# Seeing is believing?
# —The role of aesthetics in assessing religion cross-culturally

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***Abstract:*** *The opinion that Japanese religion was rather "spiritual" or "superstitious" has, albeit being reproached for its Eurocentric basis, reached noteworthy spread and tempted scientific explanations. Yet, aside from dogmatic or structural differences to monotheistic religions, a major reason for the aforementioned impression may be that experiencing religion in Japan mismatches the religious experience familiar to the non-Japanese observer. This personal, immediate, aesthetic experience has been excluded from argumentation for its subjective inclination. It is argued, though, that our judgment always settles between discursive knowledge and aesthetic experience, both influencing each other.*

*This paper will trace the inversion of the discourse on Japanese religion from Ōnishi Hajime's diagnosis that Japanese religious tradition was insufficient for the establishment of national art, up to Richard B. Pilgrim's claim of a 'religio-aesthetic tradition of Japan'. It is then argued that this gradual acknowledgement of the aesthetic dimension in religious experience can be beneficial for cross-cultural understanding since it provides access for religious outsiders and since aesthetic subjectivity can itself become a basis for objective statements if it is recognized as inevitable basis for descriptive categories.*

If you ask Google for "Japanese religion", you will soon stumble upon catchy phrases like: "Japan: the most religious atheist country" (Coslett 2015) or "Japanese are rather spiritual than religious" (Japan Today 2013). Certainly, those statements are all moderated in the course of the articles by adding scientific facts and statistic findings, as if to show that they are not *merely* subjective assessments. Still, many personal experiences seem to sustain the view that whatever there is between colorful lucky charms, dressed up Jizō statues, and votive tablets in anime style is *less serious* or *less solemn—less religious*—than religion in Europe. Surely, some statistics well known by now seem to prove that Japanese individuals tend to assign

themselves to various persuasions.[1] But one reason why Japanese religion may seem more accessible (and thus less exclusive) could lie in the typical shrine structure with its openness and wood-based architecture. It can evoke a warm and welcoming atmosphere, compared to dark stone churches with marble and gold interior; even more so thanks to the prominent position of Zen meditation, Shrine prayer and tea ceremony within "Japanese culture experience" tourism.

The following elaborations are not meant to discuss the exoticized nature of such statements.[2] If we ask what makes them appear unacademic compared to what we would expect from a proper scientific review, we may rather find that we wanted such statements to bracket out subjective aesthetic experiences as to gain an objective, neutral view. However, it should be discussed if this "out-bracketing" is the right thing to do.

Since, when looking at another culture's expressions and traditions, we are immediately and intuitively judging. As seemingly rational concepts like 'religion' are equally tinged by aesthetic qualities, we are expecting some invisible, felt quality with religious things, and when it is missing we tend not to apply the concept. That is to say that, when judging, we are oriented by two sides: our aesthetic impression negotiates with our discursive knowledge.[3] No matter how much we may ultimately learn about Japanese culture, our aesthetic impression remains. It will guide and color our academic assessment. Thus, I argue that we should ignore aesthetics as little as possible.

By looking at how aesthetics obtained a decisive role in making Japanese religion approachable for non-Japanese, this paper wants to shed light on the shared nature of aesthetic and religious experience. Although one must be aware of the share taken by the Nihonjinron in the case of Japan, it is argued that the discourse about Japanese religion is paradigmatic for a general potential of aesthetic perception of foreign cultures.

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[1] The current data as for 2017 can be retrieved from the Statistics Bureau (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications):
http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/66nenkan/1431–26.htm.

[2] Research on the connection between exoticism, aesthetics and Japanese national identity can be found in Hijiya-Kirschnereit (1988; 2013), Iida (2002), Pekar (2003), or Yoshioka (2013).

[3] By 'discursive knowledge', I do not (only) mean conscious, explicit knowledge but principally that which has always already been said when referring to Japan in a particular language and context. It can be made explicit but usually is not.

## Spiritual Japan or: How to judge religion?

Let's have a closer look at the two hooks our impression of Japanese religion is hanging on: the discursive and the aesthetic side. I will start by tracing the discursive development that transformed a rhetoric of inferiority into the claim of Japan's exemplary aesthetic syncretism.

It is surely not the case that Japanese religion appeared different because there had not been any reflection about 'belief' or 'spirituality' before the import of the term 'religion' in the 19th century. It has been shown convincingly that different layers of the meaning 'religion' carries today have been considered in Japan before the 19th century and that the selection of the now common term *shūkyō* 宗教 had domestic reasons, too, instead of being mainly imposed by Western politics (cf. Krämer 2013). However, the import of Western ideas of 'religion' initiated endeavors to profile the image of Japanese religion, finally leading to the thesis that the best way to understand its exceptionality was by perceiving it in aesthetic terms.

## Ōnishi Hajime, Okakura Kakuzō, Yanagi Sōetsu: from the insufficiency of Japanese religion towards Teaism and the piety in a commoner's tea bowl

In the Meiji era, the translation of concepts like 'religion', 'art', or 'philosophy' marked the beginning of an academic dispute about whether Japan could offer those cultural accomplishments or if it would have to import not just the concept but also the content.

Within these quarrels, Ōnishi Hajime 大西祝 (1864–1900), a Protestant believer who studied and taught philosophy, psychology, ethics, logics, and aesthetics, published a quite courageous diagnosis about Japan's state of the arts. In his article *There is no religion in waka* (*waka ni shūkyō nashi* 和歌に宗教無し, 1887), he argues that the religious traditions of Japan, namely Shintō and Buddhism, were not a sufficient base for 'national art' (Ōnishi 2014b). He does concentrate on poetics here, but he broadens the argument elsewhere (Marra 1999, 80f.).

Japanese art, Ōnishi argues, was lacking sublimity, grandeur, profundity, and above all subjective consciousness. Shintō belief led to a concentration on the worldly and trivial, and reduced poetic expression to short-life pathos. Buddhism, by contrast, intensified negative emotions, reiterating the lament about the world's transience and the nothingness of meaning (Marra 1999, 87). Both influences

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coming together, the poetic "I" ended up being of transient character, leaving everything to the traditional canon of forms and allusions (Kaneda 1976, 25). He ends by suggesting that the introduction of Christianity could perhaps cure this shortcoming, if it was thoroughly screened, criticized and "japanificated" (Ōnishi 2014b, 21f.).

Ōnishi knew well that the European concept of art was based on metaphysical values like beauty, solemnity, or holiness and that Christianity could convey these ideas and provide the epistemological basis for an understanding of art (Kaneda 1976, 25). Then again, one should hesitate to see a Christian believer denouncing indigenous traditions, as Ōnishi highly appreciated the richness of Japanese traditions.[4] Knowing that Japanese art was only praised inside Japan because of the esteem it got from a Western audience, his goal was to find better reasons to do so and to be honest about the potentials of Japanese tradition (Watanabe 2001, 102f.). In *Are the Japanese rich in aesthetic sensibility*? (*nihonjin ha bijutsushin ni tomeru ka* 日本人は美術心に富める乎, 1888), for example, he finds that the 'art' Japan was admired for was mainly crafts, art in the mere sense of technique (Ōnishi 2014a). In a hierarchy of art forms, which he builds on the level of ideas expressed in them, those arts must rank comparably low (Aizawa 2004, 68). In other words, he assumed that Japanese religiosity would remain unseen if it was not expressed in an aesthetic way intelligible for the world.

Ōnishi could not have foreseen that discourse developments after him would lead Japan into a cultural nationalism in which the idea would flourish that Japan's syncretism provided an ideally suited basis for art. Today, we even find Günter Seubold writing in his introduction to *Aesthetics of Zen-Buddhism*:

> "If you can call Zen a 'religion' at all, then an 'experience religion'. . . . What else should Zen be if not aesthetics? Zen is aesthetics per se, the archetype of aesthetics: perception, and only perception, but in its most comprehensive sense, in front of the background of non-perception, non-experience". (Seubold 2011, 7)

Before it was possible to argue this way, the concepts of 'religion' and 'aesthetics', like Ōnishi used them, must have underwent major changes. To claim the disclosing effect of aesthetics for Japanese religion, the aesthetic experience had to be detached

[4] For example, Ōnishi admired Kagawa Kageaki, an Edo era poet who strengthened the role of the poet's subjectivity in poetry (Kaneda 1976, 59–61).

from a narrow understanding of 'art'. Facilitated by the romantic longing for the East that strongly influenced the 19th century outlook on Japan, Japanese affirmation of the emotional and the immediate seemed attractive as a cure for the rationalism and nihilism in European modernity (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 2013, 235). Such attraction made it possible for Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三 (or Tenshin 天心, 1863–1913) to demand Japan's extraordinary role in conserving the cultural traditions of Asia. Karatani Kōjin alleges that "his position was that of a modernist and a colonialist" (Karatani 1998, 157). He criticizes that Okakura adopted the stance of Orientalist aestheticism that fancies itself to treat the Oriental other with "respect", venerating its native beauty but looking down on it as a mere object of scientific analysis (Karatani 1998, 147).[5] Okakura's insistence on art as the most remarkable achievement of Japan's tradition fits well in this schema (cf. Karatani 1998, 155).

For Okakura, Japanese arts revealed that artistry, religion and everyday life were intertwined, their entanglement being the point wherein the actual timeless identity of Japan was to be found (Okakura 1903, 6–10) (Clark 2005, 10f.). He argued against Hegel's dialectical structure of history that, instead of a logical synthesis, Japanese culture worked like a peaceful juxtaposition, an aesthetic reconciliation. Already in the Ashikaga period (1394–1868), Neo-Confucianism had synthesized Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian thought to create the 'Asian consciousness' that was no thing of the past, but instead still living within the art of Japan (Tanaka 1994, 32f., 34f.).

Okakura's famous *Book of Tea*, published first in English in 1906, was dedicated to promoting Japan's syncretism—then aptly called "Teaism"—based on the tea ceremony as its paradigmatic expression. The cult of tea, first practiced in China and then brought to Japan together with Buddhism, was perfected in Japan (Okakura 1923, 3f.). Okakura designs the tea ceremony as a kind of ritual or communion when he writes: "Tea with us became more than an idealization of the form of drinking; it is a religion of the art of life" (Okakura 1923, 43). He explicitly sees Teaism as a form of art and art as a substitute or equivalent of religion:

> "Nothing is more hallowing than the union of kindred spirits in art. At the moment of meeting, the art lover transcends himself. . . . It is thus that art becomes akin to religion and ennobles mankind". (Okakura 1923, 111)

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[5] Karatani's critique is shared by Yoshioka Hiroshi, who traces Japan's "self-colonization" until the present day (Yoshioka 2013, 8–10).

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We can see Okakura's Teaism as an attempt to counter the exoticism Japan was facing with the most unlikely choice: with its own aestheticism.[6] The remarkable standing this move acquired in the following years is evident in the following quote:

> "[T]he phrase 'Zen and tea are one' [indicates] how tightly Zen and the tea ceremony were bound together—probably the first time in world history that art appreciation and religious thinking were so intimately interfused". (Yanagi 2017a, 138)

This statement, building a bridge between Okakura's ideology of tea and the 'religio-aesthetic tradition' proverbial in the late 20$^{th}$ century, was uttered by Yanagi Sōetsu (or Muneyoshi 柳宗悦, 1889–1961) in 1957. Continuing the national culture movement initiated by Okakura and others, Yanagi invented the term *Mingei* 民芸, folk craft, to promote the beauty and meaningfulness of products made by common people. While he is occasionally reproached for the same politically inspired aestheticism as Okakura (Karatani 1998, 153), his revaluation of crafts does not only seize on contemporary trends in the West like the arts and crafts movement in England, but also demonstrates how collective identity in Japan could be reasoned from arts. Hence, his understanding of art counters the notion of an individual genius creating art with art emerging from an ingenious folk's tradition and belief (Otabe 2008, 45–48). In *What is Folk Craft*? (1933) he draws a far-reaching parallel between believing and crafting which he sticks to throughout his work:

> "Some Buddhist sects believe that all people will achieve salvation in the Pure Land regardless of merit […]. In the same way, all folk artisans, regardless of their lack of academic knowledge concerning their craft, are still capable of producing works of merit. They work as if this were the natural thing to do; . . . they give birth to beauty as if this were the natural thing to do. They have entered the way of salvation through unconscious faith." (Yanagi 2017b, 84)

As not an individual's work but products of *tariki* 他力, other power, these crafts would partake in Buddha-nature and thus carry 'true beauty' in them (Porcu 2007,

[6] Later, researchers began to stress the insight into the general aesthetic constitution of human life provided by the tea ceremony. See for example Jennifer Anderson's account: "Even those who participate in the most abbreviated of tea rituals and lack any knowledge of its symbol system sense that it fulfils deep human needs". (Anderson 1987, 495)

59–61). But who would be able to appreciate it? To explain the relation of production and reception, Yanagi conceived of an anthropology that connects humans and their vessels of daily use: As man designs his environment, the things in daily use naturally acquire this life's aura (Otabe 2008). While the humble and altruistic nature of such vessels could thus be projected back on the moral constitution of its producer, an equally untainted attitude is required by its user. Here Yanagi refers back to the tea ceremony, writing in *Thoughts about the tea ceremony*: "Using the right vessel at the right place in the right moment leads naturally back to dharma" (cited after Otabe 2008, 57). Aesthetic sensibility opens the way to dharma, piety the way to creation. Thus handicrafts, those inferior arts Ōnishi disregarded for their lack of idealistic content, become filled with religious sincerity, their simplicity being an expression of the aesthetic ideals of the tea ceremony.

To summarize, we may say that up until Yanagi it was successfully advocated that there are certain aesthetic values that permeate Japanese culture and society, that they are inspired by Japanese syncretism, and that they are morally superior to the West. While this discursive shift forms the legacy of the 1930s cultural nationalism, it also introduces a rejection of Western categories; a rejection that would finally clear a space for negotiation beyond Western hermeneutical hegemony and Japanese particularism

## 20th century accounts on the religio-aesthetic Japan

In the course of the 20th century, it became an established gesture of the so-called Nihonjinron to link back expressive elements of Japanese culture to allegedly religious foundations. Even after the war and Japan's capitulation, aesthetics held its ground in the identity of the hereafter pacifist nation (Iida 2002, 5f.). These postwar decades saw the connection between Japanese aesthetics, morality, and religiosity stressed more than ever and engendered a series of now classical accounts of Japanese culture (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 2013, 242). Two of them shall be quickly introduced to show how they paved the way for a revaluation of aesthetic categories and their experiential content as an approach to Japanese culture.

Yet before that, it is important to note that even these valuable accounts verge on the same argumentative basis as does the Nihonjinron, strengthening an experiential value specific to Japan. This paper, too, sets out from the observation that individual impressions vary significantly between cultural settings. The

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Nihonjinron, however, tends to explain these differences by genetics or a hypostatized, timeless essence of Japanese culture.[7] It thus proceeds in a reductionist fashion and draws a hermeneutical wall around everything Japanese when declaring its fundamental unintelligibility for non-Japanese observers. As not to fall back into the trap of hermetic mystification, the aim of any study on Japanese culture can no longer be to illuminate "the essence of Japaneseness", but to account for the variability, porosity, and context specific determination of every culture. If we acknowledge the instructional quality of aesthetic experience, we risk subscribing to the narrative of Japan's exceptionality. Against this I contend that Japan is no exception but a case study for how sensual-corporeal experiences guide us into the disclosure of a cultural context.

The following examples show how aesthetic notions can help structuring and thus unclosing Japanese culture if they hint at an experiential value that transcends imposed classifications. Both *Ma* and *kire* are religious as well as aesthetic, artistic and moral properties of temporal and spatial arrangements.

I already hinted at Richard B. Pilgrim's dictum about the 'religio-aesthetic tradition' of Japan wherein "artistic form and aesthetic sensibility become synonymous with religious form and religious (or spiritual) sensibility" (Pilgrim 1977, 287). He argues that without relying on an idea of the transcendental, this belief worships the realm of the visible for its soteriological potentials. However, an integral part thereof is paying special attention to the "invisible" gaps and empty spaces in between, to *ma* 間. Pilgrim presents the paradigm of *ma* as a cornerstone not just of Japanese religion, but also of its social thinking and, of course, its aesthetics (Pilgrim 1986, 257). Corresponding to the moment of no-action in Noh theatre and the Buddhist concept of no-mind (*mu-shin*) as well as to the blank parts (*yohaku*) in ink painting and calligraphy, *ma* represents a 'pregnant nothingness' that does not wait to be filled by action, but which is the very substrate of action. A visitor to a Japanese shrine precinct might recognize an empty square fenced off by *shimenawa*, holy threads woven from rice straw and decorated with thunderbolt shaped white paper foldings (*shide*). Those are spaces "thought (or designed) to be

[7] A classical and instructive, yet polemic study on the main topoi of the Nihonjinron was elaborated by (Dale 1986). A more differentiated account can be found in (Hijiya-Kirschnereit 1988). Heise (1989) shows the embeddedness of the Nihonjinron in the cross-cultural setting. Mishima (2003) draws the connection between aestheticization in the cultural nationalism of the 1930s and the pre-political idea of 'nation' that persists until today.

open, cleared out, and pure in anticipation of the coming and going of kami" (Pilgrim 1986, 262).

Pilgrim also mentions the Taoist perception of a simple vessel whose positive potential of being used (*yang*) is only possible thanks to its inward void (*yin*) (Pilgrim 1986, 264f.). Just like Yanagi, Pilgrim insists that *ma* is not just a category of outer, but also of inner design:

> "The word ['ma'] carries both objective and subjective meaning; that is, ma is not only 'something' within objective, descriptive reality but also signifies particular modes of experience". (Pilgrim 1986, 256)

Although Pilgrim uses the terms 'aesthetic' or 'religious', his observations reveal them to be incongruous with Japanese culture.

Another incongruousness is tackled by Ōhashi Ryōsuke who found the Western concept of nature unfit to describe the original Japanese understanding of it. He sets out from the idea of *kire* (切れ, cut). At their beginning, Shintō Shrines were nothing more than those empty spaces of *ma*, "holy" in their emptiness. However, by *cutting out* a part of the natural environment, men did the first *kire* and intensified the surrounding nature in its being. The act of cutting created the distance that made nature an object of reverence (Ōhashi 2014, 27–35). But, instead of keeping nature in an objective distance like in the European intellectual history, the 'cut' was perfected by 'continuity'. *Kiretsuzuki* (cut-continuity, 切れ続き) was to become the aesthetic expression for the belief that nothing is originally isolated or cut off but is only cut out to become integrated again. Within men, the creative will to create and individualize struggles with the will to integrate and be embedded in nature. *Kire* is just the specific conceptual—and aesthetic—form this general struggle has taken on in Japan (cf. Ōhashi 2014, 17–25). Here its unfolding further progressed as an element of behavior, perception, and design until today. *Kire* can still be found as a stylized pattern of exercise (型, *kata*) of Noh theatre, in *ikebana* (生け花, arranging flowers), *kendo* (剣道, the way of the sword), or tea ceremony, never losing its religious tint but acquiring more and more social implications (Ōhashi 2014, 95–122).

Instead of following artificial borderlines such as the one between 'religion' and 'aesthetics', it seems more fruitful to follow threads like those of *kire* or *ma* to organize and make sense of Japanese culture. Since I am refuting the idea of an essence of Japanese culture, it is not my aim to judge these accounts to be right or

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wrong. Rather, it seems important to ask if they are helpful and if they can be taken to a more general level of cross-cultural perception. Can such approaches help to develop equitable methods for imparting cultural knowledge? Can they help to overcome axiomatic limitations? The thesis is that, indeed, taking our aesthetic impressions seriously can result in depicting the other in a way more honest to its own structure and to our emotional layout.

**Aesthetics in religious experience: How descriptive concepts gain meaning**

Normally, when researchers try to be objective and to give scientifically justified judgements, their aesthetic impression is something to be cancelled out, in the best case to be de-subjectivized as object of analysis. Yet, I am suggesting that aesthetics is more than a paraphrase or emotional supplement to research because every study of culture is experience-based in a sense. There are two reasons to argue this point: First, the aesthetic experience is an essential part of the religious—as of any cultural—experience. And second, aesthetic experience constitutes the matter out of which conceptual meaning is made.

As for the first reason, according to the sociologist Omar McRoberts, who wrote about the Christian religious life in the US, one central element of the religious experience is the shared experience of beauty. He notes:

> “Through my ethnographic encounters with people in many churches, I came to understand beauty as a key part of religious experience and religious communities partly as spaces where people generate and appreciate certain kinds of beauty”. (McRoberts 2004, 198)

When beauty is one goal of shared religious experience, an increased aesthetic attention is demanded from each participant, letting other sensual perceptions come to the fore to generate a comprehensive impression. McRoberts continues:

> “The feeling of a hard wooden pew, smoothed by decades of use, pressing uncompromisingly against the sitting bones and spine, and the very cadence of an order of service must be considered as much a part of religious experience as any sort of Divine intoxication”. (McRoberts 2004, 199)

The position of the observer does not have to be that of a member of the religious group, but that of a participant in an aesthetic event: Any researcher who is working on culture must decide either to become an "insider" to the loss of his "objectivity" or to stay an "outsider" and miss the insider's view. Even as an outsider, he will still be able to share the aesthetic experience. Here, sharing indicates more than describing. It means that the investigator is receiving something that enables him to approach his object of research apart from category testing. As a non-Japanese or a non-believer, we might never have insider knowledge. We are thrown back on perceiving the "visible" or "sensible" elements. Yet, if we realize that even within the group of believers, religiosity is communicated by visibility and shared experiences, we can make it our academic attitude to build on this ground.

Speaking of "insider" and "outsider" may sound as if there were any strict classifications to make. Quite the contrary: what counts as 'in' or 'out' is only decided "on the spot"; i.e. only if confronted with something external, the internal begins to work as such. This holds true for someone working on his "own" culture, too, since he has to obtain a self-distance for the sake of making any statement that claims objectivity (cf. Yoshioka 2013, 9).

The question where "inside" changes into "outside" is especially crucial in cross-cultural comparison since the comparing researcher might find himself trapped between being an informant or an observer. For this very reason, Takahashi Teruaki suggests setting the researcher himself as a point of comparison. He thus hopes to overcome the constraint that every cross-cultural comparison has to be justified either as genealogical or typological. Since comparing begins in the head of the individual, he must be urged to reflect on the reasons that made him compare, thereby revealing prejudices as well as sensations. Takahashi defends the individual experience as heuristics, hoping to yield an enrichment of comparative parameters (Takahashi 2016). The necessity for this arises from the bias caused by incongruous terminologies. Because culture is "sense-making", it is itself something to be understood instead of being explained. In this respect, cultural comparison and with it cultural analysis in general are a hermeneutical endeavor. And vice versa, every hermeneutical endeavor must face the challenge of the inevitably cultural nature of our understanding (Brenner 1999, 21).

Insofar, the study of religion shows a problem inherent in all fields of cultural studies: If we wanted to understand it like an insider—religion or culture, respectively—we would have to convert to a different mindset (the "metaphysical infrastructure", like McRoberts puts it (2004, 196)), which seems to diminish our,

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the researcher's, *objectivity*. It would do so as long as we insist that objectivity means an experience methodologically disengaged from personal impression; or that objectivity is gained by converting impression into data through alignment with external evidence and measurements.

But is not this understanding of "objectivity" to be rebuilt? Only because we are eschewing the insider's view, we must not wholly exclude subjective impressions. Granting a central significance to the sensual experience of the investigator does not give way to vagueness or undecidedness, but is a way to foster the investigator's standpoint (Caspar, Knatz, and Otabe 2011, 13f.). While categories and definitions that determine our knowledge have been dismantled in postmodernism, we can still strive to strengthen the subjective positioning, eventually regaining a viable sense of objectivity. Strengthened subjectivity engenders an operative kind of objectivity, which is no longer an a priori positing, but a temporary stance.

> "Objectivity, then"*, like McRoberts states,* "is not merely about achieving and holding the proper analytical distance from the phenomenon one studies; rather, the objective stance accommodates intimate experience. . . . [Empathy and objectivity] appear in dialectical tension as a methodological heuristic [that] clears a space". (McRoberts 2004, 202)

Alternately allowing ourselves to be aesthetically attracted (resp. repelled) by another culture's expressions "clears a space" of negotiation wherein our familiar categories are addressed or rejected. This is not just a legitimate way to establish cross-cultural dialogue starting from inside our heads. If we disengage objectivity from transcendental sources, it can still be maintained as a function of intersubjectivity. Within the individual, objectivity is then achieved as a stance of being an insider and an observer at the same time.

Building on the ground of aesthetics has ramifications also for how the meaning of our descriptive categories evolves in the first place. The philosopher of language Mark Johnson stresses the observation that "the meaning of something is its relations, actual and potential, to other qualities, things, events, and experiences" (Johnson 2007, 256). Hence, the meaning we attach to concepts like 'religion' has grown out of situational knowledge, memory, and experience. Such experiences are aesthetic in that they are marked by a certain *quality*. Mark Johnson refers to John Dewey's pragmatist account:

> "Experiences come whole, pervaded by unifying qualities that demarcate them within the flux of our lives. If we want to find meaning, or the basis for meaning, we must therefore start with the qualitative unity that Dewey described. The demarcating pervasive quality is, at first, unanalyzed, but it is the basis for subsequent analysis, thought, and development. . . . It is not wrong to say that we experience objects, properties, and relations, but it is wrong to say that these are primary in experience. What are primary are pervasive qualities of situations, within which we subsequently discriminate objects, properties, and relations". (Johnson 2007, 75)

Not only is our religious experience partly constituted by aesthetic perception but also our descriptive categories are built upon the sum of such experiences and their qualities. Our sensual perception is guided by our knowledge just like our knowledge is informed by our sensual experiences. Thus, it seems illogical to expect that we would be able to judge a new experience, f.ex. the encounter with another culture's 'religious' expressions, from a purely intellectual standpoint. The quality of this new situation will finally decide over the intellectual evaluations we even consider. In other words, our aesthetic experience is the very ground from which both our meaningful construction of categories and our assessment of culture originates.

Since the rationalism in Enlightenment, we have placed too much confidence in directly assessing a situation or observation intellectually using categories seemingly given to us a priori. Yet, after these have been deconstructed, we should find ways to assure ourselves again of what is primary in our perception of the world. The danger of losing objectivity could, as suggested, be turned around if we changed our expectations of the scientific stance in investigation. Objectivity is only "lost" if we stick to previous understandings, not if we acknowledge the aesthetic share even within our objective standards. The greatest danger we are facing is the loss of the richness and magnificence of cultural diversity within a too narrow terminology of Western origin. Understanding happens as a mutual alignment, not as a one-sided transformation. The researcher who dares to leave his scientific distance and to explore the aesthetic foundation of what he is studying will finally be much more suited to disclose the culture he studies to his audience.

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