Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality.* Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, eds. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. 504 pp.

Reviewed by Gabrielle A. Berlinger

“In what sense are the legacies of religion—its powers, words, things, and gestures—disarticulating and reconstellating themselves as the elementary forms of life in the twenty-first century?” The editorial board of *The Future of the Religious Past*, a book series funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), poses this question at the opening of the third of the five-volume series. This third volume, *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, follows *Religion* (2008) and *Powers* (2010) and continues an in-depth investigation of these “legacies of religion,” as well as of the study of religion, from a modern perspective. The research project was generated by, and evolved from, an international conference organized in 2007 by *The Future of the Religious Past* entitled, “Things: Material Religion and the Topography of Divine Spaces,” and many of the chapters in the series are drawn from the conference papers presented there, supplemented by continued research. Supported by the NWO Research Council for the Humanities, the NWO Research Council for the Social Sciences, and The Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research, this third volume addresses the specific relationship between religion and materiality.

Fundamental to the project of this volume is the interrogation of the assumption that religion and “things” are inherently at odds. In the editors’ theoretically grounded introduction to the 21 essays that follow, cultural sociologist Dick Houtman and religious studies scholar Birgit Meyer acknowledge the “material turn” that took hold in the humanities and sciences in the mid-1980s, and ask how and why its reach has not permeated the study of religion with equal effect. How has the “presumed antagonism” between religion and materiality—an antagonism whose roots the authors significantly relate to the interiority of religious histories including Protestantism, New Age movements, and Buddhist contemplative practice—how has this “presumed antagonism” shaped the modern study of religion? Moreover, how might scholars today *re-examine* religious faith and practice through a new lens that views religion and materiality as inextricably interdependent? Recognizing religion as historically constructed through lived experience, the editors thus claim an approach that moves beyond symbolic analysis and abstract meaning-centered study, to focus on faith and experience through the “things” that religious expression makes manifest.

In their historic and current case studies, the volume’s 24 contributors (with backgrounds in history, sociology, anthropology, applied psychology, gender studies, philosophy, theology, folklore, Buddhist and Tibetan studies, and theater studies) share an explicit interest in religious valuation and performance as expressed through the material culture of religious settings, but they also underscore the continued crucial role of the narratives of the “Protestant legacy” and the influence of Enlightenment reason on religion. The notion of dematerialization in religion that has been inherited from these sources must be reconsidered, the authors write, as critical study of both the eschewal and acceptance of “things” in religion reveals the values—positive

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and negative—that human beings bestow upon the natural and cultural materials around them, and with this understanding are revealed deeper relations between people and the divine, and this world and a notion of the next.

Of specific yet significant note is the editors' distinction between the terms "thing" and "object" in their discussion of materiality. While "object" implies a subject-object relation, they observe that "thing" cannot be circumscribed as closely, thus allowing for open interpretation in broader fields of material, intellectual, and spiritual inquiry. The ambiguity of "thing" is enough to inspire nervousness or even anxiety, they argue, and thus encourages a probing of the boundaries of material and spiritual realms (16). At a minimum, however, "thing" is used in this volume to refer to a wide range of phenomena that organize the 21 essays into six sections.

With three or four essays in each section, the volume is divided into the following parts: Part I: Anxieties About Things, Part II: Images and Incarnations, Part III: Sacred Artifacts, Part IV: Bodily Fluids, Part V: Public Space, and Part VI: Digital Technologies. The volume appropriately begins with Peter Pels, Matthew Engelke, and Ernst Van Den Hemel speaking to the historically fraught relationship between Protestantism and materiality. The studies range from a 19th-century Victorian "fear of matter" to contemporary concepts of materiality by Friday Apostolics in Zimbabwe, to a new interpretation of Calvin's writings on the Eucharist. The essays outline histories and theories of dematerialization in religious contexts, and simultaneously illustrate the importance of attending to the relational networks of people, things, and expression in those particular contexts.

Part II, containing essays by Donald S. Lopez, Jr., David Morgan, W. J. T. Mitchell, Freddie Rokem, and Irene Stengs, examines the images and incarnations that are made sacred across regions and religions. Case studies include images of the Buddha that characterized an historic philosophy more than a religious icon recognized by Western publics, the Catholic Sacred Heart of Jesus as both symbolic and visceral "icon," and the supernatural as it appears in theaters and movie screens. The transformation of such images and incantations from objects of devotion to subjects of human need and experience, gives agency to people as much as to sacred objects.

Part III addresses the category of sacred artifacts with essays by Galit Hasan-Rokem, José C. M. Van Santen, Sane Derks, Willy Jansen, and Catrien Notermans. The studies include the Jewish *sukkah* as a material expression of mobility and sacrality, the practice of counting prayer beads in a Muslim community of Northern Cameroon as a way to trace local networks and track political conflicts, and the place of stones and miniature figures in the context of the pilgrimage to the Virgin of Urkupiña in Quillacollo, Bolivia. These archival and anthropological studies highlight how the creation, use, and interpretation of these materials root individuals in physical places, and uproot them from social structures, when animated as tools in the contexts of migration, upheaval, and pilgrimage.

In Part IV, Willy Jansen and Grietje Dresen, Elizabeth A. Castelli, and Miranda Klaver examine the topic of bodily fluids in religion. The cases include an examination of the meaning of blood and milk in Christianity and Islam as they historically relate to the different sexes, the role of the materiality of blood in the context of Catholic activist protests against a U.S. attack in Iraq in 2003 in upstate New York, and the primacy of blood and suffering in the worldview of a contemporary Dutch Pentecostal church that, in line with Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* (2004) but in contrast to the tradition, emphasizes material and visual mediation over direct

experience. The examples expose how biological materials relay complex symbolic and literal messages and negotiate power when valued for their material as well as spiritual character.

Part V, with essays by Michiel Leezenberg, Annelies Moors, Birgit Meyer, and Maria José A. de Abreu, considers public space within religion. A discussion of the boundaries of public and private realms within religious space includes study of the Ottoman coffee house as a counterpart to the mosque, the discomfort and fear of public discourses and marketing imagery of the Islamic veil produced in the Netherlands against Muslim cultural assimilation, conflicted conceptions about Jesus pictures in a southern Ghanaian Pentecostal community, and the transformation of the traditional image of St. Expeditus among Catholic Charismatics in Brazil as media technologies multiply the form and function of this saint. The public realm as a space of constant contestation is filled with such examples that demonstrate the importance of local contextualization and the changing nature of traditional expressions within and across shared space.

The sixth and last Part examines digital technologies through essays by Stef Aupers, Dorien Zandbergen, Ineke Noomen, and Dick Houtman. The three studies investigate the relationship between popular “fantasy” computer games and spiritual engagement, the “New Edge” New Age spiritual movement in San Francisco that holds new technology at its spiritual core, and the circumstances in which religious heritage intersects with technological duty so that the values of one’s faith and the values of one’s technology shape each other in specific and distinctive ways.

This book’s approach to the study of materiality within religion is dense and diverse with historic and current cases exemplifying the deep meaning made from a range of methodologies, from textual analysis to anthropological fieldwork. While the multidisciplinary and international cross-section of scholarly research is impressive, not mentioned are folklorists such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Leonard Primiano, Joseph Sciorra, Simon Bronner, Kay Turner, and Henry Glassie, who have revealed seminal aspects of the relationship between religious practice and material culture. From the perspective of lived experience, process, and performance, these folklorists seek answers to many of the questions posed by the editors in the introduction: “How do things matter (or not) in religious discourses and practices? How is the value or devaluation, the appraisal or contestation, of things accounted for within particular religious perspectives? How does the current concern with “things” and “material religion” transform scholarly approaches and understandings of religion?” (18). Outside this particular history within folkloristics, however, this volume is an invaluable contribution to religious and material culture studies, broadening the scope of both fields by introducing new questions in old contexts, and investing agency in people and spirit in things.

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