

On the Religion of Things

Jason R. Young

Though often perceived as an arena of human life devoted exclusively to the ethereal, the actual practice of religion, not to mention our study of it, is mediated through the material circumstances of life. Nevertheless, the academic study of religion has traditionally proceeded along quite different historiographical paths.¹ One intellectual trend, dominant in the fields of Anthropology and Archaeology, has traditionally focused on praxis and material culture as a way of analyzing the historical circumstances of human lives, societies and cultures. Another intellectual movement, dominant in Religious Studies and several cognate fields, has focused primarily on theological, liturgical and exegetical approaches to belief and ritual.

But rather than position these two approaches to human experience as diametrically opposed, recent trends have inaugurated novel ways of thinking about the nexus of religious studies and material culture. In this view, religious belief and practice are *made* in a distinctly material world. Here, one thinks of a wide array of material expressions of religiosity including the ceremonial food that we offer up as sacrifice or consume in communion, the ritual vestments that religious leaders wear, and the relics that we animate in our approach to the divine. The materiality of religion can be found in the brick and mortar that holds our houses of worship together along with the various and sundry materials, amulets, altars and fineries that we use to communicate with the divine. As Albertina Nugteren makes clear in a similar context, material culture operates as a necessary mode for making the experience with the divine “sense-able.”² This materiality provides concrete mechanisms to assist the devotee in the search for the divine while also enabling an affective experience of religion. In this way, belief constitutes less a quality of mind and more a particular relationship to the senses. As David Morgan notes, “He says he believes, but what he really does is feel, smell, hear and see.”³

In this way, the “matter of belief” includes more than physical ritual objects. It encompasses normative human sensations, affect and embodiment along with a wide array of what we might call super-sensory experiences. The latter form a key feature of devotion in several faith traditions including the Puritan conversion narrative, the Native American Ghost Dance, or in “full gospel” Pentecostal churches. In each case, human experiences of the divine extend beyond the corporal boundaries of the human body to acquire super-sensory knowledge and experiences that are yet rooted in the material world—narrated through language, inspired through song or incited by dance and drum. For this reason, some scholars interested in the material culture of religion have taken the formal, physical aspects of devotion to be emblematic of deeper-level cultural structures. Clifford Geertz, for example, *sees* a cockfight in Bali but *perceives* a wide array of otherwise unspoken, implied aspects of Balinese culture.⁴ But a focus on the materiality of religion makes clear not only the hidden, deep-level meanings residing just below the surface, but also establishes the imminent ritual power embedded in the super-mundane. Nugteren writes it well when she notes that “a thing is an object

waiting to happen.”⁵

Increasingly, scholars are finding new and generative fields of inquiry at the nexus of religious studies and material culture. In the inaugural edition of the journal *Material Religion*, the editors lay out the key aims of a novel intellectual enterprise:

Religion is not regarded as something one does with speech or reason alone, but with the body and the spaces it inhabits. Religion is about the sensual effects of walking, eating, meditating, making pilgrimage, and performing even the most mundane of ritual acts. Religion is what people do with material things and places, and how these structure and color experience and one’s sense of oneself and others.⁶

In similar ways, *MAVCOR* has expanded the definition of material culture to include not only physical artifacts, but also soundscapes and performance along with analog and digital experiences. Meanwhile, the *Journal of Southern Religion* has been devoted to the varied and complicated ways that people living in the American South have experienced religiosity, for which the material aspects of religious practice have been a consistent theme. Importantly, both *MAVCOR* and *JSR* operate as online, open-source venues for scholarly exchange, pointing to a continually changing definition of what constitutes materiality. Precisely because they operate at this meeting of the digital and the material, both journals are able to archive and host rich visual and auditory scholarscapes across various media platforms that would be difficult to maintain in more traditional bound and printed journals. All of this makes clear both the need and the timeliness of “Material and Visual Cultures of Religion in the American South.”

The articles included in this special edition approach the intersection of material culture and religion in quite different ways. Writing in “Uncle Tom’s Bibles: Bibles as Visual and Material Objects from Antebellum Abolitionism to Jim Crow Cinema,” Edward J. Blum explores not only the cultural significance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but also the power of the book itself as a central item in what we might call a nascent global material culture. Emerging as it did at the nexus of American evangelicalism, industry and capitalism, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; that is, the book—as a thing, a product and a commodity—assumed a power all its own. This tradition of seeing in the Bible a book of power has a long history in what Henry Louis Gates calls the trope of the ‘talking book.’ For example, enslaved African James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, writing in 1772, relayed a story in which he witnessed first-hand the power of the Bible:

I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so with me. As soon as my master was done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hopes that it would say something to me; but I was very sorry, and greatly disappointed when I found that it would not speak.⁷

Famed ex-slave and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano relayed much the same experience: “I had often seen my master...employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought [he] did...for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.”⁸ In many ways, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* takes its place in this long tradition in which the ‘talking book’ carries meanings that far exceed the lines on the page.

Blum’s essay raises some fascinating questions about what we mean by the referent: *book*. Though securely bound and contained within covers, the meanings that we ascribe to a book reflect both individual and collective readings. In the space between the sign (the book) and the signified (the reading), books emerge as something much larger and more magical than a mere object. And as Blum makes clear, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, first released in episodic form before being published as a stand-alone text, has both benefited and suffered in its myriad afterlives in ways that both illuminate and obscure the novel. Indeed, one of the principle challenges that I have when teaching the novel to undergraduates involves the thorny task of both aggregating and disaggregating the novel; that is, reading it in view of its many afterlives while yet approaching it as a novel on its own.

Writing in “Horseshoe Crosses and Muddy Boots: Material Culture and Rural Masculinity in Cowboy Churches,” Sarah Moczygemba also addresses the religious power of things in a fascinating investigation of religiosity that takes bales of hay, leather boots, hard floors and horse shoes as key religious relics. In cowboy churches, specifically, and in the larger muscular Christianity movement, Moczygemba identifies the emergence of a new kind of masculine culture that carves out of traditional American evangelicalism a distinctly male space. Notably, this masculinity is not made from new exegetical understandings of the Bible, neither is it located in revised theologies. Instead, this new masculinity is made chiefly in the elevation of *things* to a new ritual status. In this process, the *stuff* of a mythic cowboy ethic assume a novel religious significance. The resulting ritual praxis is rooted in an imagined past marked by a rugged individualism that has been effectively revived in a more modern guise. Here, horses have been replaced by pick-up trucks, the roundup for the rodeo. Importantly, this embrace of a rustic, manly way of being is communicated materially. In church architecture, decoration and aesthetics, leaders in the cowboy church movement construct a specific identity for its members that focuses on the workaday implements of cowboy life. In this, Moczygemba reveals a powerful religion of things in which mundane consumer items are elevated to the level of the sublime. Indeed, this practice of cultivating religious themes by transforming the built environment is a key theme running through many of the articles in this special edition.

If Moczygemba draws our attention to the ways that the built environment can evoke connections to an imagined past, Samuel Stella, writing in “The Second Great Awakening and the Built Landscape of Missouri,” emphasizes the varied ways that leaders in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church movement embraced a design model meant to introduce the fruits of modern civilization to a natural (read: un-

Christian) western landscape. In adopting a sparse and spare church design, leaders in the movement hoped to convey something of their humility before God and their sober attention to the gospel. A key pillar of the Cumberland movement involved an imperative to distinguish themselves from what they deemed the excesses not only of rival religious movements, but also of a recalcitrant natural landscape and its native peoples. Stella makes clear the ways that an intentionally built environment can reframe not only a building, but also its surrounding natural landscapes. Churches, then, carry with them both a definite theology as well as a specific cultural and ecological order. Writing in a similar context, philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe makes clear the role that missionaries played in the expansion of imperial ideas, noting that the missionary is, at one and the same time, “an agent of a political empire, a representative of a civilization, and an envoy of God.”⁹ In this connection, Stella reveals the ways that material culture helped to produce desired affective and sensorial church experiences.

Many of these themes come together in Emily Wright’s “A Doorkeeper in the House of My God: Female Stewardship of Protestant Sacred Spaces in the Gulf South, 1830-1861.” Where Moczygemba describes a built environment that produced a decidedly masculine space in cowboy churches, Wright makes a similar case, noting that Protestant women in the Gulf South worked assiduously to frame the church as a feminine space of respectability. In this sense, the built environment of the church featured both masculine and feminine influences wherein church architects and planners (primarily men) constructed churches in hopes of adhering to certain denominational requirements while women took charge of the furnishings and other material trappings of worship in order to reproduce the domestic hearth and home in the halls of worship. But women working within the nineteenth century Protestant evangelical movement did much more than apply their traditionally defined domestic skills to the nineteenth century evangelical movement. They were central pillars in the church, ensuring its financial stability, development and maintenance. In this way, nineteenth century evangelicalism provided a key place for a middle- and upper-middle class female activism for white women, but often at the expense of poor women and women of color. Much of the public, forward facing work of white women was rooted in the extracted labor of black women, both free and enslaved.

Taken together, these articles make clear the crucial links between material culture and religiosity. Adherents invested the material trappings of worship with deep resonant meanings. In return, otherwise mundane items assumed a new kind of agency, allowing them to call and claim believers into communities of worship that were both earthy and ethereal.

Citation Guide

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Endnotes

1. See, for example, John Cort, "Religion, And Material Culture: Some Reflections On Method," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 3 (Autumn, 1996), 615.

2. Albertina Nugteren, "Introduction to the Special Issue 'Religion, Ritual and Ritualistic Objects,'" *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019) doi: 10.3390/rel10030163.

3. David Morgan, *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 5.

4. See Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

5. Nugteren, "Ritual and Ritualistic Objects."

6. "Editorial statement," *Material Religion* 1, no 1 (2005): 4.

7. James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, "A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, as Related by Himself," in Sandra Burr and Adam Potkay, eds., *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 34.

8. Olaudah Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself," in Burr and Potkay, *Black Atlantic Writers*, 196.

9. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 47.



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