantly enough, these sacral “found” or “self-manifesting” objects do not necessarily have to be consecrated. See Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 19–21, 137–40; and Hess, “Open-Air Ramayana,” 131.

that are ritually bathed at the beginning of the goddess festival.<sup>65</sup> Taken in the context of this discussion, the centrality of foodstuff in Christianity—even foodstuff theorized as flesh—contributes to the questioning of generalizations about the importance of anthropomorphism in the genesis of sacred objects.

If we turn to the second issue I suggested above—that is, how the sacred is found, or induced to appear, in the material—we find again that the parallel is between Hindu rituals surrounding images and Christian ceremonies relating to the Eucharist.

The ritual by which Durga is induced to enter her statue is lengthy: performances of prayer, song, and dance are offered; food, flowers, jewels, and textiles clothe and anoint her. In similar fashion, as Richard Davis explains, the god begins to emerge in a male statue carved for a temple at the moment when the artisans search for the appropriate male tree in the forest.<sup>66</sup> Paidi Talli is carried from the river to ferment in pots before she emerges as a tree. The aniconic linga found in nature as a stone or mountain or dried riverbed manifests itself as divine. It is not so much consecrated as accorded worship. It manifests its power in activities such as bleeding, glowing with light, providing food, drinking milk—activities that almost imperceptibly cross the line into transformation or miracle.<sup>67</sup> Whatever importance chiseling in the eyes of a statue may have, the appearance of the sacred in the material is a process, not a moment; the god is both found and induced to appear.

As Freedberg observed, Western images are not consecrated.<sup>68</sup> Some are blessed and sprinkled with holy water, but full consecration is limited to altar vessels; the altar table; the ground of cemeteries and churches; the oil, water, bread, and wine used in the sacraments; and the personnel (the clergy) who perform them.<sup>69</sup> Assuming that consecration must be a defining act has led art historians to worry about its absence vis-à-vis images and hence to propose various theories to explain the undoubted power some images acquired, arguing that they were made holy by implanting relics in them or by attributing to them miraculous origins. I would suggest rather that holiness was sometimes found in statues or wall paintings or saints' bodies in the West, as it was in stones or riverbeds in India. But the real parallel to the consecration process in Hinduism lies in the central locus of holiness in late medieval Christianity: the consecration of the Eucharist. That process is far more like the preparation

<sup>65</sup> McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing*, 104–5.

<sup>66</sup> Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 34–35; McDermott, *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing*, 1–5, 103–9.

<sup>67</sup> See Davis, *Images, Miracles, and Authority*, esp. the essay by Robert L. Brown, “Expected Miracles: The Unsurprisingly Miraculous Nature of Buddhist Images and Relics,” 23–36.

<sup>68</sup> Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 89–91.

<sup>69</sup> See A. Molien, “Bénédiction,” vol. 2 (1937), cols. 349–74, and P. Bayard, “Consécration,” vol. 4 (1949), cols. 248–67, both in *Dictionnaire de droit canonique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané).

of Durga or even the finding of Paidi Talli than we have recognized. For all the emphasis of theologians and canon lawyers on consecration by the clergy as a moment of transformation from bread into flesh, the encounter with god in foodstuff was prepared for materially and experientially.

By the later Middle Ages, the communion wafer was no longer home-baked bread offered by housewives but a flat, thin, almost transparent disk, often stamped with an image of the crucified Christ. It was ritually prepared by clergy or monks, and according to some monastic customs, the wheat was selected kernel by kernel, the mill hung with curtains, and the millers specially garbed; the bakers either sang hymns while preparing it or kept silent lest their breath touch the bread.<sup>70</sup>

Not only was the consecration of the bread prepared for, as the wood was prepared before the carving of a Hindu god, encounter with the Eucharist was, for the faithful, a process in some ways similar to the encounter with Durga in festival and song. A number of developments between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries in Europe tended to move the Eucharist away from a communal meal and toward a mystery whose impact came when a hidden something was revealed. The words of consecration became less audible; the priest now stood in front of the altar with his back to the congregation. By the thirteenth century, pierced screens that functioned to direct as well as to limit the gaze were erected between the ordinary laity and the apse where the altar was located.<sup>71</sup> The focal point of the mass came to be not the consecration but the moment when the priest elevated—that is, lifted up—the host.<sup>72</sup> Nor was the revelation of the host only visual. Through incense, music, genuflections, and candles, all the senses were over the course of the mass awakened. Increasingly then, the central Christian ritual involved a kind of synesthesia.

Moreover, the consecrated host, paraded in Corpus Christi processions or exposed on the altar outside the mass in gorgeous crystal and gold monstrances, became a holy object in and of itself, inspiring terror as well as devotion. Whether or not miracles of sensible transformation were reported, the holy was encountered as intense, reverberating presence.<sup>73</sup> So powerful was this holy stuff that wafers, sometimes even unconsecrated wafers, were used by the populace as apotropaic objects to increase fertility in beehives, fish-

<sup>70</sup> Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)*, trans. F. A. Brunner and C. Riepe, abridged ed. in 1 vol. (New York: Benziger, 1959), 330–37.

<sup>71</sup> Jacqueline E. Jung, “The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches,” *Art Bulletin* 82 (2000): 622–57.

<sup>72</sup> Édouard Dumoutet, *Le désir de voir l’hostie et les origines de la dévotion au Saint-Sacrement* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1926).

<sup>73</sup> Hence, Christian miracles are more like the “expected miracles” Robert Brown talks about (Brown, “Expected Miracles”) than students of Christianity usually recognize.

ponds, and fields. In such a religious climate, what was at stake even in many cases of miraculous appearances of Christ was less a stark moment of metamorphosis into the anthropomorphic than a sense of the palpable and encompassing emergence of the divine.

Having found a better comparandum for the Hindu statue in the Christian Eucharist, I have actually come to see the Eucharist in a new way—as less anthropomorphic and more processual than I understood before. But the fact that I have found more appropriate and telling “likes” by asking “where is the sacred?” does not obscure the radical singularity of things. Although the Eucharist—whether reserved as a wafer in a tabernacle or monstrance or displayed as a blood picture at Walldürn—is a better parallel to Durga than are the statues of the two Marys revered in the Camargue, a probing of better “likes” leads nonetheless to differences, indeed to even deeper differences. Materiality itself raises different questions for Christianity and Hinduism.

As we saw in considering Durga’s procession to and immersion in the Ganga, a different sense of the organic is at play in Catholic and Hindu worlds; fragmentation and decay raise different questions. In contrast to Durga’s or Paidi Talli’s emergence from and return to mud, one thinks of Christian miracles in which cracks in crucifixes are healed by the application of the Eucharistic host or visions in which a broken hand of a Mary statue is left behind as a relic, proof to the worshipping visionary that even pieces are permanent presences.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, it was exactly because fragmentation was so threatening that statues and stained glass were not only rejected but also smashed at periods of iconoclasm.<sup>75</sup> And although Christians in Western Europe increasingly broke relics of the saints into pieces in order to distribute their holiness, they felt a need to assert—through theories of concomitance—that part is really whole. Moreover, the tiny pieces found in reliquaries were assembled into vast collections rather than isolated as bits, thus reflecting the community of the holy in heaven more than fragmentation or individuation on earth.<sup>76</sup>

If we turn from statues and relics to the materiality in which the divine itself was instantiated, the contrast is even starker. According to the theory of transubstantiation, bread and wine are the flesh and blood of the god-man, yet

<sup>74</sup> On the story of the fissure in the Gero crucifix healed by the insertion of a Eucharistic host, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 328 n. 137; for the broken hand of the Christ child kept as a relic, see Barbara Newman, “The Visionary Texts and Visual Worlds of Religious Women,” in *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti, trans. Dietlinde Hamburger (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 164.

<sup>75</sup> It is worth noting also that Christian missionaries to the New World considered Native American rites that annihilated goods to be disturbingly pagan rituals. See Paula Findlen, ed., *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800* (London: Routledge, 2013), 8.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, “Portable Christianity.”

foodstuff, which supports life, also decays. Whereas Durga and Paidi Talli are born from and joyfully return to the organic, the process of generation and corruption is a problem for Christian theology. This problem led occasionally to what seem to modern ears ridiculous debates over whether the god in the Eucharist could be digested and excreted or piled into mountains of stuff that grew larger with each consecration. The quandary posed was even greater when miraculously transformed wafers or wine, preserved as revelations of god's body, showed signs of rot. Clergy sometimes denied evidence of change or surreptitiously replaced deteriorating wafers with new and undecayed ones.<sup>77</sup> But my point is not that certain formulations of anxiety sound silly or certain actions questionable—charges medieval contemporaries themselves made—but rather that anxiety about materiality was central. Such anxiety is reflected even today in the requirement that Catholic churches possess a sacrarium or piscina (a sink connected directly to the ground, not to the public sewage system) in which holy things, such as the water used to cleanse the Eucharistic vessels, are to be disposed of without danger of contact with garbage or human waste.<sup>78</sup> The controversy that erupted around the Madonna by Chris Ofili in the "Sensation" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999–2000 because of its use of a resin-covered lump of elephant dung and of phallic symbols has a long history behind it. Although some Hindu, like some Christian, sages and contemplatives seek to transcend the material world in ways too complicated to explore here, a comparison of divine materiality in the two traditions suggests that the presence, even the representation, of god in organic stuff has been threatening to Western Christians in a way it is not to Indian devotees of Shiva and Vishnu.<sup>79</sup>

Thus my answer to the historian colleague who asked whether I had learned anything about the West by going to India is that I did. But it was only by finding the right similitudes to start with that I was able to use increased understanding of the Hindu divine to ask new questions about, and hence probe more deeply into, the strangeness of Western practices I had studied for so long.

To conclude: comparison must start with similarities, or it cannot begin. But deciding what is similar to what is far from obvious. Students of religion have

<sup>77</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 66, 140–41, and passim for examples.

<sup>78</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piscina>. On ablutions generally, see Jungmann, *Mass of the Roman Rite*, 522–27.

<sup>79</sup> The anxiety that some Hindus feel currently over the linga as phallic (see Doniger, "God's Body," 204–6) might appear a reflection, or importation, of Western distaste for the organic. But it seems to me to reflect less a general fear that the organic might be inappropriate for the sacred than an importation of a Western obsession with the sexual, such as is reflected in the objections to Chris Ofili's Madonna.

been too cavalier in assuming that choosing comparanda is the easy part of any research. Obvious choices of parallels may result all too quickly in discoveries of difference that are not only obvious but finally unproductive. How then do I think students of religion should proceed in choosing things to compare? First, they should avoid assuming that “look-alikes”—either to explore or to dismiss—are the best parallels for understanding cultures. Second, they should seek structural, functional, phenomenological, or devotional—rather than purely morphological—parallels, prepared for the possibility that startling similarities may emerge between things that look radically different. Third, they should place each of the carefully chosen comparanda in its own context before drawing out the comparison of these things-in-context with each other.

In the end, however, scholars will find difference as much as sameness, and the more careful the decision about comparanda, the more telling will be the differences disclosed. Even when the comparison is as sensitive to the complexity of two traditions as we can make it, the terms will inevitably pull against each other, each asserting its strangeness and its integrity. And it is in the pulling against, as well as the sameness, that each will shed light on, and indeed change our understanding of, the other. As literary critic James Wood says about metaphor, “independent, generative life . . . comes from likening something to something else. . . . As soon as you liken  $x$  to  $y$ ,  $x$  has changed, and is now  $x + y$ , which has its own parallel life.”<sup>80</sup> Once understood as similar to as well as different from a Hindu statue, the Christian Eucharist never looks the same again.

Metaphor, or what one of the greatest of Christian theologians called “dissimilar similitudes,” is thus the best image I can find for true comparison.<sup>81</sup> We must seek such dissimilar likenesses—that is, things like each other at some level deeper than appearance. We must then allow these things to pull away from each other because of the unlikeness and yet each to become part of our understanding of the other because of the deeper similitude. If we do this, we will conclude not by dismissing mistaken parallels or identifying superficial incongruities but by penetrating, with learning and thoughtfulness, to true cultural singularity, which is never, given the human condition, only singular.

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<sup>80</sup> Wood, *Broken Estate*, 51. Wood is characterizing Melville’s use of metaphor. I extrapolate from what he says.

<sup>81</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius (or Denis) the Areopagite, *La Hiérarchie céleste*, ed. René Roques, Günter Heil, and Maurice de Gandillac, *Sources chrétiennes* 58 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958), chap. 2, secs. 3–4 (140C–141D), 78–81, argues that “dissimilar similitudes” or “figures without resemblance” elevate our minds better than resemblances because they do not mislead us into taking images literally—e.g., into thinking that heavenly beings are actually made of gold. I owe the idea of looking at this passage from pseudo-Dionysius for formulations of comparison to Hahn, *Strange Beauty*.