

Editor's Preface

The essays collected here in this issue of *Religion & Theology* circle around the theme of the making of a religious imaginary. Thus oriented, the collection of essays, though focussed on Christianity and Christian discourse, on the one hand, and Tibetan Buddhism on the other, speaks to a far broader framework for theorising religion as a discourse. In this regard, the essay by Johannes van Oort, “‘God’ in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” argues that, for all of his contribution to the definition of Christian doctrinal orthodoxy, Augustine’s concept of God shows multiple origins. Disavowing his earlier adherence to Manichaeism, there are still clear traces of a Manichaean concept of God remaining in his work (especially in his most influential work, *Confessions*), in addition to Neoplatonic and Stoic philosophical theologies informing the construction of their ideas of God. What makes this kind of study significant is the very long reception history and strong influence Augustine has had on the making of Christian theology up till and through the Lutheran, Calvinist and general Catholic Reformations and even far beyond. The development of the concept of God in Augustine demonstrates a fundamental insight into the formation of religious discourse, namely that “G/gods” do not come into existence *sui generis* but are shaped through multiple layers of discourses, which layers remain visible – however much one would prefer to view the Christian concept of God as the outcome of unique personal revelation. The implication of all this is that “God” in Christian theology is the result of a hybrid bricolage process, which insight not only calls into question the conventional (insider) view of God as the core of Christian theology, but also – rightly – questions the “essential integrity” of the Christian tradition, and as such, functions as a paradigmatic case study relevant to other religious and philosophical traditions.

The making of Christian discourse is further elucidated in Robert Heaton’s essay, “Toward the New Testament Canon as Fourth-Century Invention: The Scriptural List of Athanasius and Its Reverberations.” If Augustine fashioned a concept of God from such wide-ranging discursive inputs as Manichaeism, Stoicism, and Neoplatonic discourses and concepts, a concept of God that became the foundation of Christian orthodoxy, then Athanasius of Alexandria deliberately “manufactured” an orthodox collection of canonical scriptures as the enshrinement of an “approved” tradition. The test case Heaton considers here is the varied fates befalling the second-century visionary-cum-moral exhortatory

text, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, from widely circulating and popular to marginal vis-à-vis what was emerging as mainstream Christianity. What both Van Oort and Heaton demonstrate is that what became known as canonical, orthodox Christian tradition was not a natural occurrence as if *sui generis*. It was shaped and brought into being through human hands, so to speak.

David Eastman's essay, "*Under Caesar's Sword: Responses to Persecution and Martyrdom in Comparative Perspective*," uses the frame of an eponymous study of contemporary Christian responses to persecution in various parts of the world, in order to test its applicability to the phenomenon of martyrdom in early Christianity. Eastman demonstrates how, for all of the significance martyrdom and martyr discourses had in the shaping of early Christian self-conceptions, and how much the first two centuries or so of Christian history is popularly thought of as the period of martyrdoms in which martyrdom is conceived of as the evidence of true Christian faith, the reality was that Christian martyrdom was not that ubiquitous, and that Christians exhibited a range of ways of dealing with the possibility (or reality) of persecution.¹ Accommodation was not an unknown option to Christians. Just as with Eastman's essay, Thomas Martin, "The Salvific City: The New Jerusalem and the Moral Imaginary of Urban Built Environments," also draws on contemporary theory to elucidate an aspect of early Christian discourse, albeit one that still reverberates strongly into contemporary times. Martin puts the biblical book of Revelation in conversation with theories of spatiality and the conception of the intersection between space and religious orientation, especially the intersection between Revelation as a vision of a city and conceptions of urban environments as space where ideologies of well-being operate. In doing so, Martin makes the point between the lines that the Christian vision is essentially an urban vision.² But, as Martin shows, the heavenly Jerusalem is not

1 On martyrdom discourse as the matrix of Christian identity, see Eastman's earlier article in this journal, David L. Eastman, "The Linguistic Turn and the Expanding Horizons of Early Christian Martyrdom," *Relig. Theol.* 28, no. 1–2 (2021): 26–40, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-bja10019>. On the non-ubiquitousness of martyrdom, see the many works of Candida Moss, Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2012); Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, Repr. ed. (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014).

2 See the essays in Reinhard von Bendemann and Markus Tiwald, eds., *Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt*, Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament. Zehnte Folge Heft 18, der ganzen Sammlung Heft 198 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012); especially the following:

simply a salvific space, it also encodes imperial attitudes and imaginaries. Thus, there is a mutual, bi-directional counter-critique between the biblical heavenly Jerusalem as salvific city and contemporary conceptions of urban spaces as life-sustaining spaces.

Tacking away from early Christianity, Frederick Hale's essay, "Pondering Tibetan Buddhist Alterity in Peter Dickinson's *Tulku*," sets out how Tibetan Buddhism is presented in Peter Dickinson's novel, *Tulku*. In the first part of the essay, the history of the discovery of Tibetan Buddhism, the Western encounters with Tibetan Buddhism and its construction as an exotic Other, is set out as framework for demonstrating how Dickinson's novel stands in the long tradition of the Western gaze on Tibet and its version of Buddhism. An important implication of Hale's essay is how attention is drawn to how a variety of media, from (quasi-) academic and informed writings, through popular media such as newspapers and other literature, to fiction, a discourse about the religious Other is constructed that then becomes that religion in popular consciousness, that is, as discursive artifact. And as discursive artifact it had far-reaching consequences in the political domain.³

Without intending to, Pieter Craffert's essay, "*Your Brain Makes You Do It: A Critical Reflection on the Libetian Denial of Free Will*," circles back to Van Oort's study on Augustine. Free will, particularly in connection with understanding grace and sin, was an important theme in Augustine's thinking. Craffert takes aim here at studies in the broad field of neurosciences that conceives of the brain as the seat of the self, and thus ironically operates with the same kind of mind-body dualism as characterising conventional Christian theology (what some scholars call the similarity between neurodeterminism and neuro-calvinism – the denial of free will in the neurosciences closely resembling the paradox in Christian theological circles of divine intervention). Instead, Craffert holds that the self is an embodied interactional process: "Free will is an ability rather than a (non-material) thing. These kinds of phenomena are not found in the physical world, but cover space, time, and bodies as intersubjec-

Reinhard von Bendemann and Markus Tiwald, "Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt – Einleitung und Grundlegung," 9–42; and Peter Wick, "Das Paradies in der Stadt. Das himmlische Jerusalem als Ziel der Offenbarung des Johannes," 238–250.

3 A corpus of literature now exists on this aspect: see Richard King, "Orientalism and the Modern Myth of 'Hinduism,'" *Numen* 46, no. 2 (1999): 146–185, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568527991517950>; Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005); Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, Science, and Empire: Classifying Hinduism and Islam in British India* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

tive components of the lifeworld of human beings. ... Free will is a capacity of embodied persons and cannot be investigated at the neuronal level but at the level of embodied beings in context."

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