

Let us begin – outside the scope of this volume – with a concept, a metaphor, coined in the fields of social psychology and behavioural economics. The idea of ‘anchoring’ was introduced as a result of the study of how poorly the majority of people perform as intuitive statisticians: human beings tend to use any random number that has been offered to us when we need to make an estimate, and then stay too close to that as an anchor when making revisions.¹ If one applies this model to the exercise of historical understanding in dealing with a range of empirical data and with uncertainty in its interpretation, it is clear that scholarship must consistently rely on anchors – more or less random, usually in the form of a current *communis opinio*, inevitably grounded in initial premises, assumptions, prejudices or values – to establish the starting points for interpretation. And it is equally clear that interpretations inevitably are tied to the anchoring assumptions from which they are generated – a case of hugging close to the anchor. Obviously there are many respects in which such interpretive anchors are common-sense defences against potential rocks or shoals along the coast of scholarly travel (such as excess in speculation). But – especially when anchors are founded in starting points that may at a given time be collectively acceptable but are nonetheless fundamentally erroneous, wrongheaded, or immoral (such as that sound interpretations are possible only from scholars of certain races, a normative premise in Germany between 1933 and 1945) – then anchoring equally obviously prevents clear thought and restrains the scholarly boat from sailing the wide seas in search of truth, or in pursuit at least of new questions and answers.²

This volume is an interrogation of some of the more problematic restraining anchors that have been accumulated over the long history of

¹ The classic paper is A. Tversky and D. Kahneman, ‘Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases’, *Science* 185 (1974) 1124–31. See also D. Kahneman, P. Slovic and A. Tversky (eds.), *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge, 1982); D. Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York, 2011) 119–28.

² For a less pessimistic account of anchoring and its application to Classical studies, see I. Sluiter, ‘Anchoring Innovation: A Classical Research Agenda’, *European Review* 25 (2016) 20–38.

the study of art and religion in the period of late antiquity – by which we mean, broadly speaking, the first millennium AD.³ Its title, *Empires of Faith*, genuflects to the five-year research project whose members have produced the chapters of this book. It also describes the imperial world of the first millennium in which Eurasia from China to Western Europe was largely dominated by empires, which came and went, as well as the rise of the scriptural religions, known as the world religions today, and their visual cultures, all of which acquired their distinctive forms over the course of the period. At the same time, crucially, the title describes the two modern anchors that stand in the way of studying the art and religious culture of late antiquity, and are also the basis of that study. I mean the imperial systems within which Western scholarship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was founded (alongside their colonial enterprises and their post-colonial aftermaths during the twentieth century) as well as the deep nexus of ancestral thinking about faith rooted in early modern Christian debates between Catholics and Protestants that have informed all academic approaches to the study of religion (and its art) since the Reformation, not only by Western scholars and administrators but also by native scholars from countries like India, China, Persia or the Ottoman Empire, when they wrote or thought in the European languages.

One of the findings of our work is that not only are these anchors constraining, but they are also broadly incompatible – so that the assumptions that guide the study of Mediterranean polytheism (for instance) or early Christian art have very little in common, and even less in common with those that have guided scholarship largely written in the European languages or ascribing to European scholarly rules in relation to say Persian or Arab or Indian art.

The study of art in late antiquity – and the long history of its study – has been constrained by three fundamental anchors: religious, political and

³ In 1999, a very distinguished trio, G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar, put the dates of AD 250 to 800 as the book-ends of their major synopsis of scholarship on late antiquity. See G. W. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar (eds.), *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), vii–ix. For good reasons (especially to include Islam), Garth Fowden has expanded the scope to the whole first millennium AD, taken broadly: See G. Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad* (Princeton, 2014) 3–5. The *Empires of Faith* project, although initially working with c. 200–800, eventually moved to Fowden's model, despite the inevitable Christiano-centrism of the starting point (for instance in our exhibition: see J. Elsner, S. Lenk et al., *Imagining the Divine: Art and the Rise of World Religions* (Oxford, 2017)). In part this is because one needs to accommodate the culture of Mediterranean polytheism at the early end and allow for the development of Abbasid visual culture into at least the ninth century at the later end.

evidential. First, religious. Late antiquity is the period in which almost all the world's major surviving religions came into being or underwent significant transformation, including the acquisition of visual forms of communication and self-definition that have persisted to this day. This was a time when some of the dominant religious models of Eurasian antiquity from east of Iran westwards to the Mediterranean and North Africa, became extinct: the plethora of pagan cults that comprised the religious fabric of the Roman Empire collectively and swiftly died; Zoroastrianism lost its hegemony in Persia as the Sasanian state lost power, but it managed to survive. One may list Christianity, Islam, and the Mahayana forms of Buddhism as new religions in the late antique period. On the other hand, Judaism, the range of Indian religions that we now call Hinduism, and early (or Theravada) Buddhism are religions that witnessed major change during the first millennium, including the rise of characteristic iconographies. Modern practitioners of those religions are, perhaps unsurprisingly, heavily invested in them in a variety of ways; adherents of other faiths or those who have left their own often have feelings that are still more charged. There is therefore no doubt that their study – and the study of their art – cannot be separated from complex issues of polemic, apologetic, ancestral idealization, and various forms of critical condemnation from contemporary opponents. It is not surprising that these apologetics and polemics have come to crystallize around canonical monuments and major artistic masterpieces from the past, since these have acquired ancestral significance for modernity. They have become the embodiments of essential modern religious and national identities, vested at moments of origin or significant historical transformation. The problems caused by ideological investment in issues guided by religious faith (and its resistance) are huge and their history is very long; standing aside from them is all but impossible. But we can at least be aware of the problem and – in some forensic detail – of the way it has played out and continues to do so, both across the range of current religions and cultures of Asia and Europe and across the history of scholarship on their pasts in late antiquity. Religion remains one of the determining factors of modernity and post-modern identity in lived experience in the world today.

The second constraint – which I have called political – derives from the historical moment when scholarly interest in late antiquity, both in relation to the West and to the arts of Asia, came to its first fruition under the imperial apogee of European powers in the later nineteenth century. These imperial powers controlled territories whose inhabitants represented ancient and non-Christian cultures – for instance British India, Muslim

Albania within the Habsburg Empire, the Islamic world of French North Africa, and Russian expansion into Central and East Asia. There was, at the same time, the persistent presence of the Ottoman Empire to the immediate east of Europe, and beyond it Persia. In combination, these made a potent case for European self-definition by superior alterity and the insistence on difference from the foreign other, on the part of the Christian European powers. Among the colonized, in some cases, native or nationalistic positions appropriated the language of hegemonic imperial discourses in the East – whether in the dominions of the Ottoman Empire, itself independent of the European powers, or in the European colonies and conquests of India, the Far East and Africa. But the imperial discourses could also be resisted with alternative anti-colonialist and postcolonialist narratives about religion, ethnicity and nationhood, constructed in direct contradiction to standard European accounts, for instance in the thesis of a timeless and primordial Hinduism that has never been subject to historical change despite the long history of political and social transformation in the subcontinent of India, as discussed by Robert Bracey in Chapter 10. At the same time, the positivistic confidence of Western scholarship, well funded by imperial coffers and founded on a rigorous philological command, coupled with the rise of a vibrant archaeological and anthropological drive in precisely this moment of the late nineteenth century, bred a range of brilliant academic ventures. These ventures formed the basis of modern scholarly disciplines, including art history. Of course, the colonialist and imperial impetus – the urge to see foreign natives as primitive and in need of Western civilization – and the search for Orientalist primitive origins (notably Aryanism) are urges just as ideological, prejudiced and incapable of objectivity as the claims of religious polemic and apologetics. Particularly complex in matters of religion is the native attempt in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to reinterpret ancient religions, like Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, in terms that made them more palatable to European ways of thinking and more like the normative Christianities promulgated by Western powers and Western missionaries; in many cases this involved fundamental transformation of ancient and traditional religious practice.⁴

Third, evidence. We look at what we have. But surviving visual and material-cultural data about the archaeological past depends on the vagaries and fashion of excavation. A great deal more excavation has been

⁴ See esp. K. Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation and its Modern-Era Suppression* (Hong Kong, 2013) for an excellent account of Thailand, Cambodia and Sri Lanka.

conducted in the Mediterranean world than in Africa or Asia (and often for very pragmatic and sane reasons to do with the safety of those doing the excavating in complex contemporary political and military situations). Moreover, far more artefactual material survives from religious contexts – whether local or regional or even more widely spread within an imperial system – when the religions represented were largely hegemonic and their adherents held the power to control representation than in contexts where religions were marginal, subaltern or even deliberately incognito. Jewish or Manichaean art in late antiquity – both hugely important not only in themselves but because they were disseminated over very wide distances – extending eastwards well into Asia and west into Europe, are good examples of relatively poor artefactual survival by contrast with the arts of religions supported by imperial or royal patronage, like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or the Indian cults which have become categorized as Hinduism in the modern era. An outstanding example of the evidential anchor and the way it has skewed understanding is Christian art. There are innumerable studies of every aspect of Christian art in the areas where early Christianity was hegemonic and backed by the state – not only in Europe and Byzantium but in regions of Africa and Asia such as Ethiopia, Georgia and Armenia, all with distinctive forms of the religion and distinctive styles of Christian art. But there has been very little study of the art of non-hegemonic or subaltern Christianity as it spread in late antiquity within the Sasanian empire,⁵ along the Silk Road and as far as the Tang capital of Chang'an, where a surviving stele (in Chinese style and language but with some Syriac) was erected in 781.⁶ And there has been absolutely no discussion of the differences between the hegemonic and subaltern forms of this faith, or its visual kinds of representation, let alone any comparison between them. In part this is because what we know of

⁵ On formerly hegemonic Christian sites under Islam, for discussion of churches after the Arab conquest, see R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantium to Islamic Rule* (Princeton, 1995) 112–38 and on iconoclasm, 180–219.

⁶ See e.g. P. Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou* (Paris, 1996) 5–170; J. Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity: The Tang Christian Monument and Other Documents* (Strathfield, NSW, Australia, 2014) 7–44 (history of research), 144–258 (text and translation), 359–75. For the monument, see *Treasures Engraved on the Steles: Art of Calligraphy in the Xi'an Beilin Museum* (Xi'an, 2015) no. 65, 162–5. Also E. Hunter, 'The Persian Contribution to Christianity in China', in D. Winkler and L. Tang (eds.), *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia* (Berlin, 2009) 71–85 and L. Tang, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and its Literature in Chinese* (Frankfurt, 2004) esp. 145–204 for Dunhuang texts in translation.

Christian art, east of the Syrian plain, is very poorly documented, excavated and reported.

The problem facing this book is two-fold. First, it must clarify and undermine the untenable biases of the stories we have learned, inherited and retold, and which we too often continue to tell. These are interesting and important in their own right – formulated to construct cultural norms and identities in modernity through a kind of ancestral mythology about selective events and objects from the past. But they are mainly ideological fantasies, even if sometimes sustained by a formidable scholarly apparatus. Second, we need to begin to forge a new basis, within the context of a globalized world, where the range of cultural phenomena around art and religion in late antiquity can be treated with equivalence and a degree of dispassion, in such a way as to throw some comparative light on a range of broadly related phenomena at the junction between antiquity and the medieval world. That dispassion can of course only represent a current and contemporary position, which will in its turn be susceptible to critique from a different place or a later time. This second goal, a large project for a generation, is beyond the scope of this volume. But to begin the process of achieving it requires a long hard look at the difficulties of comparing incommensurate narratives of self and other, mainly constructed by European scholars, but often developed in colonial and post-colonial contexts by scholars from within the cultures on which they were working. The assumptions underlying these narratives – especially about religions whose scholars are also believers – were frequently designed to make the objects of their study unique or exceptional and in any case so special that they cannot be compared with others. To clarify the range of apologetics and polemics embedded as axiomatic starting points in modern scholarship is a formidable task, and we have attempted in this book at least to begin that process.

1. Religion

A fundamental issue is that the history of the study of religions⁷ in late antiquity has been a history of comparison with ideal models of early

⁷ This volume cannot enter the complexity of debate about what ‘religion’ is, what the ‘world religions’ are, how local religions differ from ones with universal claims and so forth. For recent thought on a number of these issues, see T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993); D. Dubuisson, *The Western*

Christianity; but at the same time, that Christianity is seen to be unique and hence incomparable, at least in the minds of the scholars concerned.⁸ All the varieties of pre-Christian religions, as well as the varieties of early Christianities, belong to a conceptual frame of complex apologetics developed by Christian theology over several centuries, whereby Christianity is unique (or absolute, or ‘wholly other’) by contrast with other cults that effectively belong in a dustbin of superstitions and misconceived fantasies.⁹ This apologetic – effectively a self-serving story of the emergence of Christian hegemony – is highly complex. Most significant is the implication in much of the scholarship that what is unique about Christianity is a kind of Protestant purity, so that the degeneracies of the pagan mystery cults are in fact a cypher for Catholic practices and beliefs by contrast with the purity of Reform.¹⁰ What appears as a conceptual and historical argument about late antiquity – and the historical origins of Christianity – is in fact an internal post-Reformation Christian polemic about Protestant claims to salvation.

The responses of non-Christian religions to the power of missionary activity and imperial hegemony led to significant movements in the nineteenth century towards Reformed models of religious self-conception through comparison. In nineteenth-century India, as Rachel Wood discusses in Chapter 9, Parsi Zoroastrians created a reformulated model of their religion that emphasized monotheism and Scripture as opposed to ritual and sacerdotal interventions, downplaying for example the significance of fire worship.¹¹ Similarly, Islamic reformers, like the Egyptian Muhammed ‘Abduh, as discussed by Nadia Ali in Chapter 13, working in the late Ottoman era under the influence of European thinking, attempted to create a modern, rational Islam anchored in Scripture, characterized by aniconic piety, with regulated doctrines and stripped of

Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology (Baltimore, 2003; original French, 1998); T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, 2005); G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, 2013).

⁸ See especially J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 1990).

⁹ Uniqueness: Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 37–46, 52–3, 116–17.

¹⁰ On the Protestant model, see Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 13–26, 39–40, 44–5, 95–6, 114–15, 143.

¹¹ See D. F. Karaka, *The Parsees: Their History, Manners, Customs, and Religion* (London, 1858); D. Naoroji, *The Parsee Religion* (London, 1861) and D. Naoroji, *The Manners and Customs of the Parsis* (London, 1864); for discussion see e.g. M. Ringer, *Pious Citizens: Reforming Zoroastrianism in India and Iran* (New York, 2011) and R. Wood, Chapter 9 this volume.

superstition, myth and magic.¹² In the British domains of Ceylon and Burma, and also in the neighbouring Theravada Buddhist countries of Thailand and Cambodia, significant reform movements – in response to rationalist models of religion purveyed by Christian missionaries – attempted to stamp out ‘old practices’, rituals and forms of meditation as superstitious.¹³ In all these cases, born of a colonial-era response to Western power, the dynamic of a unique, original and scriptural purity by contrast with decadent ritual practices that was modelled on the Protestant version of the fight between Catholicism and Reform, had potent and significant influence in the creation of modern models of these religions.

From our point of view here, in dealing with art and material culture in relation to religion, the Protestant perspective is one that relegates all forms of visual and material religion to a secondary (or corrupt) position beside Scripture.¹⁴ Since part of the fight between Catholic and Protestant was precisely about whether early Christianity was a pure scriptural faith, aniconic in practice and free of the idolatrous threats of imagery,¹⁵

¹² See N. Ali, Chapter 13 this volume with bibliography.

¹³ See Crosby, *Traditional Theravada Meditation*, 18–45, 107–42.

¹⁴ One critique of J. Z. Smith’s work in relation to late antiquity would go on these lines: while accepting the incisive analytic thrust of his argument, it needs extending in a number of ways. Despite his focus on the early Church, Smith makes hardly any mention whatever of its visual imagery (which was rich and copious). Moreover, Smith’s account is led by an acute nose for (and a deep resistance to) Protestant apologetics in writing about religion. These inevitably target Roman Catholicism as the ‘pagan’ enemy; but in doing so they oversimplify the complexity of the early Church. There is at least as powerful an Orthodox apologetic (both Greek and – in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – Russian) which is neither Catholic nor Protestant but inevitably focused on early Christianity (see Maria Lidova’s Chapter 6 in this volume). And beyond Greek and Russian Orthodoxy, there are numerous positions in the Eastern, so-called Miaphysite, churches that add further nuance. Whether the concern is ritual practices or images (such as the rise of the icon) or early philosophical theology, when one turns to the first centuries of Christianity and especially early Christian art, the fight between modern Christianities must be at the very least triangulated to include Orthodox positions and apologetics at war with Protestants and Catholics. What all these Christianities have in common is the need to trace ancestry and confront the early period (including its art) in late antiquity as central to their enterprise, and especially the self-differentiation of Christianity from the other religions of the Graeco-Roman environment, including Judaism.

¹⁵ For a Protestant view of early Christian aniconism see E. von Dobschütz, *Christusbilder: Untersuchungen zur christlichen Legende* (Leipzig, 1899) chapter 2; H. Koch, *Die altchristliche Bilderfrage nach den literarischen Quellen* (Göttingen, 1917); W. Elliger, *Die Stellung der alten Christen zu den Bildern in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten* (Leipzig, 1930); W. Elliger, *Zur Entstehung und frühen Entwicklung der altchristlichen Bildkunst* (Leipzig, 1934); E. Bevan, *Holy Images: An Inquiry into Idolatry and Image-Worship in Ancient Paganism and in Christianity* (London, 1940). This position, established on the basis of a (selective) series of

one needs to incorporate the question of images (which would ultimately translate in the eighth century into the problems of Byzantine iconoclasm)¹⁶ as a central aspect of the issue. Any exclusion of images, or any exclusive focus on texts (both ubiquitous strategies in the scholarship), are effectively indebted to a fix about what should be the relevant evidence that was established in the arguments between Reformation and Counter-Reformation.¹⁷ While it is true that all surviving world religions are in fact scriptural, they differ significantly about whether they have one defining sacred canon (as in the Abrahamic religions, for example) or many (as in the religions of India), and of course they disagree within themselves as to what precisely fits within the authoritative canon and what should be excluded as potentially heterodox or even heretical. But all in fact use images and decorated buildings, and many religions (from ancient polytheism to modern local cults in Africa, Australasia and the Amazon) put visual practices and rituals around images ahead of any use of texts.

texts, was accepted by a generation of art historians such as E. Kitzinger 'The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954) 84–150, esp. 88–9 and T. Klauser in a series of articles under the general title 'Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen Kunst' published in the 1950s and 1960s in volumes 1–10 of the *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*. See the discussion by H. Feld, *De Ikonoklasmus des Westens* (Leiden, 1990) 2–6 and P. C. Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (Oxford, 1994) 7–10. For an attack on excessive Protestant investments in the aniconism of the early Church, see M. C. Murray, 'Art and the Early Church', *Journal of Theological Studies* 28 (1977) 305–45; Sister Charles Murray, *Rebirth and Afterlife: A Study in the Transmutation of Some Pagan Imagery in Early Christian Funerary Art* (Oxford, 1981); M. Miles, *Image as Insight* (Boston, 1985) 43–8; Finney, *Invisible God*; R. M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (London, 2000) 8–31.

¹⁶ See for instance the discussions of Kitzinger, 'The Cult of Images'; N. Baynes, 'Idolatry and the Early Church', in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1960) 116–43; M. Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of An Idea* (New York, 1992); A. Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago, 2000) 11–146; J. Bremmer, 'Iconoclast, Iconoclastic and Iconoclasm: Notes towards a Genealogy', *Church History and Religious Culture* 88 (2008) 1–17; J. Elsner, 'Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium', *The Art Bulletin* 94 (2012) 369–95.

¹⁷ That is, Smith's book effectively subscribes to a (Protestant-derived) text-centred model of what religion is. Other models are possible – for instance as espoused by the periodical *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* (first published in 2005). For programmatic statements, see e.g. D. Goa, D. Morgan, C. Paine and S. B. Plate, 'Editorial', *Material Religion* 1 (2005) 4–8, esp. 6 and B. Meyer, D. Morgan, C. Paine and S. B. Plate, 'The Origin and Mission of *Material Religion*', *Religion* 40 (2010) 207–11. For some extensive discussion e.g. D. Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, 1998); D. Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (California, 2005); D. Morgan (ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London, 2010); S. Promey, *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven, 2014).

The uses of religious comparativism to insist on uniqueness (something that cannot be compared because it is so special, so *sui generis*, as to be incomparable) are a fundamental and repeated problem relevant well beyond Christianity to all forms of apologetic in any and every religion.¹⁸ Moreover, even if they are not written by overtly religious scholars, the logic of uniqueness has come to determine accounts of Islam, Hinduism and Judaism – whether as religions or as identities within various forms of post-colonial nationalism. This has extended to the arts that have come to embody national or religious cultures. Hence, for instance, accounts of early Islamic visual culture – allowing the dismissal of certain elements as syncretistic or excessively Hellenistic, and mimicking a Protestant emphasis on aniconism against figural representation – easily shift from the description of actualities to the prescription of an ideal, essential or characteristic nature of Islamic art (even when that is an exaggeration or simply untrue). The (absurd) generalization of a field like Islamic art – covering well over 1,000 years and an extraordinary geographic spread across much of southern Europe, all North Africa, and most of western and Central Asia, as well as the Middle East – alongside the emphasis on certain assumed uniquely characteristic qualities (such as decorative aniconism) allows the exclusion of much (such as the iconic) and the invention of hierarchies of normativity that may have very little historical or material reality except in scholarly dogma.¹⁹ The same has been true of Jewish art, about which a fantasy of aniconism is often repeated, against the overwhelming archaeological evidence of dozens of synagogue floors with all kinds of imagery discovered over the last 100 years. Versions of the uniqueness theme are just as powerful in accounts of Zoroastrian and Indian (particularly Hindu) arts, in contexts both of hegemonic and of subaltern politics in relation to religious identity.

The bottom line here – and it is methodologically central to any non-apologetic attempt to use comparison – is that *comparative work must compare equals*. One element of the comparison cannot be unique, special, or exceptional by contrast with the others, or what one does is not comparative but merely a rhetorical performance of the dismissal of all the non-unique instances (chosen for that purpose) which one sets against

¹⁸ Smith's model of the study of Christianity as a form of apologetic is designed to confront the roots of contemporary Christian theology as it reflects on Christian origins. It was never intended as an account of religion in general.

¹⁹ See e.g. F. B. Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art', in E. Mansfield (ed.), *Making Art History* (London, 2007) 31–53.

the exceptional object of one's apologetic.²⁰ The issue is pervasive and inherent in all areas of religious comparison and hardly less so in all areas of art-historical comparison, especially where either religious or cultural identities are in any sense at stake. Moreover, it is as problematic and relevant to the religious politics of today as it has been for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The dominance of a textual model of religion is catastrophic for any attempt at writing an art history of religion,²¹ for visual and material culture are inevitably cast as the handmaiden to Scripture, the degenerate appendages to the purity of sacred text. Images and objects are regarded as material *expressions* of a religious culture or outlook, not as the constituents (at least in part and in some cases entirely) of a religion's reality.²² Yet it is empirically observable that numerous religions – in prehistory, antiquity and modernity – have existed without scriptures, in a world of orality, myth, a vast range of material culture (some of it with writing or inscriptions), and a rich variety of rituals and practices. In the period of late antiquity this is true of most of the religions of the Mediterranean and the Roman Empire, with the unusual exceptions of Judaism and Christianity. A viable art history of religion – including that of the religions of late antiquity – must begin with the premise that visual and material culture in many respects *constitute* religious experience, and are much more than merely expressions or illustrations. In resisting the textual template for religion inherited from Protestant scholarship – a Procrustean bed that is itself an apologetic against Roman Catholicism in its origins – we need to make a place for the materialities of religious experience, including objects, buildings and images, as an equally valid body of evidence. We need to allow images not only to constitute a form of theological thinking but also to make substantive conceptual points about religion, both its theory and

²⁰ On the problem of comparisons rhetorically designed to show one element better than the other (what was called *syncretism* in antiquity) see e.g. S. Abe and J. Elsner, 'Introduction: Some Stakes of Comparison', in J. Elsner (ed.), *Comparativism in Art History* (London, 2017) 1–15, esp. 2; cf. M. Bal, 'Grounds of Comparison', in M. Bal (ed.), *The Artemisia Files* (Chicago, 2005) 129–67, esp. 129–38 on the problems of comparison in art history and p. 130 against any one term in a comparison being established as normative.

²¹ For some discussion of this in relation to the textual emphasis in art history in the German tradition, see M. Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Art History* (Cambridge, 2009) 15–89.

²² See Meyer et al., 'The Origin and Mission of *Material Religion*', 209: 'how religion happens materially . . . is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful question of how religion is *expressed* in material form. A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it . . .'

practice, in their own right and in their own way; texts would not make such points in the same way.

2. Art History

It is a curious matter that the history of the study of art, at least as conducted within the Western academic tradition, shadows the changes in ancestral interests within the development of modern European culture. Ancient art – notably that of Graeco-Roman antiquity – was rediscovered in a passionate rush at the inception of the Renaissance, which saw itself as the rebirth of the generative Classical moment of naturalistic image-making.²³ The first scientific studies of early Christian art were born in the need of the Italian Counter-Reformation in the seventeenth century to resist assertions of the long accretion of idolatrous and pagan practices in the corrupt Catholic Church through a claim for authentic apostolic continuity – in this case a continuous tradition of images and visual culture reaching back to the very origins of the Church in Rome.²⁴ The wild aesthetic and ideological love affair with Greek art and Greek culture (particularly in Germany) was born in the heady moment of the Enlightenment with its revolutionary instincts for such political ideals as freedom and democracy in the face of repressive monarchic regimes.²⁵

The invention and construction of late antiquity as such – a latecomer to these stories – is, as we argue in the chapters below, the product of a particular late imperial moment in the nineteenth century. The European imperial powers in this period sought to create stories of self-identity, by assimilating themselves with ancestral narratives in their own imagined

²³ See for example L. Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven, 1999).

²⁴ For the history of Christian archaeology in Rome, see L. V. Rutgers, *The Jews in Late Ancient Rome* (Leiden, 1995) 5–42; S. Ditchfield, 'Text before Trowel: Antonio Bosio's *Roma Sotterranea* Revisited', in R. N. Swanson (ed.), *The Church Retrospective* (Stourbridge, Suffolk, 1997) 343–60; I. Oryshkevich, 'Cultural History in the Catacombs: Early Christian Art and Macarius's Hagioglypta', in K. Van Liere, S. Ditchfield and H. Louthan (eds.), *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World* (Oxford, 2012) 250–66.

²⁵ The work of J. J. Winckelmann is paramount here. See for instance A. Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven, 1994); E. Décultot, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann: enquête sur la genèse de l'histoire de l'art* (Paris, 2000); E. Pommier, *Winckelmann, inventeur de l'histoire de l'art* (Paris, 2003); K. Harloe, *Winckelmann and the Invention of Antiquity: History and Aesthetics in the Age of Altertumswissenschaft* (Oxford, 2013). Beyond Winckelmann, see e.g. S. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970* (Princeton, 1996).

pasts and by constructing their cultures in contrast to those of the other empires but also against the pasts of the worlds they had colonized or explored. In both the Austro-Hungarian, Roman Catholic, Holy Roman Empire and the late Romanoff, Orthodox, Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, the immense resources of an imperial state-sponsored scholarly positivism and archaeology were summoned to make the argument for ancestral origins respectively in the Catholic Christian Roman Empire of Constantine and in the Orthodox Byzantine Empire that followed the establishment of Constantinople in the East.²⁶ The particular power of the late antique historiographic moment in these contexts is that it inspired remarkable and lasting scholarly works to justify its existence. Even where empires had fallen, in the wake of the First World War, the scholarly movements and accounts created by European late imperial ideologies remained in place as the principal academic basis for all later discussions of late antique art. Meanwhile, at roughly the same moment, the British in India, in association with native scholars themselves trained in European academic methods, were constructing a story of Indian religious art – Buddhist, Hindu, Jain – as both different from and dependent on that of the Greek tradition with which Britain identified no less fervently than Germany.²⁷ The urge in the German-speaking world (already in the later nineteenth century) to search for versions of Aryan origins led to an interest in Persian art, as well as to an examination of Semitic art (both Jewish and Arab) as a negative counterpoint to the Graeco-Roman tradition.²⁸ Effectively – although from very different nationalistic and ideological standpoints (all of them inevitably tainted with varieties of racial, Eurocentric and cultural prejudices) – the range of the arts of late antiquity from the post-Classical moment in Europe via the discovery of Islamic, Sasanian and Indian art, were all born in broadly the same moment as a result of similar drives in the academic culture of the great European imperial powers.

The romance of an archaeology that could find lost worlds and dig them up coincided with this moment and was in fact at its strongest when funded by the coffers of imperial powers rich with the profits of colonialism. Just as the study of the variety of fields that make up late antique art is

²⁶ See especially Chapters 5 and 6 in this volume, by Elsner and Lidova.

²⁷ See Stanley Abe, 'Inside the Wonder House: Buddhist Art in the West', in D. Lopez (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago, 1995) 63–106 and Chapters 2, 10 and 12 by Robert Bracey in this volume.

²⁸ See e.g. S. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge, 2009) 387–426.

a supremely nineteenth-century phenomenon, so is the great project of archaeology – the excavation of ancient India by the British, of early Islamic and Sasanian sites especially by the Germans (with the singular glories of Mshatta, excavated in 1840 and imported wholesale by the Kaiser in 1903 to Berlin). In the twentieth century, a similar process of Zionist-inspired archaeology would unveil dozens of late ancient synagogues in Palestine.

However, by contrast with the history of religion, where comparativism is a very old method with a long critical history within the discipline,²⁹ the enterprise of a cross-cultural comparison of the arts of different cultures is rather new in art history. Instead, this field is not yet at all clear whether its move beyond Western art is a turn to ‘global art’, ‘world art’ or comparative art.³⁰ This is compounded by a very particular Eurocentric problem. The world religions, in thinking through their philosophies and theologies, have deep and explicit theoretical models drawn on their own ancient internal traditions of scholarship and exegesis, which can be compared – even if the terms used by different religions are not strictly parallel. By contrast, only European culture has developed a sophisticated and historical scholarly discourse for the discussion of art, constituted as an academic

²⁹ The first congress of the International Association for the History of Religions took place in 1900: See J. Réville (ed.), *Actes du Premier Congrès International d'Histoire des Religions* (2 vols., Paris 1901 and 1902). For some key recent theoretical discussions of comparativism in religion, see e.g. J. Z. Smith, ‘In Comparison a Magic Dwells’, in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, 1982) 19–35; Smith, *Drudgery Divine*; M. Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable* (Stanford, 2008); B. Lincoln and C. Grottanelli, ‘Theses on Comparison’, in B. Lincoln, *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars* (Chicago, 2012); B. Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Experiments In, On, and With Comparison* (Chicago, 2018); D. Levitin, ‘What Was the Comparative History of Religion in 17th-Century Europe (and Beyond)? Pagan Monotheism/ Pagan Animism, from T’ien to Tylor’, in R. Gagné, S. Goldhill and G. E. R. Lloyd (eds.), *Regimes of Comparatism: Frameworks of Comparison in History, Religion and Anthropology* (Leiden, 2019) 49–115 and J. Sheehan, ‘Comparison and Christianity: Sacrifice in the Age of the Encyclopedia’, in Gagné et al., *Regimes of Comparatism*, 117–209.

³⁰ On world art history, see D. Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London, 2003); J. Onians, *Art, Culture, Nature: From Art History to World Art Studies* (London, 2006); K. Zijlmans and W. van Damme (eds.), *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam, 2008); J. Anderson (ed.), *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence* (Melbourne, 2009); J. Tanner, ‘Questions on “World Art History”’: a discussion between Zainab Bahrani, Jaś Elsner, and Rosemary Joyce, moderated by Jeremy Tanner, with a comment by Wu Hung’, *Perspective* (2014) 181–94. On global art history, see: J. Elkins (ed.), *Is Art History Global?* (New York, 2007) and T. DaCosta Kaufmann, C. Dossin and B. Joyeux-Prunel (eds.), *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (Farnham, 2015). For a preliminary account of some of the options going forward, see J. Elsner, *Eurocentric and Beyond: Art History, the Global Turn and the Possibilities of Comparison* (Beijing, forthcoming).

discipline. This is not to say that Chinese, Islamic or Indian traditions, for instance, lack a profound series of reflections on issues of materiality, visual culture or aesthetics; but they have simply not seen it necessary to formulate these into a scholarly language for discussing objects and images, let alone the kinds of aesthetically distinctive works that are called 'art'. Most comparativist or global art history is therefore inevitably reduced to using the theoretical tools that have been developed by European art history and archaeology in precisely the imperial and post-imperial periods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These include concepts like 'style', 'form', the 'picturesque', 'classical', 'archaic', 'mannerist' and so forth, as well as the attendant discussion of how these qualities in the material appearance of man-made objects relate to the meanings such objects hold in the worlds of their reception and use. This means that, however careful a comparison between objects from different cultures may be, it is inevitably caught in the Eurocentric frame by which aesthetic objects are described, defined and studied.³¹ This is a very significant issue which will only be resolved when cultures with conceptual roots in Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic or Persian scholarly traditions choose to develop discourses from within their own intellectual traditions for the exploration of art.³² The problem in art history is much worse than in the study of religion, because non-European cultures have extremely evolved and powerful philosophical discourses of their own – quite as sophisticated as the European, and in many cases more so – for the understanding of religion.

3. This Volume

This book attempts a critical diagnosis of some of the ideological issues – driven by nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century political and religious factors – that complicate the telling of a parallel series of comparable narratives about late antique art. It is divided into three parts. The first explores some of the contexts and legacies of the nineteenth-century imperial moment – a glorious period in the history of European

³¹ See especially Abe and Elsner, 'Introduction: Some Stakes of Comparison', 9–10. Accepting the Eurocentrism of comparison but arguing for reflexivity as a 'defensible heuristic instrument', see R. Gagné, 'Introduction: Regimes of Comparatism', in Gagné et al., *Regimes of Comparatism*, 1–17, esp. 10–11.

³² See Flood, 'From the Prophet to Postmodernism?' for the difficulties of locating 'Islamic' art.

scholarship, where the academic disciplines that determine so much of what can be discussed in this book came into being in something like their contemporary form. Art history, archaeology, anthropology, sociology, ancient history, the critical study of religion and theology all were established as self-critical methods of practice and theory in this period. But it was also an era of colonization, conquest and exploitation in which Western goods and beliefs (not least in the missionary enterprise) were exported to the colonized cultures, which were given little opportunity to resist. The second and third parts examine some forms in which resistance took place in both colonial and post-colonial contexts, with the assertion of various kinds of nationalisms including those of the former European empires as they were reduced to nation states. All kinds of claims, some of them frankly untenable, could be made in the name of national solidarity or religious self-assertion.

In Chapter 2, Robert Bracey takes an apparently simple empirical problem – when the first images of the Buddha were created – to show the deep ideological assumptions out of which Western scholars and native Indian scholars in the period before Indian independence fought out a proxy battle about the intrinsic qualities of their respective cultures on the domain of the origins of Buddhist art. In part, the position of the fine arts and archaeology in relation to imperialism is constructed as the story of how primitive natives could be civilized by foreign conquerors (which is broadly the line of those who have argued for the compelling causal influence of Greek art on early Buddhist art) or how authentic native traditions, with deep aesthetic cultures of their own, were able to resist foreign invaders, even in the distant past. Arguably, very little of this has anything to do with Buddhism, Buddhist art or what really happened in the visual culture of late antiquity in northern India. But those issues have been fundamentally appropriated to profound and much more modern cultural arguments, and no study of Buddhist art can in fact proceed without taking them on board.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Philippa Adrych and Dominic Dalglish address the ways European scholarship, all of it created in the wake of Christian culture, has attempted to think back before Christianity into an antique, ancestral but polytheistic world which had no scriptural tradition. They pose the question of how we can write a history of ancient religion from the archaeological and material-cultural evidence. Ancient religion was conducted much more through objects and artefacts than it was through texts; in spite of this, scholarship has relentlessly sought out texts as the basis for its arguments. These questions are compelling for the study of

pre-Christian religion in the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean, where we have relatively little textual evidence, but they are equally relevant to the study of all religions. Even in those religions that claim a priority for Scripture, and where we have numerous texts that make up the bulk of our evidence, religion, its liturgies and its places of worship, are always defined at least in part through material culture and the intersection of material culture with people in ritual contexts.

The remaining three chapters in Part I explore the fundamental argument about Christian origins that was promulgated around Christian art by the great empires of late nineteenth-century Europe. These empires were engaged in a debate about priority and precedence that not only constructed myths of origin within different branches of early Christianity, but were also engaged in differentiating the contemporary imperial cultures from each other. Since the theories and arguments produced in this period would become the dominant models for the writing of art history through the twentieth century, this would prove an extraordinarily significant time for formulating the roots of modern views. These models are grounded in Eurocentric and Christiano-centric attitudes that are fundamentally colonialist – indeed imperialist – and are therefore in very profound conflict with the attitudes of most scholars and most interested parties today. That is to say, in the writing of current art history, there is a very problematic and generally under-acknowledged friction between the kinds of ideological and political positions that most practitioners hold and the fundamental assumptions rooted in the theoretical and historical models within which they are working.

Chapter 5, by Jaś Elsner, explores the rise of a history of late antique art in Vienna at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century, which is deeply entangled in the Roman Catholic ideological project of the late Habsburg Holy Roman Empire. Catholicism, and the art-historical turn towards Rome, were both directed against Protestant Germany (and its new Empire) which fantasized that its cultural roots were based in Greece. One of the interests of Viennese art history at this period is the conflict between those who saw the roots of the multicultural Austro-Hungarian Empire in a multicultural early Christian Roman Empire, and those who believed that the fall of the Roman Empire (and implicitly the risk of the fall of the Habsburgs) was caused by the barbarian invasion of migrants, especially from the East. This was a fight between those who believed that artistic change in late antiquity was a positive and healthy sign of evolutionary development within a self-confident imperial system, and those who saw it as a fundamental decline caused by the decadence of

the Semitic East; its politics is still with us in the context of the current migration crisis in Europe, even if the areas in which it is played out are no longer art historical (and the Semitic invasion is no longer Jews escaping pogrom and shtetl towards the West but Arabs fleeing the war and the collapse of order in the failing states of the Middle East and North Africa). In parallel to the proposition of a continuous Catholic Roman Empire from Constantine the Great (r. 306–37) to Franz Josef (Austrian emperor, 1848–1916) and the image of a Roman art capable of creative change within its own resources from antiquity into the Middle Ages and beyond, the city of Rome itself in the wake of the papacy of Pius IX (pope 1846–78) developed a new vision of early Christian art. Especially German-born Roman Catholic priests working as archaeologists in Rome created an argument for symbolism and continuity in Christian art. This was specifically designed as a polemic against the assumptions of Protestants, who contested that the earliest Christians were opposed to the forms of idolatry implied by the use of images.

In Chapter 6, Maria Lidova explores the ways that the late Romanoff Russian Empire developed an art history of ancestral origins that rooted Russian Orthodoxy in the rise of Byzantium and Byzantine art. Although this Russian story is significantly parallel to the Viennese, it is also in substantial conflict with the Austrian narrative; it affirms an Orthodox Christianity based in Constantinople – the inheritor of a Hellenistic system derived from Alexander and rooted in the East – as the true generative heritage of Christian art, rather than a Catholic Christianity founded on Rome. In the era immediately before the Russian Revolution, an intensely brilliant scholarly generation created a series of models for emphasizing the priority of the Hellenic East in the genesis of artistic forms, styles and subject matter. The impact of this approach is extremely interesting, since it both resists a pure Eurocentrism in being open to the positive influence of the East, and it rejects the broadly xenophobic anti-Semitism of those Viennese models that saw the East as bringing Oriental decadence to destroy the Roman Empire. The late Romanoff scholarly endeavour was catastrophically interrupted by the opposition of the new Bolshevik state to any form of Christian apologetic. Those scholars who remained in Russia had to make radical adaptations to the theoretical basis of their work in line with Marxist orthodoxy – or they faced persecution and even death; the academic refugees and exiles from Russia carried versions of the late Romanoff art-historical model to cause significant influence within the field of early Christian and Islamic art in Western Europe and America.

In Chapter 7, Stefanie Lenk takes us to the Protestant heartland of Germany in Berlin, where the establishment of academic scholarly life and research were at their strongest in the nineteenth century and against which in many ways the Austrians, the Russians and the archaeologists of the Catholic Church in Rome were positioning themselves. She explores the way in which one strand of committed Reformed theology rejected models of ideal Christian aniconism, normatively promulgated by Protestants, and discusses Protestant theologians who were engaged in institutionalizing art history as a discipline in theology departments in Prussia and beyond. The theology faculty of Berlin, founded in 1810 under Friedrich Schleiermacher, led the way, teaching 'Monumental Theology' by means of its Christian art collection throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. Deeply rooted in the Berlin Awakening movement, 'Monumental Theology' stressed the importance of art for the history of Christian thought on the grounds that the faith of common churchgoers is concerned with images and objects. 'Monumental Theology' marks a shift in the object of investigation of theological scholarship from scholarly writing to everyday belief.

Part II, 'After Imperialism: Orientalism and its Resistances', turns from the construction of European ideologies of artistic origin and Western aesthetic ideals in relation to religion (whether in Christianity or in dealing with pre-Christian religions) back to the colonial issues raised in the first chapter, but especially as they arose in the clash between colonialist and anti-colonialist (or post-colonialist) perspectives. These latter are multiple – arising from very different viewpoints in very different post-imperial contexts, including within the old imperial powers (themselves much diminished by the loss of their colonial possessions). The three chapters in Part II consider various resistances to Orientalism, while the four chapters constituting Part III of this book explore forms of nationalist self-assertion through arguments based on ancestral visual culture.

In Chapter 8, Nadia Ali looks at different strategies for mapping a road away from the idea of Oriental decadence in assessing the rise of early Islamic art. All are European, but represent Europeans who in various ways saw themselves as non-normative, or writing from within the closet, and who thus identified with Islamic art as a way of distancing themselves from their own culture. The three strategies she describes – and of course there were many others – were all key to the development of the modern study of the visual culture of early Islam. Ali examines the ways assimilated Jews, especially in Germany before the 1930s, could use the study of Islam in relation to the West as a means of negotiating their own Oriental and

Semitic identity in relation to Germany; the ways the arts of a spiritual Islam could be fantasized as the product of ascetic ideals from the perspective of gay but avowedly Roman Catholic scholarship; and the ways refugee scholars constructed Islamic art as a terrain divided between a normative aniconic world of the mosque and a pleasure palace of decadent visuality in the desert castles of the first Caliphs. These forms of response to an essentially negative model of Islamic art as foreign to the norms of Western naturalism, even though its aniconic tendencies were seen as positive by some Protestant-inflected conceptions, represent some of the foundational positions in establishing current approaches to how Islamic art is studied. The immensely complex freighting of the ideological constructs that underlie them indicates the weight of the ancestral baggage with which contemporary scholarship has to contend.

Chapter 9, by Rachel Wood, explores the potent drives that have underwritten the history of Sasanian art – the visual culture of the late ancient Persian Empire before the rise of Islam, which espoused a form of Zoroastrianism as its official religion. Within communities significantly committed to the Persian past, attitudes to Sasanian art have been informed by various kinds of Persian nationalism in modernity. These include the ideologies of the imperial regime of the Shah in the mid-twentieth century and those of the Islamic Revolution after 1979, but also significant investments from the nineteenth-century Parsi Zoroastrian diaspora in response to Christian and Muslim hegemony at the time, as well as the Iranian exilic community after 1979, especially in the United States. These may all be seen, from different angles, as internalist; but there has also been an interest in the Sasanians from the outside, which has especially involved in the course of the early twentieth century a heavy dose of Aryan ancestralism, at any rate from some German scholars. Since the Sasanian world has always been seen as the key counterpoint in the East to the Roman and Byzantine empires, as well as a core ancestor for Islam and the midpoint on the Silk Road between China and the West, the need to make sense of Sasanian art and culture as the central context of any account of Eurasia has remained compelling.

In Chapter 10, Robert Bracey confronts a particular problem that arises from the construction of Hindu identity in the colonial context of the British Empire and its development into a form of religious nationalism after Independence in 1947. The dream of a timeless and primordial Hinduism that has always been present has become a fundamental axiom for a number of positions, including those that have been taken on questions of art history in India, which have become not only ahistorical

but anti-historical. If one believes that the god Śiva has always existed and will always exist, and has throughout his existence been susceptible to representation, then one can simply ignore the historical evidence that before a certain point in recorded history this god does not appear to have been worshipped, that the images that some have attributed to him certainly did not depict him and that the cult of Śiva is itself a construct of the early centuries AD. The problems in terms of trying to tie rigorous scholarship, committed to critical historical analysis, to some kind of accommodation with religious apologetic in this arena are clearly huge, especially because the religious model of Hindu timelessness has a political edge both in the local Indian context and in relation to the large Hindu diaspora around the world.

Part III takes the question of post-colonialism head on. Chapters 11 and 12 each deal with the effects of political autonomy in the art-historical writing of two new nation states born in the wake of the Second World War. In Chapter 11, jointly written by Jesse Lockard and Jaś Elsner, the question of Jewish art – a long and complex spectre in the history of European art, carrying fantasies of proto-Protestant aniconism and resistance to idolatry throughout the nineteenth century – is explored through the period of the British mandate in Palestine that followed the First World War, the birth of the state of Israel in 1948, and its aftermath. The impossibility of separating archaeology, warfare and Zionism is potent in a context where generals were among the principal archaeologists and where an extraordinary wealth of late antique synagogue mosaics and other remains were discovered through the course of the twentieth century to show that the story of Jewish aniconism is a myth and not a fact. The embeddedness of archaeological finds in the land itself, functioning to prove ancient Jewish habitation, became a profound implicit argument for the rights of Jews to that territory. The issues have been fraught for the last seventy years and remain so.

In Chapter 12, Robert Bracey investigates parallel questions in the changing positions on Indian art, again a visual culture that was seen to exemplify both a national territory and a sacred homeland. Before Independence, British India comprised a series of cultures that were excluded after 1947 – the territories that became Pakistan, Sri Lanka, East Bengal (Bangladesh) and parts of South Asia including Burma. The new model of writing Indian art history, founded on the needs of the new state of India and committed to its territories, systematically excluded these worlds – despite the fact that the provision of any proper historical or cultural analysis cannot ignore the profound interdependence between them for

centuries. The idea that one could write a history of Indian art that failed to account for the material from Gandhara, in modern Pakistan and Afghanistan, may seem distinctly eccentric from a scholarly perspective but has been perfectly normal given the political context. This chapter examines some of the problems, many of the political appropriations of ancestral images (like the swastika) and the many polemics that have arisen between scholars and nationalist advocates, Indians and Western experts on India – debates and ‘culture wars’ that continue to rage in the present day.

In Chapter 13, Nadia Ali turns her attention to the development of accounts of art and culture within the Ottoman Empire and after its demise both by Turks in the ruling elite and many of those, especially Arabs, colonized by the Ottomans. Whereas the other accounts of post-colonialism in this book deal with responses to attitudes promulgated by the Western powers, this essay shows that many of the issues in play were about competing ancestralist fantasies located entirely outside, although in dialogue with, European discourses. Early Islamic art provided actual material evidence of the early Caliphate, especially in such monuments as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the great Mosque at Damascus as well as the pilgrimage sites of Mecca and Medina; and hence it offered a sense of a direct link back to the heirs of the Prophet Mohammed himself. It is hardly surprising that this should have proved attractive to an ever weakening Ottoman Sultan in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who needed to bolster his secular power through religious authority (a strategy not so different from that of the papacy and its relations to early Christian art in the same period). But that turn to the arts of early Islam was also a turn to the masterpieces constructed by the Arabs, who in modernity were considered to be the most primitive and premodern, nomadic and uncivilized subjects of the Ottomans. For Arab nationalism before and after the end of the Ottoman Empire, the very valorization of the Arabs’ early Islamic past could serve as a rallying cry against Turkish hegemony.

Finally, in Chapter 14, Katherine Cross takes us back to the context of Christian Europe and to the post-imperial constructions of nationhood in relation to ancestral Christian origins in one of the great imperial powers, the British Isles. By focusing on the ways the iconic national museum – the British Museum – has collected, represented and displayed Anglo-Saxon art and archaeology in relation to questions of race and religion over the span of the later nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, she examines moves within the construction and presentation of national identity from the imperial period to post-Second World War retrenchment. The cultural

issues about British identity, Anglo-Saxons (as German settlers) and earlier Britons ('Celts'), played out in the arena of visual and material culture are effectively a defining point for attitudes about relations with Europe and about questions of migration which have been dominant in British politics and the anxieties about contemporary British identity in the later twentieth and throughout the twenty-first century, at least to date.

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Reflection on the modernity of the approaches that have governed (and still govern) the art histories explored in this book is necessary. We cannot study the arts of late antiquity without in fact studying through them the histories of modern ideological self-construction, and the still longer histories of religious self-definition and differentiation through polemic and apologetics in a series of former empires, modern nation states and old religions. That makes our theme more complex and fraught than may appear at first from any innocent, or naïve, comparison of two works of art of the same date from different cultures in a museum. At the same time, it makes things much more interesting and much more contemporary than one might at first imagine when deciding to explore the ancient past. For any act of art-historical exploration is inherently and necessarily a performance of the histories of thought, belief and prejudice in which we have been formed. When such exploration takes the form of comparison between topics whose histories of scholarly formation represent conflicts and fissures in our collective patterns of belief, prejudice and self-construction, then what is revealed is both urgent and compelling; it affords the potential for a potent confrontation with the contradictions that lie within ourselves.

