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Artefacts and the Mediation of Transcendence

Ehsan Arzroomchilar

South Bohemia University, Czech Republic, arzroe00@tf.jcu.cz

Abstract

Original Research

Material religion, as a broad field of inquiry, examines how material forms and embodied practices participate in the making of religious worlds. This article seeks to extend that conversation by drawing on insights from the phenomenology of technology. From this perspective, artefacts–whether explicitly religious or not–are not passive symbols but active mediators that shape and extend perception. They configure how the sacred is sensed, enacted, and made present. By attending to the mediating function of tools and technologies, the analysis highlights how material engagements can open experiential horizons that would otherwise remain beyond immediate reach. In this sense, both scientific instruments and religious artefacts function as extensions of human embodiment, enabling access to domains–such as transcendence–that would remain inaccessible without them. The article concludes that, within religious contexts, artefacts serve either to draw the transcendent into the immanent or to elevate the immanent toward the transcendent, and are therefore far from passive.

Keywords:

Material Religion, Technology, Phenomenology, Ihde; Islamic Calligraphy.

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Introduction

In *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, Husserl criticizes the positive sciences for having become excessively "mathematized," thereby losing sight of their own foundation in the *lifeworld*–the pre-reflective, pre-theoretical sphere of everyday experience (see Luft 2011). In the lifeworld, human beings are oriented toward their surroundings in a bodily manner; their engagements are primarily practical and goal-directed rather than purely contemplative and reflective.

According to Husserl, science originates within the lifeworld and initially seeks to know the very same objects intended through everyday praxis. Over time, however, modern science drifts from this primordial grounding and comes to concern itself with idealized, abstract entities: "Through Galileo's mathematization of nature, nature itself is idealized under the guidance of the new mathematics" (Husserl, 1970, p. 23). The result, Husserl argues, is a detrimental rupture between the world of science and that of *lived experience*. Whereas in pre-scientific life the world is given as concrete, sensuous, and perspectival, the scientific world abstracts from this immediacy and posits idealities that transcend sensory orientation. The universalization of the "idea of truth-in-itself" renders "the *relative* truths that arise in human life, [or] the *situational* truths" obsolete, such that mathematized science "affect[s] all traditional norms, those of right, of beauty, of usefulness, dominant personal values, [and] values connected with personal characteristics" (Husserl, 1970, p. 287 *italic added*). Within the lifeworld, objects are meaningful and perspectival whereas within the scientific attitude, they become decontextualized and absolute. Yet for Husserl, the lifeworld remains the necessary point of reference for all scientific activity: "Objective a priori is grounded in the subjective-relative a priori of the lifeworld … mathematical self-evidence has its source of meaning and source of legitimacy in the self-evidence of the lifeworld" (Husserl, 1970, p. 140). The detachment of modern science from the lifeworld, then, is for Husserl a distortion born of excessive idealization, that is, abstraction.

Don Ihde, however, finds Husserl's construal of modern science incomplete. What is missing in Husserl's analysis, he argues, is an account of science in action–that is, of the role of instrumentation, embodiment, and material praxis in the production of scientific knowledge (Ihde, 1998; 2011). There is no "forgetfulness" of the lifeworld in Galilean science; rather, science has always been rooted in the perceptual, practical, and historical lifeworld. A more robust understanding of science, Ihde suggests, requires attention to "science praxis, laboratory life, and the instruments or technologies of science" (Ihde, 2011). Galileo was not merely a "mathematizer," but also a

"lens grinder, a user of telescopes, a fiddler with inclined planes, [and] a dropper of weights from the Pisa Tower" (Ihde, 2011). His engagement was thus profoundly embodied and materially situated.

Galileo's observation, Ihde notes, was not solely conscious, conceptual, or cognitive, but "actional, perceptual, and embodied" (Ihde, 1998, p. 45). Science undoubtedly involves measurement, quantification, and idealization, but these are secondary, and depend fundamentally on material relations with things–relations that presuppose both bodily praxis and technological artefacts such as the telescope. Husserl's conception of science is therefore inadequate; his "Galileo is a Galileo without the telescope" (Ihde, 2011).

For Ihde, all theoretical knowledge, including modern science, is rooted in the lifeworld. What distinguishes science, however, is its capacity to extend perception through technological means. Instruments and the embodied practices surrounding them open realms of experience that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Galileo's telescope, for instance, brought the celestial realm into human perceptual reach, thereby expanding the very horizon of the lifeworld. His embodied engagement with technology refutes Husserl's claim of detachment, while simultaneously revealing that technological mediation can transform the structure of experience itself.

Now, what does all this have to do with the world of religion? At first glance, the domains of science and religion may seem separated by a vast and unbridgeable distance. Yet, from a structural-phenomenological perspective, the two are not as far apart as they might initially appear. The tendency toward abstraction and idealization is not confined to the empirical sciences. He detects a similar movement in other spheres of religion:

> In a sense analogous to that in which mathematics speaks of infinitely distant points, straight lines, etc., one can say metaphorically that God is the 'infinitely distant man.' For the philosopher, in correlation with his mathematization of the world and of philosophy, has in a certain sense mathematically idealized himself and, at the same time, God." (Husserl, 1970, p. 66)

In exploring both science and religion, then, one can discern comparable tendencies toward abstraction–interpretive modes that risk overlooking or downplaying the role of embodiment, materiality, and pre-cognitive, practical engagement with the lifeworld. Yet both science and religion, in their lived and enacted forms, are sustained by material mediations that shape and stabilize specific ways of perceiving, interpreting, and inhabiting the world–

mediations that are often forgotten or rendered invisible by abstraction.

This article therefore seeks to bring embodiment and artefacts back into focus within the religious lifeworld. To do so, it turns to a specific practice from the Islamic tradition: the art of calligraphy. The aim is to demonstrate how a phenomenological approach–particularly one informed by Don Ihde's postphenomenology–can illuminate the embodied and technological dimensions of religious practice that might otherwise remain unnoticed. Ihde's philosophy of technology provides a conceptual framework for understanding how artefacts mediate human experience, extend perception, and shape the very texture of *lived religiosity*.

The discussion unfolds in four sections. Section 2 briefly outlines the key tenets of Ihde's postphenomenology, emphasizing its account of technological mediation. Section 3 applies this framework to the case of Islamic calligraphy, showing how tools, materials, and embodied comportments co-constitute a religious mode of experience. Section 4 offers concluding reflections on the implications of this analysis for the study of material religion and the phenomenology of technology.

(Post)phenomenology of Technology

Technology is never a neutral or innocent instrument; it always *mediates* how we perceive and act upon the world. The notion of *mediation* lies at the core of Ihde's philosophy of technology and underscores the active role that material artefacts play in the *constitution* of experience (Ihde, 1990). Mediation, for Ihde, designates the transformative power of technology to reconfigure our relation to the lifeworld–the ways in which we experience, interpret, and engage with it.

As the example of the telescope illustrates, a technological innovation can both open and transform worlds of experience. Galileo's telescope not only enabled a novel *micro-perception*–a direct, sensory engagement with celestial detail–but also reconfigured the *macro-perception* of the cosmos, contributing to the epochal shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric worldview (Ihde, 1990, 1998, 2011). Yet, these micro- and macro-level dimensions of experience are not separate domains; their distinction is merely analytical. In practice, they are co-constitutive. Artefacts mediate how one inhabits the lifeworld, and Ihde emphasizes that both levels "belong equally to the lifeworld" and are "closely intertwined" (Ihde 1990, p. 29). Technology, in this sense, is not a passive *intermediary* but an active *mediator*, it restructures our *being-in-the-world*.

Relations are thus of crucial importance for a phenomenology of

technology. Indeed, it is relations that constitute entities, not the other way around. There is no pre-given subject or object prior to their relational interplay; both emerge through mediation. In this sense, postphenomenology advances a *relational ontology* (see Rosenberger & Verbeek, 2015). The mediation of technology is therefore not fixed or predetermined but depends on the kind of engagement through which it is encountered. Ihde identifies four basic types of human–technology relations, each shaping how individuals inhabit the lifeworld. Of these, one is particularly relevant for our purposes here, the *embodiment relation*, and we will delve into that in some detail.

In an embodiment relation[1], technology becomes an extension of the body–a *transparent* medium through which the world is experienced. A reed pen, as we will see, can become part of the calligrapher's bodily schema when fully habituated. While writing, the calligrapher rarely notices the pen itself; it withdraws into the background of awareness. Only when something goes wrong–when the reed pen malfunctions or breaks–does it suddenly become conspicuous, drawing attention away from the writing and toward itself. In such moments of breakdown, the artefact emerges from *transparency* and becomes *opaque*. Yet prior to that point, it functions as an embodied mediator of the calligrapher's world, shaping both perception and action. The calligrapher reed pen is a medium *through* which the world is constituted. We will return to this in the next Section.

Importantly, the transformations inaugurated by technological mediation are largely irreversible. Even after the pen is set aside, the mediation leaves its trace. After viewing the Moon through a telescope, for instance, one's "post-telescopic seeing" is permanently altered: the Moon now appears with "light and dark areas," displacing the earlier image of a "pure, mirror-like, featureless surface" (Ihde, 1990, pp. 63, 150). Once habituated to a new form of experience, a residue of it always remains in consciousness, subtly reshaping both micro- and macro-experience. The world appears henceforth in a new way, and that transformation persists.

Here Ihde draws on the phenomenological notion of *sedimentation*–Husserl's insight that "meaning is grounded upon meaning; the earlier meaning gives something of its validity to the later one" (Husserl, 1970, pp. 52, 363). Sedimentation or traditionalization implies that sufficiently habituated practices sink into the cultural background and become taken

1. Other possible types of relationships are, *hermeneutic*, *alterity*, and *background* relationships. See (Ihde 1990; 2009; Verbeek 2005; Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015). For other possible contribution to such classification of human-technology relationships see Verbeek (2011)

for granted. A contemporary example can be found in our understanding of disease. Few today, even among the religiously devout, interpreted the recent pandemic as divine punishment; rather, it was understood primarily as the spread of a virus. This orientation reflects the deeply sedimented influence of techno-scientific practices, which now frame the perceptual and interpretive horizons through which reality is encountered. Technologically mediated embodiments, once culturally sedimented, become the background for future experience.

For such sedimentation to occur, however, new practices and instruments must first be learned, exercised, and habituated. As Galileo himself emphasized, telescopic observation requires training; only through practice does the instrument recede into transparency (Ihde, 1990). Tools and the praxes they summon must truly become extensions of the body before they can become part of cultural sedimentation.

Next, as is already alluded to, the mediation of technology is not only quantitative but transformative. But, according to Ihde, technological transformation is not arbitrary, it follows rather a specific pattern: technology *enables* and *constrains*, *amplifies* and *obscures*. This structure of *magnification* and *reduction* constitutes an invariant pattern of technological mediation. Every technological interface shapes the user's experience by accentuating certain aspects of reality while simultaneously diminishing others.

As Ihde notes, Galileo's telescope enabled the Moon's mountains, seas, and craters to become visible for the first time: "The magnification of the Moon such that for the first time details of mountains, seas, and craters immediately are visible" (Ihde, 2011, p. 80). Yet this visual enhancement comes at a cost, a reduction. The telescope decontextualizes its object, extracting it from its natural spatial relations: "The Moon thus made visible now ceases to be placed in its normal, expansive location within the vault of the heaven" and is thereby brought "out of the context" (Ihde, 2011, p. 80). The observer, therefore, does not encounter the Moon in an unmediated form, but as a technologically constituted phenomenon. Galileo's telescope did not merely reveal a pre-existing object; it constituted a new experiential reality.

Finally, as noted earlier, relations are central in determining how a given technology unfolds and mediates experience. According to Ihde, technology–far from possessing a fixed or essential nature–exhibits a multiplicity of possible variations; it is *multistable* (Ihde, 2009, p. 16). As he writes, "no technology is one thing, nor is it incapable of belonging to multiple contexts" (Ihde, 1999, p. 47). Technologies therefore lack intrinsic or immutable meanings; they acquire significance only within concrete relations

and contexts of use. Their affordances are enacted through particular modes of practice and may be taken up differently by different users.

A hammer's canonical function is to drive nails, yet it may also serve as a paperweight, an objet d'art, a murder weapon, or even a door handle (Ihde, 1993, p. 37). Nevertheless, the range of possible uses is not unlimited. It is bounded by the artefact's material and technical configuration–by its material constraints. Technologies may thus be re-appropriated in many ways, but not in every conceivable way (Rosenberger & Verbeek 2015).

The same applies to the reed pen. It can be taken up in different ways, each opening distinct horizons of meaning and engagement, as will be discussed, yet its possible significances remain tethered to its material form and function. The reed pen (*qalam*) can participate in artistic, religious, or even mundane writing practices, but it cannot, of course, be transformed into a tool for flight or other incongruous uses. The *multistability* of technology therefore reflects not arbitrariness, but relational variability–how embodied practice and material configuration together co-constitute meaning.

Our survey of postphenomenology could continue, but for the purposes of this article, this brief overview suffices to prepare the ground for the analysis of Islamic calligraphy. The next section turns to the mediation of the reed pen (*qalam*) and the role of the body in religious experience.

Islamic Calligraphy and Constitution of a Religious Lifeward

Let us now map Ihde's critique of Husserl's treatment of modern science onto the domain of religion and, accordingly, spotlight the material and praxical dimensions of religious life–the instruments and embodied engagements through which transcendence becomes tangible. To illustrate this, I turn to Islamic calligraphy and the materialities that sustain it.

In the Islamic world, two parallel traditions of calligraphy developed: one secular, serving everyday and administrative purposes, and another sacred, dedicated primarily to transcribing divine texts–above all, the Qur'an (Suit, 2020, p. 38). My concern here is with the latter: a genuinely religious practice in which material engagement mediates spiritual experience. Before turning to this, however, it is worth noting the *multistability* of calligraphic practice, and particularly the diverse modes of engagement that may arise with the reed pen (*qalam*).

As noted, technological artefacts do not possess fixed, pre-existing identities; their capacities and the kinds of mediation they exert depend on the *relations* established with them. In this light, the same artefact may give

rise to distinct experiential worlds depending on its context of use. Conditioned by its mode of engagement, an otherwise secular object such as the calligrapher's *qalam* can serve religious ends and, through that relation, help *constitute* a specifically religious lifeworld.

Calligraphy involves a range of tools–ink, reed pens, and writing surfaces such as papyrus, parchment, or paper. Among these, the *qalam* occupies a privileged position. To begin with, its material characteristics are decisive, not merely technical. They set the normative standards of excellence in the craft. As Suit (2020, p. 43) notes, "the [proper] size and shape of letters [are] measured by the number and relative positions of hypothetical dots made by the nib of a pen" (see also Meidani, 2020). Similarly, "the height, length, and concavity of individual letters are all measured against the backdrop of the pen's characteristics" (Osborn, 2017, p. 34). The *qalam*, in this sense, is not an inert tool but the very condition of possibility for the practice's formal order and aesthetic precision (Olsen, 2008).

Next, beyond its formal function, the *qalam* also structures bodily comportment; it mediates embodiment. It dictates how the calligrapher sits, how they hold and move the pen, where they fix their gaze, and even how they breathe. Variations in the size and tilt of the pen's nib, the texture of the paper, or the viscosity of the ink summon specific gestures and rhythms. For instance, as Meidani (2020) observes, smaller *qalams* afford shorter hand movements and thus enable faster writing. Material traits shape not only technique but also the tempo and affective tone of practice. The precise tracing of dots, careful calibration of spacing, and rhythmic execution of strokes exemplify the seamless integration of bodily skill, tool, and aesthetic principle–revealing how pen, hand, and eye together generate both form and meaning. Through such material mediation, the *qalam* modulates *micro-experience* (the embodied sensing of the body and environment) and, crucially, *macro-experience* (the calligrapher's attunement to meaning and transcendence).

For the sacred calligrapher, writing is not a neutral act of transcription but a form of divine communication–a re-enactment of revelation. As Nasr (1987, p. 21) writes, the calligrapher's *qalam* is "a direct symbol of the Divine *Qalam*, and the calligraphy it traces on paper or parchment [is] an image of that Divine Calligraphy which has written the very reality of all things upon the pages of the cosmic book." In the act of writing, "the calligrapher becomes himself the pen in the hands of the Divine Artist… the pen in his hand becomes like his own being–an instrument in the hand of God" (Nasr, 1987, p. 24).

Here, the *qalam* first becomes embodied (i.e. holding an *embodied*

relationship)–meaning and material are intertwined through bodily incorporation. Once embodied, it mediates the calligrapher's experience, rendering the divine present within the lifeworld. Here, God is not merely represented as an abstract referent; divinity is enacted and made immanent through the *qalam*, just as the world is drawn into God through the calligrapher's body.

In this sense, writing becomes a form of divine revelation. Just as Galileo's telescope extended the lifeworld by disclosing celestial realms previously unseen, the *qalam* extends the calligrapher's lifeworld by rendering the divine sensorially and bodily accessible. The *qalam*, in this sense, participates in *world-constitution*: it opens new horizons of experience and inaugurates corresponding praxes. The correlation between the transformed object of experience (noema) and the transformed mode of engagement (noesis) remains structurally invariant across both scientific and religious technologies.

Derek de Solla Price famously referred to Galileo's telescope as an "artificial revelation" (cited in Ihde 1998, p. 48). The metaphor strikingly captures the structural parallel between scientific and religious instruments. Both serve as mediatory technologies that disclose otherwise inaccessible dimensions of reality, a constituted world. In Islamic sacred calligraphy, the *qalam* functions analogously: it makes manifest what is otherwise beyond reach. As Suit (2020, p. 42) recounts, handwriting the Qur'anic text is, at first, a technologically mediated embodiment–"a technique of bodily exercise involving hand–eye coordination and a breathing rhythm corresponding with the movement of the pen." Yet through this embodied rhythm, the practice transcends the mundane and constitutes a world, becoming "a pious act that brought the writer personal blessings." Writing, in this light, is a praxis of religious contemplation–"equivalent to contemplating divine beauty" (Meidani, 2019; Schimmel 1990).

As Baba Shah Isfahani, the sixteenth-century master calligrapher, expressed it, calligraphy "is… a vehicle through which the luminous sparks of the Real Beloved's beauty appear in the scribe's vision" (cited in Ernst 1992). In this sense, the *qalam* not only represents divinity–it *emanates* it. The repetitive hand movements function not merely as technical drills but as meditative acts, training the body in rhythm, balance, and restraint, thereby aligning craft with spiritual cultivation (Ekhtiar, 2006). The written word, inscribed on the page, is not mere script but "a manifestation of the divine essence" (Ernst, 1992, p. 285), even "the beloved's face" (Ernst 1992, p. 286).

Now, over time, this *qalam*-mediated experience becomes *sedimented* within the culture from which it arises. What was once an intense, novel

spiritual encounter gradually transforms into a *habitual* mode of engagement–transparent, taken for granted, yet deeply formative. As Ihde observes regarding the telescope, technological mediation not only alters immediate perception but also reconfigures subsequent experience, stabilizing new modes of understanding. This resonates with Morgan's (2021, p. 77) insight that religious vision is never purely observational but sustained by material and bodily practices:

> The physical characteristics of things and bodily practices enable thought and feeling … Practice is not simply the expression of ideas but often their very origin. Belief often comes after practice, not only before it. The act of doing or performing religion creates a reality for it–a perceived necessity around which human values take shape.

Yet such spiritual experiences, initially confined to the calligrapher's inner horizon, must eventually attain intersubjective validity if they are to endure. As Husserl maintains, subjective experiences acquire objectivity only when rendered communicable–through *empathy* and *language* (Husserl, 1970, p. 360). Empathy allows for the immediate sharing of experience within a co-present relationship; one may, through embodied resonance, partially access the calligrapher's devotion. However, empathy is inherently limited by co-presence and mortality: it extends only to those who share the same temporal horizon and have the privilege of direct, face-to-face encounter with the practitioner.

Hence, empathy alone is insufficient. The sustainability of the religious spirit embodied in calligraphy demands something more enduring–*language*. What survives beyond the practitioner's life is the written trace, the linguistic artefact.

As Husserl observes, written expression grants "persisting existence" to meaning even when its originator is absent. Though the written sign may only evoke the original experience in a mediated or passive manner, it nonetheless retains the potential for reactivation: a reader may, through engagement, reawaken the calligrapher's self-evidence. In this way, the divine experience–though transformed through mediation–is not lost. It becomes sedimented: embedded in collective memory, preserved within the living tradition of calligraphy, and transmitted across generations.

Seen in this light, the private and otherwise inaccessible lifeworld of the calligrapher extends through time and space. The technologically constituted religious world becomes stabilized and sedimented in culture–no longer a private ecstasy but a taken-for-granted horizon of meaning shared by a community.

Closing Remarks

In *Philosophy and Religious Language* (1974), Paul Ricoeur distinguishes a hermeneutical philosophy of religion from a linguistic or analytical one. Whereas the latter concerns itself with abstract, "second-order" theological statements–such as "God exists"–the former turns instead to "the most originary expressions of a community of faith." In this sense, a hermeneutical approach, by engaging with the ordinary expressions of religious life rather than detached propositions, takes a significant step toward grasping the *lived religion* of a community in practice. Correspondingly, a hermeneutical reading of scripture is not "textualist" (Molendijk, 2016; Rakow, 2023)–that is, it does not treat the text as an intellectual object to be mastered or mined for doctrinal knowledge–but is rather an *act of interpretation*. To interpret, for Ricoeur, "is to explicate the sort of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text." Interpretation thus becomes a "projection of our ownmost possibilities into the text," revealing that the text is not merely a collection of words but a disclosure of a possible world–a *world of the text*.

Yet despite departing from what Vásquez calls "the Cartesian mind alienat[ed] from the social and historical world" (2011, p. 40)–in which "the essence of religion [is placed] in beliefs, doctrines, or texts, or in contemplation and the inner life of the soul" (Vásquez, 2011, p. 36)–the hermeneutical approach ultimately falls short in one crucial respect: it tends to overlook the *material dimensions* of religious practice, that is, "the power of performance, which is all about doing things together through bodily movement and posture" (Vásquez, 2011, p. 112). As Meyer (2013, p. 8) observes, religion "necessarily requires specific material media–that is, authorized forms through which the transcendent is generated and becomes somehow tangible." Religious life, therefore, is never purely symbolic or interpretive, even in the Ricoeurian sense; it is embodied, sensorial, and materially mediated. Tamimi Arab et al. (2023) make this point forcefully, arguing that materiality in religion is not merely a vehicle for transmitting belief: "Religion does not refer to content, and material does not refer to some container into which content is poured. Instead, religion is material through and through." From this perspective, materiality becomes the *primary condition* of religious life, while beliefs, ideas, and theologies emerge as *secondary articulations* of an already material engagement with the sacred.

In contrast to such intellectualist tendencies, the *material culture approach* to religion reverses this hierarchy, contending that materiality, artefacts, and embodied practices *ground* religious belief rather than merely express it. Religious life does not originate in disembodied interiority but

in our corporeal being-in-the-world and our engagements with material objects. From this perspective, "our lived [religious] reality emerges from the reciprocal exchanges between our embodied practices and material apparatuses (art, popular culture, technology, and science) and the environment that is itself summoned and enacted by those practices and apparatuses" (Vásquez, 2011, p. 83).

Building on Don Ihde's phenomenology of technology, this article argues against a rigid separation between the concrete and the ideal. Rather than existing as discrete realms, these dimensions are *continuous*: embodied practices and technological artefacts extend the concrete into the domain of the ideal. In this sense, technologically mediated praxes do not simply operate within the lifeworld–they *incorporate* the ideal into it.

To illustrate how engagement with artefacts can open otherwise inaccessible horizons of experience, the discussion turns to the Islamic tradition of calligraphy. It shows how the material elements of this practice–particularly the *qalam* (reed pen)–in concert with the calligrapher's embodied comportment, cultivate a lived sense of proximity to the divine. Implicit in this account is a broader methodological claim: that technology warrants a more integral role in the study of religion. While the turn toward the lived body, embodied practice, and material culture has significantly enriched the field, the specific *mediating function* of technology within this materiality remains largely undertheorized.

As Morgan (2016) reminds us, "the materiality of religion consists of how feeling, gathering, teaching, learning, punishing, celebrating, hating, adoring, speaking, dressing, eating, breathing, seeing, hearing, touching, and tasting make religion happen." Yet even in such accounts, technology seldom occupies a decisive place. A phenomenological approach to technology reveals that artefacts are not mere instruments but active *mediators* that configure religious perception and experience. Attending to this dimension enables a more nuanced and embodied understanding of religiosity–one that bridges the gap between abstract belief and concrete practice, between the ideal and the material, between transcendence and the lived world.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

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