Editors’ Introduction to Special Postgraduate Issue: Rethinking Religion and the Non/Human

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The *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* prides itself on publishing original research on a range of topics from both established academics and early career scholars. This is a special issue of the *JASR* for two reasons: it is a thematic issue based around the challenge of rethinking religion and the non/human, and it is a postgraduate issue, compiled, edited, and written by postgraduate students. It has been an exciting adventure for us as guest editors to put together this issue which, we are proud to say, showcases the work of up-and-coming young scholars from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Interest in contributing to this themed issue came from far and wide, but in the end the papers that were selected displayed the fresh and experimental approach to research, theory, and subject matter that characterises the importance of the work of junior scholars. Thus we see this postgraduate issue as not only providing a platform for publication experience for students, but also as an invaluable opportunity for academia at large to witness the innovative efforts of this new generation of researchers.

The articles featured in this issue engage with a range of disciplines, demonstrating the relevance of the study of religion to a great many schools of thought. ‘Religion’ has herein been represented in a variety of ways, doing justice to the polysemy of the term. From ancient to modern mythology, monotheistic traditions to pantheism, secularisation and sacralisation, theory and practice, the vast spectrum of religiosity and its study has been taken to task by these papers. In addition, these articles comprise a special issue of the *JASR* that reveals the ways in which the ‘human’, like that of ‘religion’, is a category under constant disputation. Indeed, while humans are often credited with the ‘invention’ of religion, religion itself has played a central role in constructing ‘the human’ as we
have understood it at many points throughout history. This symbiotic relationship is multifaceted, multivalent, and under-theorised within much of the current field of the contemporary study of religion. Here it is noteworthy that the study of religion, fundamentally concerned with the consideration of one of the most enduring products of ‘the human’, only sporadically and reluctantly embraces a deconstructive (re)thinking of this seemingly commonsensical, yet discursively and materially volatile category.

This collection of papers, authored by emergent scholars in the field, aims to hence bridge the gap between the study of religion and the plethora of recent efforts in academic scholarship that challenge and problematise ‘humanness’. Recent critical theory and debates in mainstream culture have convincingly demonstrated that we cannot with any certainty say that we always and only ever have been ‘human’. We are prompted to consider the ways in which distinctions between that which is ‘human’ and that which is ‘nonhuman’, ‘inhuman’, ‘posthuman’, and ‘transhuman’ are constantly under intense contestation and reformulation. Indeed, more often than not, it is conservative religious, social, political, and cultural forces that seek to re-inscribe the human within a biopolitical paradigm that brings about the centrality of the human, and particularly of certain humans. Yet such forces also destabilise the grounds on which the ‘fully’ human stands by describing, in myriad ways, the state of being or becoming ‘religious’ as always already accounting for the role that nonhumans play in the constitution of our world. It is through such an observation that we, as editors, contend that the non/human things, creatures, and animals that populate the pages of this special issue—dirt, nature, monsters, cyborgs, cockroaches, God(s), machines, mermaids, matter, trees, birds, robots, dolphins, plants, spirits, ghosts, ecosystems, Frankensteins, blood, fairies, electricity grids, Lady Gaga—excitingly and powerfully challenge what it means to be ‘human’ when placed in open, exuberant, and yet troubling and unfinished conversations with this concept we call ‘religion’. The following five articles demonstrate the rich results that such interventions into the study of religion and the non/human can yield for contemporary critical thinking and future research.

To begin this special issue, we have an article from guest co-editor George Ioannides, a PhD candidate in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney, who, in his essay, addresses the complex associations between the study of religion, materiality, and the nonhuman. This stimulating paper is theoretical in nature, focusing on the applicability of a new materialist reading of religion for the examination of human and nonhuman ontology. New materialism and material religion, here analysed
primarily through the works of Manuel Vásquez and Jane Bennett, uncouple traditional, dualistic modes of envisioning the world, particularly the religio-cultural syzygies of spirit/matter, nature/culture, and human/nonhuman. This leads us to conceptualise new and innovative ways of thinking with and through onto-epistemologies that may encompass this re-enchanted, vitalised view of the world. Ioannides posits a form of neo-animism or animacy as a constructive lens through which we can de-anthropocentrise our ontological suppositions and instead understand them as relational and intersubjective. Ioannides aims for no less in his article than the building of a new conceptual understanding of religious materiality and an ontological framework for the study of material religion.

Daniel C. Dillard, a doctoral candidate in American Religious History at Florida State University, provides us, in the second article of this issue, with a compelling historical analysis of the work of the nineteenth century essayist and poet Henry David Thoreau, examining his unsettling of dualistic worldviews. Within Thoreau’s Transcendalist vision of the interconnectedness of nature, humanity, and the divine, Dillard locates an identity that is betwixt-and-between the liberal humanist subject of the Enlightenment era and the posthuman subject of late/post-modernity. A close reading of *Walden* (1854) and *The Maine Woods* (1864) reveals Thoreau’s trailblazing role in developing a ‘post-reductive materialism’ and posthuman ontology well before such ideas came to be the subject of debate in the late twentieth century. Dillard makes a compelling case for how we can trace the roots of contemporary posthumanism back to the nineteenth century, arguing for its constantly fraught relationship with super/natural philosophies and religiosities.

In continuing this discussion of the posthuman as an embodied subjectivity, the third article by doctoral student in Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester, Scott Midson, looks further at this theme in contemporary literature and film. Midson’s nuanced textual analysis uses a theological framework through which the religious implications of the ‘created human’ or ‘ex anthropos’ can be postulated. From usefully comparing and contrasting the ideology of transhumanism and posthumanism, to critically engaging with a variety of exegetical and philosophical views put forward by theologians and religious studies scholars, Midson draws out the challenges posed by the figure *ex anthropos* to the human as conceived within the Judeo-Christian tradition as created *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) and *imago dei* (in the image of God). Works of speculative fiction like Margaret Atwood’s dystopic novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003) have offered a take on this conundrum by updating Dr Frankenstein’s hubris with genetic modification and interspecies hybridity, and
Midson investigates how such somatechnic experiments, seen by some as a dilution or corruption of the purity of the original subject, may effect or be effected by notions of the sacred and God-given ‘creaturely’ boundaries. Midson’s is a fascinating article that, on the whole, thinks through the complex interconnections between posthumanism, creatureliness, hybridity, and the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation.

Eva Birch, a PhD student at the University of Melbourne, further contributes to the exploration of creatureliness within monotheism in her article on the status of women and animals as impure subjects as theorised by the biblical critiques in écriture feminine. Birch draws on thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray to interrogate how these categories of being have been marginalised, degraded, and segregated from the ‘pure’ human. The classical frameworks of Mary Douglas’s pollution and taboo and Jacques Derrida’s carnophallogocentrism are employed to provide an anthropological and historico-cultural lens through which the invention of normativity can be seen. It is not just in being-woman and being-animal that Birch sees a challenge to the patriarchal subject, but in emotional writing—the complement of logical speech (logos traditionally conceived as the realm of men)—an arena in which authors like Clarice Lispector and Luce Irigaray have expressed their experiences of hosting the impure and the nonhuman in an auto/biographical or confessional format. This article provides an exciting foray into the profound and subversive feminist interactions with/in Judeo-Christian doctrine, highlighting the ways in which both writers of fiction and continental philosophers have used such conflicts to re-imagine both human and nonhuman subjectivities.

Finally, guest co-editor Venetia Laura Delano Robertson, a PhD candidate in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney, concludes this issue with an overview of other-than-human identity formation in the contemporary mermaid subculture. Beginning with a brief look at the history of the mermaid and her appeal as a mythical and mystical character in Western popular culture, this article delves into the industry and fandom that has been built around mermaid ‘cosplay’ (costume-play) and mermaid identities, or ‘mersonas’. A subculture that has manifestations both online and offline, ‘mermaiding’ provides participants with a nonhuman avatar for identity-play through embodiment, performance, and personal myth-making. Robertson argues that in a society saturated in modes by which one can take on multiple, interchangeable personae, mermaiding is one such way that individuals, and women in particular, have sought self-discovery and self-sacralisation via engagement with an other-than-human subjectivity. This is an insightful and innovative article that tackles with tremendous verve the means with which ‘mermaiders’
express these non- and in-human ontologies by way of subverting (or paradoxically affirming) perceived personal and societal strictures.

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