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Trauma and Lived Religion: Embodiment and Emplotment

Srdjan Sremac and R. Ruard Ganzevoort

Traumatic experiences and other significant life events have specific significance in the study of religion. They are on the one hand important drivers for religious reflection and action but on the other hand they constitute fundamental challenges to religious meaning systems. Religious traditions provide a repertoire of language and actions that can express and transform these challenging experiences. In the past decades, trauma studies have become an important field of insight, combining neurosciences, coping theories, and sociocultural and religious studies. In bringing trauma studies into the field of lived religion, this volume offers more profound understanding of the ways in which individuals and communities respond to challenging situations.

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By giving attention to lived religious wisdom, both scholars and caregivers can reimagine experiences of trauma. There may be both possibilities for transformation and growth and moments of harm.

The present volume focuses on the power of the ‘ordinary,’ ‘everydayness,’ and ‘embodiment’ as key to exploring the intersection of trauma and the everyday reality of religion. These essays examine how trauma is articulated and lived in people’s concrete, material actualities wherein meaning is made (religious), coping mechanisms are constructed, and bodies testify to espoused truths. *Trauma and Lived Religion* covers this broad and complex area of interrelated issues. The authors represent various theoretical and methodological perspectives on lived religious and post-traumatic realities, but each seeks to demonstrate the vital relevance of the concept of lived religion to the study of trauma. Each helps us to understand the lived particularities of trauma as embodied practices in which (religious) stories and narratives are created, transformed, and shared. They will show how the meaning of (religious) narratives may be reframed and how somatic memories of trauma express sacred realities. They examine symbolic regimes, contemplative prayer techniques, and liturgical micro-practices to ask how trauma is experienced and expressed. They look anew at sacred texts and varieties of meditational and mystical experiences to see them through the lens of trauma. This collection thus evokes a deeper exploration of how lived religion exposes the spiritual realm underneath post-traumatic realities, looking for the ways it may bring things back into a meaningful order. These essays call attention to material and spatial practices in the post-traumatic situation that point to the relationship between *presences* and *absences* of the ‘object of significance’ (Pargament 1997). They explore the lived experiences out of which theodicy and meaning-making emerge in the aftermath of violent trauma (Klassen et al. 2006).

A central question in this volume therefore regards the key elements of structure and content in the connection between lived religion and the experience of trauma. In order to understand the process through which lived religious and traumatic experiences are constructed, and how this shapes individual as well as collective identity, it is necessary to focus on the everyday experiences, interests, and needs of the trauma survivors involved in this process. In previous studies on trauma, the role of lived

religion in this process has not always been acknowledged. Instead, religion was often conceptualized as a more or less stable system of convictions and behaviors, operationalized as an independent variable affecting traumatic experiences and especially coping processes (Pargament 1997), rather than as a volatile and ambiguous multidimensional repertoire that individuals navigate in a continuous negotiation with their personal and social context and narrative (Ganzevoort 1998a, b).

Because lived religion is fluid, religious actors and phenomena cannot be fully demarcated from other domains (psychoanalytical, cultural, political) in which they are situated. This volume acknowledges that complexity and focuses on the post-traumatic actualities and world-making subjectivities of lived religion. Our lived religion approach also, critically, points to ways that such potentially destructive narratives, bodily actions, and meanings might be disrupted and resisted. In the chapter by Kathryn House, for example, there is a call to develop practices of everyday prophetic religion that can resist the normalization of torture.

Our approach to lived religion attends to its multilayered complexity. It is at once social, material, memorial, somatic, narrative, acoustic, aesthetic, and erotic. It is all the ways in which the sacred is produced and performed in the realm of the everyday. A lived religion approach takes its starting point in religious *practices* (or what Morgan (2014) aptly calls ‘religion-at-work’) and its exquisitely varied expressions: in ‘what people actually do, experience, desire, hope, think, imagine, and touch’ in everyday contexts and settings (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2017, 5; Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014). It is also characterized by a particular holistic or ecological understanding of religion as something that is *embedded* and *embodied* (cf. McGuire 2008, 13–14; Orsi 2016, 2010, xv). Lived religion, in other words, *takes place* in concrete material, spatial, political, cultural, and social environments, through embodied subjects who act, think, feel, see, hear, smell, touch, and experience. Adopting the general framework of everyday lived religion as the ethnographic and hermeneutical background for understanding the performative dimensions of ‘religion-in-action’ as it functions in people’s ordinary lives, the authors in this collection critically correlate the experience of trauma with lived religious realities, symbols, sacred

texts, canonical religious stories, spiritual contemplative practices, and transcendental material/aesthetic meaning-making. That is to say, lived religion is a matrix of performative representations of symbols, narratives, and imaginations. The concrete forms of the sacred and its real *presence* in ordinary people's lives promise rich and generative material for analysis.

We consider in this volume the sacred to refer to those dimensions of human experience that allow for another way of perceiving and being in the world. It is not necessarily another reality outside this world/reality, but another perspective toward this reality. Lived religion, therefore, points to the real encounter with a sense of extraordinary presence. It may be in the midst of mundane action, or it may be a revelatory event that effects a dramatic reordering of the individual's horizon of meaning and an autobiographical transformation. Everyday religious experience, as well as ritual/liturgical practices, can (as both Ommen and Scarsella explore) place traumatic experience within a cultural, narrative, and/or personal history and memory. And learning from the experiences of those who bring trauma memories to those rituals challenges the established theo-religious modes of academic knowledge production.

As a traumatic event irrupts into life and reconfigures the ways we see the world, lived religious world-making processes involve various relationships between *memory*, *body*, *language*, *sensations*, and *space*. These processes take place in a realm where earlier taken-for-granted references have been traumatically interrupted and stripped of their previous significations. Lived religious world-making can, however, inform post-traumatic coping mechanisms, significantly contribute to the re-envisioning of traumatic experience, and open a regenerative realm of action and relationship. Trauma is often experienced as a contradiction to reality-as-perceived, and it resembles the limits of language and presentation in general. Trauma's reality, as Orsi (2016, 102) points out, is 'disassociated from all semantic-linguistic-verbal representation.' Bodies must be taken into account, since trauma goes beyond the subject's discursive horizons and it is experienced in the visceral realm (van der Kolk 2014). As Michelle Walsh's essay points out, one is rendered speechless, and cognitive processes can become frozen along with

particular viscerally encoded memories. To understand the lived traumatic (and religious) repertoire, we have to be aware that the traumatic and religious experiences are often stored in somatic memories without discursive frameworks attached to them. Both lived religion and trauma insist that bodies *remember* (see House, this volume). Shelly Rambo (2016, 7) states in her introductory chapter of *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* that the evolving attentiveness to the ‘somatic dimensions of trauma emphasizes the limits of language and points to ritual expressions of healing that target the body.’

The present volume, therefore, assumes that trauma speech is never entirely comprehended by linguistic ‘grammar’—and the same could be said for spiritual speech. Drives, affects, fantasies, dreams, ecstasies, and aesthetics are often known and expressed in bodily performances not words. Hopes, sensations, and moods are trans- and extra-linguistic experiences that constantly irrupt into the symbolic/linguistic and the material order of trauma. As Walsh’s essay also reminds us, trauma leaves traces, not only on people’s bodies and minds/discourses but also inscribed on space. Meaning-making is not ‘disembodied and abstract, but deeply sensorial and material’ (Meyer 2014, 218).

At this point in the conversation, our explorations could benefit from insights into the effects of trauma on the brain. While technically not completely accurate, the triune brain model originally proposed by Paul MacLean in the 1960s helpfully distinguishes between three functions of the human brain. The first function is the control of basic bodily functions and the continuous monitoring of the environment as being safe or unsafe. The second function is located in the ‘limbic’ system of affects and emotions, regulating among others stress hormones. The third function is based on the neocortex, allowing the cognitive processes of memory, interpretation, and choice. These three functions combined allow us to process and respond to significant life events. Stress responses serve to alert and energize the system in order to cope with the threatening situation. If all goes well, the neocortical system restores cognitive agency so that the stress levels return to normal. In the case of trauma, this balancing mechanism becomes ineffective due to a destabilizing high stress level resulting from the sensory overload in the primary and limbic system. This basic insight into the

effects of traumatic experiences on the brain helps us to understand the precognitive, bodily nature of trauma, but it also reminds us that the connection of trauma and religion might not be located primarily in the cognitive dimensions like religious convictions, creeds, and attribution of meanings, but in the limbic, sensory, material, and bodily dimensions. Scholars in religious studies and theology would do well to attend more closely to these non-cognitive dimensions of lived religion. The studies in this volume offer ample material for that transition.

Overview

This volume is organized around five dimensions of the trauma–lived religion nexus: body, meaning, relationship, testimony, and ritual. Although these dimensions are not thought to be exhaustive, they offer a useful spectrum of perspectives to understand the variegated interactions of trauma and lived religion.

Body

To begin with, two chapters focus explicitly on the embodied nature of both trauma and lived religion. Kathryn House's essay engages the centrality of embodiment in both torture and the study of lived religion to suggest practices of resistance. It notes the depth of physical and psychological trauma inflicted in torture and insists that in order to begin to resist torture as a moral or effective practice, careful attention must be given to articulating and then dismantling the underlying logics of the body, truth, and practice. The essay delineates current faith-based efforts to educate communities and advocate for an end to state-sanctioned torture and solitary confinement, specifically through a focus on the work of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), and concludes with a call for resistance to torture through both prophetic imagination and practice.

Stephanie Arel examines the impact of touch—as both an optic and haptic phenomenon—on the affective residues of trauma manifested in disgust and shame. Probing the media presence of Pope Francis and his modeling of inclusivity through touch, the chapter presses for a Christian theological awareness of the effects of touch, readily apparent in Christian praxis, on those marginalized and traumatized by society, noting how touch and touching become modes of living religion. Calling for a theological intervention on shame and disgust as vestiges of trauma, Arel presents a theological counter-narrative to shame embodied in the lived religious acts—and their representations—of Pope Francis.

Meaning

Building on embodiment, the next two chapters focus on the construction of meaning regarding traumatic experiences. Drawing on her personal vignettes of ethnographic immersion experiences, Michelle Walsh explores the significance of attending to the body as a source of knowledge in the lived religion study of trauma. Bodily experience not only is argued to be the relational root of the religious impulse, it also is the source of disrupted meaning-making in the aftermath of trauma. The experience of trauma is one source of embodied depth fiercely seeking new forms of expression, including through religious stories and practices. Such fierce desire also can press the poetic limits of language and material expressions and the boundaries of formal religion. These in turn raise complicated questions in challenges to traditional ethnographic boundaries and claims of objectivity, as well as for power and ethics in field research.

Against the background of multiple cases of sexual abuse by church personnel, Maike Schult's contribution explores the trauma's special range of expression in the area of religious taboo subjects. It is centered on the comic 'Why I Killed Peter.' Schult argues that its imaginative combination of words and images can make the perspective of the abused child visible and show the manipulative way the moment of abuse is prepared. This essay reveals critical moments of trauma that can lead to a disintegration of religious notions and values.

Relationship

In the next step, we present two chapters that focus on the effect of trauma on religion mediated through relationships. Hanneke Schaap-Jonker focuses on the *functions* of lived religion in the context of trauma from the perspective of psychology of religion. A case study in which the vivid re-experiencing of trauma in flashbacks is explicitly connected with religious faith is discussed and analyzed with concepts from object relation theories. The author focuses on the concepts of transformational object (Bollas) and transitional object (Winnicott). The case study of Rachel is presented and analyzed. Rachel is a twenty-year-old Dutch woman with a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) who discusses her suffering, including her flashbacks and related questions about God with her Christian therapist.

Mariële Wulf explores theologically how trauma may affect spirituality. If a relationship is traumatizing, she argues, it affects all the dimensions of the human being and deprives a person of his/her dignity. As a result of trauma, a person's identity collapses, and the offender destroys the existence of his victim. In contrast to the malignant verdict of the offender, pastoral care can provide the experience that 'it is good that you are just as you are.' The loss of relationships following infidelity can be healed by a faithful relationship. This triple promise confirms a person's dignity; it is a promise that is finally, and in unbroken fidelity, given by God himself.

Testimony

The next two chapters deal with testimony, i.e., the presentation of personal narratives of trauma in terms related to spiritual traditions, thereby linking to the 'dangerous narratives' of those traditions (Metz 2011). Rocio Figueroa Alvear and David Tombs explore the traumatic impact of church-related sexual abuse through a case study of the Sodalicio Society in Peru. It draws on recent interviews with eight male survivors, who are now middle aged and who were psychologically and sexually abused when they were younger. The authors argue that

the abuse had a major impact on their lived religion and that attention to spiritual impacts taking place alongside physical and psychological impacts.

Jürgen Jian Lembke and Julianne Funk in their chapter seek to describe the distortion as a psychological and physiological phenomenon, as a lens through which to consider a particular experience of trauma and healing, also related to Auschwitz, though individual lived religiosity. The authors argue that through the Three Tenets—not knowing, bearing witness, and loving action—Bearing Witness Retreats open ritualized spaces to recall traumatic events, confess the unspeakable, acknowledge the experiences of one another, drawing together a community reconnecting not only those called ‘victims,’ but also ‘perpetrators.’ While the Zen Peacemakers’ approach is not a therapeutic method, this engaged and lived spiritual practice includes all domains of human experience and therapeutic attention, thus addressing trauma, grief, the distortion of social interaction, but also joy, sharing, encouragement. The chapter bears witness to one German experience of this retreat in Auschwitz/Birkenau, including a ritual, the Gate of Sweet Nectar, which takes seriously the psycho-spiritual damage of violence by welcoming and feeding the hungry spirits—e.g., the ghosts of genocide and marginalization.

Ritual

The final two chapters focus on ritual as the trans-linguistic space for both healing and revictimization. Léon van Ommen’s chapter contains the search for space for trauma in one of the focal points of religious communities, i.e., their liturgical gatherings. The author connects trauma and liturgy through the concept of remembrance, which is a key concept in both trauma studies and liturgical theology. The author elaborates on remembrance by looking at the complementary studies on trauma and lived religion of Storm Swain, Miroslav Volf, and Robert Schreier. Showing the potential power of lived liturgy to create space for suffering and trauma, the chapter ends with a plea for liturgical communities of careful remembrance.

Finally, Hilary Scarsella interrogates the relationship between trauma and liturgical ritual as it manifests for survivors of sexual violence participating in Christian celebrations of communion in particular US contexts. Arguing that ritualization has a uniquely intimate relationship with traumatic experience, the chapter theoretically undergirds sexual violence survivors' sense that communion participation exacerbated their vulnerability to harm, and it validates survivors' experiences of communion participation as retraumatizing. Far from seeking to categorically dismiss Christian communion as irredeemably problematic in light of sexual violence, the author calls on theorists and practitioners to partner with sexual violence survivors in reforming the practice such that participation refrains from perpetuating harm.

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