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Thinking Religion in Place

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The *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* (*JASR*) was founded—under the title of the *Australian Religion Studies Review* (*ARSR*)—some 35 years ago in 1988 and renamed in 2013. Now, the co-editors are relaunching the journal: this time, our name remains the same, but our song is changing. Our hope is to make the *JASR* distinctive in the religious studies publishing landscape. Although there are many high-quality journals in our field, we want to offer a unique scholarly conversation in our pages, one captured by the title of this editorial: thinking religion in place.

What is the significance of place—including the scholar's own location—to the study of religion? In this editorial, we sketch out some of the ways in which an emphasis on the significance of place for thinking religion opens new possibilities for conversation among scholars of religion. We do not intend what follows to narrowly define the scope of *JASR*. Rather, we want to gesture towards the kinds of debates we hope might unfold and intend that over the coming years the articles published in this journal will build a comprehensive, nuanced, and ever-evolving case for the significance of place to the study of religion.

We think about place in two ways: most immediately, the significance of place points to the scholar's situatedness in a location with historical, cultural, and geographical particularities. Our driving question prompts us to consider in turn the way this situatedness impacts the production of knowledge, shaped as it is by the global politics of place. We invite scholars to reflect critically both on their place on larger maps, and also on the impact of local and international forces on the phenomena that interest them. *JASR* has an historic centre of gravity in Australia as the affiliated journal of the Australian Association for the Study of Religion. Australia is also where all three Co-Editors live and work, although two of us have also lived elsewhere in the world. 'Thinking religion' from our

place in the antipodes gives rise to specific questions. Those same questions may be answered differently from elsewhere; and a different place may also give rise to different questions.

Because the concept of 'religion' is deeply marked by the (modern, European) places in which it developed, we want to be clear that we take 'thinking religion' in its most capacious sense. This includes the study of nonreligion, spirituality both within and beyond conventional religion, conventional religion itself, and critical approaches to the concepts that animate our field (including whether 'religion' exists *sui generis*).

Place as Context

As Australians, we are keenly aware of the historical, social, and cultural particularities that shape the places we inhabit and research. In 2010, a special issue of the *ARSR* on religion and buildings featured an article by David Roberts on an Anglican mission on the western fringe of settlement in New South Wales between 1832 and 1843. Housed in an old convict prison, Roberts argues that the 'material facilities occupied by the mission reflected and exaggerated many of the shortcomings and conundrums of the missionary agenda, and that infrastructural and spatial difficulties contributed markedly to its failure' (Roberts 2010: 91). Here, a distinctively Australian built structure—a convict prison—shaped both the interactions on, and mission of, the station: in this case, to the missionaries' detriment. In a time of advancing climate crisis, considering how the changing material conditions of a place (re)shapes religions and/or society itself (along with the practice of scholarship) is particularly pressing.

The material and territorial dimensions of place are closely related to how places become 'storied' (Bramadat 2022)—the narratives constructed about places, and the communities that inhabit them, that give meaning and identity. For example, Australia has been 'storied' in a variety of ways: on the one hand, colonial Australia was an 'antipodean possibility of an Edenic new beginning' for (at least some) early Christian migrants (Koepping 1988: 9); on the other hand, the story of Australia as a supposedly 'Christian nation' recurs in political and social discourse, often to justify nativist tendencies. These stories have crowded out alternative narratives about Australia and religion—including Australia's place in and relationship to the broader Pacific region, which one author in the *ARSR* called 'the new Mediterranean: not a barrier but a bonding agent, a watery membrane' (May 1988: 16).

Critically considering 'place' in the study of religion is particularly important for the Australian context. The history of colonisation and the complex role of religion in that program is, often, intentionally omitted from many of the mainstream narratives about Australia. Yet there are ancient Indigenous traditions here in which place is central. 'Country' for Indigenous Australians is more than a geographical place: culture, people, nature and land are bound together. Tyson Yunkaporta (2023) describes the centrality of Indigenous relationship to Country—subverting Descartes—as 'I am located, therefore I am'. There have been many thousands of years of knowledge transmission and sharing between Indigenous elders in Australia. Yet the disciplines in which many of us work—religious studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, history and psychology—have too-often treated Indigenous Australians as objects of study, rather than true partners in the production of knowledge.

The relationship of people to a territory, and the claims religions make upon territory, is therefore an urgent focus for scholars of religion. Not only the role of religions in colonisation gestured to above, but there are also both historic and contemporary forms of religious nationalism that take different forms in different contexts. On the other hand, Bruno Latour's call to reclaim territoriality from nationalism as a politically viable and hopeful response to climate change—to 'come down to earth' and be grounded in a territory—aims to overcome exclusionary forms of territoriality. The ethics of how people in a settler-colony can 'come down to earth' in a colonised land without perpetuating the injustices of colonialism, however, remains an open question.

Place, the 'Knowledge Economy', and Disciplinary Formation

We also want the conversations in *JASR* to critically engage with the significance of place to the study of religion itself, and the (ongoing) formation of our disciplines. Raewyn Connell's (2007) work names an inequality in the global 'knowledge economy' between what she calls the 'metropole' (by which she means Northern Hemisphere centres of economic, political, and cultural power like the United States of America, Europe, and the United Kingdom) and 'periphery' (referring to everywhere else) in the production of knowledge. This metropole/periphery tension is a hierarchy: one where knowledge produced in some places (the metropole) travels more easily, and has more assumed universality, than others. This hierarchy defines the Northern hemisphere as the standard, the normal, the universal.

As a country on the periphery of the global production of knowledge, Australia—like other peripheral contexts—is 'the source of data, or arena in which metropolitan theory is applied' (Connell 2009: 106). For example, one of the founding texts in the sociology of religion (a discipline well-represented in *JASR*), Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), took for its main empirical data a report from the 1890s by Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen based on anthropological research in central Australia called 'The Native Tribes of Central Australia' (Connell 2009: 78). And yet, Durkheim himself never came to Australia. Nonetheless, he used the religious lives of Indigenous Australians to construct a grand theory of human society and religion. Whereas Australia is figured as particular and peripheral, Durkeim's metropolitan theory is supposedly universal, unmoored from the central Australian desert.

Australia's place on the periphery of the global academic marketplace means the study of religion here has typically looked towards and defined itself in relation to the disciplinary norms found in Europe and North America. For example, in the inaugural issue of the *ARSR*, Gillman (1988: 5) complained of the tendency of Australian religious studies departments to set their curricula according to the concerns of the field in European and American universities—where most Australian religious studies academics had done their training.

Some of these reflections will be familiar to colleagues working in Singapore, Cairo, and Lima—those of us working at the periphery still work with a disciplinary canon dominated by theory from Europe and North America. At the same time, the relation between metropole and periphery is particular to each place in which it plays out. For this reason, we have much to learn by exploring the way place shapes the work that each of us do.

Thinking Religion in Place

Thinking religion in place is an invitation to consider the particularity of your location—even if you are working in the metropole, or with metropolitan theory—and how your location shapes your scholarship. It is also a challenge: the southern theory of religion we hope this journal will generate may enable scholars of the global north to see the world and the study of religion upside-down. In this way, we argue that by naming and complicating the metropole/periphery tension in the study of religion, the metropole can be particularised.

In particularising the metropole, we want to develop a conversation in the study of religion that is multi-polar. Part of challenging the dominance and assumed universality of metropolitan theory in our disciplines is cultivating a rich conversation amongst scholars from many, diverse locations in the periphery. Australian, or Oceanian, perspectives on and experiences of religion are but one cluster of possibilities. We see Indigenous perspectives on the study of religion, from many different places across the globe, as a key dimension to this multi-polar conversation.

In renewing the *JASR*, we intend to preserve our distinctively Australian point of view. We will continue to publish work on religion in Australia and our wider region—that is, work from scholars based in the antipodes as well as those working on antipodean traditions. However, we have come to see that our Australian location points to a broader question about what it means to 'think religion' from a particular place. With that in mind, we aim to cultivate a conversation about the significance of place that includes scholars from many contexts, antipodean and otherwise. In this way, we hope our journal will offer a distinctive perspective on what it means to study the many phenomena we call 'religion' in the many places where we live and work.

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