

The Currency of Religion in America in Three Acts: Market Logics, Emissaries of Kinship, and Technologies of Feeling

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, Roxanne L. Korpan & Cody Musselman

- 1 *The following conversation between Cody Musselman, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, and Roxanne Korpan took place via Zoom in the fall of 2020. Each presented an object for consideration and together they thought about what it meant for each object to be involved in the material economy of religion. From the SoulCycle candle used in fitness studios, to wuḍū' or ablution socks marketed to Muslims to facilitate prayer in the workplace, to the circulation of Bible translations among Indigenous peoples in nineteenth-century Canada, their conversation traverses various geographies, religious contexts, and traditions to ponder how material objects can be carriers of religion and how, in turn, religion can act as currency. Throughout the conversation, the colonial backdrop of America, America's Protestant hegemony, and the role capitalism has played in shaping religious observance, exchange, and theorizing arise as persistent themes that Musselman, GhaneaBassiri, and Korpan wrestle with as they collectively analyze their selected objects*

Cody Musselman's Slides

- 2 **Cody:** I chose to focus on the SoulCycle candle because, in many ways, it is what sets SoulCycle apart from other cycling businesses. The candle does a lot of work in setting the mood. It helps facilitate a spiritual aesthetic. While the use of motivational speaking and even the invocation of spirituality has been a mainstay of American exercise culture for decades, SoulCycle takes this tradition to the next level by spiritualizing its fitness studio, calling it a sanctuary and using candles to validate this moniker.
- 3 When SoulCycle launched its at-home bike (as a rival service to Peloton) in the spring of 2020, it came with an "At Home" kit to help the purchaser set up their home studio. Crucially, the kit included a candle to light when riding the bike. This inclusion reinforced how the candle and its scent are part of getting the rider into the moment and mood of self-transformation. It also reinforced the candle's prominence in the ritual opening and closure of the class. I thought it was really interesting that this part of the studio experience was not overlooked when product designers thought about translating the studio experience to the home setting.
- 4 I've also been thinking a lot about the labor involved in creating magical or spiritual-seeming experiences. The candle, like other features of the brand experience, works on the consumer so that it feels like things are magically happening to you, the consumer, without your awareness of it. The SoulCycle founders often talk about how every part of their brand was thought through and how there's a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes, including thinking about the design, intention, and purpose of the candle. It has a particular look, a distinct smell, it is placed in a certain spot within the fitness studio, and it becomes part of the fitness instructor's choreographed and ritual movements. It is meant to naturalize the magic feeling the participant is experiencing and distract from

the labor that goes into creating that feeling.

- 5 **Kambiz:** I was blown away by the candle, and I didn't realize how distinct SoulCycle is from other cycling businesses. Their candle made me wonder: To what extent is SoulCycle using religion to inform the marketing of their business? Or are they trying to design a fitness experience with a religious purpose in mind? What do I mean by that? I mean do they have some theological conception of how one's body and mind should work together in the modern era to make one's self whole? Are they thinking, "Religion teaches us what makes a person spiritually whole; can we help modern Americans achieve humans' spiritual telos and make money at the same time?" Does it matter if their goal is one or the other? What does this mean for the study of religion in America?
- 6 **Cody:** I've been struggling with the questions you pose. Is spirituality just a marketing ploy or is it something significant for a modern human who requires a one-stop-shop for their spirituality, their fitness, and their socialization because otherwise their schedule is too busy? But in this case, the "parishioners" have to be able to afford it. Then there's another question as to what do people get out of this experience and is what they are getting out of it really truly religious? In many respects I've tried to stay away from those questions because—yes for some, no for others. Yes, it's just marketing for some, no, it's a real spiritual connection for others.
- 7 But in regards to the question about spirituality as a marketing force, I wonder what is the form of palatable religion that will enable a sale? SoulCycle demurs from the word religion but embraces spirituality.
- 8 **Roxanne:** I'm thinking about how your work complicates the spiritual-but-not-religious narrative, because your interlocutors are not always explicitly spiritual.
- 9 **Cody:** Right. It's "I'm not spiritual. I'm not religious. I'm consumer."
- 10 **Roxanne:** Yes, it's something else.
- 11 I was struck by how you articulated these candles as "evidence of an elite spiritual economy," and it made me think about my own research where nineteenth-century Anishinaabemowin bibles serve as different kinds of evidence: e.g., these bibles serve as evidence that Indigenous populations have converted to Christianity, evidence of the universality of Christianity across linguistic difference, etc. I'd like to hear you speak more about what you see these candles as evidence of: are the candles evidence of the insider, elite belonging that you talked about earlier or are they evidence that one, in the past, participated in this ritual. Who is this evidence for?
- 12 **Cody:** I think the evidence is for people who would understand its meaning. It's both for insiders and a way of creating insiders. In relating it to your project, it's interesting to think about objects mediating relationships and operating at a grand scale—such as land, territories, and nations. And in some ways, this is a minor version of that. It's evidence stating, "look at the class position that I hold that I could afford this \$42 candle, that I could repeatedly go to this \$28/class experience." I think it's another way of reinscribing an elite class position—it is a form of conspicuous consumption. It also, theoretically, conveys being conspicuous in your spiritual-mindedness, in your spiritual

consumption. The brand conveys that you are elite, that you are spiritually in-touch, and that you are taking care of your body. It is an identity marker that ties together embodiment, consumption, and gestures towards some status of your interior wellbeing. In this way it is evidence of wellness or of a wellness journey. Yet neither the candle, nor SoulCycle works to complicate wellness as a state of being or as an industry.

- 13 **Kambiz:** There's a tension between the labor that goes into orchestrating a particular kind of experience, which is how the consumer is enticed to spend money on something, and this other experience where you, as the consumer, want to have this healthy mind-body connection and SoulCycle, as the brand, provides the means for you to get what you want. I wonder, in terms of thinking about the material economies of religion and class, whether that works differently for people who are wealthy. Some people are so wealthy that they don't have to choose between one expenditure or another because of the expansive limits of their resources. Most people, however, have very limited resources, and their consumer choices come to be seen by them and others as a reflection of how they wish to be perceived in society.
- 14 There's a way in which people in the modern era participate in religion without knowing it. There's something of that sort going on here that's telling of the role of religion in the marketplace.
- 15 Is there something about how, through consumption, ad agencies or marketers are making people feel something?
- 16 **Cody:** I do think there's something to be gleaned about technologies of feeling from this. When it comes to technologies of feeling, religions are expert at evoking moods, emotions, and sensations as they introduce intercession and interaction with the divine. There's no reason why people who work in marketing or social media can't also become experts at technologies of feeling, and indeed they have. So is that the realm of religion? Or is it just that it has previously been the realm of religion and now—with an incentive to ever-increase profits and be employable, etc.—we're finding that experts in the technologies of feeling pop up in other parts of our life?

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri's Slides

- 17 **Kambiz:** Through these “wudhu” or ablution socks, I wanted to draw attention to the way religions conceptualize objects. I wanted to suggest that we should take into consideration what religious traditions themselves say about materiality when we theorize material objects. There are ways in which Islamic teachings are passed down in embodied, material fashion. For example, the Hajj embodies a universal Muslim community or *Umma*, and the way you learn about this universal Muslim community is through the instance of the Hajj, as an embodied practice. One's Hajj doesn't count unless one stands on Mount Arafat at the same time as other Muslims performing the Hajj at its prescribed time. This is an important way by which the idea of a universal Muslim community or *Umma* is made sensible in Islam. Everyone attending the Hajj from varying parts of the world is asked to be at the same place at the same time. This

embodiment of a Muslim community in time and space is what makes the abstract ideal of the Umma sensible as a practical reality.

- 18 In order to demonstrate the significance of religions' own conceptualizations of materiality for thinking about material economies of religion in the Americas, I looked for an object through which we can see how the logic of the American marketplace butts up against the embodiment of religious ideals. These "wudhu socks" were interesting because they are marketed as a product that solves a problem American Muslims are perceived to have in the workplace, where Muslims can't easily wash their feet in order to pray.
- 19 Immediately after Muhammad passed away, whether or not you have to wash your feet to do the ritual prayer became a major point of controversy in early Muslim communities. How feet should be treated in preparation for prayers is therefore something that Muslims have been thinking about in terms of embodiment of religion for centuries. And the fact that the "wudhu socks" are not a commercial success shows the limits of the logic of the market—particularly the American market logic that has for a long time held that one way of assimilating minority groups is by finding what their needs are that the market does not meet and then trying to fulfill those needs through market mechanisms. This attempt is being made here through these "wudhu socks," but American Muslims are not rushing to buy them because the tradition itself has given them ways of thinking about the ritual purity of their feet, and they have embodied these ways of thinking about ritual purity. So, they are not looking to the market for a solution to praying at the workplace.
- 20 **Roxanne:** That's really interesting. I'm thinking about when the marketplace tells you that you have a need that it can fill and when does this move work or not work: in the SoulCycle example it works really well, but with these socks it didn't work. Are you saying this process doesn't work in this case because there is this centuries-long tradition that has already parsed this practice out?
- 21 **Kambiz:** The centuries-old traditions have made people think about ritual purity in very specific ways, that this market logic doesn't pierce. I think there's another logic at work in the marketing of these socks. For some American Muslim entrepreneurs there seems to be an expectation that if the "wudhu socks" business takes off, it will help with the assimilation of American Muslims who feel marginalized in contemporary America; through these purchases they could come to feel more American: "Oh, you mean I could be a good practicing Muslim *and* have my corporate job and act like everybody else?" There's a presumed logic of assimilation and a logic of the marketplace that make this product seem profitable, but in practice they fall flat.
- 22 **Cody:** I think it's interesting that the market is both facilitating the problem and trying to facilitate a solution to it. When you talk about this product butting up against the market, it's interesting because it's so tempting to talk about the market as this huge powerful force that is *beyond* the individual human, but this product is a good reminder that there are other powerful things at work *beyond* the market as well, such as centuries long religious debates.

- 23 **Roxanne:** There are these forces—other systems—that the market can't pierce.
- 24 **Kambiz:** That is another thing I was thinking about, Roxanne, with respect to your project. You say, "These bibles open onto sets of social relations that are simultaneously relations of power and resistance." They seem to be objects that are not shaped by their context in the same ways that Cody's and my objects are. Rather, they seem to be objects that shape their context? I wanted to hear more about how these bibles are objects that are shaping relations—spatial, territorial relations. What about them makes them able to do this? What about them gives them this power to shape relations rather than be entirely shaped by them?

Roxanne Korpan's Slides

- 25 **Roxanne:** I can see Anishinaabemowin bibles shaping relations throughout their life cycle as book objects. On the production side, this was because there was an extensive amount of Indigenous labor that went into producing these bibles. For example, the Anishinaabe translator I focus my research on, Peter Jones, wrote Bible translations himself, revised and corrected his own and others' translations, and even superintended the printing of some of his own Bible translations. This gave him access to people of influence since it was often Christian, political, and administrative leaders who were involved in Bible publishing. The colonial government of Canada, for example, paid for the publication of one of Peter Jones's translations of the Gospel of Matthew, so he would regularly go talk to Sir John Colborne, the then-Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada and head of the Indian Department, about the printing of his bibles. But at these meetings he'd also bring up legal concerns of Anishinaabe communities like requests to grant land tenure. Here I can see how bibles were used in community advocacy, to build different sorts of legal relationships between Indigenous nations and settler governments.
- 26 The kind of work these bibles do after they're produced—after they're printed and bound and distributed to others—has to do with their qualities as books and the Christian texts printed inside and is really bound by context. So the bible that Peter Jones presents to King William IV means something very different than a bible that he gives to an Anishinaabe community member or a chief or keeps for himself.
- 27 **Kambiz:** In terms of quality?
- 28 **Roxanne:** The analytic I'm using here is looking at these bibles as objects that can form relations. Or as a way of denying or rejecting those relations if the bible gift was not accepted. These relationships mean different things in different contexts.
- 29 **Cody:** I saw that you were bringing in the theory of the gift—the idea that giving a gift is the giving of an obligation or of a social relation. Something I've been thinking about with material objects, well, I've been returning to Sir George James Frazer's notion of *sympathetic magic*, which I realize is a problematic text, but I'm drawn by the idea that something, an object, gains its power because it once had proximity to something

or somebody else, or something gains its power because it was touched by something or somebody, and therefore (either through the touch or the association) now the object has power. It's interesting to think about the bibles circulating because not only is it creating relations, but it's creating relations because the thing itself is an emblem of the sacred. I'd love to hear you talk more about how the object is created, because I imagine its creation could be mundane. At what point is it sacred? Is it *the word* (of God) that ultimately makes it sacred? Or is it merely that *the word* is important to the person you're trying to create relations with? Or is *the word* important to the gift giver and therefore it's symbolic for you to give a bible?

- 30 **Roxanne:** In the way I'm looking at the bibles, I think their meaningfulness is in the way that they are symbolizing something beyond just the book—that they're symbolizing relations. And, specifically in Anishinaabe gift-giving contexts, relations also invoke obligations of reciprocity, so they're not just saying, "I am in kinship with you, and this gift symbolizes it," but it also means, "You will take care of me when I have need, and I will take care of you when you have need." And this is also how gift-giving works in treaty negotiations. So you agree to a treaty, which negotiates use of land, and there are gifts that are given over and over again as part of this agreement such as clothing or food—and Peter Jones was often the one who helped distribute the treaty presents. These gifts were material objects, but they were more meaningful in that they symbolized this relationship of care, of enduring reciprocal care. Giving food means I will take care of your sustenance. And I think that's the thing that's meaningful beyond the object, that is sacred maybe?
- 31 Your second question—at what point are these books sacred?—is an important one too. When I look at the construction of the books, they're not really sacred. It's just industrial production at print shops and binderies in London. For Peter Jones, the Anishinaabe translator I focus my research on, I think *the word* is extremely important and considered sacred. In his journals, Jones recalls agonizing over the translation process and feeling like he is inadequate to do it. He'll pray before he translates. In his journal, he also writes about fasting before he translates, which has a whole other resonance in Anishinaabe ceremony. I'd say there's great concern over the words themselves. The British and Foreign Bible Society administrators also care a lot about the translations, the words on the page. Peter Jones would meet with the editor of the British and Foreign Bible Society, William Greenfield, and would go through his translations to make sure that they were legitimate, to make sure that the Bible Society agreed with how he was translating certain words and terms. So there's a lot of care there about the actual words.
- 32 But Jones is also concerned with the book itself, not just *the word* his bibles contained. He gets upset when bibles are printed badly, with missing words and crooked lines. And he's also perfectly comfortable using bibles as objects of exchange. In terms of the book itself, I think that the meaning of it depends more on who ends up getting it in their hands. For example, in my piece I talk about Chief Yellowhead, who was a Methodist Anishinaabe chief who Jones gifted a bible to. Yellowhead couldn't read but he took this bible, wrapped it in a cloth, and kept it in his trunk. He kept it with a lot of care, so there's obviously some meaning in the object itself regardless of the words. He couldn't read them but the object itself was really important to him. Likewise, when Jones gave a

bible to King William IV, the King wouldn't have been able to read this book because he didn't know Anishinaabemowin.

- 33 **Kambiz:** What would the checking of the translation look like in practice? Would the people in London have known Anishinaabemowin?
- 34 **Roxanne:** They claim to. William Greenfield claimed to be decently fluent in it, but it was only a few months from when he was exposed to Anishinaabemowin and when this translation was published so I doubt that was true. I think the way that it worked would've been that Peter Jones would read his Anishinaabemowin translation and then translate it back into English and then Greenfield would be able to check it that way.
- 35 There were particular words that they would be preoccupied with. How the word "baptism" was translated was a key point of contention because the British and Foreign Bible Society claimed to be denominationally inclusive so they did not want a term that only denoted a sprinkling of water or only denoted immersion. There's a letter in the archives where Peter Jones is explaining the Anishinaabemowin word he used and explaining why it would be inclusive but then, ultimately, in the next publication they end up just going back to the Greek. It was too fraught.
- 36 I'm doing some digging into where these 1,000 copies ended up and who used them, but one thing they did end up being used as was stand-ins for Anishinaabemowin-speaking missionaries. With a translated bible in hand, an Anglophone missionary could take the bible and read it and not rely on a translator. This was a striking departure from how Anglophone missionaries, especially Methodists, relied so deeply on Indigenous intermediaries like translators, exhorters, and even ordained ministers to facilitate their work with Indigenous communities. Peter Jones got his foot in the door by being a translator for Anglophone preachers: they would preach something from, say, the Gospel of John in English and Jones would translate it into Anishinaabemowin. So Jones's first translation work was doing oral translations. Anishinaabemowin bibles, in a way, reified this essential Indigenous linguistic knowledge and expertise and replaced Indigenous intermediaries.
- 37 **Kambiz:** Fascinating! You'd think it would be the other way around, that you'd need the Indigenous person to help you read the text.
- 38 **Roxanne:** In the later translations phonetic guides were often printed in the bibles, which may have been specifically meant to aid Anglophone readers.
- 39 **Cody:** It is interesting to think about how and for whom this serves. Do you get a certain assurance as the missionary that your word has gotten out the way you want it because it is straight from the book that has an authorized translation and then you don't have to worry about an interpreter taking short cuts or mistranslating?
- 40 **Roxanne:** There was certainly an anxiety about the potential for mistranslation, whether intentionally seditious or not. Another reason to prefer to use bibles than hire interpreters might have been financial—a book was cheaper than paying a salary. The other way I think we can view this move to replace Anishinaabe intermediaries with Anishinaabemowin bibles is as part of contemporary efforts to undermine and constrain

the authority of Indigenous mediators and leaders. But I still don't know how you'd be able to communicate and build relations with a community with only a bible.

- 41 **Cody:** Or even reading just the Bible without any theological context, so much of it would seem bizarre.
- 42 **Roxanne:** Exactly. Peter Jones often provided this context and explanation. People will ask, "what is this story really about?" and he would explain it with his background in Christian theology and the Anishinaabe cultural contexts of the communities he worked with. Because translation is more than just about translating words, he could say something like, "well this Methodist ritual is actually a lot like this Anishinaabe ritual that you perform," and he does this a lot in his journals. He writes about making these comparisons.
- 43 **Kambiz:** Was calling Christianity "religion in a book" a pretty common way of describing it?
- 44 **Roxanne:** It seemed to be at the very least a literary trope in missionary writings and a phrase that would often be attributed to Indigenous people. In Peter Jones's journals, he never personally calls Christianity a "religion in a book," but describes instances of chiefs reifying Christianity as a "religion in a book," sometimes contrasting it with Anishinaabe "religion of the heart," and thus rejecting Christianity and saying effectively "this is not for us."
- 45 I was thinking, Kambiz, about your suggestion that we should also consider what traditions themselves have to say about materiality and embodiment, and of course Christianity and Christian traditions have a lot to say about words and the Bible and books.

Religion as Currency

- 46 **Kambiz:** I think another important element in considering what religious traditions, particularly non-Christian religions, have to say about materiality and embodiment is that it helps us overcome the Protestantization of the category of religion in the modern era. Asking questions about how conceptions of materiality in non-Christian religions have shaped their histories and their communities is a way of ensuring that the ways in which we talk about religion don't presume a Protestant religion.
- 47 There's something about religion as currency that is operative here, if you think of currency as something that allows for things that are not commensurable to be made commensurable so that they can be exchanged. In all of these objects I see religion as a currency that facilitates exchange. It's being resorted to as a way of making things commensurable that are not otherwise commensurable, and the reason for this is so that either money can be made or goods exchanged.
- 48 **Cody:** That's such an excellent point. And Roxanne, something your project made me think of was use of metaphor or figurative language—particularly when people

say “xyz is my religion”—I think that’s doing some of that work in making things commensurable. Kambiz, I really like the way you articulated that. I think metaphor does some of that conceptually and verbally, but focusing on the materiality is helpful for thinking about currency.

- 49 **Kambiz:** And it’s also helpful for thinking about the practice of religion that takes place on the ground. I find that even though the material turn in the study of religion is often discussed as a turn away from the Protestant presuppositions that shaped the field, a lot of the extant scholarship on material religion still presumes religions are about experiences and aesthetics; they presume religion to be Protestant. Much less attention is paid to religious laws and institutional doctrines regarding objects and bodies.
- 50 **Roxanne:** Even when religion is presumed to be Protestant, even that phrase “religion in a book,” they’re talking about Protestant Christianity, but what that meant was even different from what Anglo-Protestants thought religion was. For example, the “religion” that Anishinaabe chiefs were rejecting in the early-nineteenth century looked like the construction of a school in your community, the construction of a church in your community, the construction of a certain kind of housing, and agriculture. It might have been things that Anglo-Canadians would not have thought of as religion. For them religion might have been more individual and belief-based, the way we think about Protestant religion. But at this time, the religion that chiefs were rejecting was specifically the construction of a missionary village—they had a very material understanding of what religion was.
- 51 **Cody:** That points to an interesting moment in which the missionaries are trying to dematerialize religion, in their conception of it, if not in practice.
- 52 **Roxanne:** Right, which connects to what Kambiz is saying: how is our conception of materiality shaped by a lurking Protestantism?
- 53 **Cody:** That makes me think about how during fieldwork on fitness and religion, I was speaking with a young Muslim man who affirmed how CrossFit was like religion, but in his analysis, he kept comparing CrossFit to evangelical Christianity, and never to his Islamic practice. Part of what he was conveying was “yes this is religion, but it’s only religion if you view it as Protestant.”
- 54 **Kambiz:** That has an interesting history, when we start thinking about the centrality of books to the study of religion. I am thinking of Max Müller’s Sacred Books of the East project. His Protestant presumptions about the centrality of scripture in shaping religion led him to seek the history of humanity’s religion through the medium of the book. He didn’t ask: how have non-Protestant religions conceptualized or put to use the book as a religious medium? He thought his Protestant understanding of scripture was universalizable. I think there is a cautionary tale here for those of us interested in material religion. Materiality, embodiment, and praxis have been varyingly conceptualized in different religions in order to express different religious ideals about selves and societies. I think it behooves us not to lose sight of these expressions—which are often legalistic and doctrinal—as we think about the selves and societies that material economies of religion have enabled in the Americas in the modern era.

- 54 This conversation relates to Kambiz GhaneaBassiri's study of [wudhu socks](#), Roxanne L. Korpan's research into [Anishinaabemowin bibles](#), and Cody Musselman's examination of the [SoulCycle candle](#).

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