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Exploring Religion

A Magical Realist Story

IN GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ's short story "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World,"¹ the children of a fishermen's village on a desert-like cape find the body of a drowned man, a man of abnormal size, washed up on the beach. The children don't know what to do with the giant dead man. All afternoon they play with the corpse, until somebody happens to see what they are doing. The men then carry the body to the nearest house. They wonder why the corpse is so huge. Has the seawater gotten into this man's bones? Did he continue to grow after death?

The men go to surrounding villages to see whether anyone has gone missing. As is the custom, the women take care of the corpse. Once they finish cleaning the man's body, they are left breathless from his beauty and virility. They see that he has borne his death with pride. They keep staring at him, but he simply is too sizable for their imagination. During the vigil that follows, the women grow aware of the tragic irrevocability of his death. Their eyes fill with tears; they go from sighing to wailing and then sing the traditional dirge, improvising new lyrics. When the men return from the other villages with the news that nobody is missing, the women smile in the midst of their tears. "He is ours!" they cry. The men don't see the women's point and wonder what, in their absence, has happened to the women.

1. Márquez, *Collected Stories*, 247–54. The full text can also be found on the internet. Alves, *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*, 23–24, uses the same story but with a different analysis. For the sake of the argument, I have adopted some of the changes Alves introduces in Márquez's story and have also added some elements myself. This section is an adapted version of Droogers, "The Recovery of Perverted Religion," 23–24.

While sewing pants from a piece of sail and a shirt from bridal linen, the women imagine how the drowned giant's life had been, how happy his wife must have been with him, how he had attracted fish by calling them by name, and how springs had begun to flow when he worked on the land. Did he know the secret word that makes a woman pick a flower and put it in her hair? They compare the drowned man with their husbands—who in no way can bear such comparison. This man could do more in one night than their husbands in their whole lives. They thus wander through the maze of their fantasies until the eldest woman, more out of compassion than passion, sighs: "He has the face of someone called Esteban." At dawn they cover his face with a handkerchief, so that the light will not bother him.

Thus the women bring Esteban to life. The men wish to be rid of the dead man. As is the burial custom, the corpse will be thrown off the cliffs. In this village, committing to the earth is committing to the sea. The men tie an old anchor to the body so that it will be gone once and for all. Whereas the men want to return to their normal tasks, the women invent reasons to tarry. They add relics to the bier that the men have made from the remains of a foremast and gaff. The men ask why the stranger deserves decorations worthy of a main altar. But when the women remove the handkerchief from Esteban's face, the men are left breathless too.

Esteban is then given a splendid funeral. Some of the women, who have gone to nearby villages to get flowers for the burial, return with other women, who also feel that something extraordinary is happening. In order not to return Esteban to the sea as an orphan, he is given a father and mother and uncles and aunts from among the best people. He is promoted to kin. Being much more alive than he is, the dead man's splendor is experienced by the villagers as contrasting with their own dullness. In the end, the men remove the anchor so that Esteban will be able to return—if he wishes to do so.

When they throw Esteban's body off the cliffs, they hold their breath for the fraction of centuries—as Márquez puts it—that the corpse needs to reach the sea. They all know that their lives will be different from now on. Henceforth their village is known as Esteban's village.



Though this account is fictional, the case is plausible. It is a modern myth with many pre-modern elements. As I will suggest in more detail in chapter four, when presenting a sequel to this story, we witness the birth of a

religious cult that emerges from a mixture of events and experiences, coincidences and strategies, wellbeing and suffering, joy and sadness, Eros and Thanatos, a moment of insight and a hundred years of solitude. Though fiction, Márquez's story could in real life perfectly serve as the founding myth of the Saint Esteban cult. Even a dead body is able to inspire a message of life and hope. To the women, the drowned man belongs to the gray area between death and life. His huge, dead presence interrupts the dull routine of their daily lives. His beauty and virility suggest a possibility of life beyond death. In a waft of sanctity, a cult comes to life. Persons, feelings, events, interpretations, and local customs come together in a constellation that generates creativity and has its own dynamic. The unexpected power of a drowned man is explored by a cult that empowers followers. As we will see, the story shows how people deal with religious experiences, but also how these experiences influence people. This is how religion comes about.

The Margin

Religious creativity flourishes at the margins and in transition zones, in society, in physical space as well as in time.² The stories told about the founders of religions or religious movements abound with references to marginality. The founders' marginal—or even marginalized or exiled—position, outside the center of religious power of their time, is emphasized by the reference to deserts, gardens, or caves, and by mentioning transitions in space, such as rivers, or in time, such as midnight, the full moon, or anniversaries. These references may be literally true, but they also come to serve as metaphors. The founders' birth may induce narratives in which margins also appear, for example that the mother is traveling, no longer here, not yet there, as in Buddha's and Jesus' case. During their lifetime, some of the founders roam through the country, without a fixed abode. In addition, in their religion's beliefs and practices, margins may play a major role, such as in rites of transition, meditation, mystical experiences, or pilgrimage. The existential questions that religions seek to answer deal with margins as well, such as between health and sickness, life and death, salvation and loss, and ultimately between the human and the divine spheres.

Let us look again at Márquez's story. As I will show, the children, the beach, the women, and the burial all represent marginality. In the margin,

2. A classical study on margins is Turner, *Ritual Process*. See also Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*. On founders of religions, see Droogers, "Symbols of Marginality."

a useful symbolic repertoire lies waiting to be used, expressing the betwixt and between. No rules seem to exist, in contrast to normal human existence, and yet the fullness of existence rules. Márquez makes people play with the endless repertoire of meanings concerning the contrast between the ordinary and the extraordinary, in society as well as in space and time.

Thus the children, with whom the short story begins, are by definition marginal to the adults' society. They do not yet participate fully and are still being trained in the adults' way of life. They are allowed to play, and that is what they do when they find the drowned man. Not yet fully socialized, the children do not understand that one does not play with corpses. They play their extraordinary game, and in their own manner do so seriously, until an adult puts an end to it, imposing society's ordinary course of events on such an extraordinary occurrence.

Once the huge body is carried to the village, the women enter stage. In relation to the men, they are as marginal a social category as the children are to adults. Though women may informally compensate for their marginal position, formally this society appears to be male dominated. Yet the women have their own exclusive gatherings, such as the vigil. Performing the task that tradition ascribes to them in cases of bereavement, they play their autonomous role with regard to the drowned man. Subsequently the men do not understand what has happened to the women. The women even succeed in extending their traditional role so as to temporarily redirect the men's behavior in preparation for Esteban's ritual return to the sea. They invert normal social relations and behave as the mistresses of ceremonies. The men are even left breathless, temporarily sharing in the women's extraordinary experience. The removal of the anchor confirms their faith in this singularly significant man.

Another example of the story's marginal symbolism relates to the location where the drowned giant is found, on the beach, in the margin between land and sea, in the space separating the inhabited village and the uninhabitable sea. The beach is transition zone. Marginalized children play there. The beach also contrasts with the sea. Fishermen risk their lives daily to make their living, inhabiting a space separated from the safe haven of their village. Moreover, the sea is where the dead are buried, offering another contrast with the village of the living. The drowned man on the beach is a reminder of the inevitable passage between life and death. At the end of the story, on the cliffs, the same spatial margin between land and water is emphasized when the corpse is returned to the sea.

Finally, in terms of margins in time, the dead man's burial opens up a short but significant transition period, heralding the birth of a transformed society. Even the nameless dead, washed ashore, can posthumously claim ritual time from the living. Daily life comes to a standstill. Men and women leave their normal duties. For a short period, ritual time becomes more important than economic time. The vigil shifts the usual distinction between day and night. When Esteban's body falls to the sea, people "hold their breath for the fraction of centuries," a double and paradoxical reference to this extraordinary lull in time, short and yet extensive. A heartbeat, like one breath, separates people from their death.

Margins stimulate reflection and ritual action in relation to the ontological, ethical, epistemological, aesthetic, and identity questions mentioned in the Introduction. From there, the normal course of affairs can be looked at from some distance, in a disconnected way. Involvement demands a centered position. Detachment opens room for the consideration of alternatives to the norm, especially when extraordinary events occur, such as the appearance of the drowned man. Playtime lasts as long as the ritual takes.

The Body

The story also highlights the significance of the body in the emergence of a cult. The many layers of meaning contained within the symbolism of the human body invite a playful reflection on existential questions. Like marginal situations, corporality stimulates meaning-making. A focus on the body exists in all religions, even in religions where the soul or the afterlife seem more important.

Almost anything that people can do, using their bodies, has gained a place in religious repertoire. With their bodies, believers perform regular gestures, such as bowing or kneeling. Special clothes cover bodies on ritual occasions. Believers may mutilate their bodies, as with circumcision or flagellation. Experiences of trance are corporeal. The healing of the sick body is an important rite in many religions. Disciplining the body is another common activity, especially when it is perceived in a negative way, as a source of moral inferiority. Meditation practice, fasting, and asceticism put demands on the believer's body. Even the resurrection of the body can be an article of faith. The idea of immortality does away with all the limitations that rule the human body. In beliefs about salvation or enlightenment, the body is an important element. In at least one religion, the body of its

founder is eaten, quite literally according to one faction, symbolically in the opinion of the other: "Take and eat, this is my body, given up for you."

In Márquez's story, the body is very present, beginning with the huge corpse of the drowned man, dead but beautiful. Its status as a corpse puts the transition from life to death at the center of reflection. The size and splendor of that body adds to meaning-making. Both men and women invent narratives and statements that describe Esteban's size and allure. Whereas the men seek to describe the corpse's size in a prosaic way, the women are much more poetic. They perform a collective Pieta. From their marginalized position, women, in their search for meaning, appear to be more outspoken and less conditioned than the men in stating their central position. The women explore the exciting implications that the panacea of the giant body opens up and thereby find compensation for the afflictions of their own marginality. The giant body is even said to be too big for the women's imagination. They know that Esteban is as dead as mutton, but against the odds they visualize his life. Through their imagination they bring the dead body to life. They find it necessary to protect his eyes from dawn's harsh light.

The women intuitively reconstruct his life, with an emphasis on characteristics of his body: his size, strength, beauty, and especially his sexual attributes. Since fertility and sexuality mark their identity, they are aware of the role of the body and particularly of their own bodies. It is their body that puts them in a marginal position. As newcomers to the families of their men, the village women share the experience of living with their men's kin group, yet continuing to have their own relatives elsewhere. Their bodies are imported essentially for the continuity of the kin group that their husbands dominate. The bridal linen that they use to make the corpse's shirt reflects their domestic role, just as the piece of sail symbolizes the dangerous profession of the men. In sexual intercourse the women become physically one with their husband, yet in a temporal way. In pregnancy they are one with their child, to be separated after birth. In compensation, their erotic fantasy highlights the contrast between Esteban's extraordinary virility with the poor performances of their husbands. Their laughter is tearful. More than the men they are able to recognize, in a natural way, the marginal characteristics of Esteban's body. As persons occupying the margin, they appear to be the prime architects of the new Esteban cult. Esteban is even promoted to kin, like the women, who were also latently added to the community, however his status is incomparably higher. He is the new icon of the reunited community. An anonymous drowned giant has found a home.

In the theoretical terms set out in the Introduction, the drowned man's body, like the marginal positions discussed in the previous section, stimulates the search for answers to ontological, ethical, epistemological, aesthetic, and identity questions regarding human existence. Matters of life and death, of moral essence, of truth, beauty, and identity are discussed explicitly. The huge, drowned body invites the women to play the religious game. His body is given extraordinary status. Without a trace of proof, miracles are attributed to this man. The women accord him saint-like characteristics. The name that the eldest woman—marginal not only in gender but also by age—gives him, is that of a saint and martyr whose body was sacrificed by stoning.

Symbols

In both Márquez's narrative and the villagers' behavior, the symbol is the main tool for the religious imagination. Symbols serve as models of and for the sacred, representing the sacred and invoking it as well. Together the religions of the world—whether world religions, tribal religions, or religious movements—represent the huge stock of symbols and meanings from which believers from all quarters draw when expressing their experiences with the sacred and finding answers to their existential questions. Extending beyond themselves, symbols are excellent tools to represent and invoke what is invisible, absent, abstract, or belonging to the future—all crucial ingredients of religious messages pertaining to the divine. Thus these characteristics of the sacred can be converted into something visible, present, concrete, and actual. A variety of symbols are brought together, in a more or less coherent way, suggesting connections between them as well as between their respective meanings. Some symbols play a key role, encompassing many layers of meaning, including references to other symbols—as occurs in the Christian Eucharist, symbolized with bread and wine, or in the Hindu wheel of reincarnation. Thanks to symbols, a new way of classifying reality can be explored and played with.

A process of reification occurs, attributing a kind of reality status to what can be thought, even though the thought itself cannot be verified empirically. What can be said via symbolic means, can be thought to exist. Myths and rituals, as symbolic powerhouses, are effective ways of turning the invisible into a real presence. The sacred, made present through myth and ritual, is open to communication and negotiation. Mythical narratives

bring with them behavior models as examples for engagement with the sacred, or for appropriate moral conduct. People can identify with the main characters. The stories explain why the world is as it is, on occasion explaining even the reason for the dots on the leopard's skin. In ritual, sacrifice becomes possible. God, the gods, saints, or spirits can be pleased. Their power can be addressed. Believers may share in the ritual, empowered by their religion. Without the human capacity to produce and use symbols, religion would not exist.

In a fictional narrative such as "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World," symbols are an important tool. Even though the story is written in the style of magical realism, the magical and uncommon are depicted as real and normal. Extraordinary events are described as being plausible. Sober empirical realism is thus amended to accommodate religious and magical features. A drowned man is already exceptional, moreover he is a giant, and as an added bonus, he is beautiful. And yet he is accorded a place in the ordinary village setting. To uncover the religious and magical features hidden within the text, one must delve deeper, through layers of meaning. Ultimately the extraordinary drowned man points to basic existential human questions. Symbols extend beyond themselves. They stand for something that can be better understood through their association with symbol and meanings, just as the women reconsider and come to a better understanding of their lives when confronted with the dead giant. Following from the dynamics of creative reflection and corporeal experience, the use of symbols suggests a movement. Thus, the drowned giant extends beyond himself, at first as the symbol of the uncanny, and only later becoming the symbol of the familiar. Initially he represents death, but is transformed into a symbol of immortality. His arrival alerts the reader to the dangers of the sea, he a victim of the sea, and yet he confers benefit to those who find him. Symbolizing the dangers in life, he comes to represent that which is secure. In the end, and unlike the characters of fairy tales, this giant poses no threat at all. He, and all that he represents, confers a welcome asset to the community. He stands for a better life, a higher quality of existence.

The margin and the body, discussed in previous sections, are important symbols. Whether in society, space, or time, marginality proves to be crucial to the establishment of the Esteban cult, achieved via the meanings given to the body, primarily of the drowned man, but indirectly also by the meanings given to the bodies of the women. The story's realist components infer religious meaning in other ways, such as when the men claim that the bier created by the women's decorations turned Esteban's funeral space into

a main altar. There are also potential hidden meanings. That same bier is said to be made from the remains of a foremast and gaff—which could be read as a literal reference to Jesus' cross.

The giant's appearance in the village reforms the religious system. The village is revitalized. Danger is transfigured into blessing. Anonymous foreigner becomes honorary citizen. Posthumously he is depicted as successful, handsome, virile, and loved. Though dead, he establishes his own cult. The puzzling event of the sudden arrival of a giant corpse on the beach is neutralized by the process of meaning-making that it provokes. By accepting Esteban as kin, his appearance is made familiar.

The added bonus conferred by the use of symbols and their interconnected layers of meaning is that some degree of order is established. Symbols convey an order that seems comprehensive. Individual symbols are linked within a consistent worldview with its own dynamics, and these rule the life of the believer. The handsomest drowned man can thus become the mainstay of village identity. He can be promoted to iconic status. His cult reemphasizes the relevance of existing categories in society, space, and time, yet giving them a transformative twist. The social distinctions between children and adults or between men and women are important in the course of events. They are subjected to inversions. As the discoverers of the drowned giant, the children, although immature, play a major role without knowing that they have. Gender relations are temporarily inverted, women taking the leading role in ritual, and turning their skeptical men into believers. Spatial categories that are part of the village classification system are also prominent in the story, dividing the world into the village center, the sea, and the beach, with the cliffs as the vertical equivalent of the beach. Culture and nature, home and work correspond with the contrast between village and sea. As a drowned man, Esteban brings these all together. The time dimension, another component of life, becomes present in a paradoxical way, because it is halted by the discovery of the giant's body. As the villagers deviate from the usual daily rituals, they reconfirm the rhythms of regular time. Conversely, the few seconds during which the corpse falls from the cliff to the sea, are magnified into a fraction of centuries.

In the course of telling Esteban's story, Márquez applies a narrative technique that plays with contrasting symbolic meanings. The villagers move from the negative, mortal world to the positive and resurrected world. A series of inversions takes place. The disheartening inevitability of death is transformed into an encouraging celebration of life. The children's strange and dramatic find becomes a significant turning-point in the adults' village

history. The vicissitudes of life are made manageable. The women especially invent fantasies of a better life.

A Sad Personal Experience

As I write this section, on Ascension Day 2012, today as a family we remember a terribly sad event. Five years ago today, on Ascension Day, my grandson Sam arrived stillborn. The pregnancy that sustained him had been normal and full term, and yet, at the very last moment, death intruded before birth. It was a shattering experience for all of us, but especially for our daughter-in-law Annuska. But life continued without pity. That summer we regularly went to Sam's little grave, part of a growing row of children's tombs. More than once an Atalanta butterfly flew around the grave, sometimes even two. During that summer, Sam's brothers, Wouter and Noah, came to spend a few days with us. In our back garden the blackberries were ripe and together we picked them. All of a sudden an Atalanta came flying around us and then settled on the blackberry bush. I got my camera from the house and took a series of pictures. It seemed to me that the Atalanta was quietly posing for me. It was a very special experience.

A year later my wife and I saw the Japanese movie *Still Walking*, directed by Hirokazu Kore-eda. Three generations of a family meet to remember the death of the eldest son Junpei. After a visit to the grave, they find that a yellow butterfly has come into the house, landing on Junpei's picture. His mother immediately interprets this as a sign of Junpei's presence.

A well-known Dutch entertainer, Herman van Veen, had a friend who was soon to die. He asked this friend, in the event that there was life after death, to send him a sign from the afterlife in due course. In order for the proof to be convincing, they agreed that the sign should be as specific as possible. They decided on a butterfly the color of the friend's brown eyes. On the day of his friend's death, Van Veen performed his show, explained that his friend had passed away, and told the audience about the agreement he had entered into with him. At that very moment a brown butterfly landed on him. The audience thought it was part of the show. At the same time the friend's son was also visited by a brown butterfly.³

3. In one interview (*Algemeen Dagblad*, June 26, 1999) Van Veen used the word "nachtvlinder," literally "night butterfly," or "moth." In another interview (*De Telegraaf*, September 2, 1999), he spoke of a brown butterfly.

How are we to understand such experiences? Of course, I could ignore these examples, by suggesting that statistically speaking coincidences exist and nothing more. I could say that the idea that Sam—or Junpei, or Van Veen’s friend—provided a sign from the afterlife is irrational or at least not rational. Dawkins or Hitchens would have used stronger terms. And yet there is an extra component to these events. For example, I could consider it likely, in a playful manner, that Sam’s message is “With my brothers I am with you, I am here as well.” Junpei’s mother and Herman van Veen may well have cherished similar thoughts.

To me the most important conclusion from the butterfly experience is that this symbol of Sam’s life, in spite of his death, can be brought into existence. Similarly, the women of the village of the fishermen became free to play with the elements from Esteban’s biography. I am able to play with this possibility, regardless of whether it is true or not. I would even be ready to say that the symbolism conferred by the presence of butterflies is probably nonsense, but I find it to be pleasant nonsense. When I see an Atalanta I do not react each time with a devout belief in roaming souls or animated insects, and nor will I lay the foundations for the Society for the Promotion of Belief in Butterflies. I will not do so, even though I know that the butterfly is a forceful symbol. It transforms itself from caterpillar into pupa—seemingly dead—and then is revived as a beautiful butterfly. This confers a nice symbol of the soul and it has been used as such in numerous different cultures. I do not require the institution of belief. And yet, the whole event helped me to cope with Sam’s death and birth. Therefore, I will always keep Sam and the butterfly connected. One of the pictures I took of the Atalanta occupies a prominent place in our living room. I play the game seriously, but I understand that I am playing.

I know of one similar event, with a similar conclusion. Sadly one of my PhD students, Ronald Schouten, died of cancer before he could finish his degree. On the day of his burial, half an hour before we were to leave for the ceremony, the pupa of a dragonfly crept up a reed at the border of the small pond in our garden. Going through a number of transformations, a dragonfly came to show itself in all its glory. Again I took up my camera and made a series of pictures recording the stages through which the insect developed into its ultimate form. Then the moment came that we had to leave for Ronald’s burial. Hours later, when we returned from the ceremony, the dragonfly, in its final form, was still clinging to the reed. I was able to take one more picture, but then the insect took flight and disappeared. A few days after, my wife went into the garden to fetch something, and when she

came into the house again, there was a dragonfly sitting on her back, seemingly the same one that we had seen come to life on the day of Ronald's burial. We could not believe our eyes. I took a picture, and put the insect outside the door. Again, the event is open to meaning-making. We found the presence of the dragonfly comforting after Ronald's tragic death.

I do think that many religions begin with similar extraordinary events, with people smiling inwardly about all the hidden and tentative meanings contained within stories of drowned giants, in butterflies or dragonflies, and in everything else, including our great loss on Ascension Day. The seemingly objective question, imposed on modern wo/man by science and modernization, of whether such a connection is either true or real, ceases to be relevant. The focus is changed. The playful interpretation can be both playful and serious at once, a combination that serious science has difficulty accommodating.

Conclusion

In this chapter we paid an exploratory visit to the field of religion. Márquez's story presents us with a fictitious but plausible situation, in which people are active in the processes of designing and transforming their religious views and practices. People act as meaning-makers, triggered by an extraordinary event. I defined play as the human capacity to deal simultaneously with two or more ways of classifying reality. By playing with possibilities, the fishermen find a new way of classifying reality. The women of the village in particular, are very creative in imagining a new way of classifying the event that in its profane and literal version can be summarized as: "drowned giant washed ashore." Although the arrival of the giant is a serious incident, taken seriously by the fishermen and particularly by their wives, a playful religion is practiced there. The villagers play with symbols and meanings, seeking to make sense of the occurrence. A close reading of the story establishes the importance of margins and the body in acts of religious signification. The Esteban cult is born. The discussion resulting from this shows that believers can be playful, even where life and death seem to intermingle. This also becomes clear from my own sad experience with grandson Sam.