

Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus

***The Material Culture of Religions***

Monday/Wednesday, 2:00 – 3:15

***Description and Rationale***

This course examines the role of things, bodies, spaces, sensations, and feelings in the study of religions. Materiality is not an “expression” of ideas, beliefs, or theological doctrines, but the felt-life of a religion, material practice, the embodied form of belief. Beginning with the assumption that religions are grounded in embodiment as the matrix of human experience, this course argues that however much religions may militate against the body, the study of religion must recognize the primary importance of such embodied media as feeling, intuition, affect, emotion, sensation, and perception.

***Requirements and Evaluation***

Students will participate robustly in class, doing all readings and engaging in open discussion. There will be four written assignments. *Every paper must include at least one or two illustrations keyed to description and analysis, treating them as evidence in your argumentation.*

The final grade will be based on these criteria: 20% participation in class discussion; 80% written assignments.

***Written Assignments***

Four papers, two of which are developed from in-class writing projects.

***Class Sessions, Readings, Discussion Questions, Videos, Writing Assignments***

**Session 1. Thing**

Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 1-10

Hodder, *Entangled*, pp. 1-14.

Brown, “Thing Theory.”

Discussion Questions

What is a thing?  
Why is it useful for the study of religions to answer this question?  
Is matter enchanted?  
What is objectification?

## Session 2. Agency

### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 10-23

Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, chapters 46 & 47, pp. 773-86, 787-802.

Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, pp. 492-512.

Gruber, "Idols and Figural Images in Islam," pp. 8-29.

Eck, *Darśan*, 3-31

### Discussion questions:

What are the six forms of agency outlined in the Introduction?  
What is ecology in the study of religious material culture?  
What is *darśan*?  
What does agency have to do with assemblages?  
Compare the horcrux from Potter with Frazer's discussion of the external soul.

How do the following things operate as agents?

incense	mezuzah	hijab	nun's habit
eruv	hamsa	prasad	church organ
scapular	holy water	taqiyah	prayer wheel
icon	qibla	tattoo	yantra diagram
altar	turbah	rosary	devotional statue

### Videos:

- Exclusive look at the statue of the Virgin Mary in Notre Dame (5 min)
- Buddhist pilgrimage at Bodhgaya, Clear Vision Trust (3 min 20 sec)
- The Kaaba's Black Stone is a cornerstone with an essence of Heaven (2 min)

## Session 3. Icons, Idols, Fetishes, Iconoclasm

### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 27-41

Calvin, *Institutes*, pp. 90-103.

Pietz, "Fetish," *Critical Terms for Art History*, pp. 197-207.

Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, pp. 1-11

### Discussion Questions

Why did Bernard of Clairvaux distrust images?

What was Constantine V's attitude toward icons?

What was Ch'iu Chün's view of imagery in Confucian shrines?

What is powering the suspicion of images and things in various religions?

What is a fetish?

What is an idol?

What is iconoclasm and how does it work?

How and why has Protestantism distrusted the materiality of images?

### Videos

- Confucian Ancestor Worship, YouTube BBC (1 min 35 sec)
- Plato on: The Allegory of the Cave, YouTube (6 min, 15 sec)
- First Iconoclast Controversy, 726-787 CE, YouTube (32 min)

### Session 4. Writing about Objects

The instructor may bring a number of artifacts for students to choose from, or students may be invited to bring objects with them. Consult the Writing Guide (pp. ) in the book as a guideline for student writing about artifacts.

#### In-class writing assignment

Select a religious artifact or space that exhibits more than one form of agency at work in its use and experience. What kinds of agency are they and how do they work together?

### Session 5. How some theories of religion dematerialize it

#### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 41-48

Plato, "The Simile of the Cave," pp. 255-64, in *The Republic*.

Bielefeldt, *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation*, pp. 174-205.  
Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, pp. 134-44, 153-60 (sections i-iii, vi-viii)

Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, pp. 33-45.

#### Questions for discussion

What role does Hume understand “unknown causes” to play in the origin and function of religions? How are emotions and religious artifacts related to this?

Is reality cookie dough shaped by human ideas? What role does materiality play in the sense of reality?

#### Video

- Animating Poststructuralism, YouTube (9 min)

### **Session 6. New Materialism**

#### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 48-53

Orlie, “Impersonal Matter,” in *New Materialisms*, pp. 116-136.

#### Questions for discussion

What is a thing?

What is thing power?

What is the material turn?

What is the new materialism?

What is a focal object?

What is recalcitrance?

What is affordance?

Of what use are theories about networks and things to the study of religion?

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Writing Assignment Due

Develop the in-class writing assignment on the agency of a thing. 4 pages.

### **Session 7. Defining Religion in Material Terms**

#### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 54-58

“Sacrifices,” *Religions of Rome*, vol. 2, pp. 148-65.

Kieschnick, “Material Culture.”

#### Discussion Questions

What did religion mean for Cato and what does it do?

What is sacrifice?

What do altars do?

What is sacred economy?

#### Video

•CLC 102 web 1 Roman Religion & Ritual (University of Mississippi) (31 min)

### **Session 8. Magic, Religion, Enchantment**

#### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 58-62

Morgan, “Enchantment and Disenchantment,” in *Images at Work*, pp. 69-89.

#### Discussion Questions

What is the definition of magic?

How have different scholars regarded the relationship of magic and religion?

Do you consider that there is a strong difference between the two? If so, why?

What is enchantment? Is it a useful concept?

### **Session 9. Belief, Embodiment, Social Bodies**

#### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 62-76

Hurd, *New Universal History of the Religious Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs of the Whole World*, preface and explanation of the frontispiece.

Morgan, “Introduction,” in *Religion and Material Culture*, pp. 1-12.

Orsi, “Belief,” in *Key Words in Material Religion*, pp. 17-24.

## Discussion Questions

- What is belief and how does it operate in religion?
- How does Hurd's treatment of religion in terms of beliefs keyed to symbols affect the study of religion?
- Is the body a technology? What are "techniques of the body"?
- What is the consequence of insisting on the continuity of body and mind as opposed to their fundamental distinction?
- What might be other examples of Maron's derby?
- How important are emotion, feeling, and affect in studying religion?
- What is a social body?
- How is prayer an embodied practice?

## Videos

- The story of the Wailing Wall, Jerusalem, Israel (6 min)
- Video of EarthFirst morning loss of trees in North Carolina (2 min)

## Session 10. How Religions happen materially, Part I

### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 77-88

Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada, "Men, Tattoos, and Catholic Devotion in Brooklyn," *Material Religion* 16, no. 4, 2020

Christopher Pinney, "The Politics of Popular Images: From Cow Protection to M. K. Gandhi, 1890-1950," *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion, 2004, pp. 105-44.

### Discussion Questions

Define the following terms as aspects of material religion:

tefillin	prasad	halal	kosher
iftar	auto-da-fe	yajña	social control

What does it mean to say that religions happen materially?

## Session 11. In class writing

After viewing several of the brief videos below, students should select one example of how religions happen materially and describe how it works. If they wish, they should enumerate further categories and to distinguish them as they apply or fail to

apply to different religious traditions. Additional categories might include movement, gender, sensation, pain, decay, time, or seasonality.

#### Videos

- Vedic Fire Sacrifice in Sri Dham Mayapur, India, YouTube (3 min)
- Kajol seeks blessings at Durga puja, distributes Prasad, Durga puja 2016
- Tripping the Way to God: Hallucinogens and Religions (2 min 40 sec)
- Peyote: The people who take drugs to see God - BBC News (3 min 45 sec)
- "Islam as a religion is against permanent tattoos" Huffpost (3 min 20 sec)
- Aboriginal Initiation Ceremony in Borroloola, Australia (4 min)
- Gender Inequality in Religion (6 ½ min)

### **Session 12. How Religions happen materially, Part II**

#### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 88-98

McDaniel, "The Material Turn: An Introduction to Thai Sources for the Study of Buddhist Amulets," pp. 135-48.

Goring-Morris and Belfer-Cohen, "Different Strokes for Different Folks," pp. 35-57.

Define the following terms as aspects of material religion

divination	ideology	bibliomancy	exchange
tattoo	piercing	circumcision	pharmacology

#### Videos

- What is Divination? Wicca - YouTube (2 min 20 sec)
- Roman Augury, the Prediction Project (2 min)
- Afa Divination: Togo, West Africa (10 min)
- Medicine Woman, The Navajo Way of Healing (3 ½ min)
- A Diné Ceremony of Restoration – YouTube (3 min 15 sec)
- Introduction to Jainism, Belief (2 ½ min)
- Uncovering the long-hidden secrets of Stonehenge, CBS News (6 min 45 sec)

### **Session 13. Power Objects—The Case of Magic Wands**

#### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 101-115

The Bible, Exodus chapters 3, 4, 7 & 14

Define the following terms:

cadeucus      wand      scepter      phurbu      opening the mouth

Videos

- Ancient Egypt: Religion, Myths, Gods, and Symbols (3 min, 11 sec)
- Imhotep's Book of the Dead (2 min 10 sec)
- Last Judgement of Hunefer, from his tomb, YouTube (7 min, 40 sec)
- Let My People Go – The Ten Commandments (1/10) Movie Clip 1956 (2 ½ min)
- Vajra YouTube Audiopedia (10 ½ min)
- How to Use The Vajra and Bell (English) by Geshe Ngawang Tsering (52 min)
- The World of Midrash – Moses' Magical Rod, YouTube (20 min)

#### **Session 14. Modern Wands**

Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 115-128

Alferian Gwydion MacLir, *The Witch's Wand*, pp.

Gypsy Elaine Teague, *The Witch's Guide to Wands*, pp.

Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, pp.

Videos

- Wicca & Paganism: Making Wicca Wands (1 min 37 sec)
- Making Your Own Wand - YouTube (4 min 30 sec)
- Harry Potter: 10 Most Powerful Wands! (10 min)

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> Paper due**

Develop the in-class writing assignment on how religions happen materially to a six-page discussion.

#### **Session 15. Notre Dame in early history**

Readings



Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 129-137

Define the following terms

Frenchness  
chevet  
transept  
altar  
flying buttress

Videos

- Paris: The Great Saga – How Notre Dame was built (4 min)
- The History of Notre Dame – YouTube Kings and Things (7 ½ min)

## **Session 16. Notre Dame in Reformation and Revolution**

Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 137-147

Karlstadt, *On the Removal of Images*, 1522

Eck, *On Not Removing Images of Christ and the Saints*, 1522

Define the following terms

Affair of the Placards  
Transubstantiation  
Calvinism  
Gallicanism  
de-Christianization  
Festival of Reason  
civil religion  
deism

Questions for discussion

The cathedral, like many religious sites, has a history of powerful relations to the state. Discuss power and buildings. Why are they closely related? Why are buildings attacked by opponents of the state?

## **Session 17. Modernity and the Rise of Civil Religion**

Readings

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Civil religion," chapter 8, *The Social Contract*, in Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, tr. G.D.H. Cole, revised and augmented by J.H. Brumfitt and John C. Hall. London: J.M. Dent & Sons; New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1973, 268-77.

Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, tr. Karen E. Fields. New York: Open Press, 1995, pp. 207-31.

Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1-21.

### Discussion Questions

What is civil religion? Provide examples of it. Rousseau coined the term, but is it a uniquely modern phenomenon?

What is the role of objects and practices in civil religion? Why are buildings, shrines, and monuments important for the conduct of civil religion?

### **Session 18. Field Trip: Sacred Spaces**

The instructor will organize visits at local sacred spaces, which may vary considerably, ranging from churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples to university chapels, meditation spaces, shrines, monuments, memorials, sports arenas, parks, or cemeteries. Discussion will focus on the role of space in religious practice and belief.

### **Session 19. Notre Dame from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Present**

#### Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 147-154

Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, tr. Alban Krailsheimer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 119-127, 163-70, 173-206.

Eugène Viollet le Duc and Jean-Baptiste Lassus, "On the Restoration of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris" (1843), in M. F. Hearn, ed., *The Architectural Theory of Viollet-Le-Duc: Readings and Commentary* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 279-88.

Alex Greenberger, "Let's Take the Time to Diagnose: In Open Letter, Experts Urge Emmanuel Macron Not to Rush Notre-Dame Restoration," *ARTnews*, April 29, 2019, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/notre-dame-experts-open-letter-macron-12461/>

Define the following terms

the invention of print  
Baron Haussman  
Viollet le Duc  
Restoration, innovation, renovation

Discussion questions

What do you learn about Notre Dame from Hugo's novel? What was the impact of the novel?

Why was Viollet le Duc engaged to work on the cathedral? How did he understand the task? Should historical buildings be restored or creatively innovated?

Do you agree or disagree with the writers of the open letter regarding the restoration of the cathedral following the fire of 2019? Why?

What does this building mean to the French nation? How should that meaning(s) inform the task of restoration?

3<sup>rd</sup> Writing Assignment Due

Select a space (it may be any of those visited on the field trip) that you analyze as a site in which the sacred happens. Discuss how, what role the space plays, how it is made and maintained, and what happens to it after ritual or ceremony. What is the sacred in terms of this space and the practices that take place there? Six pages.

## Session 20. Words & Things, Part 1

Reading

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 155-165

*The Māndūkya Upanishad*, translation and commentary by Swami Krishnananda. Shivanandanagar, India: The Divine Life Society, 1996, pp. 1-6.

Discussion questions

Why approach artifacts in terms of their cultural biographies?

What is the relation between words and things? How do things change when their names change?

How do certain words perform action?

What was the 'original' setting of the artifacts? Is there an 'original' setting?

Why did missionaries destroy indigenous artifacts in Polynesia?

Compare destroying objects and the evolution of names and "taxonomic shift" in other settings. For instance, why clean, re-paint, or redesign an apartment that you move into, even though the previous owner cleaned and repainted it? How do objects in a collection change when displayed? How does discussion of works of art transform them?

Define the following terms

taxonomic shift  
marae  
Oro  
Pomare I & II

Videos

- History of Polynesia – YouTube (4 ½ min)
- Tahiti, Exploring the ancient sacred religious sites (marae), Pacific Ocean (33 min)

## **Session 21. Words & Things, Part 2**

Reading

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 165-180

William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches, during a Residence of Nearly Eight Years in the Society and Sandwich Islands*, 4 vols. New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833, chapter 14, pp. 353-81.

William Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp," 1795

Define the following terms

Aeolian harp  
London Missionary Society  
idols  
trophies of Christianity  
staff god  
specimen

Discussion questions

What makes images do things?

Why did the missionaries exhibit the artifacts they collected?

How did the objects and their names change once they were in Boston or London?

How does “science” in a natural science museum change things?

How would repatriation change an object? Would it be ‘restored’ to its original meaning and setting?

#### Videos

- New Investigations into the Tahitian Mourner’s Costume, British Museum (13 min)
- Inside the Pitt Rivers Museum (4 min)

### **Session 22. Wrapping up**

#### Reading

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 181-186

#### Discussion questions

With this class behind you, how would you define ‘religion’?

Do you consider religion or religiosity to be an essential feature of human nature? If so, how does that affect the role of material conditions and artifacts in what you understand religion to be?

What is a thing and how does it figure in the definition and study of religion?

What is a focal object and what is its relation to a network?

How do the concepts of focal objects, networks, and things inform the understanding of the agency of things?

### **Session 23. Student presentations of final project**

Each speaker has ten minutes to present the object, practice, place, food, or other kind of artifact on which the final project has been prepared.

### **Session 24. Student presentations of final project**

Each speaker has ten minutes to present the object, practice, place, food, or other kind of artifact on which the final project has been prepared.

### **Final paper project**

An eight-page analysis of an artifact, examining the object, its location and display, its history of use, and the reception it has enjoyed (or suffered) at various times.

### **Bibliography of Readings**

Bielefeldt, Carl. *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1, Autumn 2001, 1-22.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989.

Eck, Diana L. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Eck, Johannes. *On Not Removing Images of Christ and the Saints*, 1522, pp. 97-125 in Bryan D. Mangrum and Giuseppe Scavizzi, trs., *A Reformation Debate: Three Treatises in Translation*. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1998.

Frazer, Sir James. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. New York: Collier Books, 1950.

Goring-Morris, Nigel, and Anna Belfer-Cohen, "Different Strokes for Different Folks: Near Eastern Neolithic Mortuary Practices in Perspective," in *Religion at Work in a Neolithic Society: Vital Matters*, ed. Ian Hodder. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 35-57.

Gruber, Christiane. "Idols and Figural Images in Islam: A Brief Dive into a Perennial Debate," in Gruber, ed., *The Image Debate: Figural Representation in Islam and Across the World*, ed. Christiane Gruber. London: Gingko, 2019, pp. 8-29.

Hodder, Ian. "Thinking about Things Differently," in Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things*. Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Hume, David. *Natural History of Religion*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993

Hurd, William, D.D. *New Universal History of the Religious Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs of the Whole World: Or, A Complete and Impartial View of all the Religions in the Various Nations of the Universe*. London: printed for Alexander Hogg, 1788.

Karlstadt, Andreas. *On the Removal of Images*, 1522, pp. 21-43, in Bryan D. Mangrum and Giuseppe Scavizzi, trs., *A Reformation Debate: Three Treatises in Translation*. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1998.

Kieschnick, John. "Material Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, ed. John Corrigan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Latour, Bruno. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, trans. Catherine Porter and Heather MacLean. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

McDaniel, Justin. "The Material Turn: An Introduction to Thai Sources for the Study of Buddhist Amulets," in *Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*, eds., Benjamin J. Fleming and Richard D. Mann. New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 135-48.

Maldonado-Estrada, Alyssa. "Men, Tattoos, and Catholic Devotion in Brooklyn," *Material Religion* 16, no. 4, 2020

Martin, Craig. *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2017.

Morgan, David. *Images at Work: The Material Culture of Enchantment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Morgan, David, ed. *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Orlie, Melissa A. "Impersonal Matter," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

Orsi, Robert A. "Belief," in *Key Words in Material Religion*, ed. S. Brent Plate. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 17-24.

Pietz, William. "Fetish," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Pinney, Christopher. "The Politics of Popular Images: From Cow Protection to M. K. Gandhi, 1890-1950," *'Photos of the Gods': The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion, 2004, pp. 105-44.

Plato. *The Republic*, tr. Desmond Lee, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Penguin, 1987

*Religions of Rome, vol. 2, A Sourcebook*, eds. Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price. Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge University Press, 1998

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. New York: Scholastic, 2005.