



*Claire Maria Chambers*

Editor

# Editorial

## Scholarship as Spiritual Activism

It is my honor to welcome you to the opening pages of *Performance, Religion, and Spirituality*. This journal has had a gestational period of several years, during which my co-editors and I found ourselves asking many questions about the role of a scholarly journal in service to our unique subfield. What does it mean to offer a new platform for scholarship focusing on questions of the performative dimensions of spirituality and religion in the year 2017? How can a new journal reach out to a diverse readership and foster a healthy scholarly community with rigor and integrity, while working interdisciplinarily and internationally (recognizing that the privilege of scholarly speech is still unequally tilted toward the English-speaking world)? How might a new publication work both within and alongside traditional academia and academic publishing, while also challenging the conventions of both? Ultimately, we came to understand that we can offer *PRS* as an invitation to a vision. We envision a journal that not only highlights the best scholarship that our subfield has to offer, but also acts as a sounding board for working scholars of all kinds, especially scholars who are also artists, teachers, and practitioners. This sounding board is a place to test ideas and enter into conversation with peers. In the way that the sounding board of a stringed instrument literally projects sound toward an audience, we want to amplify the voices of teachers, artists, and practitioners around the globe. We envision a scholarly journal that elevates the field because it elevates the voices of those who are actually doing the work and creating the practices that help define the productive intersections between the study of performance and the study of religion and spirituality. We envision a journal that maintains high scholarly standards through rigorous peer review, while also challenging the gate-keeping function that such publications often perform. This is why we are committed to maintaining free and open access to the journal. It is also why you will encounter much more than the traditional article in these

pages. But above all, we envision a journal that performs the function that it investigates, a journal that engages with both the spiritual and the performative as well as analyses them. This is a difficult role to carve for ourselves, because *PRS* does not align itself with any particular faith (or lack thereof). However, scholarship itself can be approached as spiritual practice. Humanistic scholarship, as deep listening and meditative attention to the dynamics of human thought, experience, and expression (as well as to the rhythms of the earth and all its inhabitants) is a creative act of empathy. When done well, it is also a kind of spiritual activism, because it is action performed to bring about change in the form of greater consciousness, compassion, and understanding.<sup>1</sup>

As a publication that also envisions itself as an active conversation, we are very pleased to introduce readers to our first *PRS* Forum, a section of the journal that brings together a heterogeneous group of scholars and artists under a single theme, who then offer biographies and position statements to one another while participating in an online discussion. A transcript of this discussion is then edited and published. The theme of our inaugural Forum is “Devised Theatre as Activism in a Religious and Spiritual Context”. Our discussants are Robert Choiniere, an experienced pastoral minister who is also a playwright and activist with the Roman Catholic LGBTQ community; Victoria Rue, a professor of religious studies and a feminist theologian who has been using theatre to build community for many years; and Catharine Christof Dada, a teacher, actor, and scholar with a focus on contemporary spiritual experience. As an additional treat, each participant has generously made available sections of their scripts. This Forum embodies *PRS*’s vision that the journal will also bring to scholarly attention the work of today’s writers and artists.

An unprecedented joy of this first issue has been the reviews section, to which I urge our readers to pay special attention. The number of book-length publications that treat some aspect of performance in relationship to religion and spirituality seems to have grown in recent years, and this first special issue on activism and protest is a response to such burgeoning. We had a surprisingly large number of volumes up for review, and a very healthy crowd of volunteer reviewers. But this should not be surprising. Times of social upheaval often witness a swelling of interest in questions of the spirit and religion. As we issued the first call for papers a year ago, Native American activists issued calls for prayer as peaceful protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline. In the wake of Great Britain’s decision to exit the European Union and the 2016 American presidential election, marginalized groups, especially immigrants, are even more vulnerable than before, as populist forces from both the right and the left of the political spectrum attempt to consolidate power at the expense of the workers and the “common people” they ostensibly represent. The “preferential option for the poor”, as Gustavo Gutiérrez explains in his *A Theology of Liberation* (1973), is not only compassion for but also solidarity with those who exist on the extreme peripheries of society (“poor” in this sense can mean not only economically but also socially, culturally, and sexually oppressed); acting for the benefit of the “least of these” is a tenet of Catholic social doctrine, but also a spiritual stance that can cross religious borders. As an American citizen who lives and works in Asia, the pain of what remains the same is often more harrowing to me than what has changed, especially when it comes to witnessing those extreme distances between the center of power and the periphery in my own country. For example, watching the development of the Black Lives Matter movement alongside the entrenched, circular battle over gun control in the

United States has brought me home to the reality that a powerful few think nothing (literally nothing) of expending lives in order to maintain wealth and influence.

The argument implicit in creating *PRS* is that the global scholarly community needs a specific venue wherein to discuss the dynamics of public life as not only inflected or shaped by the performance of religion and spirituality, but also as produced and composed by its influence. As Judith Butler argues, the “public sphere” itself can be understood as an effect of certain religious traditions (Butler 2011, 8). Focusing on the public life of activism and protest, this issue asks how religion and spirituality are caught up performatively within the creation of or reaction to political change, especially on the parts of individuals or groups who might engage religion and spirituality both in service for or against social protests or activist movements. As the articles illustrate, religion and spirituality are undeniably visible and visceral components of both historical and recent activist and protest culture—on the web as much as on the ground, amidst casual conversation as much as within political debate. The articles contribute to another argument implicit in the creation of *PRS*: that the greatest political, economic, environmental, and cultural crises facing the world community today cannot be adequately understood without an appreciation of the performative dimensions of religion, spirituality, and ritual. As David Kertzer notes, “History is dotted with acts of revolt spawned by the special atmosphere that communal rites provide” (Kertzer 1988, 150). The articles grapple with the fact that religious attitudes, cultural theologies, spiritual economies, and ritual structures inflect and infuse the flow of wealth, the migration of workers, the fleeing of refugees, the distribution of power, the assertion of identity, and the negotiation of borders. Although religion and spirituality might be broadly perceived to work toward greater social good, they can also contribute to conflict. Each of the articles examines how religious or spiritual movements, groups, and individuals perform the perception of injustice and the need for alleviation or reform. The goal with this special issue on activism and protest is to demonstrate the fruitfulness of focusing scholarship on the specific relationship between religion, spirituality, and performance, and to create the best platform for doing so in an international setting, thereby meeting the need for a scholarly venue that takes as given the value of studying the performative dynamics of religion and spirituality.

While three of the articles are more traditionally research-based, Praba Pilar offers a piece that both analyses the role of religious modes of thinking and speaking in corporate culture’s powerful public influence, and reflects upon her own artistic practice as research, guiding the reader through accounts of her activist performance as the high priestess of her invented Church of Nano Bio Info Cogno. Her article, “Situating the Web of the Necro-Techno Complex: The Church of Nano Bio Info Cogno”, argues that Silicon Valley’s use of the “salvation narrative”, which proclaims a liberated future of the “singularity” thanks to the beneficence of technology, is actually a form of neo-colonialism that extracts and exploits data from human populations. Her performative interventions are satirical rituals that mock the god-like power of such tech corporations, and seek to expose the creeping spread of their surveillance power. Alvin Eng Hui Lim also inspects the role of technology in protest, but from a different angle. In “Theology and Belief in Digital Speech Acts and Online Protests: A Singapore Case Study”, Lim studies the way that digital platforms such as Facebook and blogs enable religiously-motivated protestors to reconfigure the structure of public space according to their theological beliefs. His argument is that online protests, in effect, stage manage

the real world. His analysis focuses on the Singaporean Pink Dot Movement for LGBTQ rights and their conflicts (both online and off) with religious counter-protest.

Both Joy Palacios and Danielle (Danee) Conley turn toward the embodied performance of ritual activity in speech and gesture. In “Sermonic Performance as Cultural Protest in New France”, Palacios situates her discussion of seventeenth-century anti-theatrical sermons in Quebec as a question of performative efficacy, as Bishop Jean-Baptiste de la Croix de Chevrières de Saint-Vallier attempted to defend the social and religious ideal order he envisioned for New France from the creeping influence of popular, satirical comedies like Moliere’s *Tartuffe*. However, the bishop found himself inhabiting a contradictory stance: lacking a printing press, the colony relied on sermons such as his to teach a wide audience lessons on appropriate devotional thinking and action, which meant that the bishop had to perform his devotion in order to argue against performance. Palacios’s article is a fascinating and nuanced discussion of the way that performance both helped and hindered the anti-theatricalism of New France’s clergy, and how the clergy’s attempt to quash theatre both helped and hindered the spread of theatrical performance. In “Gestural Legacy: Bridging the Gap between the Black Church and the Black Lives Matter Movement”, Conley’s approach to the “Hands up!” gesture adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement also dives into history—that of the African American church and its cultural influence throughout the long battle for justice for people of color in the United States. “Hands up!” has an embodied “gestural legacy” rooted in the praise rituals of the Black Church (what has come to be known as “praise hands”). Drawing from the spiritual and religious connotations of the gesture, Conley analyses its associations with subjugation and vulnerability—two qualities, she argues, that are not often expressed through protest or resistance, but deserve re-evaluation in service to socio-political change.

Interestingly, a theme that unites all four authors is that of performative failure: with its spiritual implications, the “Hands up!” gesture is a compelling symbol for the Black Lives Matter movement because it has sadly failed to prevent the violence it intends to deflect; Pilar’s satirical use of the rhetoric of religious conversion highlights the failure of surveillance capitalism to entirely convert the globe to its ideology (at least for now); as Palacios illustrates, anti-theatrical rhetoric used to consolidate religious ideology in New France seems to have failed to erase the inherent theatricality of the pulpit; and according to Lim’s analysis of the Pink Dot Movement by way of Giorgio Agamben’s “theological genealogy” of government, counter-protestors attempting to cast the Singaporean LGBTQ community in the role of “devils” fail to adequately account for the way they share social space (online and off), which does not easily separate the “saved” from the “damned”. By highlighting performances that fail, our authors crack open the dark spaces between the known and the unknown, the categorizable and that which defies categorization, and what can be spoken and what cannot be said. In her *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (2011), Sara Jane Bailes probes failure as constitutive of and necessary for performance: “[W]e cannot ‘do’ without failure, in both senses of that expression (we cannot make, nor can we manage without). Its practicable potentiality enables us to go on, and we go on because failure is a driver in the attempt to continue, even when interruption or disorientation or inoperativeness are constituent features of continuation. Failure is a function of doing....” (12). Bailes’s appreciation of failure speaks to scholarship, again, as spiritual practice: attending to the possibilities for new understanding that arise through deep listening at the periphery rather than the center, in the darkness rather

than the light, because failure indexes the moment when the other, when alterity, is present. This presence may be most keenly felt when it transcends and evades the grasp of representation.

The voices that most need to be heard are often the voices that are the least represented in normative discourse. If *PRS* can succeed in its aim to not only analyze the performative functions of religion and spirituality in society and culture, but also perform the value of scholarship as spiritual practice, it will be because we learn, over time, how to truly listen.

—*Claire Maria Chambers*  
Seoul, 2017

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The claim could be discussed from the perspective of spiritual and psychological development, as well as effective scholarship. See Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow's discussion of spirituality as the culmination of consciousness in *Consciousness, Literature, and Theatre: Theory and Beyond* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 1997). From a more theological perspective, James Fowler's well-known stages of psycho-spiritual development peak with "universalizing faith" (what others might call as "enlightenment" or "bliss"), which is characterized by mature compassion for others and lack of doubt and self-concern, while also harboring mystery and cultivating paradox. See *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

## Works Cited

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