

The **Capstone Course** in Religious Studies, 2013:

Material Objects/**Spiritual** Subjects

RE 375

Tues & Thurs 3:40-5:30 pm
Classroom: Bolton 101

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Through a cross-cultural discussion of various objects, icons, relics, replicas, so-called fetishes, and other ‘bodies’ of evidence, we not only examine technologies and economies of the sacred, but we are provided with a wonderful opportunity for reexamining the criteria by which we define “religion.” The course is conducted as an advanced seminar, emphasizing student research, writing, presentation, and collaboration.

Methodological Prologue

Not all that long ago, it might have been argued that “material religion” is an oxymoronic formulation, because religion chiefly concerns itself with transcendent beings and spiritual encounters, and not with ‘worldly’ things. Yet religions clearly have immediate impacts on how people act in this world, from how they eat and dress to the dwellings they build and the sacred arts and social institutions they make. Moreover, religious people have been making, exchanging and selling sacred objects for a very long time, sometimes featuring them in their worship, and otherwise using them in an astonishing variety of rituals. Hence, material objects are very much an integral part and focal point of what Robert Orsi calls “lived religion,” even as religious discourse is never limited to material conditions.

So we open our senior seminar with this methodological question: how can we look at an object, or a group of objects, and learn from it/them about how religion is lived? What might a particular form of materiality “say” about the spirituality of those who make and use it? Do things speak, or want, or act? How is it that some things are, or become, holy? Our goal when we finish the semester is to have a much firmer purchase when addressing these sorts of questions, and to have devised new and more nuanced questions that advance our understanding of the study of religion.

An academic journal called *Material Religion* has been published since 2005, marking the unofficial recognition of a sub-field several decades in the making. The turn towards the materiality of religion is part of an ongoing disciplinary shift away from an exclusive focus on texts (scriptures, commentaries, homilies, theological and philosophical treatises, polemics, etc.), looking to a wider field of practices, embodiments and

“expressive culture,” by which scholars designate the full range of visual arts and performances (music, dance, theatre, sport, parades, masquerades, radio, television, movies, videos, comics, etc.). To be sure, there are many kinds of texts and many canons, and undoubtedly they play significant roles in lived religion, but they are not the only or necessarily the most salient component. Perhaps one is tempted to pit the rarified discourses of text-toting elites against the vernacular expressions and material culture of the unwashed masses, but this would be a retrograde assumption. It is imperative that we *not* set up materiality simply as an alternative or in opposition to textuality, as materiality encompasses textuality. After all, books, scrolls, and manuscripts are material objects; and scribal arts, reading practices and study habits are bodily activities. As Matthew Engleke rightly asserts, “all religion is material religion.” It is thus really a matter of *how we proceed with studying religion* and not a means for identifying some separate type of religiosity.

Scholars of material religion eschew simplistic binaries (elite vs. popular religion, high vs. low culture) and have joined with other disciplines, such as anthropology and art history, in collapsing the divide between ‘Art’ and artifact. In this regard, the titles of two recent monographs -- Esther Pasztor’s Thinking with Things (2005), and a volume edited by Henare et. al., Thinking Through Things (2006) -- suggest that our underlying concern should be as much with *thinking* as with things. Our foray into material religion actually requires viewing things in relation to ideas and social interactions, analyzing how any “thing” attains and maintains its value. We will attend, therefore, not simply to objects in and of themselves, but to what they might “tell” us about religious agency and the construction of the sacred. That is, we will also need to think about the people who make and use such sacred things, learning about their aims and intentions: what are their desires, duties, devotions? What are their operative notions about place, polity, and empowerment? How do these ideas translate into material conditions and concrete relations, realizing distinct ways of being in the world?

Ultimately, we are aiming for a kind of *embodied phenomenology*, seeking to better understand religious subjectivities wherein bodily experiences and material objects are factored in, rather than filtered out. Our methodological challenge, then, is to take seriously the materiality of religion *yet in a non-reductive manner*. We do not intend to shrink “religion” down to things being accumulated or exchanged, whittling it down to hardened kernels of unreflective modes of production, distribution and consumption. Rather, we want to open up our critical inquiry in ways that allow us to sample some of the historical richness, cultural complexity, and emotional entanglement with the world that manifests through religious expressivity.

Plan of the Course

The two main components of this seminar, shared readings and individualized research, are designed to compliment each other. But let me address them in turn.

Readings. There are no books to purchase for this course. All the readings will either be in the Course Reader that I distribute, or they can be accessed through Blackboard or found on the Web.

I have chosen our shared readings so that we approach the materiality of religion from comparative and critical perspectives, including unusual materials and arranging unexpected juxtapositions in order to spur discussion. Hopefully, we extend our study of religion in new directions, pushing the boundaries of what you've been exposed to previously, but we will also double-back to some familiar terrain and problematize certain assumptions. A quick list includes: breaking down the hermeneutical barrier between art and other modes of cultural expression, exploring the complex relation between place and mobility, questioning the distinction between the animate and inanimate, and even complicating that fundamental opposition of sacred and profane.

Research. Your research is individualized, but it will also be shared with the group. Below, I will say more about choosing an appropriate topic, but part of what distinguishes this project is that you will be discussing it with your classmates as everyone progresses from start to finish. Initially we'll talk over topics together, and then we'll critique bibliographies, and help each other to developing theses. You will read each other's drafts, and comment upon them. Your research project culminates with writing a substantive paper (20-25 pages). Additionally, you will make a formal presentation to the class.

Deadlines

Annotated Bibliography	March 21
Outline	April 2
Draft	April 18
Formal Presentation	April 9 - April 25
Final Paper	May 6

Breakdown of Grading

Participation	10
Ekphrasis	5
Reflection: Tang visit	5
Response: Perez	5
Reflection: Re/Positionings	5
Annotated Bibliography	10
Paper Outline	10
Draft	10
Final Paper	20

Picking an Object

Each student will pick an object or a kind of object, from any religious tradition, as the basis for his or her project. You will proceed from a material thing to uncover its spiritual values and religious uses, examining the ways in which it qualifies as or mediates the sacred. Cult images and liturgical objects are ‘obvious’ places to start to think about this project, as they are things either being worshipped or used during worship. Liturgical objects include items made for the Eucharist (chalice, paten, ciborium, monstrance, etc.), *dipa* lamps for Diwali, *kiddush* cups, spice boxes for Havdalah, whatever is placed on altars or brought to shrines, etc. Some examples may be rather simply made, while others may be finely crafted, perhaps ornately decorated using precious materials.

There is a tremendous profusion of such things, providing many good choices for a research topic; but I want you to understand that they are *not your only options*. This is because religion does not just take place in “authorized” spaces, such as churches, temples and synagogues, or only at “official” times, like holy days. Religion may occur at odd junctures or eccentric locales, perhaps taking place on the battlefield or on the hunt, on the run or out on the street, at roadside shrines or makeshift memorials or plastered on billboards, at airports or concerts, in prisons and in hospitals, in the workplace and in the home. In all these settings, people make things as part of making religion, so that the possibilities for picking an object are nearly unlimited, even if many such objects are often overlooked by scholars for being too practical or pedestrian.

Take, for example, prayer beads: they are relatively simple objects, basically being (wood, clay, coral, plastic) beads strung in a specific pattern. But when one investigates the use of the beads for the act of prayer, then many forking paths lead from a single type of object. Does one pray aloud, or silently? Is prayer an individual or collective performance? And so on, such that one might end up discussing the role of intention or questions of efficacy, as well as visualization and breathing techniques, hesychastic practices, and contemplative exercises.

Prayer beads can be compared with other devices (prayer wheels, electronic prayer machines), or with meditation aids (yantras, sand mandalas), or even with contemplative environments (like a zendo, or a labyrinth). One can focus on a begging bowl to explore self-denial in renunciatory traditions like Jainism or Buddhism, as well as the social dynamics of alms-giving. *Ex votos* (called *milagros* in Spanish, *tamata* in Greek: offerings made in fulfillment of a vow) could be your entry point for studying religious healing in vernacular Christianity. A sacred pipe can tell you a good deal about Lakota cosmology, just as a sacred pole encodes Haida mythology and kinship patterns. There are carved canoes in Polynesia, and bullroarers in Australia (or in Africa, or in ancient Europe) that occupy pivotal roles in religious life. Throughout the world, people fashion ‘ceremonial’ masks that embody divinities, ancestors or spirits of the bush. Working

along these lines, one thinks about the ritual context of that personation, that is, the mask is made to be part of masquerade, and so an element in a larger complex of sacred music and dance. You begin with any object -- whether it's an amulet, a canopic jar, a *kirpan*, a drum, or a divining tray -- and your study should eventually open up onto entire vistas of religious experience.

So be bold, be ambitious, and trust that I will restrain you, or retrain your focus, when you over-reach. **It's *your* capstone course**, and I want it to provide you with a rousing finish to your study of Religion here at Skidmore.

Two further notes: First, for those of you working on other projects, such as a senior thesis or another capstone, you will need to choose topics that *compliment* rather than *supplement* your other research. This is to say that your topic for this course should not be a direct continuation of research being conducted for other instructors. But I will work with you so that you may pursue overlapping interests, maybe through some convergence of theory or a point of comparison. The goal is a synergistic effect by which both projects are strengthened.

Second: Early in the semester we will visit the Tang Museum, where we'll look at some objects from their collection. We can gaze upon, but not touch, this assortment of objects. This wonderful opportunity is not, however, meant to privilege sight when studying material religion, as with certain sacred objects it may be more important to hear, or to smell, touch or taste. Moreover, understand that senses are rarely activated discretely, one at a time; instead, they are compounded and coordinated in ways that powerfully shape perception and mold memory. So feel free to focus on a type of object that engages or prioritizes some of the other senses, and not confine yourself to the visually expressive.

Riding the Syllabus

What else should we cover? *You all know the drill by now*. I ask that you be respectful and supportive of your classmates; adopt a comportment somewhere between courtesy and kindness. Come to every class, and read all the materials beforehand. Make that effort; and make your deadlines. I expect you to abide by the Skidmore Honor Code. Be proactive about your learning: when something is unclear, or you feel unfocused or overwhelmed, then contact me and set up a meeting. (Email is the quickest method for communication.) If you run into any problems, notify me sooner rather than later. And let's commit to making this a memorable, brilliant semester.

Dr. Spinner

Class Schedule: RE 375

Material Objects/Spiritual Subjects

Jan 22. Introductions.

Jan 24. **Religion/Everyday Life.** Reading 1.

Jan 29. *Visiting the Tang: Ekphrasis.* Reading 2.

Jan 31. **Mus(eum)ings.**

Feb 5. **Art/Not-Art.** *Reflections on our visit to the Tang.* Reading 3.

Feb 7. **Presence/Power.** Reading 4.

Feb 12. **Presence/Power,** *continued.* Reading 5.

Feb 14. **Objects/Persons.** Reading 6.

Feb 19. **Objects/Persons,** *continued.* Reading 7.

Feb 21. **Icons.** Reading 8.

Feb 26. **Icons,** *continued.* Reading 9.

Feb 28. **Relics.** Reading 10.

Mar 5. **Relics,** *continued.* Reading 11.

Mar 7. **Relocations.** Reading 12.

Spring Break.

Mar 19. **Feeding Ellegua.** *Guest-instruction by Dr. Perez.* Reading 13.

Mar 20. **Lecture:** On the Concept of the Fetish,
by Elizabeth Perez, Emerson Auditorium, 8 pm

Mar 21. **Desires/Values.** Reading 14.

Class Schedule, *continued*

Mar 26. **Commodities**. Reading 15.

Mar 28. **Replicas**. Reading 16.

Apr 2. **Reproductions**. Reading 17.

Apr 4. **Simulacra**. Reading 18.

Apr 9. **Bodies/Knowledge**. Reading 19. *Presentations*.

Apr 11. **Bodies/Knowledge**, *continued*. Reading 20. *Presentations*.

Apr 16. **Re/Positionings**. Reading 21. *Presentations*.

Apr 18. **Re/Positionings**, *continued*. Reading 22. *Presentations*.

Apr 23. *Presentations*.

Apr 25. *Presentations*.

Apr 30. Conclusions.

Material Objects/Spiritual Subjects

- Reading 1. Houtman & Meyers, Things. Orsi, “Everyday Miracles.”
- Reading 2. Imperato, Legends, Sorcerers & Enchanted Lizards.
- Reading 3. Paszorty, Thinking with Things.
- Reading 4. McAlister, “Sorcerer’s Bottle,” *available on Blackboard*.
- Reading 5. Brown, The Cult of the Saints. Mihesuah & Riding In.
- Reading 6. Whitehead, “Gift Giving and Power Perspectives,” *accessed at*
<http://www.basr.ac.uk/diskus/diskus12/whitehead.pdf>. Harvey, “Things Act.”
- Reading 7. Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography of Things.” Davis, The Lives of Indian Images, *skimming ch. 7*, “Loss and Recovery.”
- Reading 8. Belting, Likeness and Presence. Morgan, The Embodied Eye.
- Reading 9. Swearer, Becoming the Buddha. *Ch. 4 gives a long, detailed account of the ritual; skim that part, until p. 108, “Making the Buddha Present,” then slow down.*
- Reading 10. Strong, Relics of the Buddha. Scharf, “Allure.”
- Reading 11. Schopen, “Relics.” Freeman, Holy Bones, Holy Dust.
 Cox Miller, Corporeal Imagination.
- Reading 12. Geary, Furta Sacra. Davis, Lives of Indian Images.
- Reading 13. *To Be Announced*.
- Reading 14. Marx, Capital. Harvey. Appadurai.
- Reading 15. Geary, “Sacred Commodities.”
- Reading 16. Wharton, Selling Jerusalem. Long, Imagining the Holy Land.
- Reading 17. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”
 Roberts & Roberts, A Saint in the City, *available on Blackboard*.
- Reading 18. Wharton, Selling Jerusalem, *continued*. Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra.” Ferguson, Anyon & Ladd, “Repatriation at the Pueblo of Zuni.”
- Reading 19. Selections from Jackson, Stoller, and Csordas.
- Reading 20. Perez, “Cooking for the Gods.”
- Reading 21. Boucher, “Sutra on the Merit of Bathing the Buddha.” Hughes,
 “Mysterium Materiae.”
- Reading 22. Orsi, “The Problem of the Holy.”