

## Moving: The Core of Religion<sup>1</sup>

Sam Gill  
University of Colorado, Boulder

**Abstract:** *Identifying hope and redemption with moving and vitality, the dystopian film “Mad Max: Fury Road” surprisingly inspires us to develop the implications of moving as the core of religion. For animate organisms life is synonymous with self-moving. Philosophy and biology connect moving with not only vitality, but also with experience, perception, and conception. Hope and redemption are qualia of human living. Enduring academic standards tend to halt the moving richness of religions. Taking as radically as possible the primacy of self-moving, an alternative is presented that prefers kinesiology to autopsy. Seven propositions are developed directed especially to the emerging generation of religion scholars.*

Give me a place to stand on and I will move the world.  
~ Archimedes

When I think of my body and ask what it does to  
earn that name, two things stand out. It moves.  
It feels. In fact it does both at the same time.  
~ Brian Massumi

“Fury Road,” the subtitle of George Miller’s 2015 dystopian “Mad Max” film, identifies its central theme as moving with passion and purpose.<sup>2</sup> The word “fury” indicates an unrestrained or violent anger, rage, or passion and indeed this characterizes nearly every second of this filmic journey. Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) driving an enormous black tanker truck and trailer, the War Rig, abandons her contracted designation to procure gasoline and bullets in exchange for mother’s milk and water, to pursue her own mission of hope and redemption. Unknown to Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), the tyrant who controls the Citadel where the raggedy remnants of humankind live, Furiosa has hidden Joe’s Wives, five young beauties, in her rig and the whole female gang strike out to find “the green place,” Furiosa’s childhood home. Of course, upon learning of the rebellion, Immortan Joe sends his crazy gang of mechanics in their cars—works of dystopian art pieced together from found scraps—to bring the women back. Max (Tom Hardy) is an independent kind of guy and has attempted escape from, but was recaptured by, Joe’s cult<sup>3</sup> of mechanics. Max spends the first long section of the road chase strapped to a metal cross on the front of a car wildly pursuing the fleeing women. A

---

<sup>1</sup> A version of this article was presented as a lecture at University of Florida January 2017. My thanks to the folks there for inviting me.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEJnMQG9ev8&feature=em-share\\_video\\_user](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEJnMQG9ev8&feature=em-share_video_user)

<sup>3</sup> This group of young men are “branded” as initiates and their personal totem is a steering wheel.

metal grill attached to his head covers his nose and mouth echoing the metal chastity belts Immortan Joe forces on his wives. A tube tapping a vein in Max's neck supplies a flow of blood to the terminally ill Nux (Nicholas Hoult), the crazy this-is-a-good-day-to-die "warboy" driver of one of the chase cars. Max finally escapes and becomes awkward companion to Furiosa; yet, the small extent to which he is savior to the women, he is a reluctant, almost accidental, one. And, compared with the Mel Gibson's Max, this Max is not all that mad.

In Greek mythology Fury is the name of a female spirit of punishment often represented as one of three goddesses of vengeance and retribution, the Furies or Erinyes, a name perhaps coming from the Arcadian word meaning, "to be angry." Furiosa, joined by the five wives of Immortan Joe, might be understood as modeled on these Greek goddesses. Perhaps the film, enhanced by its harshly dystopian setting, is a version of the old story that life is a journey with every moment invigorated by the presence of grave risk; yet life is a moving on that must be pursued with passion (even anger<sup>4</sup>) and the courage to act strongly with conviction inspired by hope and redemption.

One of the few conversations in the film more than a phrase long occurs just before the War Rig arrives at Furiosa's childhood home, which she calls "the green place." Max is in the passenger seat, Furiosa is driving, the wives are in the back seat sleeping.

Referring to "the green place" Max asks, "How do you know this place even exists?"

Furiosa: "I was born there."

Max: "Why did you leave?"

Furiosa: "I didn't. I was taken as a child. ... Stolen."

Max: "Have you done this before?"

Furiosa: "Many times. Now that I drive a War Rig this is the best shot I'll ever have."

Pointing to the back seat where the wives are sleeping Max asks, "And them?"

Furiosa: "They are looking for hope."

---

<sup>4</sup> I find it fascinating—a copresence—that both anger and one's heart-felt calling are associated with the term "passion." There is more on which to reflect when taking the etymology of the words "fury" and "passion" into consideration. Fury: late 14c., "fierce passion," from Old French *furie*, *fuire* "rage, frenzy" (14c.), from Latin *furia* "violent passion, rage, madness," from or related to *furere* "to rage, be mad." Passion: late 12c., "sufferings of Christ on the Cross," from Old French *passion* "Christ's passion, physical suffering" (10c.), from Late Latin *passionem* (nominative *passio*) "suffering, enduring," from past participle stem of Latin *pati* "to suffer, endure," possibly from PIE root *\*pe(i)-* "to hurt".

Max: "What about you?"

Furiosa: "Redemption."

Arriving where "the green place" is supposed to be, they find only a rusted old metal power pole in a sandy desert and a motley gang of bikie chicks called the Vulvalini, remnants of Furiosa's ancestors. They learn that "the green place" has become poisoned and is no more. There seems no place to go; hope seems lost. In one of the most searing images in the film, with evening light casting her in silhouette fallen to her knees with the wind blowing the sand about her, Furiosa howls in anguish, silenced by the fury of the wind carrying her voice away into the vastness. Yet to live another day hope must prevail and Furiosa decides that they must attempt to cross the "unknown territory," endless desert flats.<sup>5</sup> She calculates that they can probably last for 160 days. Max decides to go his own way telling Furiosa, "Hope is a mistake. If you can't fix what's broken, you'll go insane." Yet, as Max watches the women drive off into the desert, he has a vision of his dead daughter, apparently killed in the apocalypse, who beseeches him to take action, to get moving. Max intercepts Furiosa and the Vulvalini and convinces them that if they seek hope and redemption<sup>6</sup> their only chance is to return to the Citadel.<sup>7</sup> This choice of route will require them to engage head on the motored gangs that have been chasing them; their only weapons left are surprise and audacity. Yet, it is clear that it is the moving itself, not the place, that fuels and enacts hope and redemption.

Hope and redemption, but redemption more so, are common religious notions. Redemption is being saved from sin and evil and it is usually something attributed to the action of god, earned by good deeds or given as grace or forgiveness. Max, a blood bag affixed to the cross shaped hood ornament on the pursuing roadster,

---

<sup>5</sup> There is a fascinating historical parallel especially given that this film was shot in Australia. In the mid-nineteenth century, when European Australians attempted to explore the interior of Australia, they had no idea what was out there or even if there. Many an exploring party were faced with the same challenge of starting across a vast barren territory.

<sup>6</sup> As Max is trying to convince the women to return to the Citadel, Nux traveling with the women is among the first to accept the plan saying, "It sounds like hope." Pressing his plan to Furiosa Max says to her, "At least if we go that way we might together find some kind of redemption." He offers his hand to her and finally she accepts the plan and grasps Max's hand.

<sup>7</sup> This journey might be understood in many possible ways, yet surely it is a primary gesture that makes a place one's home. Yet, taking moving and gesturing radically it gives a nuanced meaning to the adage "there's no place like home." This would mean that home is not a place so much as an unattainable designation associated with certain values enacted through gesture. This mobilizing of the idea is compatible with the phrase "home making" as an action never finished or complete. The moving approach also gives insight into the phrase "you can't go home again" suggesting that it is relationship thus moving/gesturing, rather than place, that has primacy.

reminds us of this old old story. In the end he saves Furiosa's life and does so by giving her his blood connecting the plastic tube from himself to Furiosa as she lay dying; he gives his blood that she might live at the expected cost of his own life. Yet, seemingly with an endless supply of blood, Max lives as well, perhaps his own redemption.

Hope and redemption are both associated with something sought, but not yet attained. Both terms denote moving, the continuing transcending of where one is in the desire for what seems to be at a distance, yet remains on the horizon beckoning yet always a bit out of reach. Hope and redemption invoke a way to understand what characterizes life and most fundamentally the insight is that we are *animate organisms*.<sup>8</sup> The life we attribute to our being is inseparable from our *self-moving*.<sup>9</sup> We don't acquire movement, we come to life as movement and our vitality is characterized by the way we move. Thus, we must recognize that hope and redemption are *corporeal concepts* that arise from human self-moving; that is, that hope and redemption are empty apart from the felt experience distinctive to human self-movement.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's remarkable book, *The Primacy of Movement* (1999, rev. ed. 2011), goes far to help us appreciate the inseparability of moving and vitality.<sup>10</sup> She points out that we do not learn to move; moving is not something we are capable of doing yet must acquire. Rather, as animate beings, we come to life moving. Prenatally our mothers are assured of our aliveness as they feel us moving. A stillborn describes a newborn that does not move; it is a baby born without life. Renaud Barbaras notes insightfully, "it is *in living movement that the essence of incarnation resides*."<sup>11</sup> He also writes, "It is quite intrinsic to movement that it does not and cannot arise from something foreign to it; movement is not a mere contingent modality; it is not possible to enter into a sphere of movement if one is not already in it."<sup>12</sup>

Yet, throughout our lives, we certainly learn many kinds of movings; Sheets-Johnstone calls them "I cans." The life cycle is often articulated as a sequence of modes of motility that mark distinct phases in our journey (note the metaphor based on moving) through life—from creeping and crawling to walking and running to doddering and shuffling, to the cessation of moving that marks death. There is a primary connection between moving and living; indeed, an identity. Shared motility connects us with all animals and creatures; yet modes of motility help distinguish

---

<sup>8</sup> The term is perhaps most strongly associated in philosophy with Edmund Husserl.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the awkwardness of this hyphenated term I use it to be more precise. It indicates movement that a body actively performs as opposed to passive movement as in a vehicle. Based on Barbaras's use, I also see the term synonymous with "living movement."

<sup>10</sup> As also does her collection of essays *Inside and Outside* (2016)

<sup>11</sup> Barbaras, *Desire and Distance* (2005), p. 143 (ital. in orig.).

<sup>12</sup> Barbaras, "Life and Exteriority," in *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science*, John Stewart, et al, eds. (2010), p. 105.

animal groupings. Brian Massumi expresses this primacy of movement adding the remarkable connection of moving with feeling when he writes, “When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. It moves. It feels. In fact it does both at the same time.”<sup>13</sup>

Hope and redemption require temporal implications. Hope suggests the conjunction of a present felt absence with its future felt presence. Hope is the attribute of experiencing in positive terms a not-yet future. Redemption implicates a presence of something past that, in its present, is acknowledged as needing to be set right somehow some day. Redemption is the attribute of experiencing a not-yet future conversion to positive of what is felt in the present as negative attributed to an accumulation from the past. In identifying hope, rather than redemption, as what the wives seek, Furiosa is indicating the innocence of their past although a past characterized as confinement. She acknowledges her own painful and storied past by indicating her goal as redemption. These temporal implications of hope and redemption are not simply descriptive; states identified with specifiable places along the grid of time. Rather the implications are inseparable from the specific circumstances and energetics of self-movement.

Hope and redemption give specific coloration to what Renaud Barbaras referred to as “desire and distance,” terms he explored in developing his understanding of the energetics of living movement.<sup>14</sup> By *desire* Barbaras does not denote some lack that can be fulfilled or even an emotion really. *Desire* is how he refers to that living force of moving, moving on. We feel it as vitality; that bittersweet sense of going on while also departing from. Desire is a dynamic or tonus rather than a place. And as desire has a temporal implication, it also has a spatial one, *distance*. A remarkable, yet obvious, attribute of living movement, as discussed by Brian Massumi,<sup>15</sup> is that it is never “in” any place, yet it always implicates the conjunction of places, if virtual ones. Simply put if we attach moving to any specific place, it would cease to be moving. Moving is the very quality of not being in any place, neither here nor there. Yet moving implicates the living connection of a virtual here with a virtual there. Moving is always relational; mover in context of moving, here in relation to there. Moving is vectored, directed, valued, and experienced because it invokes this sense of *distance*, a virtual spatiality. Moving implies a distance before there is a measurant; moving occurs in a virtual gap.

Kinesthesia, the feeling of self-moving, is grounded in proprioception, the biology that turns moving and touching (nearly synonymous) into awareness and experience. These miraculous gifts that distinguish humans among their animate kin imply a “common sense” or the awareness, even a reflective awareness, of being sentient.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (2002), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*

<sup>15</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables*

<sup>16</sup> Various Aristotle’s “common sense” or *aisthesis*, Christian Hübner’s “coenesthesia,” and Daniel Heller-Roazen’s “inner touch.”

Movement is the objectification of moving; the verb made noun, action made thing. We have become most comfortable comprehending and reckoning moving in terms of movement; the track rather than the traveling. Math and science tend to be concerned with gridified movement, with traces rather than moving in process. We see movement as captured by a line or trajectory from here to there that in being represented as a fixed object permitting the calculation of all sorts of things like speed, acceleration, and lapsed time. Yet clearly as movement, the vitality, the actual moving, has been removed or transduced into a different form or phase of reality. Yet, even when we backfill moving as a trajectory across a piece of paper, a route on a map, a journey across a place, we can comprehend that moving involves both a here and there that are at once separate and conjoined. A journey traced as a route on a map clearly has a here (or beginning) and a there (or destination) that are different and separate<sup>17</sup>; otherwise no route, no movement. Yet we can objectively simultaneously see the beginning and end points and all those points in between.<sup>18</sup> The whole process exists at once for us. In movement, we are “in” all places at the same time. In contrast, in moving we experience a common presence of here and there while being “in” neither one. While moving, our “here” is never a full presence because, were it so, we would not be moving. While moving, our “there” is a not yet, a destination, the idea of destination, a horizon even, present only as destination not as presence in place.<sup>19</sup> The experience of “process,” the sense of moving, is framed in the common presence of here and there, yet with the experienced implication of uncertainty or openness or transition. And isn’t it this uncertainty (the *is* that also *is not*) that is inseparable from the experience of vitality, of life itself?

Hope and redemption then might valuably be appreciated more deeply in terms of *moving* more so than *movement*. Whereas we typically halt the dynamics by attempting to state goals and repair the effects of the past, be they stories or sins, we might propose that hope and redemption are distinctive ways of shaping the factors of desire and distance that comprise moving; moving as vitality.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps, simply put, hope and redemption articulate life force in some specifiable terms. Redemption and hope are *qualia* of living. Both terms provide a sense of direction and motivation, a *desire* and *distance* in Barbaras’s terms, that we might comprehend as moving or living movement. We might understand that one’s life is a journey fueled necessarily by hope and redemption. Quite commonly stories of life are told in the very terms of moving, hope, redemption. We may account for

---

<sup>17</sup> Yet, of course, as “Fury Road,” “The Fantastics,” and life itself show the end point is often a return to the beginning.

<sup>18</sup> I find it helpful to understand this “representation” of moving in terms of Charles Sander’s Peirce’s theory of signs. The map image is what he called *iconic* in that it allows the whole of process to be represented as present.

<sup>19</sup> Zeno’s arrow paradox is based on the conflation of movement and moving. Henri Bergson was perhaps the first to recognize this aspect of the paradox.

<sup>20</sup> Barbaras understands desire/distance as a negative that energizes or we might consider it a gap.

cultural and human differences in terms of how the notions of hope and redemption are understood and used to engage action, power, and agency. We may appreciate the importance of these words in terms of their correlation with specific qualities of moving and those qualities include passion and fury.

The more important implication of moving as understood by Sheets-Johnstone, Massumi, Barbaras, and others is that the self-moving body has a primacy to the formation of concepts that arise as experienced and felt kinds of knowings.<sup>21</sup> As *gesture* self-movement is also essential to the construction and constituency of identity. Showing that moving is essential to perception, Barbaras writes that “only a being that is originally in touch with exteriority is able to discover what is likely to suit it there,” that is, a self-moving being. Yet there is something of the miraculous in the self-transcendent implications of exteriority, of outside. This connection recognizes the primacy of experience, repetition, and a feeling kind of knowing.

Given this introduction, students of religion must ask, “What is our ‘fury road’?” I suggest that the future of the academic study of religion might be enriched if inspired by the primacy of self-moving, by entertaining that moving is the core of religion. I offer the following seven suggestions made in an effort to take as radically as possible the implications of the primacy of self-moving.

**First: Religion/Religions.** The distinction between movement and moving corresponds with Brian Massumi’s term “backfill,” Erin Manning’s term “territorialize”<sup>22</sup> both likely reflecting the influence of Henri Bergson who wrote of the “retrograde movement of the truth.”<sup>23</sup> Where the term “movement” might refer to a “halt” that captures and holds still dynamics and energetics, in doing so it tends to lose the moving itself. Movement results from a transduction of the energetics of moving itself, moving in process, into trace or mark or text or description or meaning. The gestural and postural skills that identify the academic enterprise tend to discourage moving.<sup>24</sup> The academy is, in a fundamental sense, the transduction of a moving reality into books and labs, into movement-controlled environments. The gestural naturalization of movement tends to obfuscate the living, moving, vitality of our subjects, diminishing them to mere objects of academic description and analysis.

It seems an important inspiration for students of religion to recognize and account for the moving/movement distinction. I have tended to use the terms *religion* and *religions* in the effort to do so. As Jonathan Smith proclaimed some time ago,

---

<sup>21</sup> Once appreciated, it is difficult to comprehend any concept as purely abstract or intellectual, since all conception is based on living corporeality, that is, the distinctiveness of the human brand of animate organism.

<sup>22</sup> Erin Manning, *Relationscape*, (2009), p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind* (1946), pp. 1-17.

<sup>24</sup> Our jobs are described as “positions,” “lines,” or “chairs.” Our work is to articulate a “position” or a “point” of view.

religion is the scholar's invention, yet I would propose that religions are not.<sup>25</sup> Religion involves the ongoing comparative discourse on and construction of a common category, be it academic or folk. It contributes to the modern liberal concern of the humanities and importantly so. Religions (from this perspective) are however the "stuff" of our discourse that makes it a conversation that is not wholly self-referential and abstract and academic, despite our penchant for this tendency. Religions are essential to religion; yet religion, at least in some technical academic sense, is not essential to and is often totally unknown to and commonly irrelevant to the subjects, the data, the stuff comprising religions.

While the distinction religion/religions has long been made, the essential implication from the "moving as the core of religion perspective" (used here to implicate the copresence of both religion and religions) is that we need appreciate that much of the moving is halted by academic studies, that we need develop methods that honor the moving aspect of both religion and religions, and that the very vitality of the academic study of religion is generated in holding as copresent both these terms. I sometimes use the awkward gerund "religioning" to remind that it is the ongoingness of religions (and in a different sense also the study of religion) that is, or I believe should be, most interesting.

**Second: Definition.** It seems that any academic study identifying itself with the term "religion" must offer at least a working definition; surely such a definition is the fruit of the academic invention. When I was a graduate student at Chicago, we spent much time reading and analyzing definitions. This seems no longer the fashion, yet the enterprise is still recognized as important. Thomas Tweed's 2006 *Crossings and Dwellings: A Theory of Religion* is a book length effort to do so, yet, despite the complexity of his definition, it gravitates toward the core idea that religions "intensify joy and comfort suffering." In his *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005) Bob Orsi reflects on the Protestant Christian influence on a broadly held folk understanding summed in the phrase "religion is good" and suggests this understanding is commonly held by religion scholars as well. There are others.

What we must recognize from the perspective of an appreciation of "moving" is that defining religion is a halting activity. To define suggests our work is done, seemingly also that our subject is dead. We sometimes qualify the objective of our urge to define as producing a "working definition," yet as a qualification it betrays our sense that a final definition is our true goal. We tend to prefer *autopsy* to *kinesiology*.

My practice is to model the use of the term "religion" on color terms. For a host of reasons there is no satisfying way to precisely define a color term without ignoring most of what makes color interesting and aesthetic. Yet we not only use color terms knowing that we are all talking about approximately the same thing, we also find the energetics of the conversation located in the variances and differences and

---

<sup>25</sup> In his article "Religion, Religions, Religious" in Mark Taylor, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998) Jonathan Smith gives the full history of the distinction of the singular and plural uses of the term.

applications and observations. Color terms encourage discourse on variations in style, culture, history, aesthetics, philosophy, and psychology. What delights in such conversations is the appreciation that color terms and the corresponding experiential realities are so interesting precisely because they resist and confound objective grasp and final definition.<sup>26</sup>

My sense is that developing a similar strategy for the study of religion—that is, *conversations* and *accounts* honoring differences in style as opposed to halting definition—opens the study to the moving energetics and vitality that are surely what most attracts us to our studies. It also avoids prickly academic arguments in defense of terms while directing our attention toward religions and religioning, the actual stuff of our interest.

**Third: Body.** In recent decades, the study of religion has included, seemingly as a reluctant afterthought or nod, a niche or limited range of concerns that relate to “body.” Gender, lived religion, popular religion, practice, ritual, and performance are but a few of the terms that implicate body. Other terms with misleading implications, like *embody*, are now also commonly used.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as we acknowledge the primacy of moving, self-moving, we must realize that both religion and religions are *always already* body. Moving is bodied, yet *to recognize moving body is not a materialist reduction*. To rise to the challenge of appreciating moving, we must take deeply seriously that moving is a becoming as much as it is a being. Self-moving is always a transcending in the most fundamental, even biological, sense. Our biological design has evolved to be highly sophisticated at engaging, responding to, and creating the environment in which we live. Animate organisms at the most fundamental biological level are designed for self-transcendence. Humans are distinguished among their animal kin in having an awareness of and a creative

---

<sup>26</sup> Color is a wonderfully rich topic. The biology of sight varies with person and species. Color terminology is believed to impact perceptual capabilities. Colors confound with environment and one another. Color is both objective and subjective and the experience of color can never be isolated to one or the other.

<sup>27</sup> See Sheets-Johnstone, *Primacy*, pp. 310-11, 454, 466-67, 496-97, for her critique of “embody,” “enaction,” and similar terms. She is even more incisive in her “Emotion and Movement,” pp. 274-5, where she writes, “the term ‘embodied’ is a lexical Band-Aid covering a 350-year-old wound generated and kept suppurating by a schizoid metaphysics” p. 275. The term “enaction” is proposed as the “new paradigm” for cognitive science (see Thompson, ed., *Enaction*). It has a significant history of development that correlates closely with the development of cognitive science. Certainly while “action” correlates well with self-movement, the implications of the “enaction” form need to be carefully reconsidered in terms of Sheets-Johnstone’s comments. Sheets-Johnstone, *Primacy* p. 310, even includes warnings about such compound terms as “lived body” that were introduced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I fully agree with Sheets-Johnstone and recognize that finding alternatives to the use of such terminology is far more than just clever use of language; it demands a wholly new and innovative approach.

response to the experience of transcendence. Moving is what Massumi shows to be at the core of our “incorporeal corporeality.” As he puts it, “to think the body in movement thus means accepting the paradox that there is an incorporeal dimension *of the body*. Of it, but not it. Real, material, but incorporeal. Inseparable, coincident, but disjunct.”<sup>28</sup> I suggest that the foundation of such common yet squishy terms as “spirituality,” “divine,” and “ethereal” is and can be no other than the extension and implication of human felt transcendent experience of quotidian moving. Moving necessarily involves, in Barbaras’ terms, distance, but not a distance that can be mastered. As Erin Manning puts it, “movement is qualitative multiplicity . . . becoming toward a potential future that will always remain not-yet.”<sup>29</sup> This present yet always unattainable future gives rise to the notion of “horizon.” “Horizon” experienced in conjunction with what Sheets-Johnstone suggested as our first corporeal concept “in” and the necessary accompanying “out” leads to the imagination and construct of some “radical other,”<sup>30</sup> itself necessarily a corporeal concept.

Moving offers an alternative to the thorny and persistent problem that arises in an embracing of body as distinct from mind, soul, spirit, even brain. When we begin with this Cartesian distinction we can never stitch it back together.<sup>31</sup> This effort never achieves more than a patch job accomplished with hyphen glue or slash paste. Moving, as an alternative, cannot be comprehended apart from the copresence of corporeal/incorporeal.

**Forth: Metastability and Nonlinearity.** Everywhere that I’ve encountered religions their attraction is linked to what I recognize as their penchant for exaggeration and fictionalization; for practicing an *aesthetics of the impossible*. While fiction may be said to be comprised of “lies that tell the truth,” we might suggest that religions concoct certain kinds of “impossibles” while proclaiming them to have an originary, an ontogenetic, an ontological status deserving the capital “T” for their proclamation of truth. Religions unapologetically concoct worlds and times and beings that defy sober reasoned acceptance or common sense.

I spent years researching an Australian Aboriginal example used by Mircea Eliade as one of his principal illustrations for his understanding of religion. It was the story of Numbakulla who, after creating the Aruntan people and their landscape in Central Australia, erected a pole, anointed it with blood, and ascended it into heaven. This story, we’d call it myth, is linked to a second account that Eliade implied was ethnographic rather than mythic. In this story, the Aborigines inadvertently broke

---

<sup>28</sup> Massumi, *Parables*, p. 5, italics in original.

<sup>29</sup> Manning, *Relationescapes* (2009), 17.

<sup>30</sup> I think this is what Charles Sanders Peirce referred to as “The Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” (1908)

<sup>31</sup> I often refer to the impossibility of this strategy with the term “the Humpty principle” because when one begins with the assumption of separation and brokenness, it is impossible to put it seamlessly back together. Better a totally different strategy; which is what I believe moving offers.

the pole and so dismayed were they by their loss of connection with their god Numbakulla that they reportedly laid down and died. While my research<sup>32</sup> shows that both stories are almost wholly the concoction of the scholar's imagination, they nonetheless have the aesthetic distinctive of the "religious"; the practice of an *aesthetic of the impossible*.

To offer another more familiar example, we commonly understand the categories human being and divinity or god to be mutually exclusive, each one dependent on its exclusion of the other. Yet we might understand the energetics driving the Christian tradition across two millennia as fueled by the Christ event in which, knowing full well that gods and humans are mutually exclusive categories, god is declared to be human, indeed so fully human as to be subject to death. God is not human; human is not God. God is human; human is God. And it goes on "death is life; indeed, eternal life."

I refer to the structurality of this aesthetic of the impossible by the technical term *metastability*, borrowing it from science largely to demonstrate that it is not rare and unusual or humanities-soft but rather that as a copresence it exists everywhere; I like to say it is "as common as dirt."<sup>33</sup> Metastability is when each of two or more things depends on a distinction from the other, yet their identity or copresence with one another is not a problem to be solved but rather is the dynamic source of energetics and vitality. Natural language illustrates metastability; the word is both the same and different from its referent. The word *is* its referent; the word *is not* its referent. We do not understand the power of language by resolving the impossibility of the copresence of *is* and *is not*, but rather by appreciating how this metastability is the very source of its power. Going further, the force of metaphor is in its metastability; metaphor can be described as understanding something in terms of something else, which it is not. Metaphor structurality is to say something *is* what we know it *is not*. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Zoltan Kövecses, and others have shown, metaphor underlies the power of language and its structurality is metastability: holding as copresent that something is what we clearly know it is not. Coordination dynamics is a branch of neuroscience and mathematics that studies self-adjusting complex networks. Metastability is a vitalizing structurality commonly recognized in these networks.

By *nonlinearity* I refer to the non-predictable, the unexpected, the surprises, the novelties, the randomness that occurs in any complex self-regulating network from the nervous system to the animate organism to societies. Nonlinearity too is inspired by moving; since moving is not in any place, there is a necessary element of the unexpected and unpredictable in the very essence of moving. Nonlinearities are

---

<sup>32</sup> *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, History in Central Australia* (1998)

<sup>33</sup> Mary Douglas and Jonathan Smith showed that "dirt" is not a phenomenological category but rather a relational one; a valuation based on the copresence of a thing and a place. The term "dirt" then implicates the long history of considerations of place and the dynamics and value dependent on place. Yet, I also simply mean to implicate the ubiquity of soil or earth; it is always and everywhere beneath our feet.

what laboratories seek to eliminate and what academic theories and definitions seek to normalize and reduce. Yet nonlinearity is an essential part of any system and, in my view, exists at the core of change and creativity. History and biography and even scientific theory may articulate recognizable patterns, yet our interest in such stories is always drawn to those occasions where nonlinearity becomes apparent and impactful.

Taking radically the primacy of moving requires that we embrace these notions of *metastability* and *nonlinearity* with the greatest of expectations and interest resulting in, I believe, a richer account of religion and religions. Playing out these structuralities is, I'd suggest, the forte of religions. Exploring them should be the mandate of the study of religion.

**Fifth: Coherence.** The copresence *coherence/incoherence* is, as I have come to realize, preferable to *meaning*. Coherence is a felt energetic inseparable from moving that has temporal and spatial implications. The term has to do with fit, yet the older Latin root indicates also "hesitation." This root suggesting that uneasiness or concern is a clue that coherence is necessarily copresent with incoherence. Coherence is not a rational or logical condition objectively determined. Coherence is the felt knowing of relief, the relief of fit or rightness, if temporary, from the ubiquitous threat of looming chaos. It is experiential, subjective, temporary yet it occurs in contexts that can be described and appreciated. I suggest that our most fundamental model for recognizing the feeling of coherence, a feeling kind of knowing, is our experience of skilled movement as smooth and natural and easy; *sprezzatura* as the Italians might term it.<sup>34</sup>

**Sixth: Gesture.** Based on the inspiration of moving as primary, our attention should be on matters related to gesture, posture, prosthesis which I understand as comprising a nexus. This approach directs us to the skills that cultural and religious traditions give folks to creatively navigate the complexities of life experience. In attending to gesture, posture, prosthesis we appreciate repetition, practice, accumulations of experience, biology. We appreciate the experience of ordinary religious practice as important and valued every bit as much as the so-called peak experiences we have so commonly exclusively identified as religious experience. In his 2010 lecture "Now You See It Now You Won't: Religious Studies over the Next Forty Years," Jonathan Smith listed gestural studies as one among five trends he expects will emerge.

As we go forward I think we must be careful not to identify moving with the peripheral niche locations where we place "body" and "performance" and "practice." The focus on moving should relocate these "lesser" concerns as deserving much greater consideration. For example, we must recognize that reading and writing

---

<sup>34</sup> As slippery as appears the term "smooth movement" there is considerable scientific study in support of such an idea, notably that done by Nicholas Bernstein.

texts are also essentially bodied, performance, practice, gestured, postured, and have their own prosthetic reach, if somewhat limited.<sup>35</sup>

**Seventh: Place.** For decades students of religion have sought a firm place on which to stand. This has sometimes taken on the proclamation of some proper place. For example, Eliade articulated his construction of religion, a sort of academic theology, in terms of a fixed center and originating time. He understood in largely negative terms the ongoingness, the moving of religions, the history of religions, the metastable nonlinear (or relativist) aspects of religions that inevitably arise over time. He imagined ritual as the antidote to history allowing a cyclic return to the purity of the original firm place. Eliade's colleague Jonathan Smith, recognizing something of the dynamics of place, brought our attention to the mapping, to even religions as mappings, that directs our attention to the issues of fit/coherence; his favored term has been "incongruity." Yet, despite this awareness of a fundamental dynamics, Smith sought place, even if place had no ontological status beyond the proclamation of one's present interests. He recognized that the choice of a place on which to stand largely determines the outcome of the succeeding academic process. Scholars have argued for definitions or grounding theories or a selected discipline or a fixed medium on which to stand, recognizing that the firmness of stance, place, is fundamental in determining outcomes, to producing defensible results. The study of religion has become gesturally naturalized to articulating its distinctiveness in terms of the articulation of place. While it is perhaps no longer done in the theological style of Eliade, the articulation of place nonetheless occurs in the narrow devotion to the expertise of a specific religion, era, figure, event, perspective, medium, issue, problem. Without the serious common and comparative academic discourse on religion, the study of religion gravitates toward a loosely related collection each designated largely by geography, historical specificity, or sub-specialty. Scholars are standing firm in all sorts of places without raising any concern or contention, without acknowledging the importance of any common discourse.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> We've wasted much of a generation on the struggle for dominance between text and practice; an issue that wouldn't even arise if we allowed in a radical way the primacy of moving.

<sup>36</sup> Despite important critiques such as Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* the study of religion remains largely one of studies defined and articulated by place designation: East/West, Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Native American, European, Indigenous, Latin American, Borderlands. Even the designation of specific "world" religions as singular (e.g., Christianity) rather than plural (e.g., Christianities) I suspect is due to a strong identity of religion as place. It is without contest that religions, being historical and cultural, are always located geographically, yet even the discussion of religion and movement is often one confined to the dynamics of place. An example of this understanding of movement is Thomas Tweed's discussion in his *Crossing and Border*. The proposition I'm making is that to understand religion in terms of "moving," place is made and

Jonathan Smith often cited the dictum of Archimedes “give me a place to stand on and I will move the world.” While I think the statement was made as evidence of the multiplying force of levers, Smith cited it to demonstrate the importance of finding a place on which to stand; that is, carefully constructing and selecting one’s theory. I’m suggesting that there is another element of Archimedes’ statement that might also be of interest; perhaps an even greater one. Archimedes’ concern is with agency, the potential for power. To move, as in to “move the world,” marks the agency and power of making, doing, creating, acting, living. Archimedes’ attention is beyond place to moving.

I offer these suggestions to the emerging study of religion.<sup>37</sup> Each is a chasing of the vitalizing dynamics of self-moving. Each is an implication of the premise that moving is the core of religion. Each is offered in the spirit of hope and redemption that we might venture on down our own fury road.

#### Bibliography

- Barbaras, Renaud. “Life and Exteriority: The Problem of Metabolism.” In *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science*, edited by John Stewart, et al, 89-122. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.
- . *Desire and Distance: Introduction to a Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Paul B. Milan. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Bergson, Henri. *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by T. E. Hulme. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1946.
- Gill, Sam D. *Storytracking: Texts, Stories, and History in Central Australia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Manning, Erin. *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. *The Primacy of Movement*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999.
- Warner Bros. Pictures. “Mad Max: Fury Road - Official Main Trailer [HD].” Youtube video, 2:31. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEJnMQG9ev8>.

---

negotiated as a dynamic of religion rather than a given that delimits one’s area of study. Moving (kinesiology) is primary rather than place (autopsy).

<sup>37</sup> I’m well aware that this presentation is the briefest summary, yet I hope it is at least tantalizing. I’ve developed these ideas much more fully in forthcoming works.