

Towards a metamodern academic study of religion and a more religiously informed metamodernism

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The academic study of religion has long enjoyed a variety of philosophies and methodologies. A new entrant to this list has now arisen: metamodernism. This article examines the claims of metamodernism and makes an initial attempt to relate it to the academic study of religion, both in its guise as Religious Studies and, more tentatively, as the Theological sciences. Metamodernism, with its emphasis on oscillation and simultaneity, shows great promise as an explanatory framework to understand certain current religious developments, such as the 'Spiritual but not Religious' phenomenon. It may also assist in creating a growing convergence between the various branches of the academic study of religion.

Introduction

Metamodernism is the dominant cultural philosophy of the Internet Age. (Abramson 2015c)

... so I never worry when I'm 'sad' as the meta modernist in me knows that I will soon oscillate to ecstasy. (Tweet by Aisha Lëna Shapiro @ciaolena, 20 July 2015)

Postmodernism is over. As global warming, the credit crunch and political instabilities are rapidly taking us beyond that so prematurely proclaimed 'End of History', the postmodern culture of relativism, irony and pastiche, too, is superseded by another sensibility. One that evokes the will to look forward, that invokes the will to hope again. (Anonymous 2012a)

In Religious Studies, the most common name these days for the comparative academic study of religion,¹ one does not need to look far to see that we never entirely discard a methodology. We can still write exegeses of the various religions' scriptures that would have been entirely recognisable to F. Max Müller. We can use survey methods borrowed from the social sciences, analyse religious performances using the playful irony of postmodernism and so on. Bricolage seems to come naturally to us. Furthermore, we can see a similar range of methodologies in each religion's own theological² discipline.

To this methodological smorgasbord, we may now be able to add yet another approach: metamodernism.³ This article will present metamodernism as a new approach to life, society and thought, and ask whether it has something to add to our disciplines and vice versa. I will primarily approach this issue from a Religious Studies perspective, but there are implications for Theology as well. Indeed, one of the possible effects of a metamodern perspective that we shall explore below will be a reconsideration of the boundaries between these disciplines and their roles in the overall academic study of religion.⁴

The term 'metamodernism' has a prehistory: we can see the term being used with various shades of meaning attached to it as far back as 1975 (Carruth 1986; Haig 1991; Koutselini 1997; McCloskey 1992; Stambler 2004; Truitt 2006; Valiande & Koutselini 2009; Zavarzadeh 1975), with none of these using the term precisely as it is used today. However, it is generally agreed that metamodernism as we understand it today arose in 2010 when Vermeulen and Van den Akker published their article *Notes on metamodernism* (Vermeulen & Van den Akker 2010), a publication

1.The term 'Religious Studies' will be used here as broadly synonymous with 'the comparative academic study of religion' and should be understood to include disciplines such as history of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, various fields of investigation into specific religions from (Buddhist Studies, Baha'i Studies etc.) and others.

2.'Theology' will be used in this article to indicate the study of a single religion carried out within the paradigm of that religion, exemplified by but not limited to Christian Theology. It is any approach that accepts certain core truths from a religious tradition as axiomatic and proceeds to argue from that point. We can therefore speak of Muslim theology, Buddhist theology etc. The religious tradition may not necessarily use that term itself: In Buddhism, for example, 'Buddhist philosophy' is used rather than 'Buddhist theology'.

3.Or alternatively 'meta-modernism' or even 'meta modernism'. The philosophy is so new that authors and editors have yet to agree on how to spell it, although the joined, unhyphenated version seems to be gaining ground, perhaps because this is Vermeulen and Van den Akkers' preferred form.

4.The phrase 'the academic study of religion' will be used in this article to refer to a broad meta-discipline encompassing both Religious Studies and Theology, as defined above.

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that can be regarded as the metamodernist foundational document. The following year, they followed it up with an updated version of their theory in the Dutch-language journal *Twijfel* (Van den Akker & Vermeulen 2011), and they have remained active in the metamodernist movement ever since (e.g. Vermeulen & Van den Akker 2015a; 2015b). By 2015, they felt it necessary to clarify, firstly, that they had not invented the term, but that their predecessors leaned more towards either modernism or postmodernism than they felt comfortable with, and more importantly, that:

Metamodernism, as we see, is *not* a philosophy. In the same vein, it is *not* a movement, a programme, an aesthetic register, a visual strategy, or a literary technique or trope. ... For us, it is a structure of feeling. (Vermeulen & Van den Akker 2015a)

Elsewhere, Vermeulen (Anonymous 2012b) explains the concept in slightly different terms:

For us, metamodernism is not so much a philosophy – which implies a closed ontology – as it is an attempt at a vernacular, or as you say, a sort of open source document, that might contextualise and explain what is going on around us, in political economy as much as in the arts.

I sympathise with the effort to avoid a closed ontology, but this implies a somewhat technical definition of ‘philosophy’ and not necessarily the only sense in which the term can be used in the humanities, and especially in Religious Studies. I trust Vermeulen and Van den Akker will forgive me for continuing to speak of metamodern ‘philosophy’ if I stipulate that I understand the term in a far more open-ended way, indeed, one might say metamodernistically as an oscillation between ‘love’ and ‘wisdom’, the original constitutive parts of the term.

Metamodernism is not the only proposed alternative to the modernist versus postmodernist stalemate. Knudsen (2013) names some of the main contenders:

I will admit, as academia clamors to find some term for ‘whatever-we-call-coming-after’ postmodernism, I long for the days of yore when the nomenclature took little effort. ... As for the hideous term post-postmodernism, let’s pray that it is simply a place marker.⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud’s essay, *Altermodernism*, shows some good sense, but unfortunately the term ‘altermodernism’ sounds too much like postmodernism. I am trying to gain a fondness for the term ‘metamodernism’, advanced in 2010 by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker ... The theorists use ‘meta’ as a prefix to refer to ‘between’. Granted, ‘meta’ is more commonly associated with the idea of ‘after’ or ‘post’, but that definition would be unhelpful as we have been there and done that. Fortunately, ‘meta’ also can refer to an oscillation between adjacent positions. ... metamodernism then denotes the to-and-fro occupation of both the positions of modern attachment and postmodern detachment.

The differences between metamodernism, altermodernism and post-postmodernism are subtle and need not concern us here. All claim that they reflect (and, simultaneously, create) a new zeitgeist, or, to use Vermeulen and Van den Akker’s

5. I must concur with Knudsen on this point. What comes next, post-post-postmodernism?

term, a structure of feeling. Whatever ends up as the historical label for that zeitgeist to future cultural historians may well be known by none of these terms. For our current purposes, however, metamodernism will serve as the verbal placeholder for this emerging zeitgeist.

Art, and discussion about art, has been the mainstay of metamodernism since its inception, and metamodernism has become an underlying leitmotiv in a number of contemporary artistic movements. On the *Notes on Metamodernism* webzine, we find metamodern analyses of New Romanticism (Turner 2010) and The New Aesthetic (Turner 2012). Levin (2012) traces the beginning of metamodern art to a crisis within postmodern art circles:

Vermeulen and Van den Akker propose that ‘the Postmodern culture of relativism, irony, and pastiche’ is finished, having been replaced by a post-ideological condition that stresses engagement, affect, and storytelling. ‘Meta’, they note, implies an oscillation between Modernism and Postmodernism and therefore must embrace doubt, as well as hope and melancholy, sincerity and irony, affect and apathy, the personal and the political, and technology and techne (which is translated as ‘knowingness’).

Although it rejects the postmodernist call to choose sides, metamodernism is not necessarily apolitical. Vermeulen (Aikens, Kopsa & Vermeulen 2012), for example, analyses the position of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in the light of the 2012 Dutch elections. More broadly speaking, the emergence of metamodernism was itself the result of political turmoil:

In sum, the emergent sensibility we have come to call metamodernism must be situated within the context of a threefold ‘crisis’. To our minds, this triple crisis consists of a collapsing political centre, the climate crisis and the credit crunch. (Anonymous 2010a)

This self-positioning of metamodernism in a concrete historical context shows that it is not ahistorical. Indeed, within its own terms of reference, metamodernism oscillates between the historical and the ahistorical (Vermeulen 2011).

Metamodernism is a 21st-century development, and its proponents tend to be young. If it catches on, it will be the philosophy of the Millennial Generation. Metamodernism is ‘a paradigmatic shift lived by a generation born in the 1980s’ (Anonymous 2014). It is therefore unsurprising to see that it has not (yet) necessarily used the conventional 20th-century academic distribution channels of the monograph and the journal article to disseminate itself. To investigate metamodernism, we have to delve into the world of online articles, tweets, blog posts and podcasts. It has started to make its presence known in students’ postgraduate dissertations, however (Colvin 2013; Dumitrescu 2014; Duquette 2014; Frick 2015; Furlow 2015; McDonald 2014; Rowell 2013; Shepherd 2015; Suparka 2012; Van Beuningen 2014), once again underlining its current status as a philosophy for and by the young.

What, then, am I, a not-so-young academic, seeing in this new philosophy? Just this: while it would be expecting too

much for us to be able to apply metamodernism simplistically to Religious Studies without adapting it to our needs, its underlying principles can be shown to apply to religion itself (or at least to some religions) and to the study of religion.

Furthermore, metamodernism claims to express the zeitgeist of the early 21st century, which is borne out when art critics who show no signs of being familiar with it say things like:

At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind ... (Saltz 2010)

not to mention when large numbers of people use apparently contradictory self-ascriptions like 'spiritual but not religious' with perfect sincerity. Even if we choose not to use metamodernism explicitly as a research methodology, it clarifies events in our time that remain baffling and contradictory in terms of earlier ways of looking at the world.

This is a first exploration into the relationship, if there is one, between metamodernism, religion and Religious Studies. Rather than responding to Vermeulen and Van den Akker's original thesis and the reactions to it, I intend to structure this article according to the list of 10 characteristics of metamodernism listed by Abramson (2015b). There is also a supplementary list of five more characteristics he provided soon afterwards (Abramson 2015a), but these will not be directly considered in this article. For each of Abramson's 10 characteristics, I will consider whether this is something we in the academic study of religion can use, and where possible, whether we have something metamodernism can use. This is admittedly a somewhat superficial approach, but it is intended to act as a starting point only. A more in-depth discussion between Religious Studies/Theology and metamodernism, the discussion will show, can be fruitful and is something that needs to be done. It will take considerably more than this brief article. As an editorial in the webzine *Notes on Metamodernism* states, '... metamodernism is an oscillation rather than a balance, an ongoing discussion without answer ...' (Anonymous 2010b), and this will hopefully be the beginning rather than the end of a relationship between metamodernism, Theology and Religious Studies.

It needs to be understood that metamodernists see it as more than just a methodology. It is also a movement, a prescriptive view of what at least some metamodernists see as the dominant pattern of thought and feeling in the near future. We will return to that briefly in the conclusion of this article, but for now, let us concentrate on metamodernism as a methodology, as a tool with which to analyse religious phenomena, at least as far as the academic study of religion is concerned.

However, the ideas of metamodernism also affect religion itself, and in that context the totalising aspect of metamodernism takes on a greater significance. We will

briefly consider how Abramson's principles resonate within the history of religions, so that by the conclusion of this article we can arrive at some thoughts at what role religion would play in a metamodern society.

Metamodernism as a negotiation between modernism and postmodernism

Because postmodernism was a direct response to modernism, these two cultural philosophies include a number of diametrically opposed first principles. ... Metamodernism negotiates between modernism and postmodernism by submitting that the first principles of modernism and postmodernism need not be seen as being in opposition to one another, but in fact can both be operative simultaneously within a single individual or group of individuals. (Abramson 2015b)

This was the prime motivation behind the development of metamodernism, and it reflects its origins in Cultural Studies and the study of the role of the arts in society. In Religious Studies, the clash between the modernist and postmodernist paradigms has perhaps not been experienced with quite the same level of alarm. That is not to say that we have been left completely untouched by it, of course. This contradiction is society-wide, and it affects even those who prefer not to participate.

In what follows, Abramson presents examples and case studies mostly from the postmodern pole before displaying the metamodern alternatives. I, however, come from Religious Studies, a very modernist academic tradition, and my own analyses will no doubt display that background. Perhaps between the two of us, the reader will come to an understanding of how metamodernism can become a useful part of the Religious Studies toolkit.

Nevertheless, let us take the principle explained here and ask whether in Religious Studies there are two completely contradictory views that both seem to be entirely valid. Secularisation theory comes to mind. It is undeniably true that more and more people worldwide are leaving religion behind and taking on a non-religious identity. It is equally the case that religion is thriving and that as a factor in society, it is more vital than ever to take account of the role of religion.

From either a classical (i.e. modernist) or a postmodern perspective, this is an intolerable contradiction. The modernist demands a solution to the logical contradiction, while the postmodernist demands that sides be taken and the situation be ironically deconstructed. From the metamodernist point of view, however, the new emerging category of 'spiritual but not religious' was only to be expected. A metamodern Peter Berger (1996) would not have needed to recant his earlier work – it would simply become one pole of a view of reality that needed to be balanced by a new one. The new does not invalidate the old – it completes the picture, for now.

Another useful example is the drawn-out tension between Religious Studies and Theology. In a metamodern approach to religion, the two classical approaches towards studying religion would not cease to exist. Individuals would probably feel drawn to one or the other, as they do now. But moving within the spectrum of approaches would become less of a life-and-death academic struggle. One could, within the constraints of a given project, accept certain religious teachings as true without setting this as the yardstick of all future projects. Of course, this already happens. Religious Studies scholars are human beings, and they have their own beliefs, prejudices and preferences that will affect their work. But the advantage of the metamodern approach is that it allows an openness, an accountability that is now closed off by a rigid attempt to maintain an unattainable epoch. Equally, the theologian can move into Religious Studies territory with a greater fluidity of thought. You have not ceased to be a theologian because you are currently oscillating in the direction of Religious Studies. You have become a different kind of theologian, one better suited to the task at hand. Tomorrow's project will call for a different blend of the two.

Dialogue over dialectics

Postmodernism favored 'dialectics' over dialogue, whereas metamodernism explicitly advances the cause of dialogue. Where the 'dialectical' thinking of the postmodernists assumed that every situation involves just two primary opposing forces – which do battle until one emerges victorious and the other is destroyed – dialogic thinking rejects the idea that there is no middle ground or means of negotiation between different positions. ... Metamodern dialogue does not pave over differences between parties and positions, it simply emphasizes areas of overlap between contesting opinions that could lead to effective collective action on a slate of issues. (Abramson 2015b)

This statement distinguishes metamodernism from neo-Marxism or any other philosophy with a Hegelian ancestry. Metamodernism does not seek to destroy modernism or postmodernism by bringing them into an all-encompassing synthesis. Indeed, for the metamodernist project to succeed, the contrasting forces it attempts to bring into dialogue must, I submit, continue to exist and even to thrive. Both modernism and postmodernism must exist as viable alternatives to act as boundary conditions between which the metamodern thinker can oscillate (or, in the alternative understanding explored below, hold simultaneously):

[I]n a postmodern scenario, nothing ever gets solved because the contending forces angrily oppose and caricature one another until (in fact) both are degraded and destroyed in number and in spirit. Meanwhile, in a metamodern scenario, at least something gets achieved, even if it doesn't resolve all disputes between the two groups or ensure that they'll be able to work together on other issues. (Abramson 2015b)

In a small way, this has been the case in Religious Studies. The very conservatism and methodological eclecticism with which I opened this article has ensured that there have been vigorous dialogues between scholars of religion working from different perspectives.

This should not make us shrug our shoulders and declare that metamodernism is something 'we have always done'. To recognise oneself in a small aspect of something as all-encompassing as metamodernism is heartening, but that is very different from embracing this philosophy and trying to put it into action consistently.

Paradox

Metamodernism embraces the paradoxical. For instance, in negotiating between modernism's belief in universality and postmodernism's belief in contingency, metamodernism posits that certain ideas can be 'objectively' true for an individual even though the individual also understands that they are not universally true. ... This paradoxical relationship between how we conceive of truth 'locally' and how we conceive of it at the level of society allows us to constantly exhibit and participate in paradoxes, as we are simultaneously aware and accepting of how we individually operate and how that differs dramatically from how others do. (Abramson 2015b)

If we had asked metamodernism to supply us with a way to understand religious belief and practice, we could hardly have asked for more than this. The person who sincerely believes in the creation story presented in the book of Genesis also knows for a fact that the dinosaurs were killed off by a giant comet 75 million years ago. The person who knows perfectly well that the wafer of bread was created in a bakery down the road out of flour, yeast and water also knows that it is the body of Christ.

To the modernist mindset (and the profoundly modernist biblical literalist), this is a contradiction that must be resolved by choosing one side or another. To the postmodernist it is an ironic situation ripe for deconstruction. To the metamodernist, however, the fact that there is a paradox does not mean that one is wrong and the other right, or that one has to be relegated to a mere 'subjective truth'.

What metamodernism does here is to discredit the entire concept of cognitive dissonance by placing different levels of objective truth in different sectors (I hesitate to call them 'levels') of existential and universal truth. Paradox, in this context, is not limited to contradictory truth claims. It is an existential acknowledgement of differences, differences between you and I, and differences within my own experience.

In this, metamodernism comes surprisingly close to the traditional exegetical rules from the major religions, none of which ever followed the modernist project of literalism. Origen, for example, laid down that besides a literal reading of a piece of scripture, one also needed:

three further senses, or levels of meaning, each of which was in a broad sense allegorical: the 'moral' or 'tropological' (from which one learned rules of conduct), the 'allegorical' proper (from which one learned articles of faith), and the 'anagogical' (from which one learned of the invisible realities of heaven). (Packer 1958:101; cf. Reno 2006)

The literal sense was the least interesting and least religiously fulfilling of these. Indeed, all the major religions can be shown to have developed such sophisticated ways of interpreting their texts, and there are indications of the same in lesser known ones: as an often-cited⁶ but possibly apocryphal story has it, Ashanti storytellers preface their performance with 'I am going to tell you a story. It is a lie. But not everything in it is false'.⁷

Spong (2016; cf. Chellew-Hodge 2016) goes so far as to call literalism a 'Gentile Heresy', in which non-Jewish converts diverged from the sophisticated exegetical practices of the Jewish tradition. Such a conclusion is controversial, but regardless of whether the origins of literalism can be traced to late Antiquity, it certainly became a major factor in the Modern era. Modernism has no appetite for paradoxes.

In some religious traditions, the paradox is not merely an issue of interpretation; it is employed as a psycho-spiritual technology that is only now being duplicated by contemporary psychology, the most famous example of this being the Zen kōan (Clasquin 1989), but examples can be shown from the Orthodox Christian and Muslim Sufi traditions as well. What metamodernism offers us here may be a way to speak about paradox without constantly needing to slip back into modernist language patterns that require us to explain the paradox away.

An academic study of religion based on metamodernism would ultimately not even employ the word 'paradox', so completely integrated would be the paradoxical view of life. We are a long way from that. Even metamodernism itself, as we can see in the quotation above, has yet to reach that point. And that, too, is a familiar position to students of Zen Buddhism. If the paradoxical view of reality completely transcends the reality that produced the paradox in the first place, it ceases to be paradoxical and just becomes another reality, ready to produce its own paradoxes. Kōan study prepares the student to see 'transcendence' as an illusion and 'enter the market place with helping hands', not trying to make the paradox go away but living it fully. In Zen Buddhism, this is expressed in the 'Ten Ox-herding pictures', a pictorial Pilgrim's Progress in which:

The first six of these scenes show the gradual stages in the aspirant's taming of the ox, but number seven – Forgetting the Ox, the Person Remains – illustrates the ox-tamer alone living as a recluse in a mountain retreat. But this is clearly not the end of spiritual training, for the final picture in the sequence, far from being a depiction of a life of nature freed from the bounds of society, is a clear return from the mountains and forests back to re-engagement with the social realm. (Harris 2007:163)

The return of the sage to social reality is a common motif in religious literature. Jesus emerges from the desert (and later,

6. For example, <http://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1993/2/93.02.01.x.html>, viewed 11 October 2016.

7. Attributed by some users (e.g. <http://www.thinkbuddha.org/article/358/lies-in-which-not-everything-is-false>, viewed 11 October 2016) to Wendy Doniger but otherwise of obscure origin. In this case, though, the quotation's mysterious provenance reinforces exactly what it is trying to convey.

more famously, from the realm of death). The Prophet Muhammad leaves the cave to preach his message in the streets of Makkah. The Buddha rises from his seat under the Bodhi tree; the shaman exits the trance world of the ancestors. What the sage has experienced is too important to be kept private. It must be shared. We can see this as a religious variation on Campbell's (1949) 'Myth of the Hero'. The paradox here is an existential one, of setting out to teach the unteachable, sharing that which is most private.

In metamodernism, as we shall see under point 9 below, we see a similar re-engagement in the form of a cautious return to grand narratives. By pointing this out, I do not mean to imply that metamodernism is a religion, nor even a proto-religion. But it points to metamodernism as a way of viewing reality that may be particularly fruitful as we try to understand the religious impulse. That does not necessarily imply that Religious Studies, or Theology, must necessarily turn to metamodernism. A purely modernist or postmodernist approach to the academic study of religion remains a viable option – viable within the restraints of the chosen paradigm. As we have seen, metamodernism actually requires these options to remain viable. However, we can perhaps see a deeper, richer picture of the religious world when we transcend these and adopt a methodology that already has affinities with our topic of investigation.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition occurs when one thing is super-imposed atop another thing from which it would normally be deemed entirely separate. ... this juxtaposition can arise when an individual feels an ironic detachment from their culture, but this detachment gives rise to a series of entirely earnest emotions and perspectives. (Abramson 2015b)

In Religious Studies, one of the first things we teach our students is that anyone, from any religion or none, can study or teach this discipline. We arrived at this position from the Eliade/Van der Leeuw interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology ('soft positivism', as my friends in the Philosophy department call it). But can we not recognise ourselves in Abramson's description above? When I teach a religion that I do not belong to, indeed a religion that in my most private thoughts I regard as ridiculous, I am indeed both ironic and completely earnest.

Some years ago, a colleague reported on a conference in which the burning topic had been whether one could study Islam without being a Muslim. I replied, 'That is very interesting. I just came from a conference in which the main topic was whether you could study Buddhism if you actually *were* a Buddhist!' In Religious Studies, the role of the scholar-practitioner remains an open issue subject to constant re-examination. Metamodernism could lend us insights here to assist. There need not be a separate category of scholar-practitioner. One oscillates between the role of scholar and the role of practitioner. With time and practice, both roles are present simultaneously. The dichotomy is shown not to be false but negotiable.

The collapse of distances

The distance between the self and others, and between the self and society, is one that postmodernism celebrates by finding myriad ways to put the self (or groups of selves) in a dialectic with opposing selves or groups. Postmodernism, which came of age in the Age of Radio, is therefore likely to emphasize how meaning degenerates as it moves across the vast expanse of space between selves and groups of selves. Metamodernism, which came of age in the Digital Age, recognizes that we feel at once distant from others — because on the Internet almost everyone is a stranger, so we are daily surrounded by more strangers than at any other point in human history — but also incredibly close to others, as the Internet allows us to create connections more quickly than ever before. (Abramson 2015b)

The central argument here seems to be that an overriding philosophical approach betrays the traces of the technological environment in which it arose. Although Abramson does not mention it here, modernism arose in the Age of the Book, and reveals its central belief in the permanence of Truth, once it was satisfactorily discovered. In contrast to this is postmodernism, with its legacy from the Age of Radio, and now metamodernism, which reflects its arising in the Age of the Internet.

It is an intriguing notion, and one that certainly warrants further thought. One objection is obviously that the flow of causality is seen as a one-way process in a, dare I say it, quite modernist fashion. Is it the case that the technological environment directly influences what philosophical movements are able to arise, or does an incipient philosophical movement also influence what technological environments are able to be invented? Would it have been possible to invent the Internet unless there was already the first glimmering of a metamodernist awareness? Can we not see an intricate interplay and mutual pattern of influences between these entities? In a sense I am accusing Abramson here of being insufficiently metamodern in his analysis.

But for the moment, Abramson's (2015b) project is to clearly distinguish metamodernism from postmodernism, as we can see when he states that:

The simultaneous anonymity and false intimacy of the Internet also so confuses self-identity that it makes it harder and harder to distinguish our opinion of ourselves from others' opinions of us, or distinguish what we could or do believe from what others believe. This means that it's harder than ever before to pretend that we are in a dialectical relationship with other people or ideas — rather than being in the midst of a swirl of identity and belief we only sometimes feel we control.

But what does Abramson understand by 'the Internet'? This is not Tim Berners-Lee's Internet of static web pages, which took an existing concept of 'publishing' and applied it to a digital environment. It is not even the Internet of e-mail, which for all its convenience is just a digitised version of letter writing, an eminently modernist activity. Later, under point 2 of his *Five Further Characteristics*, he cites the 'social discovery application Tinder' and 'the 140-character free-for-all, that is, Twitter' as examples

(Abramson 2015a), and it is the domain of 'social networking' that appears to be the Internet that inspires the diffused, ever-changing metamodern identity.

Multiple subjectivities

Postmodernism required the 'Balkanization' of self-identity — the partitioning of the self and groups of selves into clear boxes of race, religion, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and so on — in order to establish its dialectics. ... Metamodernism embraces, instead, the notion of multiple subjectivities: the idea that not only do we all find ourselves in numberless subjective categories all at once, but that we even temporarily occupy and share subjectivities with others who might seem very different from us. ... To be clear, none of this reflects a desire to erase or sideline existing subjective categories, merely to complicate our models of how they develop, interact, intersect, and in time help form our individual and collective identities. (Abramson 2015b)

Identity is a key concept in Religious Studies and indeed in religion itself, though not always discussed explicitly. We identify a specific block of religious beliefs and practices as, say, Christianity, and lump everyone with an institutional affiliation to that block as 'Christians'. When the question arises whether one can be simultaneously Christian and, say, Buddhist, we have a problem. We may say that one can adopt certain innocuous aspects of Buddhism into Christianity, or we may talk of a new syncretism that is ongoing, which will in the course of time give rise to a new 'ism'. But in reality, identity remains a deeply entrenched part of religious life. We still see Christian speakers and organisations denouncing yoga because of its Hindu roots. They rarely denounce the Gregorian calendar with its days named after Germanic gods and months named after Roman ones. That has become entrenched as part of their identity and no paradox is experienced.

Identities are remarkably persistent and may outlive their original referents: South Africans of Indian descent continue to self-identify as 'Tamil speakers', 'Hindi speakers' and so on long after the last fluent speaker of that language has passed away (Clasquin 1997). My membership in a linguistic group, or a religion, is the essential descriptor of who I am. It does not disappear just because I no longer actually speak the language, or practice the religion.

In the metamodern paradigm, however, it is the multiple identity that is the new normal and the singular identity that is an old-fashioned holdover. From a Religious Studies perspective, this mingling of identities started long before the Internet, and of course Abramson gives it only as an example. But taking the metamodernist perspective frees us from having to explain why the 21st-century, yoga-practising, Kabbalah-studying and still occasionally churchgoing urbanite feels no need to solidify the new syncretic lifestyle into a new 'Something-ism'. Metamodernism does not call for the destruction of the existing religious 'isms' and their replacement by a new secular order. It asks us to recognise that identity formation is a complex process and that the result is always provisional and may stubbornly refuse to comply with the religious blocs we continue to teach our students.

This may be a hard lesson for Religious Studies. There are certain unspoken theological assumptions about group identity that have formed this discipline and continue to inform it. In a world where religious identities shift and mutate constantly, can Religious Studies continue to teach that 'Hindus do this' and 'Christians believe that'? And as for Theology? That is likely to be an even harder battle, as theologians from the various religious traditions adjust to a world that questions the very basis of their disciplines. If it is hard to assign definitive identities to various religious groups, how much harder will it be to argue that this identity forms a viable basis from which to commence an argument?

On a more individual level, Stirner (2012) argues that the suppression of the subject by postmodernism is overcome in the metamodern paradigm, but that there is no going back to the old modernist subject:

The reemerged subject is not the old modern one. It contains no transcendental justifications. Concepts of identity, selfhood and subjectivity can always be dismantled and deconstructed. But while the awareness about this still rightfully persists, new times call us to acknowledge that the subject nevertheless appears, in moments of intersubjectivity, in reciprocal spaces of belief, trust and love.

To the Religious Studies scholar, this kind of analysis simply cries out for a dialogue with ancient Buddhist debates about the nature of *anatta*, involving not only current Buddhist orthodoxy, but also the points of view of now-extinct schools such as the Sarvāstivāda and Pudgalavāda. Similarly, it invites dialogue with sophisticated arguments on the nature of the self-emerging from thousands of years of Hindu, Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholarships. Some of those arguments will resonate with metamodernism, others not. A mutual enrichment will occur in either case.

Collaboration

Metamodernism encourages not only dialogue but collaboration. In a world in which we are constantly being influenced by innumerable forces – some we recognize as influential for us, some we don't – metamodernism literalizes this experience by encouraging us to consciously join our efforts and perspectives with those of others. (Abramson 2015b)

Collaboration does not seem to come naturally to Religious Studies scholars. I am writing this article as a sole author. Research in Religious Studies is normally done by one, two, or at most three people. We have maintained a 19th-century model of the lone and (hopefully) brilliant scholar disseminating knowledge to students and fellow academics alike. The lecture remains our prime means of tuition; the monograph and research article our research output. Metamodernism may be a wake-up call to us to reconsider our research and teaching models. Yes, even tuition. Abramson (2015b) continues:

Metamodern learning models, for instance, are likely to emphasize students working together to create projects that are simultaneously self-expressive for each individual member and also an adequate self-expression of the group, however diverse its viewpoints and subjectivities may be.

We see from the tentative tone ('are likely to') that this is an area of thus-far unrealised potential. Perhaps it is not only

Religious Studies that suffers from the long reach of 19th-century modernism.

Simultaneity and generative ambiguity

Early descriptions of metamodernism suggested that an individual thinking metamodernistically 'oscillates' between opposing states of thought, feeling, and being – almost as though human beings were pendulums swinging between very different subjectivities. More recent understandings of metamodernism emphasize, instead, simultaneity – the idea that the metamodern self does not move between differing positions but in fact inhabits all of them at once. The paradoxical element of metamodern juxtapositions is produced by this very simultaneity; after all. (Abramson 2015b)

Metamodernism has moved from a philosophy of oscillation to one of simultaneity. For a 6-year-old philosophical system to have undergone such a profound change shows that it is capable of change and growth. As recently as 2011, Vermeulen could still state categorically that 'metamodernism is above all about oscillation' (Vermeulen 2011).

Perusing metamodernist writings shows that the older 'oscillation' metaphor is far from dead. '[W]e enter a new period: a metamodern period, whose structure of feeling is characterised by a sort of "oscillation" between these poles' (Dempsey 2015). It would be contrary to the entire spirit of metamodernism to launch an inquisition against a recalcitrant oscillationist faction, or to split into Vermeulenist and Abramsonist schools. If metamodern thought consists of being able to contain two contradictory ideas simultaneously, then it must be able to contain both the oscillationist model and (recursively) itself. Besides, a sufficiently fast oscillation gives us a de facto simultaneity.

If metamodernism is indeed moving towards a position of simultaneity, then a rich field of discussion between metamodernism and Religious Studies opens up. Binary, 'Aristotelian' logic, as Religious Studies scholars know, is not the only game in town. Hindu Advaita, the Buddhist Catuskoṭi system as used (and demolished) by Nāgārjuna, the non-dual position found in Zen and Taoism, and even the complex Jain epistemology all become possible interlocutory partners. I will not pretend to commence this multilogue in this initial investigation, but it shows that metamodernism has the potential to be an interesting new western perspective on perennial issues in the comparative study of religious philosophies.

For such a conversation to take place, a number of questions would need to be cleared up. For example, if metamodernist simultaneity remains built on an oscillation between two poles, is there not a dualism built into it, if at a somewhat deeper level? Is it possible to oscillate between three, or four, poles? Infinite poles? Vermeulen hints that it may be so when he writes that '... it is not so much about the oscillation between binary opposites, as between the various ends on a multidimensional continuum of energies and intensities' (Vermeulen 2011).

Likewise, Abramson (2015a) notes, ‘The problem with “metaxic oscillation” is that it merely re-entrenches postmodern dialectics by convincing us that every problem is fundamentally bipolar’, and:

if one were to very self-consciously ‘oscillate’ between opposing positions, one would in fact just be acknowledging the dominance of postmodern dialectics (i.e. binary systems with ‘poles’ at either end that one can swing between). (Abramson 2015b)

From a Religious Studies perspective, I agree that a philosophy that reduces reality to a series of bipolar contradictions is insufficient to explain the complex interactions of beliefs and practices we observe in the religious sphere. But simultaneity has its own danger of suggesting a situation of stasis that is certainly not the aim of metamodernism – Abramson speaks of ‘moving “between and beyond” currently entrenched positions’. The relation between oscillation and simultaneity is the metamodern kōan, the burning question that can be ‘solved’ only temporarily and provisionally before the student moves on to the next kōan.

Abramson (2015b) continues:

While by no means explicitly connected to drug culture, metamodernism often indulges paradoxes and juxtapositions more readily observed and accepted in an altered state of consciousness, which is why so many television programs and books that appeal to the drug-using demographic ... can be considered metamodern.

And here we may have found a potentially especially fruitful area where Religious Studies and metamodernism can cooperate. This time, the contribution goes both ways. Religious Studies has been studying altered states of consciousness for over a century. We have analysed the texts, we have observed the rituals (with and without drugs) that lead to these states, we have attached electrodes to the scalps of meditating monks ... Religious Studies has lifetimes of empirical observations and textual analysis to contribute here. Metamodernism can contribute a philosophical language in which mystical experience is no longer the exception, not a rare ‘peak experience’, rather this realm of paradox and juxtaposition becomes the norm. The combination of the two would be a fascinating study of human experience.

An optimistic response to tragedy by returning, albeit cautiously, to metanarratives

Since the term ‘metamodernism’ was coined in 1975, metamodern theorists have all agreed that metamodernism is used by individuals and societies as a generative response to tragedy; indeed, the phrase ‘a romantic response to crisis’ is often used to describe metamodernism. (cf. Dempsey 2015; Turner 2010)

Metamodernists are as aware of political, economic, climatological, and other forms of chaos as is anyone else, but they choose to remain optimistic and to engage their communities proactively even when and where they believe a cause has been

lost. Theorists describe this way of thinking as an ‘as if’ philosophical mode; that is, the metamodernist chooses to live ‘as if’ positive change is possible even when we are daily given reminders that human culture is in fact in a state of disarray and likely even decline. (Abramson 2015b)

To live ‘as if’ positive change is possible? To the scholar of religion, this statement immediately brings up Pascal’s wager, as it has been restated by Pope Benedict XVI, Robert Spaemann, Iain King and so many others (e.g. Spaemann 2005:200). To live ‘as if God exists’ is in fact a venerable religious position that long predates Pascal. In Greek philosophy, we see it in the life of Protagoras, who was personally agnostic but continued to practise conventional rituals. It appears in the *Bacchae* by Euripides, where it is pronounced by the character Kadmos (who is punished by the gods for his impiety!). Versions of the argument can be found in the writings of the early Christian apologist Arnobius of Sicca (c. 330) and the Muslim kalam scholar Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni (c. 478). Given a modicum of literary license, we can even see it in Hindu and Buddhist apologetics, for example, in the Kalama Sutta (A guttara Nikaya 3:65). It has even been inverted into ‘the Atheist’s Wager’ by the contemporary philosopher Michael Martin (1990:232–238).

However, Abramson, unlike Pascal, does not present the reader with a forced choice between two incommensurable alternatives. His ‘positive change’ is a broad conception and an ongoing process, not a static choice between two competing ontologies.

Despite this, it shows that metamodernism is not entirely a radical break with all philosophy that has gone before it. Like any philosophy, it builds on what has been done before, explicitly so when it attempts to balance the competing trends of modernism and postmodernism, more subtly when it presents, as it does here, arguments and positions taken, perhaps on an unconscious level, from the rich history of religio-philosophical enquiry. Even more so when it then extends those positions into new contexts.

Abramson continues:

If postmodernism negated the possibility of personal, local, regional, national, or international metanarratives other than those that were/are strictly dialectical, metamodernism permits us to selectively, and with eyes wide open, return to such metanarratives when they help save us from ennui, anomie, despair, or moral and ethical sloth.

Could religion be among such metanarratives? Of course, in this context religion would never be the *only* metanarrative in play, always a bitter pill for the religious believer to swallow. But certainly religion could be one source of the metanarratives that would inform, however temporarily and contingently, the creation of cautious new metanarratives.

Interdisciplinarity

The reason metamodernism is so oriented toward crisis-response is because its tendency to dismantle and rearrange structures is a

tacit acknowledgment that those structures – as they were previously arranged – are what likely caused the crisis in the first place. The metamodernist is therefore likely to support the dismantling, realignment, and rearrangement (or even the exclusion altogether) of received terms like ‘genre’, ‘party’, ‘department’, ‘discipline’, ‘institution’, and other similar demarcations of difference and segregation. To be clear, this is not an anarchistic opposition to structure, but rather a thoughtful and civic-minded interest in the radical reevaluation of structures with an eye toward progressive change. (Abramson 2015b)

My response to this echoes what I said with regard to point 1 above. Metamodernism offers us an opportunity to phase out the ongoing conflict between Religious Studies and Theology. Religious Studies is a 19th-century construct. Theology is much older. Being old does not disqualify either, and a metamodernist reconceptualisation of the field of the academic study of religion would most likely see them survive as two loci of interest. But it would also allow the rise of new loci, and free scholars to move among those loci as the moment demands. I take some small issue with Abramson’s terminology here. ‘Inter’-disciplinarity implies the existence of two disciplines as hard, well-defined entities. What we need in the academic study of religion is a ‘Meta’-disciplinarity in which the boundaries between disciplines are softened and allowed to overlap.

Conclusion

This has been an admittedly superficial, initial look at metamodernism from the point of view of Religious Studies. Each of Abramson’s 10 points, and indeed the 5 supplementary points that we could not touch upon here, could easily serve as the source for an entire article on its own, and I hope that this first attempt will lead to exactly that, if not necessarily by me. A thorough engagement with Vermeulen and Van den Akker remains to be done. Even so, I believe that this first step has shown that there are promising points of contact.

Engagement with metamodernism, I believe I have shown, opens up the possibilities of new discourses within Religious Studies and new opportunities for engagement with our colleagues in Theology, and vice versa. It allows us to understand the new kind of secularisation we are viewing right now, that simply refuses to comply with traditional secularisation theories.

There are limitations to these new possibilities. For now, I do not see this 6-year-old philosophy as the basis for an overall, all-encompassing theory of religion. It is not sufficiently developed for that. More seriously, metamodernism runs the risk of getting bogged down in its own kind of parochialism. For now, metamodernism is a Western development, making use of predominantly Western examples. It is not merely the philosophy of the Millennial Generation but specifically of that generation in the Euro-American environment. However, Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2015a) have stated that this is a happenstance based on their personal familiarity with that context and a reluctance to impose metamodernism on other cultures, and that they would welcome inputs from other

contexts. How will metamodernism deal with current debates on decoloniality, for example?

If Religious Studies has much to gain from interaction with metamodernism, the picture gets murkier when we look at religion itself. Religion as we know it today reflects a premodern, Axial Age mindset (or arguably an even earlier one), and much of today’s contemporary events regarding religion reflects those traditions that have yet to make their peace with modernism. As for postmodernism, while there have of course been postmodern theologians and thinkers within the religious world, we can hardly say that self-consciously postmodern religion is a large-scale phenomenon. What are the chances of metamodernism, a ‘structure of feeling’ that claims to supersede both modernism and postmodernism, by incorporating both, making an impact on religion?

Paradoxically (of course) this is quite possible. The history of religion shows that altered states of consciousness, the creative use of paradox, the provisional reconciliation of false dualisms and many of the other issues that were discussed above are part of the religious impulse. This does not mean that metamodernism takes us back to the premodern, even less that religion was a sort of primordial metamodernism. It shows that there is a potential affinity between metamodernism and religion, one that could be explored and embraced by participants of both, oscillating from one to the other.

If one may hazard a prediction, it will be the religious tradition least affected by, and least reconciled with, modernism that will most easily adjust to a metamodern world. Orthodox Christianity rather than Evangelical Protestantism and Vajrayana Buddhism rather than secularised Vipassana, to name but a few, are the traditions that can reach back into their rich hermeneutical traditions and engage with an emerging zeitgeist that has so many themes in common with them.

The religious traditions that have spent the last several centuries fighting rearguard battles against modernism, in the process becoming either semi-secularised themselves or retreating further and further into literalist fundamentalism, are less likely to thrive in this environment. Either reaction to modernism has involved sloughing off of the rich texture of thought, action and affect that gives the adherent a choice of ‘various ends on a multidimensional continuum of energies and intensities’ (Vermeulen 2011) to oscillate between.

The metamodern religious world will be neither unipolar nor bipolar. It will be multipolar, and some religions will find themselves better able to engage with this than others. It is instructive to note that the most popular form of Buddhism among Western converts is Tibetan Vajrayana, and that Orthodox Christianity reports an upsurge in converts in the Western world. Just as the rise of the overprotective nanny state⁸ was countered by the development of extreme sports, so will metamodernism enable certain religions to return to

8. As foreseen by Michel Foucault under the term ‘biopolitics’ (viz. Lemm & Vatter 2014; Morar 2015).

their roots within the context of this new, connected world. A new form of religiosity will evolve that oscillates between (or simultaneously adheres to) deep reserves of traditional spirituality and radical personal freedom. Dare we call it 'spiritual but not religious'?

In the end, neither the Religious Studies scholar, nor the theologian, nor the religious adherent may have much choice in the matter. If the proponents of metamodernism are correct and it, or something very much like it by another name, turns out to be the dominant 'structure of feeling' of the 21st century and beyond, then we will all end up living in it, and with it. Nobody can claim to be unaffected by 400 years of modernism. Equally, even if one personally does not adhere to postmodernism, one cannot claim to be unaffected by it. These historical realities are as much part of our psychosocial environment as the air we breathe is part of the physical. If we are indeed moving into a metamodern world, then religion and the academic study of religion will be both part of that move and be affected by it. With luck, religion will not need to be dragged in there against its will, and Religious Studies and Theology will be there to document and analyse the development, hopefully with an increased awareness of themselves as part of an overarching academic study of religion.

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