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The Wristwatch and Religion: the Semiotics of Timekeeping, Tradition, and Technology

Anders Ackfeldt and Andreas Johansson Weber

1 “Research Should Be Fun, Otherwise You Are Doing It Wrong”¹

Professor Jonas Otterbeck’s oft-repeated phrase, “Research should be fun, otherwise you are doing it wrong,” shared during supervision or casual conversations, has become an inspiring informal motto for us. It has encouraged us to explore what some might perceive as unconventional connections, from the interplay between hip-hop culture and Islam (Ackfeldt 2025) to the religious motifs found in Yakuza tattoos (Johansson 2019). For us, Jonas’ words serve as a powerful reminder of the essential role that curiosity and creativity play in making any academic adventure both meaningful and engaging – a perspective that can sometimes be forgotten in the daily grind of academia.

We wrote this chapter with inspiration from Otterbeck’s motto and his work on the intersections of religion, art, music, and consumption (see, for example, Otterbeck 2021a; 2024). Here, we examine the semiotics of wristwatches in religious contexts, exploring how these timekeeping devices convey faith, tradition, and identity. By delving into this connection – a topic close to our hearts – we hope to contribute, in one way or another, to the broader conversation about how material culture mediates different perceptions of the sacred. In his article, “Finding the object of study: Islamic studies in practice,” Otterbeck discusses semiotic resources, symbols, and signs that convey meaning, which is particularly valuable for understanding how religions like Islam are constructed and interpreted. In the context of understanding watches and religion, this approach highlights that both are shaped by power dynamics and the control over meaning. Just as timekeeping systems regulate daily life and symbolize order, religious symbols and language regulate beliefs and behavior (Otterbeck 2021b).

1 Portions of this article were previously published in Swedish on www.eqotime.com (and online as part of a three-article series by the authors titled “Tid, Tro och Teknologi”).

2 Ancient Rhythms and Early Clocks – the Origins of Timekeeping and the Wristwatch

The human need to understand and structure time has been fundamental since the dawn of civilization. Early humans likely observed celestial patterns, such as the movements of the sun and moon, to comprehend and manage their daily rhythms. Archaeologist Alexander Marshack suggests that timekeeping dates back approximately 42,000 years, citing the Lebombo Bone discovered near the South Africa-Eswatini border. Featuring 29 notches, the artifact may represent an ancient lunar calendar, reflecting early humans' attempts to measure and structure time (Marshack 1972).² Regardless of its specific purpose, the Lebombo Bone underscores humanity's enduring curiosity about the patterns governing their environment.

As knowledge of celestial movements deepened, tools such as sundials and astronomical structures emerged. The origins of sundials remain unclear, as they appeared independently in various cultures. Stonehenge, dating back to 3,000 BCE in England, aligns with the sun during solstices, indicating its use as a timekeeping tool. Similarly, at the Taosi site in ancient China (c.2,300 BCE), painted sticks were used to observe shadows and measure time. These instruments not only tracked the passing hours but also played critical social roles. Often located in central areas of towns, they provided a shared sense of time, enabling organized farming, trade, and governance (Struthers 2023, 12).

In River Valley Civilizations like Mesopotamia and Egypt, some of the earliest sundials connected timekeeping with religious practices. In ancient Egypt, Amon-Re, the sun god, symbolized life, light, and cosmic order. Sundials tracked his daily journey across the sky, aligning human activities and religious ceremonies with the divine rhythms of creation and eternity by observing the sun's shadows. Egyptians connected their existence to the sacred cycles of renewal and order (Hosny 2020).

Timekeeping underwent significant evolution in medieval Europe, where mechanical clocks emerged in the 13th and 14th centuries. According to the Swedish historian Lennart Lundmark (1993), there are two explanations for why the development of watches occurred during these centuries. On one hand, there was the need to understand astronomical phenomena; on the other, monasteries needed to keep track of times for prayers (1993, 26). However, both

2 While Marshack's interpretation of the Lebombo Bone as an ancient lunar calendar is intriguing, it remains a subject of scholarly debate. Critics argue that the notches could represent something other than a structured calendar, such as tally marks for counting or symbolic representations unrelated to timekeeping (see, for example, Robinson 1992).

of these devices are often housed in churches and rely on weights and gears to measure time and astronomical events. The exact moment of the birth of the mechanical clock is shrouded in the fog of history. However, one hypothesis suggests that the mechanical clock was originally designed to regulate monastic prayers (Dohrn-van Rossum 1996).

In the Ottoman Empire, timekeeping was closely tied to Islamic traditions. “Islamic time” was based on the sun’s movements and the daily prayer schedule. While mechanical clocks initially symbolized luxury and were used privately, clock towers became prominent in the 19th century as symbols of modernization and authority (Uluengin 2010, 18). One of the first public Ottoman clock towers was built in the city of Safranbolu between 1794 and 1797. This clock was built by Grand Vizier İzzet Mehmed Pasha (1743–1812), marking a significant development in Ottoman architecture (Hadrovic 2024, 795).

By the 18th century, the watch industry was in full bloom, and mass production of pocket watches was widespread (Lundmark 1993, 102). While these early timekeeping devices are captivating, the focus for this chapter is the wristwatch – a relatively modern invention with immense cultural significance. The origins of wristwatches can be traced back to the Calvinist reforms of 16th-century Geneva. Due to religious restrictions on ornate jewelry, local jewelers shifted their attention to the practical craft of watchmaking (Struthers 2023, 48). The Swiss watch industry grew into a global standard of excellence. Religious institutions laid the groundwork for the watch industry, but it was wartime necessity that popularized the wristwatch. Soldiers found it easier to coordinate trench departures with wristwatches, leading to further technological development (Kern 2003, 8–9). The global wristwatch market was valued at \$73.1 billion in 2023, and it continues to grow, driven by luxury brands and the rise of smartwatches (Global Market Insights 2023).

As seen in this brief history, religion has long influenced the evolution of timekeeping, embedding sacred rhythms into devices from ancient sundials to modern wristwatches. These timekeeping devices express humanity’s deep connection to the passage of time, seamlessly intertwined with religious contemplation on the eternal cycle of life.

3 **The Semiotics of Wristwatches and Wristwatches as Mediators of the Sacred**

Douglas Freake’s article, “The Semiotics of Wristwatches” (1994), provides a crisp exploration of the symbolic meaning embedded in these seemingly mundane objects. Freake draws upon the work of Roland Barthes, who, in his

book *Mythologies* (1975), examined seemingly ordinary objects like steak and chips to reveal their hidden symbolic meanings. Freake agrees with Barthes that even objects with useful functions, like wristwatches, can – and should – be subject to semiotic analysis. He argues that “objects that have a self-evident practical function (like timekeeping) tend to be protected from symbolic or semiotic analysis by their very usefulness” (Freake 1994, 67). Freake believes that this very practicality can camouflage deeper symbolic meanings related to societal power dynamics and the commodification of time.

While Freake focuses on wristwatches, particularly within the workforce and advertising, his insights provide a springboard for exploring their significance in religious contexts as well. Freake highlights how advertising manipulates these meanings to create desire and sell an image of individuality. This observation raises questions about how religious institutions and/or authorities might similarly utilize wristwatches to convey messages about, for example, faith, discipline, and identity.

To further develop this argument, we find that Bruno Latour’s concept of *mediators* becomes useful. The concept of *mediators* refers to entities – human or non-human – that actively transform, translate, distort, or modify the meaning or force of what they mediate. Latour puts a *mediator* in direct opposition to an *intermediary*:

Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry. No matter how complicated an intermediary is, it may, for all practical purposes, count for just one – or even for nothing at all because it can be easily forgotten. No matter how apparently simple a mediator may look, it may become complex; it may lead in multiple directions which will modify all the contradictory accounts attributed to its role. (Latour 2005, 39)

To put it simply: an intermediary transmits information without change; inputs predict outputs. A mediator transforms, translates, and modifies, producing unpredictable, context-dependent outcomes, altering meanings and roles dynamically. For example, the input function of a wristwatch (e.g., keeping time) does not necessarily predict its output in this context. The wristwatch’s significance shifts, becoming a tool for moral discipline, a marker of faith, or a status symbol within a religious hierarchy. Its role can vary based on the specific religious traditions or the intentions of the leaders promoting its use, demonstrating how a seemingly mundane object transforms into a complex mediator of religious, sacred, and social values.

Building on the above insights from Freake and Latour, we will provide illustrative examples of wristwatches in this context. To explore how these objects

mediate perceptions of time, devotion, and the sacred, we will first present compelling examples of wristwatches designed with religious semiotics and equipped with religious applications. These examples will illustrate how their materiality and functionality communicate faith and practice. Following this, we will examine wristwatches worn by religious authorities, analyzing the contexts in which they are used and the symbolic roles they play. These examples will provide a foundation for understanding the broader semiotic and mediating roles of wristwatches in religious contexts.

4 Faith in Every Tick: the Religious Semiotics and Application of Wrist Watches

As the watch industry has grown, many prominent watchmakers have seized opportunities to develop both designs and techniques tailored to a religious market. As noted, watchmaking has historically been intertwined with religious traditions, making the move toward appealing to a religious audience a natural progression. Many renowned watchmakers have centuries-long histories and long-standing connections to religious institutions. One notable example is the luxury brand Patek Philippe, which has crafted customized



FIGURE 22.1 Patek Philippe, “Papal Purple” (Photo: hodinkee.com)



FIGURE 22.2 Jaeger-LeCoultre, Reverso (Photo: Alekswatches)

timepieces in “Papal Purple” with faceted gold batons for the upper echelons of the Catholic Church (Reardon 2013).

Another early example of watchmakers developing watches for a religious community comes from the 1930s, when Jaeger-LeCoultre launched its Reverso model. Initially, buyers could customize the watch according to their preferences. The watch’s popularity among British polo players in India contributed to its widespread appeal across the Indian subcontinent, which was a British colony at the time. This led to the watch becoming popular among the Indian elite, with images of Maharajas soon adorning wristwatches. Later, Jaeger-LeCoultre took this practice further by designing the backs of the watches with images of Hindu gods. One example of this is a Reverso decorated with a miniature painting of the Hindu deity Krishna, one of the main gods of Indian mythology and a prominent incarnation of the god Vishnu (Mazzardo 2024).



FIGURE 22.3 Patek Philippe, World Time, Mecca edition (Photo: Amsterdam vintagewatches)

More recently, in 2011, Patek Philippe released the World Time, Mecca Edition. The watch was designed for consumers in the Muslim world and features several symbols associated with Islam. The center of the dial is emerald green with a guilloché pattern in the form of twelve thick lines and eight thinner rays radiating from the center, which is intended to imitate the sun's rays. The outer edge of the dial is white with "Mecca" written in green, which harmonizes with the center of the dial. The choice of green is also deliberate, as the Prophet Muhammad is said to have worn a green robe and turban, a detail mentioned in various texts. In the Qur'an, green is also associated with paradise.³ The dial

3 Green ('akhdar') is mentioned six times in the Qur'an where it represents growth, fertility, and heavenly rewards, symbolizing believers' attire and paradise's luxuries. As the Prophet Muhammad's color, it embodies spiritual hope, eternity, and freshness. Its dual symbolism of



FIGURE 22.4 Blancpain, Shakudo (Photo: Blancpain.com)

also features the star and crescent, which are often seen as unofficial symbols of Islam. These symbols are also found on the flags of many Muslim countries. Patek has also been thoughtful in the choice of precious metal, platinum, since, according to some interpretations of Islam, men are prohibited from wearing gold (Amsterdam Vintage Watches, n.d.).

Another example of watchmakers using religious semiotics is Blancpain, which launched a series of watches that utilized the *Shakudo* technique, a unique alloy of gold and copper that results in a distinctive black-blue hue on the dial. The brand presented various dial motifs, including one depicting the Hindu god Ganesha, one of the most worshipped deities in Hinduism, known particularly for being a messenger of wisdom. He is easily recognizable by his elephant head and human body. Blancpain's choice of Ganesha as a motif may have to do with the deity's status as a general symbol of luck and wisdom globally, which has led to its widespread "acceptance," particularly in Euro-American contexts. It is not uncommon for religious semiotics to take on a different meaning in new contexts. The term "neo-spirituality" is sometimes used to describe a spiritual affiliation that moves away from the dogmatic world

life and paradise endures, reflected in Islamic culture in for example flags of many Muslim states (Hirsch 2020, 103ff).

religions. This new form of spirituality is mainly found in Europe and the USA (Hornborg 2015). In this sphere, symbolism and rituals are drawn from several different sources, not least from Hinduism and Buddhism (Blancpain, n.d.).

In the more affordable segments of the watch market, we find what best can be called “religious kitsch watches.” These fascinating watches blend the spiritual and the commercial, where sacred symbols and figures are transformed into mass-produced ornaments or souvenirs that are sold, for example, at religious shrines and other holy sites. It is not uncommon to see religious motifs on everything from lighters to fridge magnets or cheap plastic imitations of religious objects mass-produced in various low-cost Asian countries. This form of kitsch has also found its way into the watch industry, where watch faces can be adorned with everything from religious icons depicting the Baby Jesus and Mary to representations of Buddha, Hindu deities, neo-spiritual symbols, and emblems of Sikhism. While some argue that such items trivialize the deeper meaning of religion, others view them as harmless or even affectionate spiritual reminders. In this context, the watch serves not only as a timekeeper but also a carrier of meaning. “Religious kitsch watches” are undeniably a part of our modern culture, embodying the ongoing relationship between commercialism and spirituality.

Religious complications in watches are relatively uncommon, but they do exist.⁴ Wristwatches may include special functions that display prayer times, especially those designed for the Muslim market, or moon phase indicators that hold cultural and spiritual significance in religions that follow lunar calendars, such as Judaism and Islam. One example of a wristwatch with a Hijri calendar is the Parmigiani Fleurier Tonda Hijri Perpetual Calendar, a watch that will delight anyone interested in religious semiotics.⁵ The wristwatch is based on technology that Parmigiani Fleurier originally developed for a table clock launched in 2011. The inspiration came from a pocket watch with a Hijri calendar. The names and lengths of the months are written in Arabic, and in addition to a Hijri Perpetual Calendar, the watch has a moon phase complication. The aesthetic decoration of the movement is richly intricate. The movement

4 In watchmaking, a complication refers to functions beyond basic timekeeping, such as calendars, chronographs, or moon phases. These features showcase exceptional craftsmanship, reflecting the intricate intersection of horology, artistry, and, at times, devotion.

5 The Islamic lunar calendar, also called the *Hijri*, consists of twelve months of 29 or 30 days – depending on the phase of the moon – and is used to determine the days of Islamic holidays. Unlike the solar calendar used in, for example, Sweden and Europe, the months in the lunar calendar change annually by a difference of –10 to –12 days. As a result, each month always falls in a different season and thus varies from the Gregorian calendar. The Islamic lunar cycle is 30 years. It consists of 19 common years of 354 days and 11 leap years of 355 days.



FIGURE 22.5 Parmigiani Fleurier Tonda Hijri Perpetual Calendar (Photo: ParmigianiFleurier.com)

is decorated with waxing and waning crescents and the Islamic symbol *Rub el-Hizb*, which consists of two overlapping squares with a circle in the middle. These basic geometric shapes form a more complex eight-pointed star, divided into eight equal triangular parts. The *Rub el-Hizb* is used as a tool to facilitate the recitation and memorization of the Qur'an, which is an important part of Muslim religious life. With the help of this geometric figure, the verses of the Qur'an can be divided into quantifiable sections. The symbol is also often used to mark the end of a chapter in Arabic calligraphy. As with most of Parmigiani Fleurier's wristwatches, the watch can be further customized according to personal wishes and preferences (Yusuf 2021).

5 Sacred Style: the Wristwatches of Religious Leaders

Interest in celebrity luxury watches has risen significantly in recent years, a trend that can be partly attributed to social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram. Specialized accounts have emerged with the express purpose of showcasing exclusive watch brands and models worn by celebrities. These accounts often attract substantial followings, becoming influential forces in the watch industry. As a result, they not only increase the visibility of luxury

timepieces but also contribute to the emergence of a new celebrity culture centered on watches. Notably, the watch choices of religious leaders often spark discussions about ethics, transparency, and trust.

For example, in 2009, an incident involving Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, was photographed alongside Alexander Kolarov, then Russia's Minister of Justice. While the Patriarch appeared to be without a watch, a keen-eyed Russian blogger noticed the reflection of a luxurious Breguet Réveil du Tsar on the table beneath him. It soon emerged that the church had Photoshopped the watch out of the image, but overlooked its reflection. When interviewed, Kirill initially denied owning such a watch and claimed that all photos showing him wearing it were fabricated. However, the Russian Orthodox Church later admitted to editing the images, issuing a public statement on the matter. The watch, valued today at approximately \$20,000, became a powerful symbol of the church's wealth and alleged corruption, prompting widespread criticism (BBC 2012).

Several Russian opposition bloggers voiced their discontent, arguing that Kirill could not truly represent the people or serve as a spiritual leader while displaying such lavishness. This criticism was particularly significant, given the close relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and President Vladimir Putin, which led many in the opposition to scrutinize the church with heightened vigilance (BBC 2012).

Further controversy arose a few years later when the Metropolitan of St. Petersburg, Ladoga Varsonofiy, was photographed wearing a Rolex Daytona, valued at the time of writing to approximately \$30,000, while on vacation in Greece. This time, the Russian Orthodox Church offered a more restrained response, stating only that an explanation would be provided upon Varsonofiy's return from vacation (Rothrock 2016).

In India, spiritual leaders are not only associated with traditional rituals and spiritual teachings, but some have also developed an interest in the world of watches. Their penchant for wearing luxury watches often stems from the generosity of their followers. Devotees often see their spiritual gurus as holy role models and therefore want to give them gifts that are as exceptional as they consider their teachings to be. As a result, it is not uncommon to see spiritual leaders wearing watches adorned with precious stones, diamonds, and other luxurious materials, which sometimes raises ethical questions about material indulgence in a spiritual context.

To name a few examples: The late religious guru Osho, or Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, owned several luxury watches. The Rolex Day-Date set with alternating rubies and diamonds worn by Osho was sold at an auction for 40,000 Swiss francs. The bracelet alone had about 31 carats of diamonds. Another

guru, Sathya Sai Baba, did not wear watches himself but was said to materialize luxury items, including Rolex watches, out of thin air (Antiquorum Auction Catalog 2015).

Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, has risen to global fame as a celebrated spiritual leader. However, the Dalai Lama is also known for his impressive collection of watches, including a Patek Philippe gifted to him by then-US President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His collection also features several Rolex watches, including a gold Day-Date. The Dalai Lama also apparently enjoys repairing mechanical timepieces. In his book *Ethics for the New Millennium* (1999), he writes:

I have always enjoyed repairing watches. But I can recall a number of occasions as a boy when, completely losing my patience with those tiny, intricate parts, I picked up the mechanism and smashed it down on the table. Of course, later I felt very sorry and ashamed of my behavior especially when, as on one occasion, I had to return the watch to its owner in a condition worse than it was before. (Dalia Lama 1999, 95f)

Luxury watches have also become a prominent topic of discussion among Muslim religious leaders. For instance, Idris Ahmad, who was the Malaysian government's representative on religious matters, was accused on social media of being more interested in material luxury than spiritual insight, due to the suspicion that he was wearing a Rolex. However, Ahmad quickly came out and cleared up the misunderstanding by showing off his actual watch, a Buruj model, stating that: "For your information, I have been using this Buruj watch for a long time, it helps me know the prayer time and the Qibla direction" (FMT 2021). This watch features special Islamic-related functions, including one that displays prayer times and another that indicates the direction to Mecca (Qibla). His detractors were later forced to apologize on social media.

The wristwatch as a symbol of greed arguably reached its peak with Carlton Funderburke, the founding senior pastor of Church at The Well, in Kansas City, Missouri. During a sermon, he requested a luxury Movado watch from his congregation as a gesture of their appreciation, saying, "Y'all know I asked for one last year. Here it is all the way in August and I still ain't got it," in a widely circulated video recording of his remarks (Universal Life Church 2022). Funderburke later apologized on Facebook, calling his sermon "inexcusable" and not reflective of his feelings toward God's people (Church at the Well 2022).

As the significance of watches has shifted from religious and practical purposes to becoming symbols of economic status, it is not surprising that Pope Francis, the previous leader of the Catholic Church, chose to wear a Swatch

watch rather than a Patek Philippe or, for that matter, the Rolex Datejust favored by his predecessor, John Paul II. Pope Francis also donated his Swatch to a charity auction, where it sold for \$56,250 – making it the most expensive Swatch watch in history (Wright Auction 2022).

Finally, leaving behind luxury, glitz, and religious elitism, there is one watch that has earned a less glamorous reputation in religious circles: the Casio F-91W, also known as the “terrorist watch.” This mass-produced, inexpensive timepiece has, in recent years, become a symbol of primarily Muslim terrorism. It has been used in time bombs and spotted on the wrists of known terrorist leaders. The watch became so closely associated with bomb makers in the Middle East that CIA agents in Iraq and Syria testified that the watch was one of the items they looked for when trying to identify bomb makers linked to terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. It has been established that the watch plays a role in bomb making, and F-91Ws have been found in unexploded bombs and seized in raids on bomb factories. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that this watch model was used in al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Several members of ISIS and al-Qaeda, including Osama bin Laden – perhaps the world’s most famous terrorist, and the leader of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda until his death in 2011 – have been seen wearing the watch. This firmly established the F-91W’s association with terrorism, a connection that seems likely to endure. Bin Laden’s choice of this watch can be interpreted as a deliberate rejection of what is perceived as Western luxury and extravagance (Watches of Espionage 2022).

6 Conclusion – Timeless Connections

This exposé of wristwatches in religious contexts reveals a captivating interplay between material culture and the sacred. Wristwatches, far from mere timekeepers, embody layered meanings that connect individuals to broader cultural, spiritual, and socio-economic narratives. Douglas Freake’s semiotic insights highlight how these objects transcend utility, embedding symbolic meanings often camouflaged by their practical use.

Through their designs, materials, and applications, watches transcend their functional purpose, mediating values like piety, identity, and status. Whether as luxury artifacts imbued with religious semiotics, like Patek Philippe’s Mecca Edition, or as mass-produced “religious kitsch” items accessible to the broader public, wristwatches amplify human values and reflect cultural narratives. Freake’s perspective helps frame how these objects, through their aesthetic and

symbolic uses, convey layered meanings that align with spiritual, cultural, or economic frameworks. This perspective reinforces the idea that wristwatches, as cultural artifacts, serve as dynamic connections between the material and the sacred.

Moreover, Latour's concept of mediators suggests that certain objects do more than merely *transmit* meaning; they actively transform and reinterpret it. Wristwatches, through their design and functionality, can play a significant role in shaping religious experiences and expressions.

For instance, watches designed to serve religious functions, such as those with prayer time indicators or Hijri calendars, make daily rituals more accessible and seamlessly integrated into modern life. They connect technology with tradition, facilitating devotion in a contemporary context. Likewise, watches adorned with religious symbols or designs, such as Blancpain's Ganesha-themed dials, serve as visible markers of faith, allowing wearers to express their religious identity in ways that align with modern and even fashionable aesthetics.

Furthermore, the democratization of religious symbols through kitsch watches transforms sacred motifs into accessible consumer products, broadening their appeal and reshaping how they are valued. Conversely, luxury watches decorated with religious semiotics or worn by religious leaders can provoke criticism and ethical dilemmas. Their use by spiritual figures may challenge or clash with traditional values of humility and asceticism, leading to accusations of hypocrisy or materialism. Such controversies can erode trust in religious leaders and institutions, as seen in instances where luxury watches have become symbols of excess and privilege rather than devotion.

Wristwatches function as active mediators, transforming, translating, and modifying faith, identity, and tradition within a continuously evolving cultural and technological landscape. This role is far from new; throughout history, timekeeping devices have mediated the relationship between the sacred and the practical. Ancient tools like the Lebombo Bone, sundials aligning religious rituals with celestial patterns, and medieval clocks designed to regulate monastic prayers exemplify how timekeeping has consistently integrated sacred rhythms with technological advancements. These devices have not only measured time but also transformed cultural and spiritual perceptions, reflecting humanity's enduring need to connect the material with the metaphysical.

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