Rel 391: Religion and Materiality

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Friday 1:30-4:00 Westbrook 0011  
Spring 2010

Description and Rationale
This course examines the role of things, material practices, the body, space and performance in the study of religions. Materiality is not understood as an “expression” of ideas, beliefs, or theological doctrines, but as the felt-life of a religion and as the actual basis of beliefs. Beginning with the assumption that religion is grounded in the body 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, emotion, sensation, and perception. Belief depends on such faculty as intuition, imagination, and discernment as much as (if not more than) on ideas and rational thinking. Moreover, religion is in need of a thorough materializing in order to be understood as involving far more of a human being than the will imposing itself on the submissive mind and body. How to study this is the problem that the course pursues in five domains of inquiry: sensation, things, body, space, and practice/performance. By focusing on a variety of methods and religious traditions in the present and the past, the aim is to sketch out a broad materialization of Religious Studies.

Requirements and Evaluation
Students will participate robustly in class, doing all readings and engaging in open discussion. Each reading will have a designated discussion leader. Four written assignments consist of a paper on the material analysis of an object; an analysis of a material practice; a critical assessment of materiality in the student’s area of special interest; and a set of definitions of key terms (see below) within the field of religion and material culture. Also required is an oral presentation to class members of the third paper. The final grade will be based on each of these criteria: 15% participation and class leadership; 10% oral presentation; 75% written assignments. Written assignments must be turned in during class on the date listed when due. Papers will be assessed a penalty when late. Incompletes are not allowed except in cases involving serious medical issues. Under no circumstances will an ‘Incomplete’ be granted to anyone who has otherwise failed to hand in assignments on time.

Required Texts
All other texts are posted on Blackboard
Written Assignments
No. 1 Material analysis of an object (four pages). Due in class on February 5
No. 2 Analysis of a material practice (five pages). Due in class on March 5
No. 3 Critical assessment of materiality in student’s area of interest (seven pages).
   Due in class on April 2
No. 4 Key terms in religion & material culture (eight pages) Due in class on April 23

List of Key Terms
These terms will comprise the list of brief definitions for the final paper. Each word
should be defined at a length of approximately 150 words. Students may organize or
cluster the terms in their papers as they see fit. They should include two or three
additional terms that they consider important. The rationale for their additions
should be stated in an introduction to the essay. Terms: body, display, sacred, matter,
thing, material culture, sensation, emotion, feeling, aesthetic, practice, performance,
space. Total length: approximately 2,300 words.

Schedule of Readings and Class Discussions

1. Material Analysis of the Object (1/15)
   Zimmerman, “Workmanship as Evidence”

2. Material Analysis, continued (1/22)
   Prown, “Style as Evidence”
   Lewis-Williams, Cosmos in Stone, 15-28; Dowson, “Rock Art”
   Morgan, “Painting as Visual Evidence”

3. Sensation (1/29)
   Corbin, “Charting the Cultural History of the Senses,” in Howes
   Classen, “McLuhan in the Rainforest,” in Howes
   Kondo, “The Way of Tea,” in Howes
   Drobnik, “Volatile Effects,” in Howes
   Nooter-Roberts, “Tactility and Transcendence”

4. Things (2/5) Paper due
   Brown, “Thing Theory”
   Daniels, “The Material Culture of Japanese Domesticity”
   Hermkens, “Clothing as Embodied Experience of Belief”

5. Things in Circulation and Use (2/12)
   Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things”
   Geary, “Sacred Commodities”
   Weiner, Inalienable Possessions, 23-43
   Roberts, “Re-Signification and the Migration of Images”
6. Body: Theoretical Approaches (2/19)
   Mauss, “Techniques of the Body”
   Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 235-82
   Strathern, Body Thoughts, 9-39
   Blackman, “Lived Bodies”

7. Body in Practice (2/26)
   Geurts, “Consciousness as ‘Feeling in the Body,’” in Howes
   DeRogatis, “Born Again Is a Sexual Term”
   Harrington, “The Feeling of Buddhahood”
   Morgan, “The Look of the Sacred”

8. Space and Place (3/5) Paper due
   Feld, “Places Sensed, Senses Placed,” in Howes
   Rainey, “Hallowed Grounds and Rituals of Remembrance”
   Upton, “Seen, Unseen, and Scene”
   Tilley, “Space, Place, Landscape and Perception”
   Cho, “Materializing Ancestor Spirits”

9. Sacred Space (3/19)
   Cousineau, “The Urban Practice of Jewish Space”
   Yi Fu Tuan, “Sacred Space”
   Ovsyannikov and Terebikhin, “Sacred Space in the Culture of the Arctic”
   Upton, “Spaces,” in Holy Things and Profane

10. Performance in Theory (3/26)
    Goffman, The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life, 1-76
    Turner, “The Anthropology of Performance”
    Prasad, excerpts from Poetics of Conduct

11. Performance in Practice (4/2) Paper due
    Kanafani, “Rites of Hospitality”; Waterbury, “Islam and Hajj Brahims World”;
    Shrine”; Betteridge, “Women and Shrines in Shiraz,” in Everyday Life in the
    Muslim Middle East
    McGregor, “Dressing the Ka‘ba from Cairo”
    Mitchell, “Performing Statues”

12. Aesthetics (4/9)
    Patterson, The Senses of Touch, 1-35
    Meyer and Verrips, “Aesthetics”
    Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, Meaning of Things, 173-96
    Morgan, “The Practice of Visual Piety”

13. Defining Material Culture (4/16)
    Schlereth, “Material Culture and Cultural Research”
Prown, “Mind in Matter”
Buchli, “Introduction”
“Visual Culture and Material Culture: Paradigms for the Study of Religion,” in Material Religion
Morgan, “Materiality, Social Analysis, and the Study of Religions,” in Morgan, ed., Religion and Material Culture


Bibliography of Readings


Canfield, Robert L. “New Year’s Day at Ali’s Shrine,” pp. 234-238, in Bowen and Early, eds., Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East.


Prown, Jules David. “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and


