Religion, State & Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/crss20

Afterword: religious infrastructure, or doing religion in the contemporary mode

Matteo (Teo) Benussi

To cite this article: Matteo (Teo) Benussi (2024) Afterword: religious infrastructure, or doing religion in the contemporary mode, Religion, State & Society, 52:2-3, 235-249, DOI: 10.1080/09637494.2024.2352197

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2352197

Published online: 10 Jul 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=crss20

RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY
2024, VOL. 52, NOS. 2–3, 235–249
https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2352197

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Afterword: religious infrastructure, or doing religion in the contemporary mode

Matteo (Teo) Benussi

Department of Humanities, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

ABSTRACT

Written as a response to a collection of essays that proposes to think infrastructurally about religion, this Afterword builds on Paul Rabinow's reflections on an 'anthropology of the contemporary' to highlight how infrastructural thinking can strengthen our understanding of religion in a late-modern, logistically saturated and hyperconnected ecumene. This essay explores three forms in which religiously connoted sociotechnical arrangements contribute to the shaping of the present *kairos* ('fitting time', or shared moment) as infrastructures of contemporariness, coevality, and contemporaneousness. In Rabinowian terms, contemporariness encompasses modernity and its mythology, while outpacing it at the same time: thus, religious infrastructures outpace the modernist myth of secularity while thriving on the technical utopias of high modernity. Coevality refers to how the 'infrastructuring' of religious life synchronises imagined pasts, presents, and futures through vectors of connectivity, consolidation, and enablement. Contemporaneousness refers to how religious-infrastructural sociotechnical assemblages bracket different domains and spheres of activity – locality, globality, economy, spirituality, leisure, etc. – making them overlap, often with exhilarating/empowering outcomes, but, sometimes, with disruptive or uncanny results.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 April 2024
Accepted 1 May 2024

KEYWORDS
Religion; infrastructure; the contemporary, modernity; social theory

Introduction

Infrastructures underpin ecosystems and livelihoods, enabling or regulating permanence as well as movement across localities, scales, and domains. They somehow keep together an extraordinarily complex, overcharged, interconnected, yet disaggregated world, while at the same time contributing to its extraordinary complexity, overcharge, interconnection, and disaggregation. Infrastructural density is among the defining features of 'the contemporary', along with a pervasive and glaring resurgence of religion, which includes a panoply of experiences ranging from devotion to healing, from asceticism to awe. This is why a collection of studies on religious infrastructure can be a vital contribution to our collective understanding of the contemporary.

My choice of the 'contemporary' as a temporal framework is not casual. Following the late anthropologist and social theorist Rabinow (2008), I describe 'the contemporary' as

CONTACT Matteo (Teo) Benussi matteo.benussi@unive.it Department of Humanities, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

© 2024 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

the ever-shifting cutting edge of a modernity that constantly outpaces itself and its own myths. One of modernity's most notable myths is the idea of a linear development away from belief and 'superstition' – a notion that has been proved flawed time and again, yet still haunts the foundations of our present. The unstable landscape of the contemporary is abuzz with spiritual revivals, desecularisation trends, and (re)enchantment processes (Karpov 2013; Partridge 2005). What is unique, and uniquely contemporary, of this religious ferment is that it is taking place in an unprecedentedly infrastructured lifeworld, leading to an *expansion* and *capillarisation* of infrastructural arrangements that in this collection we have conceptualised as religious.

Scholarly investigations of infrastructure have long engaged with the axis of temporality alongside that of spatiality (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Gupta 2018; Joniak-Lüthi 2019; Larkin 2008, 5–6; Ramakrishnan, O'Reilly, and Budds 2020). Hoelzchen and Kirby (2020) have described how religious infrastructures may connect practitioners with ancestral *pasts* and imagined (apocalyptic or paradisical) *futures*. What may a conceptual focus on the contemporary add to our understanding of infrastructures, religion, and the overlap of multiple available pasts, presents, and futures in today's global juncture?

This is not the appropriate place to delve into an exegesis of Paul Rabinow's provocative, oft-sibylline, yet intriguing late contributions to social theory (cf. Marcus 2014). More modestly, I appropriate and operationalise his concept of an anthropology of the contemporary as a reflection upon the open processes by which the 'clustered elements and configurations' of modernity become declustered and reconfigured at local spatial and temporal scales (Rabinow et al. 2008, 58) in ways that pose novel intellectual challenges. While Rabinow's focus was on science, labs, and biotechnologies, his intuitions may well apply to the array of religiously connoted sociotechnical 'contraptions' (Id.: 77) that in this collection of essays we have chosen to define through the concept of religious infrastructure.

Part of the contemporary's potential as an analytical lens – and maybe part of the reason why hesitations persist around this term – lies in the term's polysemy. On the one hand, historiographic periodisation characterises contemporary history as something *following* modernity, though boundaries between the two periods appear arbitrary and vague. Rabinow observed that such a historical usage of the term 'both equate[s] and differentiate[s] the contemporary from the modern' (Rabinow 2008, 2). He thus chooses to characterise the contemporary as 'a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical' (Rabinow 2008, 2). On the other hand, as Rabinow himself noted, a strictly temporal understanding of the contemporary implies coevality, synchrony, the sharing of a common horizon – in this sense, for example, Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584) was the contemporary of Suleiman the Magnificent (1494–1566). Yet, such horizons are to an extent dependent upon human imagination: depending on the optics of the observer, contemporariness may stretch across locales, periods, and scales: not by chance did the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce memorably quip that 'all history is always contemporary history' (1917, 4), meaning that some of the dramas, struggles, commitments, and ideals of any given time will always find resonance with the intimate experience of humans in the present. In this sense, the contemporary may stretch far beyond the immediate

vicinities of modernity to reach the farthest corners of the past and the faintest foreshadowings of the future. To Croce, the craft of the historian is precisely to recognise this commonness, this contemporariness: an exhortation that applies to anthropologists, religion scholars, and social theorists as well.

Experimenting with the lens of the contemporary is intellectually salutary insofar as it helps us distance ourselves from a modernist conceptual baggage that is nearly inescapable when it comes to discussing infrastructure: chiefly, a framing of tradition as stasis and immobility that needs to be overcome, alongside a raft of dichotomies pitting sacred against profane, public against private, and global against local. Rabinow noted that, from a 'contemporary' angle, 'tradition and modernity are not opposed but paired'; in fact, 'the contemporary is not especially concerned with [. . .] distinguishing itself from tradition' (2008, 58). As the case studies in this collection show, tradition – that is, whatever comes to occupy the 'traditional' slot in local configurations of modernity – can indeed be a vital part of the contemporary, while religious infrastructures seem to have a habit of disturbing any rigid compartmentalisation of domains, sites, and scales.

In the remainder of this contribution, thus, I will interrogate religious infrastructure using the following intellectual coordinates:

- I argue that an infrastructural take on religious life allows us to explore what 'doing religion' entails in the contemporary era, understood as a lifeworld increasingly devoid of organic, mass solidarities, and saturated with things, shifting connections, and often opaque logistics – in a word, an infrastructurally dense lifeworld. As a concept, the contemporary is partly synonymous with, and partly in contrast to, 'late-' or 'post-modernity'. It defines an ethos shaped by the effects of nineteenth-twentieth century modernisation – including the global capillarisation of infrastructure driven by state and market agents – yet already projected beyond the modernist visions of that period, especially its naïve belief in disenchantment, positivism, and aggressive secularism.
- I propose that a focus on the contemporary allows us to attend to the processes and mechanisms contemporising – i.e. *making coeval* – the present with commitments to the past and desired futures. Ancestral nostalgias, long-standing ethical traditions, and forward-looking aspirations, both collective and individual, merge in the experience of many religionists. The following pages will tease out patterns of coevality by foregrounding the temporal vectors that undergird three quintessential functions of (religious) infrastructure: connection, consolidation and enablement.
- I explore the contemporaneousness – that is, the *simultaneous adjacency* and overlaps in religiously marked contexts – of spiritual, scientific, socio-economic, and other 'spheres of experience and value' that often are considered separated. Specifically, religious infrastructure will be shown as manifesting points of convergence of divine and occult realms, mundane tools and technologies, governmental projects, and transregional dynamics, in ways that can be both empowering and perturbing.

Throughout this exploration of the religious infrastructures of the contemporary, I engage with the rich case studies featured in this collection of essays – which take us to monasteries, radio stations, residential neighbourhoods, digital rooms, urban compounds, imagined dungeons – as well as with my own work on the subject of places,

environments, implements, and the logistical orderings of Muslim life in Russia's Idel-Ural region (Benussi 2021a, 2021c, 2022).

Infrastructures of the contemporary

It has long been recognised that a link exists between infrastructural projects and the modernist ethos ushered in by the industrial revolution, the consolidation of nation-states, and European colonialism from the eighteenth through the twentieth century (Edwards 2003; Hirsh, Ki Che Leung, and Nakayama 2020; Larkin 2008; Rubenstein 2010). Of course, this seeming commonplace should be taken with a pinch of salt: large-scale infrastructural projects are at least as old as the earliest statelike ('hydraulic') polities, which as early as several millennia ago relied on aqueducts, roads, currency systems to exist. Even small-scale communities may well be – and indeed have been – part of larger networks of communication and exchange endowed with infrastructural characteristics. Humans, after all, are 'natural-born organisers',[1] hence all societies produce and rely on infrastructural arrangements. And yet, there is no denying that the past couple of centuries have witnessed the global proliferation of larger, more ambitious and more capillary than ever infrastructural arrangements, often taken as epitomes of the modernist aspirations of whole populations.

One characteristic of the high-modern infrastructural vision is its oft-unprocessed secularist bent. Of course, large infrastructures can and do take on an enchanted aura (Harvey and Knox 2012) – not least because of the mystique imbuing the state entities behind them (Taussig 1997). But on account of the distinctly secular/evolutionist bent of the 'modernist infrastructural ideal' (Strebel, Fürst, and Bovet 2019, 12), the kind of civil, military, industrial, or financial assemblages associated with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' infrastructural expansion rarely possess a recognisably religious dimension, and have not unfrequently been seen as 'inherently antireligious' (Larkin 2008, 104).

While even the infrastructural secularity of dams, roads and radios has always been more fragile than 'classical' modernisers might have thought (Larkin 2008), the kind of assemblages discussed here under the rubric of religious infrastructures can be seen as pertaining to a distinct (and distinctly 'late', to use the terminology of Adorno and Said) moment ambiguously located both 'within' and 'after' modernity: a phase, and an ethos, that following Paul Rabinow I frame as 'the contemporary'. Albeit no less reliant on an infrastructural organisation, and indeed intensely infrastructurally saturated, the contemporary ethos appears less beholden to secularist assumptions than the classical modernist one (Casanova 2008; Taylor 2002; recall Rabinow's quip about 'tradition' being paired with modernity).

In my work on Islam in post-Soviet Russia, I focus on infrastructural formations that appear distinctly contemporary: for example, the proliferation of systemic arrangements underpinning pious self-cultivation in the sphere of consumption. Post-Soviet piety movements reveal a distinct 'post-Islamist' (and hence post-modernist, or contemporary) bent, in the sense that rather than focusing on the Islamisation of society and the state structures through mass mobilisation, these trends emphasise personal conduct and the subjective Islamisation of the nooks and crannies of everyday life across multiple scales and domains (consumption, leisure, retail, manufacturing, import-export, certification, etc.). Relatedly, I have observed (Benussi 2021c; cf. Tayob's 2020 insightful remarks on

halal practices as neoliberal) that the proliferation of an everyday halal infrastructure only becomes needed in a post-secular (and hence post-modern) ecosystem which is: a) complex, multi-scalar, and infrastructurally organised; and b) ethically disaggregated and largely governed by temporal principles, making the presence of the presence of visual markings identifying halal goods and services all the more necessary. Researching Tatarstan's Islamic heritage, I have come across infrastructural practices and projects that, albeit different from the halal assemblage, appear to be similarly indebted to a contemporary ethos. The willingness itself, on the part of state apparatuses, to turn to Tatarstan's Islamically connoted past as an area of infrastructural intervention is noteworthy in a context, the former USSR, in which the authorities' modernist vision had often entailed the marginalisation – if not the active uprooting – of religion.

I certainly do not want to overstate my case by suggesting that religious infrastructures *exclusively* pertain to a narrow and specific time frame. As mentioned above, religion, especially organised Axial religions like Islam and Christianity, has long relied upon infrastructural arrangements. For example, Nicholas Lackenby's contribution to this collection explores a religious infrastructure of networked monasteries in the Balkans that was built in the medieval period, while Sophia Schäfer's work on a mission compound in India points towards a wave of evangelisation efforts that took place at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In work published elsewhere, Yanti Hoelzchen frames mosques as infrastructures for the circulation of spiritual knowledge (Hoelchzen 2021): an analytical take that, albeit particularly compelling in a post-socialist scenario of religious revival, could easily be applied to earlier periodisations in the history of Islam.

Yet, the transformations triggered by the great technical revolutions of the past couple of centuries, from concrete to the internet, have profoundly altered the scope, complexity, and pervasiveness of our lifeworld's infrastructural landscape. It is uncontroversial to state that never before have so many humans relied on such expansive, interconnected and logistically articulated arrangements (technologies, procedures, supply chains, software, etc.) to lead what are understood to be 'normal' lives. This also concerns normal *religious* lives and the countless declinations thereof, from keeping places of worship functional to staying in touch among congregants, from going on pilgrimage to purchasing ritual paraphernalia, food, and so on. In this collection, such reliance on infrastructural arrangements is powerfully exemplified by Murtala Ibrahim's discussion of digital infrastructure's role in the circulation of religious knowledge among Salafi pietists in Nigeria – where a host of privately owned devices function as the vital knots of an immaterial but intensely vibrant social network of piety – and Genevieve Nrenzah's account of the infrastructural augmentation of traditional religious sites in Ghana.

In contrast to the top-down approach to infrastructure that was (and remains) typical of a secular-modernist ideal, cases such as Nelly Babere and Aneth Massawe's – in which revivalist congregations' do-it-yourself urban interventions overlap with and chafe against residential infrastructure in a Dar es Salaam ward – suggest that religious infrastructures often proliferate interstitially, from the bottom up, driven by processes of grassroots spirituality that elude centralised planning (see Babere, Messawe and Benussi, this collection). This, as their contribution shows, may have upsetting effects on secular-modernist configurations of urban space which require the intervention of more traditional, top-down infrastructure providers to clearly demarcate 'sacred' sites from 'religiously neutral' public space.

Moving from physical environments to digital ones, spontaneousness is also key to contemporary rhizomatic cyberspaces that rely on the input and active contributions of independent if interconnected users – although Ibrahim's contribution, perceptively, does not fail to point out the role of algorithms in structuring translocal, scalar Islamic cyberspaces. Sometimes, the staggeringly intricate interconnectivity, infrastructural saturation, and powerful enchantments that characterise contemporary lifeworlds shows a darker side, as Patrick Desplat's contribution on 'occult infrastructure' effectively illustrates. In this Malagasy study, Desplat evidences how the drivers/embodiments of an opaque contemporary empyrean (wealthy tourists, foreign investors, and cosmopolitan Malagasy who have forgone 'the ways of the ancestors'), and above all its infrastructural manifestations (lavish houses, obstructing walls, high-tech building, odd contraptions), become catalysts for suspicion and spiritually charged tension on the part of those barred from it. Just like modernity, the contemporary is not without its share of discontent.

Amid this variety of manifestations on the ground, the framework of religious infrastructure we have explored in this collection of essays is uniquely well-suited to capture the intertwinement of two dimensions that run so powerfully across the latter-day world that has emerged from the modern moment, i.e. logistical complexity and spiritual intensity, while disturbing modernist a-prioris about religion vs secularity and locality vs globality. We believe this makes it a profoundly valuable addition to the toolbox of an emerging social analysis of the contemporary.

Infrastructures of coevality

A conceptual focus on the contemporary grants insight into what might be called perceptions and imaginations of *coevality*, and how infrastructures anchor or reinforce them. In her wonderfully insightful discussion of infrastructures as 'timescapes', Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi has observed that 'multiple temporal relationships are, more or less successfully, *synchronised* in the work of infrastructure construction, maintenance and mundane utilisation' (2019, 7, emphasis added). Building on this intuition, I advance that the timescapes of religious infrastructure can, when successful, achieve coevality, which here I take to mean affective contemporaneousness, in at least three modes: connection, consolidation, and enablement.

Of course, these are classical themes in infrastructural studies. Connectivity is the main function of 'typical' infrastructural projects such as bridges, roads, or telecommunication networks. Consolidation is implicit in the habitual routines that infrastructures (allow people to) perform, even though what is most discussed in the literature tends to be the exceptions that prove the rule: the faults, interruptions, and unpredicted accidents that belie the dependability of a system (burst pipes, disrupted underground lines etc.) (Humphrey 2003; Joniak-Lüthi 2020). Lastly, the enabling quality of infrastructure has long been recognised: infrastructures are a special type of formations ('material conditions of possibility', see Venkatesan et al. 2018, 2) that allow people to get things done.

In these pages, I want to give a temporal reading of these three functions through the lens of coevality: hence, I take connectivity to mean the synchronising of a present with another present; consolidation as making an imagined past coeval with the present; and enablement as making the present coeval with a possible future. I argue that all three temporal vectors are relevant to the infrastructures of religion. Coevality in this sense does

not pertain to the sequential, accidental domain of *chronos* (one's measurable position along the arrow of time, understood as a base quantity in physics), but to the experiential realm of *kairos*: the 'fitting time', a 'season' that people are called to share. A corollary to this observation is the fact that, in our infrastructurally saturated *kairos*, 'denying coevalness' to certain demographics, normally defined by faith, is much more complicated that is has been under classical modernity paradigms (Fabian [1983] 2014). The shifting sands of the contemporary hinder any plausible chance to 'steal' history from groups and communities that, while reclaiming the label of 'traditional', can no longer be confined to the sluggish lowest rungs of a crumbling modernist hierarchy of progress (Goody 2006).

Connectivity

In the case of Islamic piety (Benussi 2021c, 2021b), halal networks can be seen as synchronising the presents of different Muslim communities into a common realm of operability that interlinks consumers, producers, auditors, and specialists from different corners of the world which have long been remote and poorly connected. This common space is defined by fluxes, both rapid and stable, of goods as well as ideas and technologies. In a very real sense, reticular halal infrastructure connects the experience of Muslim consumers in Tatarstan to that of producers of halal goods in other parts of the world (for example, Turkey), to that of certification agencies in yet other corners of the globe (say, Malaysia), and so on. Analogously, connectivity is a primary purpose of the Salafi online networks discussed by Murtala Ibrahim in his study: between rank-and-file Muslims with each other, across local and national scales, as well as between segments of the worldwide *ummah* with the global hubs of Salafi theology (which, however, has become increasingly deterritorialised).

The contribution by Sophia Schäfer illustrates a different infrastructural organisation: the hub, rather than the network. The centralised and concentric arrangement of the mission compound, and its key function for the Christian residents, provides a focus of centripetal connectivity that holds the collective together in the face of a turbulent 'outside'. In this case the material assemblage of the compound generates a specific communitarian *kairos* that evinces, most evidently, in ritual time – punctuated by the rhythm of worship, bible reading, and community ceremonies such as the 'meeting of all' (*gram sabha*) – but also in the less regimented pulsations of everyday sociality, conversations, and food exchanges. The compound's quiet, regulated temporality contrasts with what is described as a nerve-shaking, subtly (and sometimes openly) threatening frenzy of the outside urban space: the mission compound appears to deliberately put itself out of synch vis-a-vis the external temporality, while at the same time remaining, at least potentially, linked with an archipelago of missions/hubs sharing in a similar temporality.

The flipside of connection is exclusion: in Schäfer's case, framed as 'protection' from potentially threatening religious out-groups. Exclusion can also express itself along class and status lines. Desplat's contribution dwells on how the privacy-sheltering infrastructural arrangements of wealthy Malagasy's European-style houses (fences, buffer spaces, soundproof walls) connect their owner with a cosmopolitan horizon while, at the same time, denying access to poorer neighbours. Access is denied not merely to whatever goes

on behind those gates, but, crucially, to a simultaneously desirable and spiritually fraught (late) modern temporality increasingly distant from 'the way of the ancestors'.

The infrastructural domain, then, confirms itself as a key crucible of temporal, moral, and spiritual *mis*alignment or *re*alignment. A striking example of religious infrastructures synchronising long-disjoined presents into a shared *kairos* can be found in Genevieve Nrenzah's discussion of the infrastructural rejuvenation of traditional shrines in Ghana. In West Africa like in other post-colonial settings, traditional religions have long been relegated into the past, marginalised by evolutionist chronologies, in short, denied coevality (Wolf [1982] 2010). Their present was not the same as 'the moderns'. The perceived flimsiness of the materials used by traditional religionists – blood, animal remains, twiggy woodwork – has been unfavourably contrasted with the sturdiness of Axial religions' places of worship. Nrenzah's intriguing piece chronicles how the infrastructuring of traditional shrines through concrete, tiles, electrical wiring, roadside billboards, and social networking produces a narrowing of the kairologic gap between shrine and cathedral, ancestral faith and text-based theology. By means of daring infrastructural assertions, Nrenzah shows, traditional faiths claim a connection to the emergence of an African contemporary.

Consolidation

Religious infrastructure's power of anchoring the past onto the present is powerfully exemplified by projects of renovation, restoration, and buttressing of spiritually connoted remnants. Religious heritage-making often relies heavily on infrastructural dynamics. In my Tatarstani field site, for example, the process of consolidation of formerly crumbling vestiges of bygone generations has generated extremely visible results (Benussi 2021b). The archaeological site of Bolğar, ancient capital of a Mediaeval Turkic-Muslim polity of great symbolic resonance for the region's Tatars, underwent a series of particularly dramatic overhauls since *perestroika* in the late 1980s. By the mid-2010s, the complex had morphed into a vibrant regional tourist destination endowed with UNESCO World Heritage site status and complete with the necessary attendant infrastructure. In addition to being bombastically restored, the complex has come to include a new riverport, a grand new mosque, a large museum plus several smaller exhibition areas, multiple cafes and souvenir stalls, an Islamic Academy, riverside promenades, a massive hotel/resort, large parking areas, a network of motorable roads and pedestrian paths connecting all the above, and even an airstrip. Bolğar stands as a powerful example of how infrastructural rejuvenation can harness the affective potency of religious pasts to the political ends of (secular) state-making in the present.

The consolidation of the past into the present features most evidently in this collection in the work of Nicholas Lackenby on the translocal assemblage made up of Serbian Orthodox monasteries in the Balkan peninsula. As mentioned above, Lackenby's case illustrates that religious infrastructures are not inherently or necessarily 'new'. A persuasive argument can be made that an infrastructural dimension has always pertained to Serbia's coenobitic framework, in the sense that these sites – not just as individual sites, but precisely as a set of interconnected items distributed across a large area – have long provided the material underpinning for a Christian life (not only in a strictly religious sense, but also in a communitarian one) in this part of the Balkans. From

a contemporary viewpoint, however, this assemblage appears to have taken on novel connotations as an infrastructure – in one of his interlocutors' words, a 'foundation' – supporting continuity between the present and the past, as well as between a secularised lifeworld and an imaginary of sacred history.

Lackenby emphasises that while some devout churchgoers do access this infrastructure in the context of an ethical engagement with doctrinal Christianity, to many Serbians the affordative potential of monasteries has to do with their 'perceived antiquity' and the 'holy tradition' they materialise. It is unsurprising, then, that Serbian Orthodox monasteries should become incorporated into national and international heritage regimes. Also noteworthy is the distinctive tempo associated with the monastic sphere: slower, quieter than 'regular' time. This appears analogous to the Odisha compound's case discussed by Schäfer, and might not be the only point of similarity. Although Schäfer does not especially single this aspect out, indeed, consolidation also plays a role in her case study, as the mission church – explicitly described as 'the oldest religious building in town' – physically manifests the continuous presence of the Lutheran Christian community over a century in the face of a volatile and often hostile environment. These two cases contrast with Nrenzah's discussion of Ghanaian traditional shrines: although, in this case, practitioners' spiritual practices are understood (by out-groups) as archaic, the new infrastructure is meant to convey the same sense of 'modernity' and future-readiness as Christian and Islamic houses of worship.

Enablement

This leads us to the third vector I wish to explore in this section, i.e. future-orientation. The literature on infrastructure has long recognised a connection between infrastructural projects and affects of expectation and hope (particularly, of course, modernist ones: cf. Joniak-Lüthi 2019; Maertens 2019; Reeves 2017), and this is no less true of the infrastructures of religion (Hoelchzen 2021): in this case, the *kairos* brought about by infrastructural contraptions is a time pregnant with openings and calls for further action.

For users of what I have called halal infrastructure, such a future-orientation frequently takes the shape of aspirations for self-perfecting under the aegis of a religious teleology. In the context of contemporary Islamic piety, a virtually limitless variety of infrastructural affordances – from halal-certified manufacturing machines, to Islamic banking tools, to the humble bidet hose (and even unmarked items such as exercise and cycling tools, cf. Benussi 2022) – play an important role in enabling pietists' cultivational work towards a spiritual *telos*. Such telos can be both individual and collective: in the case of Islamic banking and halal business, for instance, visions of reform often discursively extend to the global economy (Rudnyckyj 2019).

A future-orientation is, of course, also manifest across many of the examples discussed by the contributors to this collection of studies. Ibrahim's contribution illustrates how Salafi-minded Nigerians mobilise IT resources to enhance exposure to guidance that can be used transformatively, to reform lives and unlock the rightful path. Lackenby's monastery-goers look after the past, but many of them also envision, and through their infrastructural engagements strive towards, scenarios that are yet to come – be it the Kingdom of God, *theosis*, or liberation from sin for devout Orthodox Christians, or an idealised Greater Serbia for nationalists. Lackenby's case shows how multiple future-

orientations as well as other temporal directionalities may intertwine and embed themselves within the same infrastructural assemblage (cf. Hoelchzen 2021). Many Pentecostal-Charismatic communities, including some of those featured in the works of Nrenzah and Babere, Massawe and Benussi, are invested in the idea of an imminent Second Coming. By contrast, for Christian communities experiencing a feeling of besiegement, like the Orishan Lutherans in Schäfer's contribution, an investment in the future might take the shape of more immanent hopes: of thriving or at the very least long-term survival.

Furthermore, a future/orientation is implicit in the large-scale infrastructural projects concerning hubs of worship (ancient and new, restored or freshly built), whose sheer vastness and imposingness may convey an impression of permanence that defies time.[2] Fascinatingly, Nrenzah's contribution shows how Protestants in Ghana appear invested in replicating the Catholic-derived format of the 'cathedral', perhaps in part because of the impressions of substantiality, durability, and future-proofness that the grandiose layout of medieval cathedrals conveys.[3] It must be added, however, that the futurities that come into play through and in religious infrastructures are not always rosy and desirable: Patrick Desplat's analysis of 'occult infrastructures' in Madagascar reveals wounded temporalities in which the future is not experienced as pregnant with possibilities but rife with anxieties and obscure terrors. From the fear of sudden economic downfall to the fear of being exploited even after death by unscrupulous organ poachers, the dark forebodings of marginalised constituencies attach themselves to ruins, sinister places, unattainable objects, and obstructing architectures that simultaneously hide and manifest a looming, threatening convolution.

Infrastructures of contemporaneousness

The final iteration of the concept of the contemporary that I wish to discuss pertains to how religious infrastructures connect – i.e. *render contemporaneous* – domains as different as technology, spirituality, ethics, economy, and so on (see also Kirby, in this collection). The array of processes that go under the name of 'modernisation' have been analytically described as entailing the disaggregation of increasingly independent 'spheres' of value and experience such as politics, production, leisure, intimacy, and so on (Benussi 2021c; Robbins 2007; cf.; Weber 1946a, 1946b). This reading is a compelling one, and one may add that each of these spheres has in turn generated and come to rely on its own infrastructural arrangements: governmental infrastructure for politics, industrial infrastructure for production, consumption infrastructure for leisure, domestic and wellness infrastructure for intimacy, and so on. Similarly, such separation had a temporal effect with the separation of office hours and free time, the current character of elections and public ceremonies, etc.

Except, of course, things are not quite so simple. The inescapable intertwinement of the above-mentioned infrastructural arrangements suffices to belie any notion of hard-and-fast boundaries separating the spheres of value and experience that make up social life. It would be absurd to consider infrastructures of consumption in isolation from those of production, governmental machinery as removed from the infrastructural domain of body and home, and so on. This does not necessarily undermine the analytical cogency of 'sphere separation' as a theoretical model, but highlights the dynamics that make those domains very much intertwined in real-life settings. To frame religious infrastructure as

a figure of the contemporary, then, allows us to foreground the processes by which the arrangements that came to define the modern era are 'declustered, reconfigured, and differently stylised' (Rabinow 2008, 3) – in particular as regards religion's relationship with other spheres of experience.

In the 'sphere separation' model, the religious sphere is increasingly independent of the others, which in modernist secularisation theory (cf. Casanova 2008, 2009) corresponds to processes of privatisation of faith, separation of church and state, and siloing of 'sacred time' into specific slots for worship. As I have discussed elsewhere (Benussi 2021c), however, religious piety can be a powerful force bringing different spheres under a common matrix – witness Muslim pietists' attempts to 'halalify' business, free time, civic as well as private life, and so forth – although such recomposition is not without its paradoxes and frustrations. In fact, religious infrastructure often exists at the points of overlap between spheres of experience. In other words, it enables contemporaneousness across would-be ideologically, spatially, and temporally distinct domains. Halal infrastructure anchors Islamic ethics onto/across domains of production, consumption, science and technology, jurisprudence (secular and religion), highlighting the co-imbrication of these (Fischer 2017; Tayob 2020). *Fiqhi* debates on religious permissibility (which a secularist perspective might be tempted to dismiss as 'a thing of the past', or otherwise remote from science and business) are made directly contemporaneous with molecular analysis (Tayob 2019), consumer protection legislation (Serrano 2020), finance and banking (Rudnyckyj 2019; Tobin 2016). The same could be said of the activities of 'cyber-imams' (see Ibrahim, in this collection) which make technology contemporaneous with theology, or Serbia's monastery network, which synchronises spirituality, geopolitics, and leisure.

The infrastructural realignment of spheres is not always and necessarily devoid of complications. A poignant discussion of the latter scenario can be found in the Tanzanian urban landscapes analysed by Babere, Massawe and Benussi, in which grassroots-built religious infrastructure and residential spaces overlap a bit *too much*, disrupting secularist arrangements confining religion within the ambit of the sacred. In the infrastructural jumble of Dar es Salaam's Sinza ward, religious sounds escape a poorly insulated religious sphere and turn into 'noise', while devotional activities seep out into everyday spaces interfering with business, study, and rest. From the point of view of the reform movements, the escape from the silo of the sacred is likely to be a sign of dynamism. From the point of view of secular out-groups, the encroachment of religion onto spaces and soundscapes – both private and communitarian – deemed a-religious is perceived as infrastructural breakdown. Insufficient insulation between domains will result in *excessive* contemporaneousness, provoking a clash between the rhythms of religious activity and the sleeping schedule of neighbours.

Desplat's reflections on occult infrastructure also point towards the discontents of infrastructural synchronisation – or perceived synchronisation – but from a different angle. In his Malagasy case, the overlap of (dysfunctional) politics, (rapacious) economy, (uncontrollable) technology, labour (extracted from Malagasy people), and leisure (of tourists) takes place in a zone of opacity beyond the ability of many to make satisfactory sense of it. Unusual infrastructural contraptions, such as a dilapidated radio station or obstructive barriers surrounding luxurious living quarters, materialise this opacity both directly and indirectly (witness the radio station's fabled high-tech underground dungeons and secret tunnels). In this case, contemporaneousness –

with global capitalism, post-colonial structures, demanding foreign visitors, and westernisation processes – is *endured*, inflicted upon actors on the ground from the top down, rather than pursued on Malagasy terms. Desplat's occult infrastructures thus reveal the sinister, uncanny quality of global dissonance: his contribution, like Babere, Massawe and Benussi's, provides an excellent opportunity for the reader of this collection of essays to appreciate the darker sides of our infrastructurally dense contemporary.

Conclusion

Through this rich collection of cases and our broader individual investigations into contemporary sociotechnical manifestations of religious life, our shared endeavour aspires to push the envelope of the current 'infrastructural moment' in anthropology and the social sciences at large. By bridging (quite a fitting infrastructural move!) the gap between analytical discourses on infrastructure and religion, we hope to offer new insights into the sacred, the profane, the secular, the uncanny, the moral, the spiritual, and whatever else may lay beyond these categories – or between them. We are confident that this collective effort is but the beginning of a conversation that will hopefully interest social analysts and religious studies practitioners working on religion through the lens of materiality, media, and technology, as well as students of roads, buildings, logistics, and urban forms.

This line of investigation is not necessarily relevant solely to specialists in either religion or infrastructure. As I hope to have illustrated in these pages, thinking infrastructurally about religious movements and developments the world over may also be a necessary component of a broader project of mapping of the contemporary – within, beyond, and against the paradigms of modernity. At its most ambitious, then, this project aspires to inspire novel and meaningful conversations about the elusive, contradictory *kairos* of which we are all part.

Notes

1. I gratefully borrow this expression from Brian Larkin, who made that point during a discussion at the 'Religious Infrastructure' conference in Accra, Ghana, in June 2023.
2. I am thankful to David Sneath for the conversation during which this point was elaborated.
3. The Accra project likely carries links to Nigeria's interdenominational National Christian Centre in Abuja, informally known as 'National Cathedral', as well as echoing, more generally, mainline Protestant churches that retain the cathedral format or title, with or without an episcopal hierarchy.

Acknowledgements

I thank my co-editors, Ben Kirby and Yanti Hoelzchen, and all the contributors to this collection of essays for this extremely exciting intellectual adventure. The writing of this afterword was made possible by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement 843901. The project methodologies and output, including this contribution, has received ethical clearance by Ca Foscari University's Ethical Board.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Matteo (Teo) Benussi is an anthropologist specialising in religion and politics in post-socialist Eurasia and beyond. Currently an assistant professor (RTDb) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, he received his training at the Universities of Venice, Cambridge, and California, Berkeley. Teo's current work deals with Islamic piety movements and the politics of virtue amongst Muslims in Tatarstan (Russia), with a special focus on spatial manifestations of ethical and devotional life. Teo has also researched vernacular Orthodox Christianity, morality, memory, and place-making in post-Chernobyl Ukraine.

ORCID

Matteo (Teo) Benussi http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9166-036X

References

Anand, N., A. Gupta, and H. Appel, eds. 2018. *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Benussi, M. 2021a. "Pietaskscapes of Halal Living: Subjectivity, Striving, and Space-Making in Muslim Russia." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44 (10): 1821–1843. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1856904.

Benussi, M. 2021b. "The Golden Cage: Heritage, (Ethnic) Muslimness, and the Place of Islam in Post-Soviet Tatarstan." *Religion, State & Society* 49 (4–5): 314–330. https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2021.1994846.

Benussi, M. 2021c. "Halal Headaches: Post-Cultural Islam in Tatarstan." In *Cultures of Islam: Vernacular Traditions and Revisionist Interpretations Across Russia*, edited by M. Laruelle and J. Schmoller, 37–46. Washington DC: The George Washington University Central Asia Program.

Benussi, M. 2022. "Ethical Infrastructure: Halal and the Ecology of Askesis in Muslim Russia." *Anthropological Theory* 22 (3): 294–316. https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996211059724.

Casanova, J. 2008. "Public Religions Revisited." In *Religion: Beyond the Concept*, edited by H. de Vries, 101–119. New York: Fordham University Press.

Casanova, J. 2009. "The Secular and Secularisms." *Social Research* 76 (4): 1049–1066. https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2009.0064.

Croce, B. 1917. *Teoria e Storia della Storiografia*. Bari: Laterza.

Edwards, P. N. 2003. "Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems." In *Modernity and Technology*, edited by M. Thomas, P. Brey, and A. Feenberg, 185–225. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Fabian, J. (1983) 2014. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Fischer, J. 2017. *Islam, Standards, and Technoscience: In Global Halal Zones*. London: Routledge.

Goody, J. 2006. *The Theft of History*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gupta, A. 2018. "The Future in Ruins: Thoughts on the Temporality of Infrastructure." In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, edited by N. Anand, A. Gupta, and H. Appel, 62–79. Durham: Duke University Press.

Harvey, P., and H. Knox. 2012. *Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hirsh, M., A. Ki Che Leung, and I. Nakayama. 2020. "Infrastructure, Modernity, and the Technologies of Everyday Life: Insights from a Collaborative Research Project on the Making of Modern East

Asia." *East Asian Science, Technology & Society: An International Journal* 14 (3): 507–520. https://doi.org/10.1215/18752160-8698160.
Hoelchzen, Y. 2021. "Mosques as Religious Infrastructure: Muslim Selfhood, Moral Imaginaries and Everyday Sociality." *Central Asian Survey* 41 (2): 368–384. 22 November. https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2021.1979468.
Hoelzchen, Y., and B. Kirby. 2020. "Introduction: Conceptualising Religious Infrastructures." In *Paper Presented at Conceptualising Religious Infrastructures Workshop, Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology*, Germany: Goethe University Frankfurt. September 24. Unpublished.
Humphrey, C. 2003. "Rethinking Infrastructure: Siberian Cities and the Great Freeze of January 2001." In *Wounded Cities: Destruction and Reconstruction in a Globalized World*, edited by J. Schneider and I. Susser, 91–107. Oxford: Berg.
Joniak-Lüthi, A. 2019. "Introduction: Infrastructure as an Asynchronic Timescape." *Roadsides* 1:3–10. https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-20190012.
Joniak-Lüthi, A. 2020. "A Road, a Disappearing River and Fragile Connectivity in Sino-Inner Asian Borderlands." *Political Geography* 78:102–122. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102122.
Karpov, V. 2013. "Desecularization: A Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Church and State* 52 (2): 232–270. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csq058.
Larkin, B. 2008. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
Maertens, C. 2019. "Back to the Future: The Aftermath of Soviet Modernity in Tajikistan's Pamirs." *Roadsides* 1:28–34. https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-20190017.
Marcus, G. 2014. "How 'An Anthropology of the Contemporary' Dwells . . .." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (3): 564–566. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12122.
Partridge, C. 2005. *The Re-Enchantment of the West (Volume 1): Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*. London/NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
Rabinow, P. 2008. *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press.
Rabinow, P., G. Marcus, J. Faubion, and T. Rees. 2008. *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
Ramakrishnan, K., K. O'Reilly, and J. Budds. 2020. "The Temporal Fragility of Infrastructure: Theorizing Decay, Maintenance, and Repair." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4 (3): 674–695. https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848620979712.
Reeves, M. 2017. "Infrastructural Hope: Anticipating 'Independent Roads' and Territorial Integrity in Southern Kyrgyzstan." *Ethnos* 82 (4): 711–737. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2015.1119176.
Robbins, J. 2007. "Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Cultural Change." *Ethnos* 72 (3): 293–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141840701576919.
Rubenstein, M. 2010. *Public Work: Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
Rudnyckyj, D. 2019. *Beyond Debt: Islamic Experiments in Global Finance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Serrano, S. 2020. "Bacon or Beef? 'Fake' Halal Scandals in the Russian Federation: Consolidating Halal Norms Through Secular Courts." *Sociology of Islam* 8 (3–4): 387–408. https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-08030002.
Strebel, I., M. Fürst, and A. Bovet. 2019. "Making Time in Maintenance Work." *Roadsides* 1:11–17. https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-20190013.
Taussig, M. 1997. *The Magic of the State*. London/New York: Routledge.
Taylor, C. 2002. *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
Tayob, S. 2019. "Molecular Halal Producing, Debating, and Evading Halal Certification in South Africa." In *Insatiable Appetite: Food as Cultural Signifier in the Middle East and Beyond*, edited by K. Dimitriev, J. Hauser, and B. Orfali, 100–118. Leiden: Brill.
Tayob, S. 2020. "The Material Semiotics of Halal: Neoliberal Islam in Practice." *Anthropological Theory Commons*. April 12. https://www.at-commons.com/2020/04/12/the-material-semiotics-of-halal-neoliberal-islam-in-practice/

Tobin, S. 2016. *Everyday Piety: Islam and Economy in Jordan*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
Venkatesan, S., L. Bear, P. Harvey, S. Lazar, L. Rival, and A. Simone. 2018. "Attention to Infrastructure Offers a Welcome Reconfiguration of Anthropological Approaches to the Political." *Critique of Anthropology* 38 (1): 3–52.
Weber, M. 1946a. "Politics as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, 77–128. New York: Oxford University Press.
Weber, M. 1946b. "Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. Hans Gerth and C. W. Mills, 323–362. New York: Oxford University Press.
Wolf, E. [1982] 2010. *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.