



The origin and mission of Material Religion

Birgit Meyer^a, David Morgan^{b,*}, Crispin Paine^c, S. Brent Plate^d

^a Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1081, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^b Department of Religion, Duke University, 118 Gray, Box 90964, Durham, North Carolina 27708, USA

^c University of London, 108 Station Road, Liss, Hants GU33 7AQ, United Kingdom

^d Department of Religious Studies, Hamilton College, 198 College Hill Road, Clinton, New York 13323, USA

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ABSTRACT

Beginning its sixth year of publication, *Material Religion* is an interdisciplinary journal that seeks to gather the best work from around the world engaged in materializing the study of religions. The editors welcome original scholarship on any religion and from any period in human history that treats material objects and practices as primary evidence and engages in critical reflection on the cultural construction of materiality. In this article the editors reflect on the formation and format of the journal, the force and direction of its articles and other features, the question of what constitutes the material culture of religion, and finally the role of materiality in the current study of religions. Along the way, the editors consider new theories and concerns that have been taken up in the journal's pages and address the range of disciplines and interests that are represented in the different departments of the journal.

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Origins and general facts

Few traditional disciplines in the arts and humanities have not involved material religion in some way, but the growth in the 1980s and '90s of the academic disciplines of material culture studies and visual culture studies placed the study of religions on a new basis. Hitherto, the study of religion had tended to prefer textual documents and to focus on various institutions. But anthropologists, ritual studies scholars, archaeologists, and art historians around the world have not only taken visual and material data seriously, they have also explored material religion beyond the Western perspective, conducting ethnographies in Africa and Asia, working on non-Western religions, narrating the histories of ritual objects and practices, scrutinizing a variety of sacred spaces, and tracing the enormous legacies of Western colonialism in diasporic communities, transnationalism, and migrations. *Material Religion* has published the work of scholars from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, whose scholarship not only contributes importantly to materializing the study of religions, but also widens the range of scholars engaged in a task that extends far beyond the traditional concentration of efforts in Europe and North America. From the beginning, the editors intended this journal to be a truly international project.

Material Religion has a threefold parentage – material culture studies, visual culture studies, and museums. Four people started in 1999 to discuss the possibility of a journal devoted to the material culture of religion: Chris Arthur, sociologist at the University of Wales at Lampeter; David Goa, then at the Provincial Museum of Alberta; David Morgan, then of Valparaiso University (now at Duke), well-known as a specialist in the visual culture of religion; and Crispin Paine, who at the time was editing the manuscript *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion*.

The search for a publisher took three years. Successive submissions of a proposal that grew from a year of email exchanges led to half a dozen responses of the following sort: 'interesting, but journals are expensive.' At last, however, Kathryn Earle of Berg Publishers, based in Oxford, gave the idea her enthusiastic support. Berg, known for its lists in cultural history and anthropology, was significantly committed not just to the content of the journal, but to the style as well, and planned from the beginning to publish each issue in four-color separation with art-quality paper and original graphic design.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: b.meyer@fsw.vu.nl (B. Meyer), dm127@duke.edu (D. Morgan), crispin@ntlworld.com (C. Paine), splate@hamilton.edu (S.B. Plate).

Brent Plate, then at Texas Christian University (now at Hamilton College), joined Goa, Morgan and Paine as the editorial team, with Plate as managing editor. At a meeting in the Russell Hotel in London in March 2003 the journal *Material Religion* was officially born. Arthur withdrew from the project before the meeting. After the first year of publication, David Goa withdrew when he became director of the University of Alberta's Chester Roning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life. The editors selected Birgit Meyer, Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, to join them. The team consists of one German anthropologist (Meyer), one American art historian (Morgan), one British museum specialist (Paine), and one American humanities scholar (Plate). Duke University supports the cost of publication. A long list of distinguished and very productive scholars from several continents serve on the journal's Advisory Board.

Published at present three times per year, the journal offers readers several regular features. Most space in each issue is devoted to three or four substantial, peer-reviewed scholarly articles on specific historical, geographical, or topical themes. The feature articles are followed by 'In Conversation,' in which two or three writers contribute 1000-word essays on a topic germane to the material culture of religion. There is a book review section (now overseen by Lauren Winner of Duke University), and a section called 'Outlook,' which includes notes and reviews of exhibitions, museum issues, Internet sites, and events such as conferences that are likely to interest readers.

The journal's subscribers are largely private and public university libraries. Its readers are students and scholars in the history of religions, anthropology, art history, material culture, visual culture, archaeology, and museum history and curatorial work.

Submissions come from a variety of scholars from around the world, though primarily from Europe and North America. Contributors are largely anthropologists, art historians, and religious studies scholars, but also include experts in media studies, museum work, archaeology, and history. Acceptance rates vary from year to year, but the journal generally accepts somewhat less than one in three submissions. The editors have not experienced difficulty in receiving a requisite amount of high quality work. Production schedules remain on time. Review time for articles rarely exceeds a total of four months, and is usually between two and three months. Submissions are first evaluated by the four editors, who determine whether or not the work is of sufficient relevance and quality to merit external review. Essays that qualify are sent to at least two experts in the pertinent field, with identities of authors and reviewers kept anonymous. Final acceptance of manuscripts is determined by the editors.

The field of *Material Religion*, as measured by articles and special issues

Once *Material Religion* had a publisher and was up and running, the editors and publishers began to publicize the new journal around the world. Relying on flyers, but more importantly on word of mouth at conferences and gatherings on several continents, submissions began to flow in. From the beginning of production, in early 2004, submissions came from scholars interested in the materiality of religion from a variety of perspectives.

Important, too, was the fact that the journal continues to be published in color, on high quality paper, a material fact itself that has not been overlooked by many of the submitters. In the inaugural editorial statement (vol. 1, March 2005), the editors indicated their interests in material objects (visual and other) as 'primary forms of evidence' and not merely illustrations of theological or literary points. Thus, the very physicality of the journal itself helped to promote the desired intellectual engagements.

At the same time, *Material Religion's* editors affirmed that they were not aiming for another journal in art history or cultural studies, nor a specialized subfield of museology, archaeology, or religious studies. Over the years the journal has received submissions from: poets and visual artists looking for a place to publicize their work, traditional scholars of literary and theological texts, iconographic analysts of specific paintings, and those engaged in describing the symbolisms of particular rituals. Each of these gets at a piece of the journal's interests, but by themselves do not display the interdisciplinary, even 'holistic,' approach for which the journal continues to strive. Over the past five years, the journal has offered a forum to develop a new focus on material practice, the circulation of objects, and their reception.

Essays published in the first year of publication (2005) came from a variety of scholars, including art historians such as Sally M. Promey (director of the Yale Initiative for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion), theologians like Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (vice-president and professor of Religion and Pentecostal Theology at Trinity Theological Seminary in Legon, Ghana), Islamic studies scholars such as Jamal J. Elias (chair of the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Religious Studies), and curators like Woodman Taylor (assistant curator for South Asian and Islamic Art at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts). The diversity of subject matter and fields in which the contributors have been trained remains a strongpoint of the journal.

The year 2010 marks the sixth year of the journal's existence, and it has continued to publish works across scholarly disciplines, and between academic and museum audiences. A sampling of subject matter in the last couple of years includes themes such as: the 'Protestantism of Victorian Science' (vol. 4, no. 3, 2008) an analysis of the material aspects of an Australian megachurch, devotional images of the Indian poet-saint Namdev (vol. 5, no. 2, 2009), and colonial Vietnamese architecture (vol. 6, no. 1, 2010).

Meanwhile, as news of the new journal spread, proposals for special issues quickly emerged, and *Material Religion* has sparingly worked on one special issue per year. The first year ended with a special issue on the 'Visual Cultures of Pentecostalism,' followed in the third year by 'Gendering Religious Objects' (vol. 3, no. 1, 2007), organized mainly by cultural anthropologists. Other issues include 'The Material Cultures of American Jewry' (vol. 3, no. 3, 2007), 'Media and the Senses in the Making of Religious Experience' (vol. 4, no. 2, 2008), and in 2009, a special issue on 'Archaeology and Material Religion' (vol. 5, no. 3). Future special issues include one on 'Education and Museums', and a special issue devoted to 'Keywords in Material Religion.'

The interest in museums and the display of objects is taken up especially in 'In Conversation' and 'Outlook.' One 'In Conversation' was devoted to discussion of the exhibition *100 Artists See God* (vol. 3, no.1, 2007), another to a Jewish children's museum (vol. 3, no. 3, 2007), and another to the 'ownership' of religious objects in museums (vol. 2, no. 3, 2006). 'Outlook' has drawn attention to most of the principal 'religion' museums in the world, and to many relevant exhibitions and programs in 'secular' museums. Thus, *Material Religion* is actively involved in the review of books and exhibitions, and scrutinizes scholarly literature as well as fieldwork and curatorial practices.

What do we mean by 'materiality' in the study of religion?

Things, at least some things like stone or precious objects like manuscripts, tend to last. But so does trash, such as the heaps of discarded papyri left in the dark corners of pyramids or the graffiti scratched on tombs or monuments by pilgrim-visitors over the ages. Whether treasure or refuse, objects bear traces that yield valuable material evidence, sometimes almost the only evidence we have of the everyday

lives of devotees. Many of the methods for studying such material are not new. Scholars have long examined the remnants of temples and town plans, pottery shards, coins, vestments, frescoes, and liturgical ware in order to piece together accounts of such things as mythology, religious ritual, priestly hierarchies, or the relation of sacred institutions to state power (Insoll, 2009).

But the emphasis placed on reception and on material practice has marked a shift in the study of materiality from primary attention to production, form, style, and artistic intention. The meaning of an object is not understood to reside singularly in it, but also to draw from its circulation, its local adaptation, from what people do with it, and from the affective and conceptual schemes whereby users apprehend an object. Rather than focus on style or iconography alone, the task has become one of concentrating on lives of objects, studying objects longitudinally in relation to audiences or users by tracing their social careers, the places they go and the different ways they are put to use. These interests have also been closely linked to different cultures of materiality. Yet scholars are not of one mind on this. Some remain strongly object-centered. *Material Religion* has hosted forums to debate the conceptualization of materialities and to register differences in prevailing views (see Editors, 2009). Other writers have focused on the cultural construction of materiality, insisting that matter is not a simple reality, but a relational structure (Pels, 2008).

Strictly speaking, material analysis may be said to focus on the object, its physical setting, or practices involving the object. By directing one's attention to objects such as images, clothing, architecture, or implements, scholars may be able to garner primary evidence where other forms are lacking. Interrogating things can offer insights that are otherwise unavailable due to the paucity of the historical record. Archaeology and art history have long honed the careful scrutinizing of objects and images, cultivating a variety of techniques. Traditional forms of material culture analysis have worked hand-in-hand with these approaches, developing a deftly educated eye that discerns subtleties of style and workmanship (Kitzinger, 1977; Zimmerman, 1981). The resulting connoisseurship is able to distinguish different artistic hands, nuanced taxonomies of design, dating, telling details in the processes of production, and genealogies of influence.

But the study of objects is not the only way to materialize the study of religion. Religion scholars have just begun when they know something of the date, provenance, and stylistic manner of objects, for it is the world that the objects and their use build and sustain that interests the religion scholar. Materializing the study of religion means asking how religion happens materially, which is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful question of how religion is expressed in material form. A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it (Arweck and Keenan, 2006; Coleman, 2006; Insoll, 2009; McDannell, 1995; Meyer, 2008; Morgan, 1998; Morgan and Promey, 2001; Plate, 2002; Stolow, 2007). Religion is not a pure realm of ideas or beliefs that are translated into material signs. The material study of religion avoids reifications that identify ideas or dogmas or individual people as the irreducible core of religion. Instead, a religion is inseparable from a matrix or network of components that consist of people, divine beings or forces, institutions, things, places, and communities. One might say that the operation of this network is the production of a life-world and that religions are powerful ways in which worlds act and maintain themselves.

It is crucial to understand that *belief* is distributed over a characteristic set of relations among these actors and that each aspect of this network of actors enjoys an element of agency (Latour, 2005). Belief, in other words, is an experience and expectation of the way one's world works (Morgan, 2010: 1–12). When a shaman or an evangelist-healer lays her hands on someone who has approached her for healing, and provides relief from suffering or illness, belief is something shared by the healer, the healed, and those who participate, no less than by the ritual moment constructed within the sacred setting, as well as by the history of practice that informs the event. In order to understand this complex constellation of factors, we need to investigate the corporeal practices of touching, of being touched, of healing as a shared material event. And we need to understand more about what goes into staging the event—from the friends or family that bring the ailing person to the healer to relevant conceptions of illness. The healing spreads out in growing arcs of social actors. Rather than merely a set of creeds or propositions to which one assents, belief may be materially understood as a configuration of material things, practices, individual bodies, and social bodies.

The material study of religion concentrates on what bodies and things do, on the practices that put them to work, on the epistemological and aesthetic paradigms that organize the bodily experience of things, hierarchizing sensations and media, all within the network of relations that make the sacred a social reality. What then does it mean to study the material culture of religions? It means to focus one's investigation on the evidence and insights offered by bodies, things, places, and practices.

A *body* consists of viscera, skeleton, musculature, and flesh, but also brain/mind, sensation, imagination, cognition, and the interface with the worlds around and within the body. The body enters integrally into every feeling, thought, emotion, and perception that human beings have. It is difficult to separate fingers from counting, shrinking from fear, fists from aggression, desire from blushing skin. And bodies are the medium of social experience, the gateway to the social bodies to which individuals belong, with which they identify, through which they feel and perceive themselves, others, and the divine.

Things are the objects of the body's apprehension, but they are also agencies within themselves, either as other bodies, or as the extension or completion of a body, or as the presence or symbol of a social body. Things are exchanged and circulate bearing values and powers that structure human relations. There is a material economy at work in sacred things such as relics and books and icons, in apotropaic devices such as amulets or talismans.

Places are the fit between bodies and things, sites for their organization into theatres for the performance of self. And places are the flesh of social bodies, where people go to find themselves part of something larger.

Practices are bodies, things, and places put to work, put on display, put into circulation, exchanged and hoarded, heard, smelled, fondled, destroyed. Practices are ways of activating bodies, things, and places, recognizing in their interrelations a presence or voice or power that engages humans and their institutions and communities.

In every case, religious belief is a reticulation of relationships. To study religion without regard for the materiality of this network is to miss the embodiment of belief and to mistake creeds for the worlds that forged them.

Study of material religion in relation to scholarly discourse in Religious Studies

Understanding things as intrinsic to religion does not only entail an empirical focus on the material culture of religion, but also has far-reaching theoretical implications for religious studies as whole. The 'material turn' contrasts sharply with an earlier understanding of religion and materiality as belonging to two opposed registers, spirit and matter. In fact, this contrast has long featured in the explicit and

implicit valuation of religion: those religions that do rely on things, bodies and other material forms— e.g. certain versions of Catholicism, and most certainly indigenous religious traditions which long featured as prime instances of ‘animism’ or even ‘fetishism’ – are understood as all too grounded in worldly matters. This, of course, echoes a post-Reformation Protestant perspective, according to which religion is a question of inner belief and experience, while at the same time, as Max Weber showed, self-discipline, and the urge to work and reveal God’s presence in the world, become central concerns – a process that eventually entailed disenchantment and secularization.

From within the field of religious studies, scholars such as Masuzawa (2000), Chidester (2000) and Taylor (1998) have critiqued the inadequacy of this opposition as a foundation for the study of religion, calling for a new ‘re-materializing’ approach. The call to ‘re-materialize’ is based on the understanding that materiality has never vanished from religion, but has been unduly neglected by scholars. One point of concern is the legacy of Protestantism in the study of modern religion that predisposes scholars to overlook the importance of things. While, as Morgan (1998) and others have shown, images have always played a role at least in popular Protestant religiosity, this role has barely been acknowledged by scholars or by religious practitioners, for whom things – and form – were understood as mere vehicles for an underlying meaning. The shortcomings of symbolic and meaning-centered approaches have been powerfully shown by Asad (1993) in his critique of Clifford Geertz’ definition of religion in terms of an inner belief and as confined to the level of concepts and doctrines. Encountering the limitations of a symbolic approach to account for religious practices in the non-Western world, in which much emphasis was placed on things, places and bodies, prompted many anthropologists to move toward a more encompassing, re-materialized understanding of religion. This entails not only paying attention to the actual use of ‘material stuff’ in religious practices, but also to religiously authorized ideas about the status, value and power of things, bodies, places, and other religious forms, as Keane (2007) pointed out in launching the notion of ‘semiotic ideology.’ In fact, materiality itself is not simply there, but subject to cultural constructions that call for our attention. In this sense, material religion is not only about existing religious material cultures, but also about attitudes toward things, including an explicitly iconophobic stance (Davis, 2005; Engelke, 2007; Pinney, 2004).

Recent, path-breaking work in the interface of philosophy, art history, mass communication, religious studies, and anthropology on the use of new and old media by religious traditions highlights the importance of media technologies as inalienable elements of religious communication, both among religious practitioners and between them and their God, gods, or spirits (Hirschkind, 2006; Meyer, 2009; Morgan, 2005; Van de Port, 2006). Important here is the view, now shared by many scholars, that it is fruitful to approach religion as a practice of mediation between the levels of humans and some spiritual, divine, or transcendental force (De Vries and Weber, 2001). In this understanding, media – understood in a broad sense as the forms that bridge the gap separating these levels – are intrinsic to religion (Horsfield et al., 2004; Mitchell, 2006; Meyer and Moors, 2006; Morgan, 2010; Sumiala-Seppänen and Stocchetti, 2005). Embracing religious objects, bodies, and all kinds of material forms, such a broad understanding of media obviously synthesizes the hitherto quite separate subfields for the study of media, body and senses, material culture, and visual culture. The synergy that comes about through the interconnections of these fields generated the ‘material turn’ in the study of religion, which inspires the authors and readers of *Material Religion*.

In short, there is no such thing as an immaterial religion (see Meyer, 2008). Religion is unable to do without things, places, or bodies, nor may it operate without theories about materiality. We need theoretical approaches for the study of religion that take materiality seriously. It is the key concern of *Material Religion* to offer a forum for this kind of reflection. Needless to say that in our view, ‘material religion’ is not another subfield, but located at the heart of religious studies.

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Birgit Meyer is professor of Cultural Anthropology at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. Her publications include *Translating the Devil. Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (1999), *Globalization and Identity. Dialectics of Flow and Closure* (edited with Peter Geschiere, 1999), *Magic and Modernity. Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (edited with Peter Pels 2003), *Religion, Media and the Public Sphere* (edited with Annelies Moors, 2006) and *Aesthetic Formations. Religion, Media and the Senses* (2009).

David Morgan is Professor of Religion at Duke University, USA. He is author of *Visual Piety* (University of California Press, 1998), *Protestants and Pictures* (Oxford University Press, 1999), *The Sacred Gaze* (University of California Press, 2005), and *The Lure of Images* (Routledge, 2007). Most recently he edited *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture* (Routledge, 2009) and *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (Routledge, 2010). He is currently at work on a new book entitled *The Embodied Eye*.

Crispin Paine is a Museums and Heritage consultant based in the United Kingdom. Formerly a curator at Oxford and elsewhere, he is Honorary Lecturer at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. In recent years he has helped to set up a new museum in Aksum, ancient religious capital of Ethiopia. He is the editor of *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* (Leicester University Press, 2000) and is at present working on a book on the role of religious objects in museums.

S. Brent Plate is currently visiting associate professor of religious studies at Hamilton College. He is author/editor of several books, including most recently, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*. Earlier books include: *Blasphemy: Art that Offends; Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics; Representing Religion in World Cinema; Religion, Art, and Visual Culture*; and *The Religion and Film Reader*. He is co-founder and managing editor of *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief*.