

Undergraduate Seminar Syllabus

Introduction to Religious Studies

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

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

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?

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, "Impiety of Attributing a Visible Form to God. The Setting Up of Idols a Defection from the True God," pp. 90-103.

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

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

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

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

Hodder, "Thinking about Things Differently," pp. 1-14.

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?

1st 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

Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System"

Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics*, pp. 1-21

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

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

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

Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 39-44

Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, pp. 22-30

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?

Compare the horcrux from Potter with Frazer's discussion of the external soul.

Session 9. Belief, Embodiment, Social Bodies

Readings

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

William Hurd, D.D., *New Universal History of the Religious Rites*, preface and explanation of the frontispiece.

Morgan, "Introduction," *Religion and Material Culture*

Orsi, "Belief"

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

Mauss, "Techniques of the Body"

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

Mauss, *The Gift*, 9-44

Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, "Apollo Pythios of Delphi," 92-102

Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, 33-60

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
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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. 5-15
 Teague, *The Witch’s Guide to Wands*, pp.1-11, 211-14
 Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, pp. 82-87

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)

2nd 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

Vovelle, *The Revolution Against the Church*, 98-148

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

Rousseau, "Civil religion"

Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 207-31.

Bellah, "Civil Religion in America"

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 19th century to the Present

Readings

Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, pp. 147-54

Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, pp. 119-127, 163-70, 173-206.

Viollet le Duc and Jean-Baptiste Lassus, "On the Restoration of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris," pp. 279-88.

Greenberger, "Let's Take the Time to Diagnose,"

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?

3rd 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

Māndūkya Upanishad, 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

Ellis, *Polynesian Researches*, vol. 1, chap. 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. 181-86

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.

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