Martin Fuchs, Anne Murphy, Andrés Quero-Sánchez,
Rubina Raja

Afterword: the social lives of religious individualisation

1 Looking beyond the individual

To consider the individual is to consider contexts, entanglements, and histories of the constitution of personhood in diverse locations: temporal, geographic, and cultural. Religious individualisation is enabled, taught, experienced, and denied within social contexts, and embedded within social relationships and structures. While the relevance of these has been denied by certain thinkers, as *Andrés Quero-Sánchez's* contribution makes clear through his work on the German Idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling, these thinkers still recognise the constitutive nature of such particular entanglements – that which is not the Absolute, that which is contingent and incomplete – as a kind of threat to the Absolute of the Idea, in itself. Even in its denial and as threat, then, the social demands full recognition.

The articles in this section present different refractive views of the social entanglements that constitute the conditions of possibility for religious individualisation, and show how the intimate and dynamic relationship between such individualisation and the social ground can both give it life and prevent its flowering. We see how relationships to religious authority and/or divinity infuse particular force and meaning to relationships between co-religionists in *Martin Fuchs'* exploration of *bhakti*, and simultaneously how individualisation can both challenge and enable particular forms of social engagements and forms of critique, in *Anne Murphy's* contribution. *Rubina Raja's* article shows how material culture represents an imprint or trace, a kind of relic one might say, of the individual's role within a larger social-religious matrix. The individual, in this case, is made visible within the material trace, but simultaneously expresses multiple socially embedded allegiances and choices. To consider the individual as being outside of the social, is, in this case, to misapprehend the conditions which allow for the individual's emergence, and to ignore the ways in which the social functions to provide a meaningful location for the individual.

Looking beyond the individual, then, is key to a full understanding of religious individualisation and of the ways in which connectivities and social contexts constitute the individual in fundamental terms. As will be discussed below, this suggests that the individual should be seen as an inherently relational figure – the flawed particular, one might say, in the terms laid out in Quero-Sánchez's article – as well as

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a self that is not bounded, is internally 'sub-divided', shifting (Murphy, Raja, Fuchs, as well as the subject of Part 2 in this publication). At the same time, as explored in Part 3, institutionalising forces are therefore fundamentally tied to the articulation of the individual, representing the social dimension of the individualising drive.

2 Seeing the religious through the social and the social through the religious

Can religious experience and the religious exist without the social, without the group, the unit? Can the individual act within a religious setting without a relational (and in this sense social) framework? Can processes of religious individualisation exist without the social at its core? The articles in this section allow us to view the religious through the lens of the social and vice versa. The social functions as a platform for communication and the means for the constitution of the group, the event, the text, the inscription, and the monument. This, in turn, perhaps paradoxically, provides possibilities for expression of the individual. The social, however, is constituted differently, and this partly under the influence of respective processes of individualisation.

We see the possibilities for expression of the individual clearly in the case of the Palmyrene *tesserae* examined by Raja: how a highly structured religious framework and the events which took place within this framework over time allowed for a high degree of individualisation in terms of how the entrance tickets to religious banquets, commissioned by individuals, were shaped through the visual language which they carried. On the one hand, these tickets are evidence for individual choices; on the other hand they were responses to a social framework around which the religious life in Palmyra was structured.

The same basic principle can be found in the case of *bhakti*, which is the topic of Fuchs' contribution. Through providing religious individualisation for, in principle, everyone including marginalized people, *bhakti* is at the same time also based on the relational (individual-group, group-divine, individual-divine) as well as participational action. Through emphasis on connectedness and self-affirmation, the religious is strengthened through the group and at the same time allows for a firm location of the individual and processes of individualisation within this framework. Equally, the individual self is opened and opening out to others, 'the' Other, and the world, via its relations. In early modern Punjab literature, as presented by Murphy, processes of religious individualisation provide a framework within which religious as well as social differences are reconciled, integrated and equilibrated through the individual and his/her actions.

Regarding both the Punjabi and the general *bhakti* cases, all this has to be seen against the background of the (rigid) rules that inform worldly social relationships, which are both deeply hierarchical and gendered. In the writings of Schelling, as presented by Quero-Sánchez, an absolute rejection of the social aspects of the religious is encountered. However, through this extreme rejection, it also becomes starkly clear that this sort of individualisation could not have been voiced without 'bouncing' off the group, family and friendships. In this extreme case, one (the individual and the individualisation process) could in fact not exist without the other (the group and the social).

Reversing the perspective and seeing the social through the religious, we see in all four cases in this section not only that the social provides a ground upon which processes of religious individualisation are, if not promoted, then at least made possible, but also how the religious mediates the social, at the very least within core arenas. The limits of the plasticity of the religious were invented, tried, pushed and broken down by individuals always while referring to a social framework, which created the relational basis of the individualisation process. At the same time, the religious, differently in each case, creates its own social. This coalescing of the religious and the social suggests factoring in what we describe below as a triangular relationship of the individual, the group and the divine, or the absolute ground. Mediated by practices through which each of these agential instances is experienced (ritual, material practices, text, performance, teaching), it is the dynamic between all three poles/nodes that keeps religious life vibrant, and which also is the source of changes and novel lines of approach. The lenses of the social and religious, when used to reflect upon each other, allow us to investigate the processes and strategies of individualisation in a nuanced setting.

3 Interactional forms

In the above essays we have presented cases in which we see the individual (self) and the interpersonal brought closer together and related to what some call an underlying 'Ground', related to the 'Absolute' as described by Quero-Sánchez, or imagined in *bhakti* frames as a *nirgun* (formless) or *sagun* (with form) divine. This ground, absolute or divine, is included in a web of relationships with human selves and social formations, and this lends itself to notions of communication – relationships defined in or through communication. This ground or aspect of divinity is experienced as part of reality, part of one's life and one's relationships. At the same time, the experience of difference of the 'Other' (to whom one relates) persists. Thus the idea of transcendence within immanence, as invoked by Fuchs,

would have to be expanded. The image rather requires that we think of this third element in two respects simultaneously, on a horizontal level as constituted by the different actors or agents – the individual (self), other humans and 'the' Other – and with a vertical and paradoxical metaphor as a relationship to that which is experienced as the non-accessible.

The 'Other' here has a specific meaning. It is not so much, or not completely, the other as the unknown, unknowable and non-accessible, but it is that one with whom one shares something, or has something in common, and that one can thus address, experience, and expect responses from. The image itself then becomes one of intense (social) dynamic. In this sense the 'Other' is included in relationships with one's human others.

The best way to depict this is that of a triangular model, but not one on a level plane. In this model the individual is not standing alone vis-à-vis the ground or divine, confronting God or ultimate reality, or being confronted by it. Instead, the individual, and the process of individualisation, grow out of social communication and relationships. The relationships have to be looked at from the angle of all three positionalities involved, that of the respective individual, that of the co-religionists, and that of the divine, which seen from this perspective is both an agent and a patient, a subject of others' actions, too. The way this is being addressed in the different contributions varies. It reaches from setting the basic frame of triangularity to a depiction and analysis of the different voices and actions within this setting. Moreover, the cases are distinguished in the way they represent these interactive dynamics.

4 The issue of representation

The triangular model proposed here indicates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of representation in relation to the nodes that we hope to define. We have struggled with how to name its third node: it can be named as ultimate abstractness, reality, absolute, ground or divine. South Asian religions, for example, define aspects of this problematic through the terms *sagun* and *nirgun*, defining that which is named as either infused through the materiality of this world ('sa' = with, 'guna' = properties), or (with the second term) by its radical alterity from that world (where 'nir' indicates lack). This reflects a larger conundrum in the conceptualisation of religion as a whole: the sometimes radically contradictory variety of definitions that exist for the transcendental force, presence, or way of knowing that is seen to undergird the religious as a category, beyond (although often intimately linked to) a literal and materialist understanding of the world. The inadequacy of our

representational abilities is an urgent issue in the case of this third node, but the issue in fact informs this whole discussion. Moreover, we speak of the self, but this is not intended to imply or denote a stable and unitary self. It, too, eludes easy and cross-culturally appropriate delineation, and the effort to define it is immediately undermined by the variety of its definition, experience, and articulation across cultural and temporal contexts. Instead, our operative notion of the self is one that is fragmented, performative, and contextually defined (comp. Part 2 of this publication); the same is the case for any understanding of the non-materialist aspect that might define the religious. However, any critique of the idea of religion that follows from this problem (and that might argue that religion itself does not exist) does not generally satisfy – given the strong parallels that persist despite differences, and because the heuristic value of a category is not *necessarily* limited by the problematics of its application.

Similarly, notions of the social must necessarily be flexible and multiple in their configuration, and must be seen as directly part of the self – the self here is a relational self, as Fuchs' essay makes clear in the *bhakti* context, but can be generalised to a broader theorisation. Both material instantiations and textual representations here only gesture towards these elements, and these elements themselves are 'fuzzy' – they do not function as bounded entities, instead representing a set of relationships that are dynamic. The three nodes delineated, which comprise our triangular form, thus function in dynamic relation, constituting and shaping each other in interaction.