



Fig. 1. Jewish men applying tefillin at Temple Mount, Jerusalem, June 2005. Photo: author.

DAVID MORGAN

THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF LIVED RELIGION: VISUALITY AND EMBODIMENT

I propose to define the material culture of lived religion in terms of several categories of practice that put images and objects to work as ways of engaging the human body in the configuration of the sacred. At the heart of my argument is the claim that religions are ways of fabricating networks of relations among human beings, on the one hand, and relations with gods, angels, saints, the afterlife, spirits or ancestors, on the other. This dual reticulation unfolds in the medium of the human body as a triangulation of individual, group, and sacred other. This pivotal role of the body is certainly evident in spectacular instances of religious ecstasy such as Theresa of Avila's sensuous mystical flights so famously portrayed by Bernini's Baroque marble extravaganza in the Cornaro Chapel in Rome. The viewer stands before altar, drawn into the scene of the Carmelite saint visited by an angel and flanked by the effigies of members of the Cornaro family seated overhead in side galleries. But we may also find the embodied reticulation of individuals, the group, and a sacred other in the most mundane and anti-spectacular moments of everyday religion. For example, even the sternest Protestants sitting rigidly in rows and rows of pews are bodily engaged in a state of religious consciousness. They severely regulate their motionless bodies in order to sharpen the capacity for hearing. They listen with their taut forms, and they convey in unstinting, rapt attention an earnest respect for what they hear. And by sitting together, mirroring one another in demeanor, gesture, and dress, they assemble a unified social body, a shared somatic regime

that endows them with a corporate identity, a congregation. The practice of hearing relies on the discipline of formal sitting, which is something that must be learned. The skill of attentive sitting is an example of what Marcel Mauss aptly called a 'technique of the body,' and it is something that parents seek to make even the youngest children grow accustomed to practicing in weekly worship.¹ Those composing an assembled body of listeners attend individually to the sermon, using their bodies to help them concentrate, but in doing so also affect one another. By acting on themselves, they act on the group, and by submitting themselves to the ethos and behavior of the group, they act upon themselves. Embodiment is at the heart of this dialectically collective and individual enterprise.

The intention of this essay is to outline primary ways in which religion happens materially, taking shape as embodied practices that configure the worlds of mortals and others. The human body plays such a central role in this process that investigations of religion that ignore the body are in danger of proposing a deeply skewed and quite misleading account of their subject. A robust study of materiality would not limit itself to images and objects, but would consider all the senses – smell, taste, sound, touch, and sight, but also senses as differently construed by varying cultures.² My focus in this essay, however, is on visuality, with special interest in space and touch as vital components of visuality, which I seek to understand not in isolation but as intricately interwoven with other senses. Far from seques-

tering sight from the other senses, I believe it is necessary to integrate it into the full sensorium in order to understand much better the embodied nature of religious experience. But since it is not possible to examine the entire range on this occasion, I will focus on vision and embodiment as an example of the larger direction in which I regard the study of religious material culture to be profitably pursuing.³

DEFINITIONS

I would like to begin with several rudimentary definitions before proceeding to identify a set of categories of religious material practice. First, by *material culture* I intend all aspects of religion that pertain to bodies, objects, places, and artifacts of any kind.⁴ In contrast to textually-driven approaches, I argue that religions are not essentially ideational, conceptual, or volitional. They are all of these, of course, but they also exhibit the corporeal nature of human existence, which means that religions consist of feeling, sensation, implements, spaces, images, clothing, food, and all manner of bodily practices regarding such things as prayer, purification, ritual eating, corporate worship, private study, pilgrimage, and so forth. Consider the way in which some Jewish men prepare for prayer at the Western wall of the temple mount in Jerusalem by winding leather straps or *tefillin* about their arms. (Fig. 1.) Shall we say that the 'essence' of religion is what people utter in prayer or worship? If so, these leather straps are mere epiphenomena, garnishes on the edge of the plate, inessential, merely ancillary embellishments of the sacred, which is as necessarily immaterial as the words that bear it forth. And yet, for Orthodox Jews, observing the practice of binding the arm is an obligatory part of prayer. It is the way they were taught to pray, it is a practice they share with one another, with their fathers, and the tradition which they instantiate and maintain

as an act of faith. The body of the believer is made to mediate the individual and his tradition as well as the individual and the divine. Prayer with the *tefillin* constitutes the material way of practicing the religion as something one feels in one's flesh. 'Material culture' consists of two aspects: the material things that people use and value, but also the practices, places, attitudes, and schemes of thought and value that shape their perception and valuation of the things. Properly speaking, the study of material culture means the study of cultured or culturally conceived and deployed things.

Embodiment is a principal register for religion. Without it we fail to understand one of the most powerful aspects of religious behavior. Religions operate on and consist of, make and are made by bodies. Religions are not discrete social institutions that work like cultural factories to produce individuals. Understanding them in this way has led to notions of secularization that purport to trace the rise and fall of religions as social forces. But this approach misses the far more subtle ways in which religions are constructive operations in human life. The Orthodox Jewish boys who visited the Western wall one summer to receive their first *siddur*, or prayer book, at five-years of age, also received shiny golden paper torah crowns to mark the occasion. (Fig. 2.) Each boy is dressed more or less the same, in black trousers and white shirts, some with vests, and all cap their esprit de corps with the crown. None of them sees himself, but he does see his fellows, these other versions of himself, and he is seen in return by them. This exchange of a common gaze assures each member that he belongs to the group. For this reason uniforms or common dress are familiar features of religious communities, most often among priests, monastics, officialdom, and officiates of formal worship, but also among laity such as members of a confraternity or students in parochial schools. Religions rely on material means such as dress, space, and artifacts to fabricate shared identity. Use of these means constructs what

Fig. 2. Orthodox Jewish teacher distributing prayer books among five year old boys at Temple Mount, Jerusalem, June 2005. Photo: author.



may be called a *social body*, that is, an imagined, felt association to which the individual belongs and in which she experiences her connection in a variety of sensuous ways. The feeling of participation in an extended collective reality is produced by material means such as dressing uniformly, displaying or using the same imagery, or performing the same practices such as songs, recitations, liturgies, or ritualized meals, especially practices that have been deeply internalized by years of rehearsal. A social body is a larger whole intuited by feeling, sensation, and imagination. Mediated by an image, a dance, a song, a space, a gathering of congregants, the social body looms as a larger version of the group and the self that envisions it. The sensation of this body is especially common in practices conducted among children. We see the Orthodox teacher busily engaged among the boys about him. He does not simply stand up and announce to the boys that they are members of a single group. Instead, the group *performs* its unity by dressing similarly and coming to the Wall together on this

ritual occasion. The boys' knowledge of their identity is an enacted and embodied knowing, a felt-cognition. More than abstractly knowing who they are, they perceive, feel, or sense their relatedness to one another and to the extended community whose trans-temporal coherence is materialized in the sacred site of the Wall and the social practice of praying there.

Communities do not engage in collective experiences merely because it is convenient to do so. The teacher does not bring the boys to the Wall on this occasion for the sake of efficiency, simply because conducting a group consumes less time than bringing the boys individually to the site. It is crucial for the material study of religion to recognize that collective experience, doing things together, calibrates feelings and emotions as social media keyed to commonly experienced events, rites, places, things, dress, food, song, music, movement or totemic figures. Commonly experienced artifacts become social media that educate the senses and operate as forms of sociality. Waiting anxiously in line, receiving gifts, dressing the same are

ways of belonging to the group, creating a cohort whose experience manages shared emotions and teaches the children to feel together, to do religion together. The feelings generated by these practices affect social cohesion, group identity, communal relations, and the compelling power of social participation.

By *lived religion* I mean religion at work – what it does in everyday life, among people, in the street or home.⁵ Lived religion comes in the form of practices – of seeing, speaking, eating, singing, and a broad variety of rituals – formal and informal, corporate and private, prescribed and improvised. Therefore, fundamental to the study of lived religion is the role of *practice*, a keyword among anthropologists, sociologists, media scholars, material culturalists, and religion scholars.⁶ Rather than define religion in terms of creeds or doctrines, these scholars find it more helpful to focus on practices as constitutive of religion. This shifts the study away from the centrality of beliefs to framing religion as one of the things people do in order to organize their worlds into coherent domains of experience such as social order, personal relationships, and interactions with forces beyond the immediate control of the body or community.

Because embodiment and materiality comprise lived religion and therefore make sensation and feeling the medium of belief, we may regard *aesthetics* as a primary framework for the study of religion. By aesthetics I do not mean the science or philosophy of beauty, as the term was commonly understood from the late eighteenth century to the twentieth. I intend instead the study of ways of feeling, forms of sensation, modes of perception. These are not hopelessly subjective and therefore inaccessible phenomena, but may be studied as shared patterns or routines that endure and therefore characterize groups of people as forms of sociality, as the sensuous means of social association and shared imagination. These forms take diverse shape – public rallies or parades, football matches, or rock concerts,

as well as formally religious events such as liturgy, hymn singing, domestic devotions, pilgrimage practices, icon veneration, and so on. Shared practices both generate and modulate feeling and sensation, which in turn mediate humans and gods.⁷

One might say that material culture is the skeleton on which the thought-world and felt-life of religion take shape. Thought, feeling, and practice are incomplete without one another. Aesthetics, as I understand it, is how they may be studied as belonging to an integrated body of experiences. Together, they form religion robustly understood. This means that the study of material artifacts and images in religious practice is the study of a powerful way in which people put their worlds together and maintain them by negotiating change in material practice. Images and objects are not inessential parts of religion, even those religions that insist they have no use for images in acts of worship. Images and objects perform powerful cultural work in mediating individual and social bodies and the sacred, and they often do it far from official religious sites such as altars or temples. Homes, work places, schools, the road, and the individual bodies of the devout are often the places where amulets, symbols, ex-votos, devotional pictures, souvenirs, trophies, emblems, commemorative objects, and mnemonic devices go to work.

The power of material culture resides in its ability to make physically present what is otherwise distant or absent or insensate, to embody the inchoate feelings, dim presentiments, the distant past, the deceased leader or saint, the religious community, the intangible or transcendent reality, and to discipline and enlist the body in acts of shared imagination. All of these aesthetic frameworks structure a people's time, space, sense of purpose, and collective identity. The study of material culture is not limited to the artifacts and spaces of human life, but also includes the concepts, aesthetic paradigms, emotional patterns, and many practices that make things and spaces

apprehensible and valuable. Material culture gives form and place to such intangible structures as feelings, presentiments of ages past or future, the nation, or the personhood of ancestors and saints, investing them with a concrete presence in daily life.

But in order to recognize the place and power of religious material culture it is necessary to consider the situation in which human beings find themselves and how objects redress the human condition. Although there is no reason to believe in a universal human nature, human beings everywhere face the common condition of life in perpetual flux. Everything changes and is therefore potentially destabilizing in human society. Achieving some degree of stability in flux is desirable, even a controlled change is more manageable than precipitous or unpredictable transformation. Managing change, retarding it or resisting it, or otherwise affecting it, negotiating its cleavages, or merely the threat of upheaval, is generally in the interest of groups. Religion is one familiar social technology for doing so. Rites of passage, for example, are social forms of managing change. Children age, inferiors long for advancement, the strong fall ill, the old die. The resulting change destabilizes power relations and requires redress if the standing order is to survive and ensure a predictable, ordered world. Rites of passage can make change productive rather than destructive. Loss may be turned to gain. By the same token, overturning the standing order is the very task of those who feel oppressed or powerless, or who yearn to enjoy the privileges of power for themselves. Revolution relies on an alternative set of material practices to achieve its end, such as iconoclastic acts of destroying the public symbols of power of the ancien regime. Defacing, toppling, or removing the statuary of the ruling power can be a powerful symbolic act for rallying support and making public the revolution that is necessary to effect a shift of power. Such acts can secure a new order, or come to embody it, just as rites of passage are

commonly used to conserve power and traditional order. But even iconoclasm is part of a larger visual strategy of negotiating change: destruction is supposed to be limited to the emblems of the old order insofar as removing them makes room for the new order. As soon as the new are in power, they seek to consolidate their hold on it. Very quickly, sometimes over night, the new becomes as old as the old it replaced.

In addition to rites of passage, a variety of other practices are able to negotiate change. Commemoration, pilgrimage, divination, intercession, healing, seeking miracles or divine intervention, the use of amulets or magic, discernment or introspection – all of these devices may be religious strategies for coming to terms with the disruption of familiar structures of authority or with the threat of disorder or the loss of health, advantage, status, fertility, or wealth.

The place of materiality in these negotiations is important to recognize. Human beings tend to organize their relations with gods, spirits, ancestors, or forces in the same way they organize their relations with one another: as a system of exchange, as an economy of relations that trade in things of value. We may speak of the *material economy of the sacred* in any given society as the negotiation of relations between gods and humans. Things made, displayed, given, received, honored, destroyed, hidden, found, stolen, hoarded, and narrated mediate all manner of values, counting for loss and gain, power and impotence, status and desire, tradition and innovation. Things circulate and act, and they are able to embody the otherwise unseen. They perform miracles and they establish or transform the identity of their owners in countless ways. The economy of things such as sacred objects educates their users, forming their senses and equipping them with the social media of things and feelings that enable them to interact productively to manage the change that constantly assaults the fragile project of social life.

Studying the constructive role of the senses in material culture is what aesthetics can contribute to the investigation of religion. Understood in this way, material culture may be organized in several categories. I describe seven below, yet by no means do I consider this number to exhaust the different operations performed by material practices. Indeed, I have enumerated additional categories on other occasions.⁸ My intention here is to demonstrate how the study of materiality can be of fundamental significance to the study of religion.

SOME PRIMARY CATEGORIES OF RELIGIOUS MATERIAL CULTURE

1. Facing the sacred

Images of saints, gods, mythic heroes, ancestors, or spiritual powers do many things, but one of their most important acts is to facilitate the face-to-face encounter with the person whose power, assistance, or blessing believers seek. Human beings are especially sensitive readers and users of the face as a nuanced set of signs. People are so interested in seeing faces as rich sources of information that one anthropologist has suggested this is the reason why we see faces in accidental formations and readily anthropomorphize, morphing virtually any phenomenon into a divine disclosure or sign.⁹ We commonly see human characteristics in the faces of animals and insects because we assume that their faces are like our own, intimately attached to the domain of feeling and intentions expressed in the visible surface of the human face. We read human faces with astonishing subtlety and rely on our own faces to engage those before us in communication. Human perception is strongly inclined to attend to the face very carefully, particularly the eyes, which can convey crucial information about intention and the relationship between ourselves and those we face. Portraits are com-

elling because they deploy a culture's formalized semantics of the human face. Not only do we recognize period costume, gesture, and expression in a portrait, we regard the painted or engraved likeness with the strong expectation that we are seeing the soul of the sitter, and in some cases that we are even seen by the portrayed person. We easily imagine that pictures of faces are looking at us, returning our gaze, seeking to engage us in conversation or the silent colloquy of looks. This reality of the likeness is grounded in the sensitive, proactive way in which human beings see faces. Infants learn this quickly. From the earliest age, humans watch the faces of those they encounter for evidence of intentions, for feedback, for a sense of how they themselves are being received. Images are in some sense grounded in the human face: we are inclined to treat them as persons. An image of a person seems to return our gaze and disclose something about us.

The human face is not an arbitrary signifier, but an emanation of presence. Its features are directly linked to musculature, which is wired to the interior domain of biochemistry, the seat of feeling and response to the world around us. The face may dissemble or deceive, but it does so only by mimicking the expression of feelings and intentions that humans rely on in everyday life as the basis of communication. The association of looks and intended meanings is taken for granted. Certainly it relies on cultural conventions. A smile may mean many different things. But the desire to believe that faces reveal true feelings is perhaps universal because it is found at work in the tender relations between parents and their children from the first days of life. Children and parents look to the other's face unceasingly in order to determine disposition, state of mind, intent, feeling.

The power of the face to address us in the form of a somatic relation is evident in Christian images of Mary, such as the delicate image of Mother and Child in an Orthodox icon in Helsinki. (Fig. 3.) The sweet face of the lit-

Fig. 3. Mother and Child, Orthodox icon, Ouspensky Orthodox Church, Helsinki, May 2005. Photo: author.



tle Jesus is paired with his loving mother's in a tradition that underscores the accessibility of Jesus to believers – he is the deity who will respond and presents himself for an affectionate visual exchange with viewers. The gaze of Mary is off to the side, indicating that she gathered up everything that happened to him (Luke 2: 51), and, according to tradition, that she contemplates the future suffering of her son, and supports him in preparation for it. Their respective lines of sight intersect in

front of the picture plane, in the actual space of the viewer, who participates vicariously in the mother's visceral pain at contemplating her son's future tribulation and death. Interpreted in this way, the image entreats devout viewers, engaging them visually and corporeally. Seeing is an embodied practice because it means being seen in return and entering reverentially into the tender, yet agonizing presence of the one returning our look.

2. *Conscripting the body into religious practice*

Bodies are complex things. They are inscrutably tied to minds such that they can challenge every resolve of intellect with itching, indigestion, fatigue, and the smell of bodies next to one's own. Some Buddhist and Hindu practitioners spend many years working at meditation and yogic exercise to bring mind and body into a disciplined state. Other religionists engage in flagellation, fasting, and ascetic practices to gain control over the body, or at least to use the body's discomfort to remind themselves of the claim that the holy has upon them. Most rites of passage involve some version of pain, even if only symbolic. But the pleasures of the body also play a key role in religious life, most commonly produced by feasting with family or kin on ritual occasions.

The body is the most personal and public form of signage – conveying to family and community the status of the individual. Many religious traditions express concern to control the unwieldy body and the will that is seated powerfully in the liver or heart or spleen or stomach, as the case may be. Religious formation invariably involves effort to train the body and will to submit to the disciplines of ritual, devotion, study, moral code, and communal authority. The body must be enlisted or conscripted in the sense that by passing through the 'boot camp' of rites of passage and forms of instruction and purification the human person emerges as transformed, a new being in its social world. The body is like a writing surface on which are inscribed the cultural demands of its world. Flesh and bone are educated to the forms and routines of life in the social body. The body's pain and discomfort are powerful dimensions in the training since reacting to pain or pleasure is an effective form of motivation. Pain is the imperative voice in a society's grammar of assent. The display of hair, eyes, teeth, bodily stance, and the angle of the head are pre-hominid behaviors that homo sapiens inherited from mammalian predecessors as

primary forms of communication. The body is meaningful, restless, desirable, unpredictable, and therefore powerful. Controlling it is the basis of human sociality.

As cultural forms dedicated to ordering and maintaining human relations and to imagining transcendent orders as the basis for human fortune or misfortune, religions make fundamental use of the bodies of their adherents. Orthodox Jewish men who arrive at the Western wall in Jerusalem wrap one arm in a leather strap, place another around their heads (each of these *tefillin* or phylacteries holds a small box with Torah inside), and cover their shoulders with a *tallith*, or prayer shawl, as bodily practices of prayer. (See fig. 1.) Prayer is a bodily practice, not merely an intellectual state of consciousness. The men hold the prayer manual as they stand or sit before the wall and recite prayers while bobbing rhythmically to immerse their consciousness into the somatic act of prayer. The Roman Catholic practice of wearing the scapular around one's neck is a part of Marian devotion. A lay version, derived from the much larger garment worn by monks and friars, consists of two small images backed by cloth and sewn at either end of two strands to wear about the neck, hanging over each shoulder. The garment is understood as a sign and guarantee of Mary's love and protection, and is closely associated with the devotion to Our Lady of Fatima. Pope Benedict XV granted an indulgence of 500 days for each time the scapular is kissed. Scapulars often include texts stating as 'Mary's promise' that the faithful who die wearing it will not suffer 'eternal fire.'

3. *Creating the space of memory: making place*

Places become sacred when they mark the site where someone vanished or something important happened. Sacred spaces arise where bodies have disappeared – most commonly by virtue of dying or being buried. The place

marks an absence, delineating the edge of where the tangible took leave, where it became intangible, which is where it might be permanently lost to memory if the site were not set off for attention. Demarcation means that the living can return to the place, thereby keeping the person available, serving as an apparatus over which to fit the narrative account of his or her identity. As a result, the place becomes the body of memory, the shape of the missing one's absence, the last place he was; and therefore the place becomes a link to him. Shrines, architectural ruins, sites of execution, graves, monuments, battle grounds: these places anchor temporal maps in the minds and bodies of those who visit them in order to remember the lost ones. The site and its regular visitation keeps the departed part of an ongoing narrative, the story that encompasses the living and the dead, a narrative that unifies the here and

the hereafter, filling the hole left by the departed. Re-enactments may or may not stage a compelling sense of the leaving. But generally speaking, commemoration forestalls the loss that forgetting would entail.

This is evident in a roadside marker along a major highway in Indiana, at the site where a young girl was killed in an automobile accident. (Fig. 4.) She is not remembered as a holy figure, and the sight is not a shrine in the sense of housing a relic. Yet the site is sacred to her memory among parents, family, and friends, and is marked by the crosses, flowers, stuffed animals, and brightly colored ornaments that visitors continue to deposit. Those leaving the objects on the anniversaries of her death have written personal messages to her on the crosses. Marking the place is important as a way of remembering her, even more, honoring her and continuing to express tender

Fig. 4. Roadside marker, site of child's death, Indiana, June 2006. Photo: author.



feelings for her. The teddy bears and brightly colored objects certainly convey such feelings, but one wonders if they might also be intended to provide a comforting presence at the site of her death, a broad, grassy ditch, not unlike the way parents place such objects in the bedrooms of their infant children in order to make an inviting, reassuring space for their sleeping and waking hours. The feelings of comfort generated by the gifts may join visitors with the deceased in the imagination of a common sensation. The personal messages recorded on the crosses address the girl directly, as if she were able to hear them, making her death a violent separation but not an end to her existence. She is somewhere else, but feels the presence of her visitors. Maintaining the site through the material practice of leaving objects and messages develops and sustains a narrative that inserts the child's loss into a larger account, one that includes the survivors and anticipates a reunion assured by the

Christian cosmology of life after death. But the gifts and messages may also do something else that is comforting to the girl's survivors: they may be intended to provide her company and proximity in memory, easing the anxious thought of her violent loss and their inability to have prevented it.

4. *Preserving the material presence of the holy*

The sacred in memory is premised on absence, which means that the sacred is a mode of emplacement designed to secure what is missing. The material form of the marker embodies and protects its memory and narrative recounting. On other occasions, the body of the beloved remains, never having left though it is always in danger of being lost or forgotten. The sacred in this case must be maintained or preserved as a material presence in the world of time and space. To this end, special measures are necessary to delineate something so as not to be



Fig. 5. African-American school children before the Horatio Greenough statue of George Washington, US Capitol, ca. 1899. Photo: Frances Benjamin Johnston. Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection, Library of Congress.

profaned or lost to deterioration or confusion with other things. Egyptians mummified the body so that it might endure as the material basis of the self in the next life. Sculptured likenesses of pharaohs were placed within burial chambers in order to host the soul. Broken images lost the power to do so. Catholics from the Middle Ages to the modern world have reassembled the bones of the holy dead or installed relics in elaborate reliquaries. Buddhists around the world have enshrined hairs of the Buddha in stupas for ritual veneration by practitioners. And it was imperative for the Soviet government to embalm the body of Lenin for public display in the Kremlin as the secular saint of the Communist state. For decades the American Congress labored to transport the bones of George Washington to a mausoleum in the Capitol rotunda, intended to house the remains of the father of the nation. The state government of Virginia repeatedly denied the request and finally succeeded in keeping the remains at Mount Vernon. Congress resorted to commissioning a giant marble likeness of Washington as lawgiver, the American Moses pictured more like a half-naked Zeus.¹⁰ (Fig. 5.) The massive size of the figure, whatever its maker's intention, appears now as if it might have acted as a kind of compensation to the young capital and nation, a titan intended to compete with the bones in Virginia, to resurrect and transpose the historical figure, George Washington, into the vaunted totem of the nation, Washington the city and myth. The body of the man became the symbolic body of the nation. Placement within the city of Washington, especially in the wake of the Civil War, meant confirming the center of moral gravity in the nation's capital as opposed to the pro-slavery South represented by Virginia. It is not by accident that a group of African-American children are shown in the photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston about 1899, visiting the sculpture while it was still displayed on the national mall. (See fig. 5.)

Preserving the sacred body matters because doing so secures everything that the person created and represents – deity, faith, nation, people. Preservation also stabilizes cult and devotion, and creates a site for pilgrimage, which means the basis for a material economy of the sacred as well as an enduring apparatus for priesthood, state-cult, or civil religion. Pilgrimage to power-sites is commonly linked to practices involving healing, divination, petition, and forgiveness. One need only consider the pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial to note the importance of Washington as the heart of the nation's civil religion.

Preserving the sacred often means treating it properly. Respect and veneration keep the sacred in place. The sacred may be lost without the observance of certain protocols and the enforcement of taboos. The use of material devices cues recognition of sacred matter qua sacred. This may involve harsh taboos against touching the sacred object, as Durkheim noted in the case of tribal societies,¹¹ but in other instances touching, smelling, eating, or seeing with the desire to touch is the suitable means of honoring the object's sacrality. For example, for centuries Christians have made pilgrimage to churches to behold relics of their saints, and to touch the reliquaries or shrines or altars that house the relics, often creating 'contact relics' by touching cloth, rosaries, prayer cards, or images to these containers of holy matter. An even more intimate form of physical contact with the holy occurs in the Eucharist, in which Christians devour the body and blood of Jesus in the ritual meal that not only remembers Jesus' death, but realizes its redemptive power. The consecrated bread and wine of the meal remain bearers of Christ's presence, so when everyone has finished the priest consumes the remaining wine and places the unconsumed host in a tabernacle near the altar, where it is stored between ritual celebrations of Holy Communion.



Fig. 6. Wooden prayer standards, graveyard at Gokokuji Temple, Tokyo, April 2005. Photo: author.

*5. Leaving and taking:
materiality and communication*

Emplacement enables various forms of access and dissemination. Once sited, the holy – whether remembered or materially invested – may enter into the lives of the devout, shaping personal narratives and social discourse. As it enters the world of social relations, the holy is extended into the lives of people over time. Therefore, we commonly see that visitors to graves, remnants, shrines, sites of former temples, or monuments often leave things there or take things away with them. People maintain ongoing relations with forces or gods or ancestors as well as with other devotees by means of a material set of negotiations consisting of the things they leave and take at holy places.

Lived religion may be described as a form of economy, a cultural system of exchange in which participants enter into relations with spiritual realities and with their community. These relations are variously negotiated in practices of gifting or donation, petition or supplication, and in *quid pro quo*. Each form of negotiation carries different expectations of reciprocity and indebtedness. And each form of negotiation involves corresponding material practices. For example, marking one's presence at the site of the holy is a way of lending ballast to one's petitions as well as physically participating in the collective and ongoing action of remembrance. Leaving an object or a text signals one's veneration of the site and what it conveys; one's intention to return; and one's desire to connect with the person, group, or event that is remembered in the place. Prayer at graveside or holy site may be much more meaningful and considered more propitious. Buddhist visitors at a Korean monastery leave bits of tile or small statuary, or piles of stones to mark their pilgrimage and prayer. The Japanese grave shown here displays a host of wooden prayer sticks that loved ones have purchased and inscribed

with passages from Buddhist sutras (especially the Diamond Sutra, among the most popular Mahayana texts). (Fig. 6.) In Japan, Buddhism is commonly intermingled with Shinto, which is a religion dedicated to spirit-forces that are petitioned with prayer and offerings. Sold by the cemetery and customized at the patron's request, the sticks are placed at graves on anniversaries of deaths (the sticks bear names and anniversary dates), demonstrating to the deceased as well as to the gods that the person has not been forgotten. Leaving in this instance is a demonstration of continuing reverence and piety.¹²

In giving, believers signal or seek to secure the expectation of some form of response. In taking, believers engage in a kind of record keeping. When pilgrims take a souvenir with them it may be to establish an enduring link with the place and time of pilgrimage; to show others as proof and as a form of veneration; to serve as the occasion for speaking with others, presenting one's testimony, or encouraging others to make pilgrimage. The structure of much religious practice is eminently economical; objects and images commonly serve as the token or currency in this economy. But when the objects they leave or venerate are understood to participate in the very being of themselves or a saint, the material economy of the sacred is intensified by trade in the very substance of value. Relics occupy a special status in the material economy of the sacred. In this regard, leaving and taking may be more than a form of communication. Anthropologists have noted that the things people give and receive are sometimes regarded as part of themselves. Dorinne Kondo observed in her study of the tea ceremony, "In Japan, objects in general are not considered atomistic entities, but extensions of people."¹³ Marcel Mauss made a similar claim in his classic study of gifting: among the Maori, gifts participated in the soul of the giver and the receiver: "to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself -- to accept something

from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul.”¹⁴ Accordingly, to leave objects means leaving part of oneself, of entering into a material relationship, one that personally connects one to the sacred other and possibly to other pilgrim-visitors who enter into what might be called the network of the partible self.

6. Pilgrimage and the economy of belief

Material practices of pilgrimage bear a certain resemblance to what souvenirs mean for tourism. Indeed, tourism and pilgrimage have always happened together. As Victor and Edith Turner put it in their important study of Christian pilgrimage: “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist.”¹⁵ Ancient pilgrims to Jerusalem purchased clay lamps for use in unlit interiors and brought them home. A thriving business in lamp production ensued. A comparable phenomenon is found at any pilgrimage site that becomes an established route, the focal point of a routine in which a predictable flow of visitors can sustain local commerce.¹⁶ Medallions, images, and certificates purchased along the way or at the site become part of the ritual as well as the narrative that is already taking shape. After the pilgrimage is completed, the narrative is deployed in devotional acts of remembrance and in interaction with others. The practice of purchasing indulgences for remission from time in purgatory constitutes yet another version of the sacred economy of religion.

Commerce remains a part of modern Christian pilgrimage. An example reproduced here shows one aspect of an annual pilgrimage each May (the international month of Mary) to Univ, a Studite monastery in southwestern Ukraine where the Virgin is believed to have revealed the site of a hidden spring several centuries ago. (Fig. 7.) Just outside of the monastery vendors set up long lines of tables and booths that offer pilgrims a great variety of printed icons, medals, crosses, candles,



Fig. 7. Sale of items for pilgrims to Univ Monastery, Southwestern Ukraine, May 2004. Photo: author.

and so forth. Cheap plastic toys, watchbands, and other inexpensive items are also included on the densely covered tables of commodities. The sacred and the secular intermingle. Their difference consists of their value within the material economy. Some items have more value, others less. Generally speaking, relics are worth more than contact relics by virtue of rarity. But the sacred can be so fluid as to challenge the conventional distinction of original and copy.¹⁷

The sacred is able to conform to laws. Some have called this magic, rather than the sacred, but that is a theological distinction rather than an anthropological one for practices varying from relic veneration to divination bear the protocols of an organized economic system. For example, visitor-tourist-pilgrims to a massive Buddhist temple dedicated to Kannon, the great bodhisattva, in the Asakusa neighborhood of Tokyo, enter down a long avenue of shops selling religious articles as well as tourist souvenirs. Japanese school children are fond of purchasing fortune sheets. If the fortune is favorable, they take the sheet with them. If it is bad or irrelevant, they fold it up and tie it to the trellis (originally a tree), where

Fig. 8. Schoolgirls tying paper fortunes to trelis for disposal, Sensoji Temple, Asakusa district, Tokyo, April 2005. Photo: author.



it will be removed from their futures. (Fig. 8.) The economy of belief operates very closely to the steady presence of chance or randomness in human life since negotiation with the powers governing events is a way of turning their whimsy to one's advantage. Economic behavior is a rationalizing technique for ordering social relations and traffic with the divine, stabilizing chance into a regulated system of negotiation.

7. Emplotment: harvesting purpose from chaos

One of the most familiar and widely practiced aspects of religions is divination. Simply put, divination consists of turning randomness into information. To do so requires a material apparatus that autonomously generates the 'noise' in which a petitioner finds an interpretable 'sound.' This conversion may be effected in the use of devices like fortune sheets, oracular sounds from trees, springs, or rocks,

the entrails of sacrificed animals, instruments such as astrology, tarot, tea leaves, or the sticks of I Ching, or bibliomancy (opening a book such as the Bible or Koran at random and pointing to a verse); or by drawing straws or casting dice. Any generation of random events becomes revelatory when the event becomes a sign whose authority is underwritten by its random origin. Religions around the world offer something that human beings find almost impossible to resist: techniques for harvesting purpose from chance. Randomness is a fundamental feature of human life and the universe. Not only do we thrive on the chance occurrence of good fortune, we amuse ourselves with games that challenge us to reduce the odds against our favor by exercising memory, strategy, cunning, or blind chance. Luck is a form of judgment about matters beyond our control, the determination of an interested party, the one who benefits or suffers from an event. Good luck means a consequence of benefit to me. Bad luck is any result that is not in my interest. Human society is a set of social arrangements and liaisons able to enhance the odds of survival and decrease the odds of disaster. By herding, we improve our chances to survive. Not only are we less likely to be selected by a predator, by remaining in groups human beings are able to develop complex social relations that bind them to one another over time, decreasing entropy and helping to ensure support when hardship inevitably happens.

Divination transforms randomness into information by one of four general techniques: 1) by *agreement* regarding result, as in drawing straws or casting lots, the loser is chosen; 2) by a *prescriptive code* that translates marks or sounds into a script; 3) by *contest* such as a riddle or athletic performance or the execution of some task; and 4) by *narration*, in which an expert reads an event as part of a narrative, an unfolding sequence, a plot that is going somewhere and taking the individual with it. Tarot

cards are an obvious example, but so is providential discernment in pagan and Christian theologies. Purpose emerges as movement toward a destination. Events are not random, but happen for a reason to be discerned in the story that they help tell.¹⁸

In every case, divination takes the client from a state of less knowledge to more, from less order to greater order, from impotence to a more favorable position. Religions are ways of emplotting life with purpose and they rely on things to do this, especially in techniques of divination. Even in formally non-religious instances such as the Japanese schoolgirls seeking good fortunes, we can see in the practice an attempt to negotiate with powers that are larger than oneself. (See fig. 8.) The girls can elude an unfavorable fortune by tying it to a trellis and letting the wind spirits take it away. Even fortunes that are not bad but simply irrelevant must be respectfully disposed of because the circulation of fortune belongs to an encompassing economy. There is a logic to this way of thinking. By ascribing divine or providential intent to random events such as storms, floods, attacks, military defeats, fires, plagues, and other catastrophic events, people are able to imagine themselves part of a story that is not directed by unfavorable or malignant powers. Disasters are not allowed to loom as ever possible and unpredictable, thus enabling hope and a variety of other, more productive feelings and moods to prevail. Because events happen for a reason, that reason must be identified and accommodated within the economy of belief so that they may not recur. The benefit includes a secured sense of belonging, of finding one's home in a world that can be terrifyingly random.

Taking these seven domains of materiality together, not as an exhaustive list but as one broadly representative of lived religions around the world, we are in the position to affirm the importance of materializing the study of religion.

NOTES

- 1 Mauss, Marcel, Techniques of the Body. *Economy and Society* 2, 1973, 70–88.
- 2 For a very helpful collection of essays that do in fact explore all of the senses see David Howes, ed., *The Empire of the Senses: A Sensual Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg, 2005.
- 3 See the author's forthcoming *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- 4 The literature on material culture is large. Studies with direct relevance for the investigation of religion include: Freedberg, David, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; McDannell, Colleen, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995; *The Visual Culture of American Religions*, ed. by David Morgan and Sally M. Promey. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; *American Sanctuary: Understanding Sacred Spaces*, ed. by Louis P. Nelson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006; *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual*, ed. by Elizabeth Arweck and William Keenan. Oxford: Ashgate, 2006; Meyer, Birgit & Morgan, David & Keane, Webb & Chidester, David, In Conversation: Materializing Religion. *Material Religion* 4, no. 2, July 2008: 226–33; Visual Culture and Material Culture: Paradigms for the Study of Religion. *Material Religion* 5, no. 3, November 2009, ed. by Gretchen Buggeln, Simon Coleman and Richard H. Davis, 355–63; and David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- 5 The idea of “lived religion” has been brought to the attention of many scholars of religion by Robert Orsi's influential study, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985; and helpfully studied in a collection of essays, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. by David D. Hall Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- 6 An excellent set of texts that study religious practices across the world is the series “Religion in Practice,” edited by Don Lopez, and published by Princeton University Press.
- 7 On this point I have found very helpful the work of my colleague Birgit Meyer, especially her discussion of “sensational form,” see Meyer, Birgit, *Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion*, professorial inaugural address, Faculty of the Social Sciences, Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2006; and *Aesthetics of Persuasion: Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms*, (forthcoming); see also Meyer, Birgit and Verrips, Joada, *Aesthetics. Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, ed. by David Morgan. London: Routledge, 2008, 20–30. See also *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. by Birgit Meyer. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- 8 In other instances, tasked by somewhat different purposes, I have enumerated more categories. In *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 48–74, I identified eight key functions of images in a variety of religious traditions; in a series of visual essays inserted in each of the volumes of the second edition of *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 2004, I discussed fourteen general categories of the visual dimensions of over two dozen religions in the ancient and modern world.
- 9 Guthrie, Stewart Elliot, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- 10 On Washington and the Capitol see Green Fryd, Vivien, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the U.S. Capitol, 1815–1860*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, 62–87.
- 11 Durkheim, Emile, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press, 1995, 306–7.
- 12 I am indebted to my colleague Jennifer Prough for information regarding this mortuary practice.
- 13 Kondo, Dorinne, The Way of Tea: A Symbolic Analysis, in *Empire of the Senses*, ed. Howes, 2002; see also Daniels, Inge, ‘Dolls are scary’: The Locus of the Spiritual in Contemporary Japanese Homes, in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan. London: Routledge, 2010, 153–70.
- 14 Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls. New York: W. W. Norton, 1990, 12. But one might make the same argument of objects displayed in the home as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton have argued in *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 25–29. For a wide-ranging reflection on seeing as the medium for experiencing relations with things, see Pattison, Stephen, *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts*. London: SCM Press, 2007, especially 171–223. For an anthropological study of the partibility of the self and the dialectical relation between self and objects see Gell, Alfred, *Art and Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 15 Turner, Victor and Turner, Edith, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, 20.
- 16 On the role of images in pilgrimage see Freedberg 1989, 99–135.
- 17 I have explored this in Finding Fabiola, in *Francis Alÿs. Fabiola: An Investigation*, ed. by Karen Kelly and Lynne Cook. New York: Dia Foundation, 2008, 11–21.
- 18 On divination and material objects see Nooter Roberts, Mary and Roberts, Allen F., Memory in Motion, in *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History*, ed. by Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts. New York: Museum for African Art and Munich: Prestel, 1996, 177–209; on luck and material objects see Daniels, Inge, Scooping, Raking, Beckoning Luck: Luck, Agency and the Interdependence between People and Things in Japan. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no. 4 (2003): 619–38.