

INTRODUCTION

ON AWE: SEMANTIC FAULTLINES AND THE AFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE OF PARADIGMATIC SHIFTS

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In the affective architecture of human experience, awe occupies an interstitial semantic space wherein the limits of language, perception, and cognition are both suspended and reconstituted. Neither strictly definable nor entirely ineffable, awe is a liminal affect that simultaneously destabilizes and realigns the semiotic structures by which subjects orient themselves in the world. This volume, gathering contributions to the panel “On Awe” held at EUARE 2024 (Palermo) within the Bruno Kessler Foundation’s 2024 research theme *(Dis)Enchantment in Religion and Ethics*, interrogates awe not merely as an emotion but as a psycho-social and psycho-cultural vector through which the undifferentiated — what Agamben might call the “whatever-being” — is momentarily staged. In its capacity to disarticulate established patterns of sense-making, awe emerges as a condition of possibility for what Thomas Kuhn termed paradigmatic transitions: it does not “belong” to a paradigm, but rather perforates its coherence, allowing new epistemic configurations to precipitate. The essays in this collection exemplify how awe functions as a semantic hinge in fields as diverse as theology, ritual practice, digital media, and biotechnology.

Nicholas Buck’s essay explores awe as a metaphysical and epistemic experience rather than a functional emotion. He argues that awe suspends the subject’s habitual posture of concern, rendering it receptive to the givenness and intrinsic value of objects and of existence itself. Drawing on thinkers such as Marion, Heschel, Marcel, and Desmond,

Buck shows that awe destabilizes the self as origin and reveals it instead as a recipient. This receptivity, he contends, discloses the abundance and gratuitousness of being. Awe thus becomes a source of insight that should inform both our understanding of the world and our ethical orientation within it.

Arkaprava Chattopadhyay's essay interrogates the techno-ritualistic metamorphosis of Durga Puja during the Covid-19 pandemic as a paradigmatic instance of the mediatization, digital secularization, and ethno-semantic reconfiguration of Hindu religious practice. Combining traditional and digital ethnography with a social semiotic framework, the study examines how immersive technologies — VR sanctums, AR filters, livestreamed rituals, and digital performative aesthetics — generated a digitally constructed grandeur that invoked awe while simultaneously unsettling traditional sacerdotal hierarchies. Through granular analysis of user engagement, symbolic participation, and communal negotiation, the paper reveals a hermeneutic hybridization wherein virtual rituality not only preserved spiritual catharsis under constraint but also redefined sacred space as algorithmically mediated and universally accessible. Theologically, this shift disrupted caste and ritual exclusivity while aesthetically amplifying the festival's mythological imaginaries through digital opulence and transmedia symbolism. Ultimately, the study posits that the digital augmentation of Durga Puja was not a contingency-bound adaptation, but a constitutive transformation that rearticulates the ontosemantic fabric of ritual in the networked age.

Accursio Graffeo's essay examines the entangled trajectories of science and religion through the lens of awe, proposing that contemporary AI- and technology-centered new religious movements function as narrative ecosystems in which metaphysical and empirical paradigms coalesce. Tracing a genealogy from Copernican decentering to quantum cosmology and the anthropic principle, the essay maps the progressive erosion of human exceptionalism and the concurrent re-emergence of transcendence in technological imaginaries. The study analyzes movements such as the Turing Church and Theta Noir as proto-religious assemblages wherein digital eschatologies, posthuman soteriologies, and techno-animistic ontologies converge to reconfigure the sacred under conditions of informational abstraction. These phenomena

are interpreted as semiotic incubators of synthetic religiosity — composite structures that re-inscribe spiritual meaning within algorithmic cosmologies, speculative science, and collective imaginaries of the singularity. Ultimately, the essay suggests that awe operates as the epistemic and affective hinge enabling a rearticulation of the sacred in post-metaphysical technoculture.

Sara Hejazi's essay articulates a bold anthropological and epistemological reframing of human centrality through the lens of quantum theory, arguing that the historical "awe of displacement" induced by scientific decentering is now being countervailed by a participatory ontology. Tracing a trajectory from paleoanthropology to quantum physics, she destabilizes both theological and Darwinian hierarchies, proposing that the observer effect repositions human cognition as an ontic operator within the fabric of physical reality. Culture is reconceived as vibrational energy — an entangled system of symbolic, biological, and technological interactions — capable of transforming not only social structures but planetary ecosystems. Within this framework, the Anthropocene emerges not as a symptom of human hubris but as a moment demanding a recalibration of agency grounded in quantum entanglement and ethical responsibility. Hejazi's synthesis advances a radically interdisciplinary paradigm, wherein recentralization no longer entails supremacy but rather recursive participation in the co-constitution of matter, meaning, and futurity.

Giulio Mariotti's essay examines the *Shirot 'Olat HaShabbat* as a literary and theological artifact articulating a form of "realized eschatology" through ecstatic liturgical communion with angels, grounded in the precise observance of a revealed, solar-based sacred calendar. Analyzing the systematic deployment of the Hebrew root *pl'* (פלא) within the second section of the text (Songs 6–8), Mariotti demonstrates how the repetition of this lexeme — semantically linked to awe, wonder, and divine transcendence — operates as both a linguistic marker and an experiential trigger for altered states of ritual consciousness. Through the juxtaposition of disenchantment with the corrupted Jerusalem Temple and the re-enchanted angelic communion of the *yahad* community at Qumran, the essay argues that sacred temporality and linguistic liturgy merge to instantiate a performative mysticism. The repetitive stylistic

architecture of the Songs, especially the obsessive invocation of “seven-fold” praise and wondrous acts, reveals a deliberate strategy for inducing participatory entry into divine order. Ultimately, Mariotti contends that awe is not merely thematic but structurally embedded in the text as the semiotic and spiritual hinge of liturgical transformation.

Luís Neiva’s essay offers a psychoanalytic and ideological critique of Renaissance liturgical polyphony as a site of sublime corruption, revealing the structural fissures of belief within Catholic ritual. Drawing on Lacan and Žižek, the essay argues that sacred music destabilized the performative mechanisms through which objective faith was sustained, exposing a void at the heart of liturgical semiotics. Polyphony, with its fracturing of the voice and suspension of textual clarity, is read not merely as aesthetic excess but as an ontological threat that ruptures the imaginary unity of the sacred. The resulting ecclesiastical anxiety reflects not a fear of beauty *per se* but of music’s capacity to render audible the absence upon which theological certainty rests. Neiva ultimately posits that awe, in this context, emerges not from divine plenitude but from the traumatic confrontation with the sacred as lack.

Boris Rähme’s article posits that awe, while frequently interpreted through religious or spiritual lenses, is not inherently tied to either; rather, it is a cognitive–emotional response to perceived vastness that triggers a need for accommodation. Building on Keltner and Haidt’s two-component model, Rähme argues that the categorization of awe as religious, spiritual, or *tout court* (neither religious nor spiritual) depends not on the elicitor but on the conceptual resources mobilized by the subject in processing the experience. He operationalizes “religious” as involving supernatural transcendence and “spiritual” as involving self-authenticating subjectivity, thereby isolating a residual category of awe that refuses both interpretive strategies. This “awe *tout court*” remains open to empirical, secular, or agnostic frameworks of meaning-making and is thus conceptually significant for a non-confessional phenomenology of affect. Ultimately, Rähme reframes awe as a site of epistemic pluralism, where interpretive latitude reveals the underlying metaphysical predispositions of the subject rather than the essence of the emotion itself.

Finally, Tommaso Ropelato reframes awe as a pivotal lens through which to reassess reproductive–genetic biotechnologies, arguing that

awe — understood as a radical intensification of epistemic wonder — serves as both an ontological and ethical resource. Contrasting the reductionist stance of Dawkins with Einstein's reverent embrace of mystery, the paper posits awe as a modality of epistemic humility that resists both religious absolutism and technoscientific totalization. By analyzing awe's moral affordances — its capacity to decenter the self, foster intergenerational responsibility, and re-enchant human agency — Ropelato articulates a normative framework in which biotechnology does not efface, but rather amplifies, the ethical gravity of procreation. He advances a critique of liberal eugenics by positioning awe as a corrective to genetic narcissism, urging a model of self-making rooted in alterity rather than optimization. Ultimately, awe becomes not a theological relic nor a cognitive illusion, but a crucial affective infrastructure for navigating bioethical thresholds in an age of reproductive mastery.

As this collection attests, awe eludes capture yet enables transition. It is not merely an emotional reaction but a semiotic faultline — an infra-conceptual resource — through which cultural systems rupture and regenerate. In moments of profound awe, the symbolic dissolves into the real only to be reabsorbed in a new configuration, rendering this emotion not residual but constitutive of paradigmatic evolution.