

Book Review

Christiane Kruse, Birgit Meyer, and Anne-Marie Korte (eds.) 2018. *Taking offense: Religion, art and visual culture in plural configurations*. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag. 383 pages. ISBN: 978-3-7705-6345-6.

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What makes an image or performance offensive? Scholars of religion have direct interests in this question. The question is central to the expanding study of material religion – the theory that things, like images, have agency because they are ‘caught up’, as Ingold (2007:1) states, in the currents of our life worlds and epistemologies (cf. Meyer, Morgan, Paine & Plate 2010:7). To ask then, ‘What makes an image offensive?’ (Meyer *et al.* 2018:11) is to understand that, what *counts* as offense, is determined by a particular set of conditions and configurations of power by ‘interpretative communities’ (Chidester 2018:291) who use the potency of images to negotiate being human. The authors of *Taking offense* engage the above question as a hermeneutic that brings chapters in a ‘multidisciplinary conversation’ (Meyer *et al.* 2018:10). This approach frames the book not only as a collection of the authors’ interpretation of this question, but as a reflection of the conceptual irretrievability of offense.

That a single definition of offense is not unanimously agreed upon amongst the authors, is unsettling but welcoming. *Taking offense* broadly maps the conceptual repertoires of offense through key concepts such as sexuality and gender (chapters 1, 3, 8), blasphemy and repulsion (chapters 2, 4, 5), and iconoclasm and performance (chapters 6, 7, 9, 10). The authors moreover show that the impossibility to determine a single image as offensive is not a limitation of this academic exercise, but a purposeful epistemological stance. This approach reveals how the boundaries between political discussion and deliberation of offense on the one hand, and the conceptual and theoretical formulations of offense on the other, are reciprocally defined and distributed. Consider, for example, the ways in which liberal presuppositions (about offense) have become naturalized in the academy (Asad 1973; Baderoon 2014; Chidester 1996; Cooper & Stoler 1997; Hirschkind 2011; Lowe 2015; Mahmood 2011). Theoretically, this means that, insofar as scholars seek to ‘disrupt or undermine the rational pursuits’ that underlie the study of offense (Meyer *et al.* 2018:117), the ana-

lytical frameworks available may be ineffective to further this pursuit. The authors invariably but differently address this concern by moving the debate to societies in the Global South (chapters 5-10), marginalized subjectivities, including homosexuals and women (chapters 3, 4), and Muslims (chapters 2, 5). In particular, Schmitz's study on how heresy 'has become a gesture of modernity' (Meyer *et al.* 2018:79), Korte's 'post-secular and gender-critical perspective' on blasphemy (Meyer *et al.* 2018:112), and O'Meara's analysis of the spatial and poetic dynamics of offense (Meyer *et al.* 2018:141) give scholars an insight on the simultaneous examination of how concepts became associated with offense and how studies of non-Eurocentric locations, phenomena, and notions of subjectivity offer new interpretations of offense.

For ethnographers, *Taking offense* leaves them wanting for methodological guidance and reflection. Although each chapter demonstrates a conceptual alert when describing offense through the 'concrete experiences of people who take offense at something' (Meyer *et al.* 2018:324), the authors are reserved as to how this vigilance also informs their methodology. The concluding chapter duly considers why one's scholarship may generate offense and reminds the reader that their standpoints, even a secular one, are 'subjected to detailed scrutiny' (Meyer *et al.* 2018:363). In addition to, and perhaps before scholars of religion consider how their writings risk offending others (Meyer *et al.* 2018:362), they should answer the question as to what ethnographic sensibilities, attitudes, and practices they should observe to examine offense empirically and to mitigate offending their research participants. Thinking through how offense may influence one's understanding of, and theorizing about the ways one conducts research, can allow ethnographers to improve their research planning and understand intimately the 'emotional regimes' of their participants (Reddy 2001), so that they can nuance their notion and practice of ethics and consent. Taking seriously the possibility to offend, can also engage one's reflexivity in the field. Being attentive to and field-noting their participants' embodied affects and resistance to certain interview questions, for example (Thomson, Ansoms & Murison 2013), can serve equally as an opportunity to renovate how a scholar proceeds ethically and methodologically, and as a data point about the ways in which their participants relay their experience.

Taking offense holds great potential for scholars of religion and social scientists interested in material culture, material religion, secularism, art history, and museum studies. The interdisciplinary approach and culture that the authors demonstrate, remind their readers that, through ongoing dialogue, joint research, and partnered writing, not only do they produce innovative research, they are also prompted to think more critically on how they should research and better theorize the complex and dynamic phenomenon of offense.

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