Editorial

Introduction: Religion, Experience, and Narrative

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At the end of his famous book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Gershom Scholem points to the important role stories have played in Hasidism, the latest phase in Jewish Mysticism, and he closes his lectures with the following story:

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the 'Maggid' of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light a fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which it all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the story-teller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three. (Scholem 1941, p. 345)

Scholem himself wonders whether this anecdote symbolizes the decay of a great movement or reflects the transformation of all its values. In any case, he concludes that it reflects the position in which Jewish Mysticism finds itself (Scholem 1941, p. 345).

Even though it may be a bit far-fetched, I would like to relate this anecdote to the discussions across academic disciplines and professional fields on whether or how "narrative" matters—on whether or how the study of stories and of story-telling matters within these fields and disciplines.

A few decades ago, so-called narrative turns have taken place in the humanities and in the social sciences as well pointing to the importance and potential of addressing stories in a variety of research perspectives and to the methodological value of narrative analyses (e.g., Mitchell 1981; Bamberg 2007; Brockmeier 2015). It is therefore not surprising that these developments have also had an impact on the multidisciplinary field of religious studies, affecting in particular the study of religious experience or constellations of religion and experience.

Within the field of religious studies, there are two main conceptualizations of the relationship between "experience" and "narrative". The first one conceptualizes this relationship as "representation" such as in the Hasidic tale, where stories represent or replace actions that are no longer possible. The second one conceptualizes the relationship as an "entanglement" that precludes drawing clear boundaries between the two. In the framework of the Hasidic tale, one could argue that the stories could only have had the same effect as the actions, because they have (perhaps unnoticed) always already been there, because actions and stories have always already been twisted together and because stories have always played an important role before, during and after the performance of

the corresponding actions. I would like to exemplify the two conceptualizations with two texts, one written by David Yamane in 2000 and one written by Courtney Bender in 2007.

In his article *Narrative and Religious Experience*, Yamane (2000) makes a distinction between "experiencing" and "experience" and argues that we cannot study experiencing, but only how an experience is made meaningful after the fact. Yamane links his suggestion that we can study the "intersubjective articulation of experience", that we can study narratives, to a clear distinction between "experiences themselves" (something we cannot address and study) and the "expressions of experiences in language" (something we can address and study adequately with a narrative approach). Bender (2007), however, questions this pre-supposition in her article *Touching the Transcendent: Rethinking Religious Experience in the Sociological Study of Religion* and refers to research lines (including her own) that investigate how, for example, contemporary American religious/spiritual experiences are shaped by "communally prescribed narratives" and "embodied practices" and demonstrates with a case study not only how religious experiences can be viewed as "the sides of religious imaginary, of religious history, and of theology", but also how, for some contemporary mystics, telling the experience is, in some ways, experiencing it (Bender 2007, pp. 204, 207).

I would like to align with Courtney Bender and argue that with regard to the study of religious experiences, "stories" or "narratives"[1] are not adequately understood as linguistic representations of religious experiences in real life. Instead, they refer to aspects and dimensions of the very religious experiences themselves that could not be captured or addressed otherwise.

Philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre and Arthur Danto have pointed to the narrative resources of our self-understanding (Taylor 1989), to a virtue ethics linked to the narrability of human life (MacIntyre 1981) and to the necessity of narrative explanations in historiography (Danto 1965). Narrative structure has come to be seen as inherent in our way of experiencing, acting and living. David Carr (1991), for example, argues that even most of our perceptions in everyday life are temporally and narratively structured. Listening to a melody or watching a neighbor coming home consists of a meaningful temporal configuration comprising at least a basic narrative structure such as a beginning–middle–end structure. More complex actions and experiences (such as to help, to offend, falling in love, becoming ill, etc.) definitely need an organizing theme, a so-called plot, in order to be experienced or recognized by the actor or experiencer as a meaningful configuration over time and space. As Paul Ricoeur (1979) has outlined, it is via narrative that we experience time as meaningful and it is this meaningful experience of time that provides the basic structure of our narratives. At the level of human actions or human consciousness, the act of emplotment synthesizes attention to the present with expectations for the future and memories of the past. The narratory principle that human beings perceive, think, remember, feel, imagine, act, experience and make moral choices according to narrative structures installs "narrative" as a "root metaphor" (Sarbin 1986) for the construction and adoption of analytical perspectives, scientific models and methods in a huge variety of research areas.

One important perspective, model and method in this context is Dan McAdam's life-story approach to personal identity, which asserts that people living in modern societies function not only as actors performing social roles and as agents pursuing goals, but also as authors of their own biographies. As biographers, they are part of an ongoing story, provide their lives with unity and purpose over time by constructing from adolescence onwards internalized and evolving narratives of the self, complete stories with particular narrative tones and forms, images, ideological settings, nuclear scenes, more or less archetypal characters, themes and familiar plot lines (McAdams 1997, 2001, 2013). This understanding of personal identity in particular as the narrative construction of a unity of the self across time and the related seminal analyses by McAdams and his colleagues inspired countless studies on the configurations of religion/spirituality and experience during the last few decades (e.g., Lindgren 2004; Belzen and Geels 2008; Buitelaar and Zock 2013; Schachter and Ben Hur 2019).

The contributions to this Special Issue are quite diverse. They cover subjects reaching from Middle Bengali texts to narratives about the haji from Moroccan-Dutch women in the Netherlands, to answers to a survey about Neo-Shamanism in the UK, to online conversations with a young person in the US who identifies with a music mixing console, to theoretical considerations with regard to a shapeshifting self, to considerations about the compatibility of synchronic and diachronic dispositions in an individual's life. What they all have in common, is the following: They all contribute to the discussion and further elaboration of narrative approaches to religious experiences that understand experiences as essentially entangled with stories and stories essentially entangled with experiences.

Stephanie Shea's research concerns the online community of a subculture of people who identify as not human, either entirely or partially. These *Otherkin* relate their identity—among others—to mythological creatures, fantastic characters, animals, plants or even machines. Shea presents in her article the analysis of the narrative of the *Machinekin* Neve, who identifies as a music mixing console (*Exploring Other-Than-Human Identity: Religious Experiences in the Life-Story of a Machinekin*). The case study is based on an online Awakening story Neve shared some years ago with the author and on an online semi-structured life-story interview. With regard to the theoretical framework for this research, Shea refers to Dan McAdams' life-story approach and analyzes Neve's identity as a narrative identity by focusing on the main features of a life story, providing a sense of unity for the autobiographical author (e.g., McAdams 1997). Shea demonstrates how in Neve's narrative, crucial experiences in life and key issues concerning his struggling with autism, their identification as transgender and Neve's identification as Machinekin are related to each other in a meaningful way. She outlines how the ideological setting of Neve's life story in particular provides Neve's life with unity and purpose. A firm belief that God has purposefully created him related to an evolving liberal Gnostic Catholicism and a belief in spiritual energy that "flows through every atom in existence" can be interpreted as essential contributions to Neve's narrative identity.

Carolina Ivanescu and Sterre Berentzen's article also demonstrates the value of McAdams' life-story approach for the analysis of storied experiences in the field of religious studies (*Becoming a Shaman: Narratives of Apprenticeship and Initiation in Contemporary Shamanism*). Their research for this article addresses contemporary people in the UK who define themselves as shamans. Based on a survey with shamans who are active online, the authors applied a narrative analysis to the storied answers to some of the open essay questions of the survey. This narrative analysis uses some coding schemes life-narrative researchers have developed and validated during the last few decades and Gerhard Mayer's ten elements of the shamanic myth. With this two-fold comparative narrative analysis, the authors reveal how the respondents include the features of their becoming a shaman into their evolving life stories and they identify some shamanic tropes that still inform the experiences and self-narratives of contemporary shamans. The self-narratives articulate intriguing combinations of tradition and innovation in the way agency has been lost, regained and mastered in journeying through a universe populated by non-human, human and beyond-human beings related to a "new understanding of one's role in relationship to forces such as spirits, humans, plants, nature, animals, but also a generic and abstract humanity".

In her article, Marjo Buitelaar analyzes second-generation Moroccan-Dutch female pilgrims' stories about their pilgrimage to Mecca (*Rearticulating the Conventions of Hajj Storytelling: Second Generation Moroccan-Dutch Female Pilgrims' Multi-Voiced Narratives about the Pilgrimage to Mecca*). For these analyses, Buitelaar adopts a dialogical approach by focusing on the dialogues that the women engage in in their storytelling with a multiplicity of personal and collective voices that also shape their expectations and experiences in their daily lives. This approach allows Buitelaar to analyze a specific constellation of intersecting norms, values and discursive traditions that have shaped the haji experiences and the stories about them including, among other things, incorporated norms about hygiene and privacy, values such as personal meaning-making and spiritual development, and

resonances with an Islamic reformist discourse and with a cultural discourse about an authentic self. Buitelar's understanding of these stories as co-authored and multi-voiced also allows questions to be raised about the possible "ineffability" of some experiences during the hajj (e.g., sexual harassment) as the result of power structures. These power structures are effective through the present and imagined audiences of the stories imposing rules with regard to the speakable and the unspeakable.

The only literary-historical contribution to this Special Issue is Robert Czyżykowski's analysis of a Middle Bengali text written approximately at the beginning of the 18th century (*The Mystical World of the Body in the Bengali Tantric Work Nigūḍhārthaprakāśāvali*). According to the author, the analyzed work is a fine example of a fusion of various tantric, yogic and bhakti elements containing fascinating descriptions of imaginary landscapes with subtle yogic bodily arteries, gates, ponds and landing spots. It is about the experience of the divine presence and the whole cosmos in one's body, including, among others, the elements of travelling through one's own body by use of the nets of internal arteries of rivers and meeting various figures or exploring various internal places such as villages, ponds or crossings. The text can be understood as a "visionary guidebook" for these experiences of the divinity in the human body on various levels, stressing the fluidity and the bliss of these experiences. The author understands all the religious symbols and metaphors in the work as based on the human body and refers in this context to Victor Turner's general claim that the human organism and its crucial experiences are the *fons et origo* of all classifications. However, here, we could also argue that these experiences are entangled in the respective images and narratives.

The aim of Sonnenschein's and Lindgren's theoretical article is to contribute to and expand our understanding of radicalization through the lens of narrative psychology in general and narrative identity theory, in particular by introducing a new perspective on the concept (*The Shapeshifting Self: Narrative Pathways into Political Violence*). They emphasize the importance of narratives in the dynamic exchange between context and mind for constructing, structuring, and maintaining realities. Individuals and groups refer continuously to stories for meaning-making and define and redefine their identities in this way. The authors suggest that, in some cases, these ceaseless processes eventuate in what they define as the *Shapeshifting Self* by coherently fusing stories of personal loss, rupture or trauma together with national stories or stories of social movements about sociopolitical violent engagement due to grievances on a societal level (injustice, domination, poverty, persecution). The active engagement of individuals in political violence may be the end-product of processes of meaning-making, adaption and coping, in which people internalize master narratives into a meaningful reconstruction of the self after negative life experiences. These narratives may also be informed by religious meaning-systems (as the authors demonstrate for the *Jewish-Israeli context*) and serve as the "arch-story" of the *Shapeshifting Self.*

The last contribution to our Special Issue challenges the concept of narrative identity as developed by Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Dan McAdams (1997) and critiqued by Galen Strawson (2004). Eunil David Cho explores in his article *Do We All Live Story-Shaped Lives? Narrative Identity, Episodic Life, and Religious Experiences* Strawson's two-fold critique against the psychological narrativity thesis (people live a storied life and develop a narrative identity) and against the ethical narrativity thesis (a narrative outlook on one's own life is a prerequisite for a good life) and gives an outline of Strawson's alternative approach, the descriptive and normative episodic life thesis (people can have episodic self-experiences only and a storied life is not necessary for living a good life). Cho points to the strengths and weaknesses of a narrative or an episodic perspective on the self and personal identity and suggests a combination of the two approaches. According to Cho, episodic senses of the self and diachronic-narrative perspectives on the self "are not mutually exclusive in an individual's life, but . . . individuals may at different points in life experience their lives in one manner or another". In this context, the author presents a case study in order to demonstrate how religious experiences can bring about narrative unity out of a fragmented episodic self. The case study consists of an analysis of Leo Tolstoy's autobiographical

writing, his personal religious experience, presented in William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and interpreted by James in terms of psychological processes related to the unification of a divided self. According to James ([1902] 1985), it was "a case of heterogeneous personality tardily and slowly finding its unity and level" (p. 186). In terms of a narrative approach, it was, according to Cho, the move from an episodic life to a sense of diachronic narrative identity.

All these contributions to this Special Issue help us to understand the complexities of narrative approaches to religious experiences or to constellations of religion and experience. Varieties of (religious) experiences are connected to varieties of narrative approaches and the analyses shed a light on the potentialities of narrative approaches to the study of religion in the context of bodies, dialogues, identity formations, cultures, and power structures. In addition, all these articles can inspire future explorations of the intriguing methodological question of how we can include "experiences" into our research agenda in order to generate the best answers to the problems we are confronted with.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Note

[1] Although a terminological distinction between "story" and "narrative" has been drawn in some approaches, other approaches are using these concepts as synonyms (Popp-Baier 2013). In this short editorial introduction to this Special Issue, I prefer to use the two terms as synonyms.

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