

Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality

Dick Houtman and Brigit Meyer, Editors

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Recent volumes on materiality and material culture have outlined its genealogy through philosophical (particularly phenomenological) enquiry upon human perception, art history – some specifically in regards to iconoclast movements. Dick Houtman and Brigit Meyer, however, take a different approach in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*. This volume starts with the premise that “matter” is a “thing” of social construction and, as such, tries to provide a methodology for religion scholars to tackle this rapidly growing interest in materiality.

Within the introduction, Houtman and Meyer deconstruct the notion of “belief,” a term that largely undergirds the study of materiality in religion. They write, “Instead of being a universal disposition that, as it were, naturally forms the defining characteristic of religion, ‘belief’ has been ‘universalized’ through scientific, religious, and political practices, such as evolutionary schemes, Christian mission, and colonial governance” (2). In this sense, they argue that belief in materiality becomes something that is mobilized against religion (6). Houtman and Meyer argue that a fixation on belief and the resulting foci on the power imbued within religious objects re-animate them in various ways, feeding into the fetish created by anti-materialism. This leaves scholars of religion “ill-equipped to understand how things matter in ways that recognize the valuation, animation, and role of ‘things’ within a given religious setting” (16).

To remedy this, scholars would have to devote themselves to the messy task of documenting and articulating the experience of the material as well as its senses, spaces, and performances. The contributors all seem to agree that studying materiality through this methodology ultimately revives the true question concerning religion in the study of materiality: How do we define something that is “beyond” our ability to fully grasp?

The editors have carefully selected and organized their contributors’ recent publications concerning materiality in religion. Each section also draws from a range of research in disciplines

like history, theology, anthropology, and political science. Most contributors of this volume employ Webb Keane's notion of "semiotic ideologies," which serves usefully to articulate a diversity of cultural perspectives on materiality. Each author discusses the question of one or more material(s) by constructing a semiotic ideology for its interpretation from the bottom-up, rooted in the socio-cultural and political fabric of a community, animating all the "things" through which the material may derive its meaning.

The first section introduces anxieties about "things" through a theoretical investigation of the Protestant dematerialization of religion. The subsequent sections each provide ways to re-animate the discourse surrounding materiality using "things" to articulate how religion occurs materially. The most valuable insertion in this volume is the inclusion of a separate section on "Public Space" that affects and is affected by religious "things" and people. No volume on religious "things" is complete without an analysis of how the lines dividing the public from the private spheres challenge the materiality of religion and make them more or less visible.

These essays can also be grouped in a number of ways not limited to the editors' selections. Essays by Mathew Engelke, Irene Stengs, Jose Van Santen, Sanne Derks, Willy Jansen, Catrien Notermans, and Brigit Meyer utilize ethnographic observation in illuminating how practitioners articulate their experience with the material and social world. Their methodology allows them to recognize shifts in meaning and signification of the same objects over different periods of time among one community. Engelke discusses the ideological and material divisions drawn in the colonial landscape of Zimbabwe between the neo-Catholics and the "traditional" healers who find a common language in their healing practices using different locally available substances. At once this conversation about healing with honey in a neo-Catholic Zimbabwean church beckons towards classical Christian theological anxieties surrounding objectification. Engelke argues that the practice of reinventing matter is inherent to materiality, matter must constantly evolve through its usage, resisting its materiality in some ways, and that "thingification makes dangerous things" (61). In a similar vein, Derks, Jansen, and Notermans show how miniature objects serve as cultural and economic aspirations to the Andean goddess Panchamama, whose ritual remnants are now predominantly seen in Catholic worship practices in Bolivia devoted to Mary. While at one political period of exchange these tiny objects depicted rural landscapes populated with cattle, fields, and their offspring, today practitioners' miniatures abound as airplanes, passports, college degrees, and cars, reflecting their socio-economic upward mobility or limitations.

The essays by Donald Lopez, David Morgan, Willy Jansen, Grietje Dresen, and Michiel Leezenberg can be read together to posit that even widely theorized discourses can serve as storehouses for new semiotic ideologies. The "pleasantness" of Buddhism, according to Lopez, is a construction of the missionizing and colonial exchange through which text was valued over ritual practices surrounding the image of Buddha. Troubling the notion of materiality in Buddhist ritual life through archives of images and artifacts, Lopez asks us to reignite the question: who

is the Buddha? On the other hand, blood isn't as inclusive in practice and, as Jansen and Dresen suggest, blood shapes cultural gender constructs, having real consequences in the material world (231). For instance, blood is thought to be pure and holy when shed and spilled by male warriors, while menstrual blood is polluting and thus the women who produce it face limited public access and religious taboos. Leezenberg's essay provides yet another example by postulating that the Enlightenment, popularly understood to have triggered modernity, actually occurred in the Islamic world within coffeehouses in the Ottoman's public sphere.

For those still preoccupied with the overwhelming "power" of materiality, Annelis Moors, Maria Jose A. De Abreu, Stef Aupers, Dorien Zandbergen, Ineke Noomen, and Houtman provide ample case studies. While Moors reckons with the disgust and fascination created through the visibility of women veiling in contemporary Netherlands, De Abreu looks at how the 'FedEx Saint' or 'St. Expeditus' of Catholic Charismatics in Brazil is transforming by the influence of electronic media on a "semiotic level and a material one" (323). Aupers, Zandbergen, Noomen, and Houtman conclude with the most powerful and contemporary of all materials—the Internet. Rather than being incongruent with religion, the Internet and its New Age users have embraced virtual reality, its spaces, and its medium to reinvent and represent their material realities.

Though this volume offers a refreshing collection of essays concerning history and religious practices, one notes the omission of the study of materiality in Indian religious traditions, a rich context commensurate with the editors' approach. However, this lack is quickly compensated by the volume's seminal contribution: constructing new semiotic ideologies for the study of materiality within and between religions in several other post-colonial countries.

Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality is filled with teaching materials for faculty. It is also suitable for undergraduate and graduate religion majors and faculty and graduate students in the fields of history, anthropology, and political science. The volume ultimately supersedes its major audience and invites new participants in order to construct how we understand materiality in unique ways.

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