The Thing about Religion

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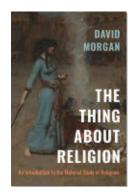
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[PART I]

THEORIES AND DEFINITIONS

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[ONE]

HOW SOME

THEORIES OF RELIGION

DEMATERIALIZE IT

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Many approaches to religion do not consider material characteristics to be important. So this chapter is devoted to tracing the history of such theories, indicating how and why they operate as they do, and pointing out the problems with doing so. The point is not to argue that materiality is the essence of all religions or that the material study of a religion is more important than any other. Instead, the task is to demonstrate the difference that studying material aspects of religions makes in understanding them.

Images and Relics as Delusions, Distractions, and Idols:
The Priority of Philosophy and Theology

The academic field of religious studies has inherited much from the history of philosophy and theology. That is because philosophy and theology formed the intellectual life of Christianity, and particularly Christian universities in Europe since the eleventh century, long before such modern material disciplines as archaeology, art history, or paleontology came into being. So if we want to understand why some theories of religion give material life little attention, it is necessary to begin with what influential philosophers and theologians have thought about images and objects. Of course, the record is starkly split in the sense that some regarded material things as distractions or even dangers even while the Catholic theology and practice of the Eucharist was robustly material and inspired a rich and varied art and architecture for the devout staging of the rite.[1] It is best not to reduce the tradition of Christianity (or any other religion, for that matter) to a single view.

In the twelfth century, the spiritual reformer and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux wrote to William of Saint-Thierry, a friend and admirer who

FIGURE 8. *Detail of carved capitals, cloister of the abbey church of Saint-Pierre, Moissac, France, 12th century. Alinari / Art Resource, NY.*

was the abbot of a Benedictine monastery in France, to complain about what he considered the material excess of Benedictine churches: their "vast height, . . . their immoderate length, their superfluous breadth, the costly polishings, the curious carvings and paintings which attract the worshipper's gaze and hinder his attention."[2] The decorated capitals of the cloister of the abbey church of Saint-Pierre at Moissac, France, a Benedictine monastery that was rebuilt in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (fig. 8), are just the sort of thing that Bernard had in mind, particularly since they adorned the cloister, or interior courtyard, a part of the monas-

tery that only monks would see.[3] Bernard acknowledged that decoration and scale might be done for God's honor but insisted that bishops had an excuse that monks like Bernard and William did not: "Unable to excite the devotion of carnal folk by spiritual things, [bishops] do so by bodily adornments." But monks, Bernard claimed, are committed to dismissing "all things fair to see or soothing to hear, sweet to smell, delightful to taste, or pleasant to touch—in a word, all bodily delights."[4] Then Bernard leveled an economic critique of artistic adornment in religious settings: wealth produces more wealth, and the quest for it operated independently of spiritual motives. "Thus, wealth is drawn up by ropes of wealth, thus money bringeth money; for I know not how it is that, wheresoever more abundant wealth is seen, there do men offer more freely." The problem was the magnetic power of lavish decoration on the spiritually undisciplined nature of the worldly. "Their eyes are feasted with relics cased in gold, and their purse-strings are loosed. They are shown a most comely image of some saint, whom they think all the more saintly that he is the more gaudily painted. Men run to kiss him, and are invited to give; there is more admiration for his comeliness than veneration for his sanctity."[5] And the effect on the spiritual inhabitants of abbeys and cathedral churches was no less a problem—spiritual distraction from the monk's proper activity: "In short, so many and so marvelous are the varieties of diverse shapes on every hand, that we are tempted to read in the marble than in our books, and to spend the whole day in wondering at these things rather than in meditating on the law of God."[6]

For Bernard, material forms were considered not only to miss the point of religious life but to subvert it by indulging an obsession with material wealth. Decorative and artistic forms are often the target of iconophobic reformers because they are criticized as perverting the spiritual purity of rites and institutions, often because of their association with commerce and the exertions of wealthy patrons. Iconophobia (the fear or avoidance of images) and iconoclasm (the breaking or removal of images) are an attitude and a practice commonly associated with religious reform—and even revolution, since the destruction of images often means an assault on the political and economic orders that installed the images and drew support from their veneration.

In the Byzantine era, for example, a series of emperors banned the use of icons, or religious images, in Orthodox Christian worship during the eighth and ninth centuries. In 754, the iconoclastic emperor Constan-

tine V called a synod or council of bishops to address the matter of images, among other matters. The council indicted "the deceitful colouring of pictures, which draws down the spirit of man from the lofty worship of God to the low and material worship of the creature."[7] Specifically, the Council of Hieria stated that "the sinful art of painting blasphemed the fundamental doctrine of our salvation, namely the Incarnation of Christ." How was that the case?

> What avails, then, the folly of the painter, who from sinful love of gain depicts that which should not be depicted, that is, with his polluted hands he tries to fashion that which should only be believed in the heart and confessed with the mouth? He makes an image and calls it Christ. The name Christ signifies God and man. Consequently, it is an image of God and man, and consequently he has in his foolish mind, in his representation of the created flesh, depicted the Godhead which cannot be represented, and thus mingled what should not be mingled. Thus, he is guilty of a double blasphemy, the one in making an image of the Godhead and the other by mingling the Godhead and manhood. Those fall into the same blasphemy who venerate the image.[8]

Already in the eighth century we find a contrast between "belief" and "material worship" that is still commonly associated with Protestantism. The distinction is premised on the conviction that any attempt to depict the divine is not only mistaken but a confusion of a human invention with what is invisible and immaterial. With this official finding in place, Constantine V proceeded against the venerators of images, especially directing his efforts at the monasteries, which were producers of icons and communities independent of imperial cities. Monasteries, which were also pilgrimage centers for the display of icons and relics, resisted the imperial ban and struggled for more than a century before they were able to see icon veneration officially reestablished and vindicated as a central feature of Orthodox worship, which it remains to this day.[9]

The history of iconoclastic reform is not limited to Christianity. In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century China, a reform initiative succeeded at modifying Confucian practice, replacing sculpted images of ancestors in Confucian temple shrines with spirit or ancestor tablets, that is, wooden plaques bearing the names of ancestors. A spirit tablet appears in an important Confucian shrine at Jiading, China, positioned before a statue of Confucius (fig. 9). A fifteenth-century Confucian scholar named Ch'iu
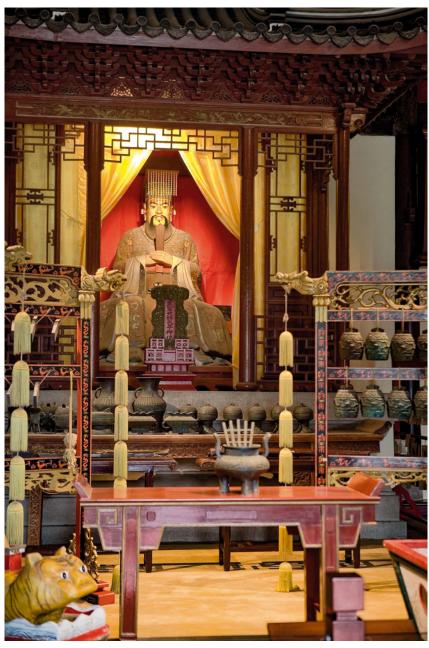
FIGURE 9. *Main hall with spirit tablet displayed before the figure of Confucius, Temple of Confucius, Jiading, China. The temple was built in 1291 and restored in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.* © *Vanni Archive / Art Resource, NY.*

Chün argued that the use of sculpted images such as the one that also appears in figure 9 departed from the venerable ancient Confucian tradition. He also claimed that their use was imported from Buddhist practice and therefore not Chinese by nature. And he pointed out that such images often failed on their own terms to visualize ancient Confucian sages because their likenesses were not recorded during their lifetimes, meaning that any image of them was nothing more than the product of an artisan's imagination.[10] The spirit tablets presented only the name and title of the spirit (teacher, sage, ancestor) to which Confucian sacrifice and prayer was directed. The name, uttered in ritual, was regarded as the more adequate means of reference since spirits, according to Ch'iu, bore no features. They were formless, colorless, odorless, and soundless.[11] Their presence was to be apprehended only within the context of ritual sacrifice. Thus, even when representations are eliminated, when iconoclasm replaces images with text, a material means of invocation remains. Incense, name plaque, altar, and the sonorous recitation of ritual formula created the stage on which worship took place. Still, Ch'iu focused his iconoclastic arguments on the use of images of sages in the setting of temples in the imperial academies at Beijing and Nanjing. He conceded that he would not remove images from shrines in military districts and "cities of the realm, however, for to change things there would disturb the common people."[12]

Ch'iu's critique of cult imagery is not altogether different from the Protestant rejection of imagery in church sanctuaries, an attitude that many Protestant groups developed in the sixteenth century as they split from Roman Catholicism and struggled to establish their reform of religion in the new political circumstances that arose in the German territories, Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and the Scandinavian states farther north.[13] North American Protestantism was firmly established during the British colonial era and continued to exert a strong influence on national attitudes into the twentieth century. For instance, as Asian immigration to the United States got seriously under way in the later nineteenth century, many Anglo Protestants expressed alarm and anxiety at the growing numbers of non-Christian Chinese and Japanese, especially in the coastal regions of New York City and San Francisco. Figure 10 registers what amounts to a perennial American concern about immigrants, who alarm some Anglo-Americans because they regard newcomers different from themselves as a threat to their racial and ideological dominance, which they consider to be integral to the divinely mandated

mission for the nation, which they view as properly Protestant in origin and identity. Race and religion can be so deeply interwoven as to be inextricable in the imagination of those who consider nation, state, or empire as the political circumstances for realizing divine purpose.

Figure 10 certainly conveys this anxiety regarding national identity. It was published in *Harper's Weekly*, which regularly printed cartoons intended to stoke alarm about Catholic immigrants from Europe and non-Christian immigrants from Asia as threats to the purity of the nation's democracy and its foundations in Protestantism. In the illustration, a Chinese priest burns joss-sticks at an altar in San Francisco, before the portrait of a deity or sacred figure, which is surrounded by spirit tablets, while those behind him bow deeply in reverence as their prayers are conveyed to the figure in incense. Entitled "Burning the Prayers—Chinese Superstitions," the engraving is a piece of Protestant anti-immigrant propaganda aimed at ritual that we have already encountered. In an accompanying text, we read that "the vending of ready-made prayers is a profitable business. They are printed on slips of paper, and a man's devotion is limited only by the resources of his pocket. Taking the slips home, or into a temple, the devout worshipper lights them in the flame of the lamp or candle, which burns before the image of his deity, and with immense inward satisfaction, if not edification, watches the smoke ascend into the air."[14]

Resentment of Chinese immigrant labor often turned on the willingness of Asian laborers to work for less than native Anglo workers, so caricatures of Chinese religion like figure 10 may reflect this economic anxiety. The Chinese Exclusion Act, passed by Congress in 1882 to curb competition from Chinese immigrant labor in the western states, specifically prohibited "skilled and unskilled laborers and Chinese employed in mining" from entering the United States for ten years.[15] The *Harper's* piece may also have intended to reduce Chinese worship to an economic transaction in order to privilege the theology and form of worship practiced by American Protestants. Buying one's salvation had long been criticized by Protestants as a Catholic and ancient Jewish practice of sacrifice. Asian "idolatry" struck many Protestants as just another version of these imperfect religions, which they considered to misconstrue relations with the divine in terms of a ritual quid pro quo. Moreover, Protestantism was held to be essential to the success of the American republic. In his widely read book *Our Country* (1885), the prominent Protestant minister Josiah Strong wrote that Anglo-Saxons represented two of the great ideas of civiliza-
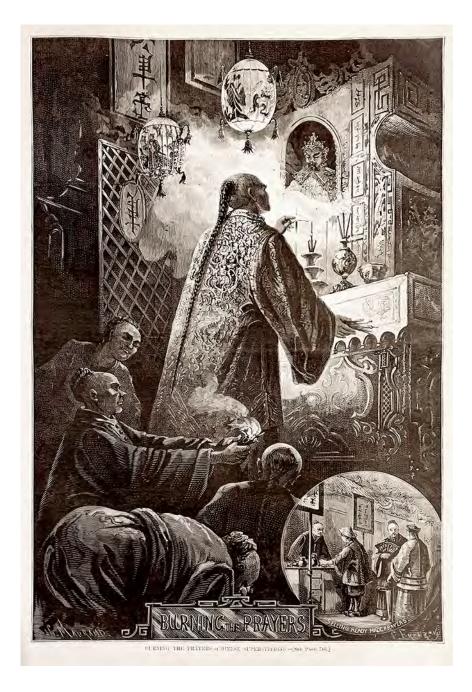
FIGURE 10. *G. Mauraud, "Burning the Prayers—Chinese Superstitions,"* Harper's Weekly, *August 23, 1873, 745. Photo by author.*

tion: civil liberty and "pure spiritual Christianity." It was the Saxons of the Reformation, "a Teutonic, rather than a Latin people," who rose up against "the absolutism of the Pope" to champion religious purity, that is, Protestantism.[16] And Strong confidently insisted that North America was "to be the great home of the Anglo-Saxon, the principal seat of his power, the center of his life and influence."[17] This rising white, manly, and English-speaking force in the world was to model the Christian faith that rivaled and would one day triumph over all other religions. Strong approvingly quoted another Protestant writer who coupled religion and race in a scheme of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism that forecasted a global hegemony: "In every corner of the world there is the same phenomenon of the decay of established religions.... Among the Mohammedans, Jews, Buddhists, Brahmins, traditionary creeds are losing their hold." "Old superstitions," Strong reiterated, "are loosening their grasp." The age of Protestant American world dominance was taking shape: "While on this continent God is training the Anglo-Saxon race for its mission, a complemental work has been in progress in the great world beyond."[18]

It is important to realize, however, that anxiety about the images of a group other than their own does not mean that Confucians or Protestants (or Jews or Muslims—other groups said to be aniconic, or opposed to images) actually avoided images or cult objects. Protestants used illustrated Bibles and tracts, displayed portraits of their founders and culture heroes, and enthroned Holy Writ in their church sanctuaries, courtrooms, public schools, and parlors. The difference is that "our" images were not idolatrous or sensuous like "theirs." "Our" images were virtuous, spiritually driven, and acknowledged the true deity and form of worship. *And that attitude tended to dematerialize them.* Protestantism, in Strong's words, was a "pure spiritual" religion that set it off against all others, and its racial basis was yet another, related version of purity. Racial thinking was not new in Strong's day, but it was increasingly elevated to a dominant way of thinking about nations, languages, religions, and cultures. Protestantism was spiritual and immaterial by nature, a purity of race, will, and revealed Word of God. All other religions were understood to take their place in a hierarchy of races, modes of idolatry, and forms of error that confused matter with spirit. The material culture of worship and devotion that belonged to other religions was associated with their "idolatry" and attachment to human motives. Only Protestantism was understood to be truly "spiritual."

The social theorist Bruno Latour has made the point powerfully regarding "our" images versus "theirs" in his discussion of one of the primary inventions of Western attitudes toward non-Western peoples and the materiality of their religion: the fetish. He imagined a conversation in the sixteenth century between a Portuguese trader and a group of Blacks on the coast of West Africa.[19] Seeing the ritual objects prized by the Africans, the trader, himself bearing a crucifix and amulets of the saints and Our Lady, points out to the Africans that their objects were made by their own hands and could not therefore be anything but idolatrous. Things cannot be both made and divine, the Portuguese insists. Idols are what humans make and call gods. *Fetish* was the term developed by European intellectuals and literati to designate such handmade objects with divine power in them. It derived from the Portuguese adjective *feitiço*, which means made, artificial, or enchanted. Fetish is what colonial outsiders called the power objects of indigenous groups in contrast to the truth of their icons and sacraments.[20]

Although Latour imagined the encounter between Portuguese Catholics and West Africans, a nineteenth-century British missionary, John Williams, recorded an actual encounter between a Tahitian Protestant missionary named Papeiha, working for the London Missionary Society, and a group of inhabitants of Rarotonga, the largest of the Cook Islands in Polynesia. On reaching the shore, the missionary was taken to an audience with the tribal chief, who asked him why he had come to the island. Papeiha replied that he had come to bring knowledge of Jesus Christ to the Rarotongans, "in order that they, like the inhabitants of Tahiti, the Society, and other islands, might burn the idols of wood, of cloth, and of birds' feathers, which they had made and called gods." The assembly responded with "surprise and horror," we are told, exclaiming, "What! burn the gods! what gods shall we then have, and what shall we do without the gods?"[21] We do not need to imagine what the islanders thought of the deity of the Protestant missionary since we learn it from Williams's narrative: "As Papeiha carried his Testament [Bible] with him, it frequently elicited curious remarks. While walking about the settlement, the people would say, 'There! there's the god of that man! What a strange god it is, he carries it about with him, but we leave ours at the marae [Polynesian open air temple].' When they saw him reading, they would say that he and his God were talking together."[22] Of course, John Williams intended for his (Protestant) readers in England to grimace at the Islanders' mistake. But

is it not fair to say that the Rarotongans recognized that Protestants have a fetishism of their own? How would Protestants have responded to a visitor's announcement that he had come to Britain or America to burn the Bible? In light of how some Protestants cherish the Bible as an object—a book without error, authored by a deity, sworn on in court, enthroned on altars, and able to read the mind of its god through various forms of divination—the Rarotongans make Latour's point very powerfully: any god is both deity and material fabrication for those who cherish the deity and its physical form. The challenge to the academic study of religion is to understand how the transformation of object into god takes place.

Fetish and *idol* are closely related terms, and both are deeply embedded in how modern Westerners think, feel about, and act toward images of a religious nature. Both are terms bathed in theological attitudes and express a religious perspective that is by no means neutral. Both terms allege forms of self-deception, ignorance, and error. Both assert a confusion of "mere" matter with spirit. Whereas *fetish* is a modern coinage and linked to the colonial encounter with and the domination and enslavement of colonized peoples, *idol* is a much older word. Idol designated the object or image to which worship was *wrongly* directed, according the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible. In the book of Isaiah, the practice of idolatry is portrayed as a human production that vainly mimics the creative power of God, resulting in nothing but human delusion.

> All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit.... The carpenter stretches a line, he marks it out with a pencil; he fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars; or he chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest; he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man; he takes a part of it and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread; also he makes a god and worships it, he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. [44:9, 13–15]

The author situates the material production of idols within everyday life in order to contrast the resulting deity from the god of the Bible, who proclaims earlier in the chapter that he is the first and the last, "Besides me there is no god. Who is like me?" (44:6–7). He was the creator of the universe and the savior of Israel. The gods that human beings craft come

from the same material that makes their fires burn to warm them and to bake their bread. Such gods, the prophetic writer insists, are nothing more than wood.

Iconoclasm is intended to reveal the singularly material nature of images, that is, their adamantly nonspiritual nature with the idea that true religion is not material. This is precisely what Protestant iconoclasts in Utrecht put into action in 1580 when they removed the faces of ten figures in a sculptural group in a burial chapel in the city's Cathedral Church (fig. 11), as the city swung to the Protestant side during the Reformation in the northern Netherlands. The sculptural figures included Saint Anne, the Virgin Mary, the Christ Child, Mary Magdalene, and God the Father. By removing their faces, the iconoclasts disabled the figures from presenting themselves to viewers as points of connection with the sacred beings they imaged. The faces could no longer function as masks returning the gaze of devoted viewers. By leaving the imagery in its damaged state, the interface was permanently thwarted.

The Protestant theology of John Calvin, the French reformer who exerted wide influence and inspired iconoclasts in Utrecht and elsewhere, formulated an ardent opposition to the use of images in churches, objecting to them as idolatrous and recalling on several points the position taken by the Council of Heiria in 754. In 1536, Calvin wrote one of his most influential treatises, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in which he contended, "Seeing there is one true God whom the Jews worshipped, visible shapes made for the purpose of representing him are false and wicked fictions; and all, therefore, who have recourse to them for knowledge [of God] are miserably deceived."[23] For Calvin, the problem was the human imagination itself: deprived of the revealed Christian truth, whenever human beings try to imagine the deity, they produce a mental fiction of it. Any artistic representation of the imaginative fiction simply extends the mistake. Thus, he could confidently assert that "the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols."[24] This meant that images ought to play no role in teaching Christian belief or in conducting Christian worship. Only the Bible, the revealed word of God, could properly inform teaching and worship. Human thought that does not anchor itself to Holy Scripture is quickly led astray by the free play of imagination, replacing divine revelation with human fabrication. Idolatry, then, for Calvin was a confusion of human desire for the true object of knowledge—divine truth. Idolatry was an act of ignorance that results in an act of criminal rebellion: "What-

FIGURE 11. *Altar of the Three Generations: Saint Ann, Mary, and the Christ Child, ca. 1500, sandstone, Burial Chapel of Jan van Arkel, bishop of Utrecht, Domkerk, Utrecht. Photo by author.*

ever is bestowed upon idols is so much robbed from [God]."[25] The Calvinist understanding of the task of Christian conversion, as the anthropologist Webb Keane has pointed out, stresses the agency of belief over against material objects and ritual practices, which Calvin insisted bear no agency or efficacy in themselves, except, Calvin asserted, the ability to trigger the imagination to dupe human beings.[26] Keane coined the term *semiotic ideology* to denote sets of assumptions about "what words and things can or cannot do, and to how they facilitate or impinge on the capacities of

human and divine agents."[27] Thus, Calvin's semiotic ideology maintained that the efficacy of any act was "mediated not by any material practice in itself but by the faith of the communicants, in conjunction with God's actions."[28]

The power of images to deceive human beings is an old fear in Western thought. Plato, for instance, recorded Socrates's apprehension of images as untruths. The famous Allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic* conveys the view of Socrates that images fall far short of what is truly real. What people take to be real are merely shadows cast on the cave wall by shapes held up before a flame. Only philosophical inquiry can arrive at what is really true. Images, we read in another part of the *Republic*, are only copies of copies. If what is truly real is the idea in the divine mind, and if the natural objects we encounter in the world around us are manifestations of it, then what painters produce are yet another remove from the real, showing only an illusion, not the real thing. For Socrates, dialectic, or reason, is the only assured way of proceeding from the lower realms of matter and human imitation to the lofty height and divine realm of truth. Discourse is the medium of movement toward it. Images are a danger precisely because they fool us into thinking we have the real thing in them, just as Calvin would later insist regarding his sharp distinction of scripture and imagery. And as Calvin would allow no painter to decorate the altar of a Protestant church, Socrates gave no place to poets or painters in his ideal city-state since their art indulged what he called the "lower elements in the mind." The higher elements consisted of words, ideas, and the operation of philosophical reason.[29] Images indulge the body; words and ideas foreground mind or intellect.

In figure 12, the contentions of Plato and Calvin seem to merge in a seventeenth-century Dutch engraving by Jan Saenredam after a painting by Cornelius van Haarlem that illustrates Plato's Allegory of the Cave. We see the huddled masses of humanity on the right, crowded together in the thrall of delusion, gazing on a set of shadows on the wall before them. They are unaware that the shadows are cast by a group of what appear to be religious statues. Among them, we can discern the figures of Silenus, sacred to the rites of Bacchus in ancient Hellenistic culture, and Eros, god of love and the archer son of Aphrodite. But also among the group are figures from Christian mythology: an angel with two trumpets, often shown heralding the birth of Jesus, and what may be two saints, one holding a cross and the other with what may be an anchor, possibly

FIGURE 12. *Jan Saenredam, after Cornelius van Haarlem,*
Plato's Allegory of the Cave, *1604, engraving.*

representing Saint Clement of Rome, who was martyred at the end of the first century CE by being strapped to an anchor and thrown into the sea. The appearance of the Christian figures in an image celebrating Plato's ancient allegory makes perfect sense in the context of Holland's Calvinist Protestantism, where images were ripped from churches as forms of idolatry only twenty years before this engraving was produced. Catholic saints joined Greek gods in a pantheon of idolatrous deities that were responsible in Calvinist theology for misleading human beings from recognizing divine truth.

The Academic Study of Religion

The notion that true religion takes the shape of ideas and the intellect was a basic premise of what may be one of the first classics in the academic study of religion—the Scottish philosopher David Hume's *Natural*

History of Religion (1757). Hume framed his inquiry in terms of what he called religion's "natural history," that is, as a phenomenon comparable to any other part of nature. He contrasted this with what he considered the superior foundation for religious belief—reason. This allowed him to gather virtually all examples of religion into one cluster as originating entirely within "human nature," subject to its whims and weaknesses, errors, and anxieties, and to contrast this with the true religion whose genesis was in reason, the faculty that carried human understanding beyond the liabilities of human nature. "The whole frame of nature," Hume asserted, "bespeaks an intelligent author; and no rational enquirer can, after serious reflection, suspend his belief a moment with regard to the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion."[30] Yet the two frames were joined into one by virtue of "the natural progress of human thought."[31] Religion had two origins: one in the fear that characterized the primitive human condition, which produced superstition and idolatry and took the original form of polytheism; and the other in the evolved rationality that gave birth to monotheism. Hume's approach helped establish the modern study of religion by stressing psychological and social factors, arguing for a purely human origin of religion, and recognizing evolutionary change as a fundamental feature of the historical nature of religions. Certainly, progressive evolution and the deism that powered Hume's rationalist account are not features widely embraced today in the study of religions, but his approach departed markedly from the theological and biblical accounts of history and the definition of religion.

Unfortunately, Hume's framework regards all material dimensions of any religion as woefully missing true religion since they substitute for reason, the true faculty of revelation, something driven by fear and need, and so reduce the deity to something "subject to human passions, pains, and infirmities."[32] Examining a series of devices and bodily practices adduced by several different religions, Hume contended for their inferiority to reason. Take, for example, what he had to say about Jewish circumcision and the use of scapulars as amulets by Roman Catholics:

> How much more must human conception fall short of [the Almighty's] infinite perfections? His smile and favour renders men forever happy; and to obtain it for your children, the best method is to cut off from them, while infants, a little bit of skin, about half the breadth of a farthing. Take two bits of cloth, say the Roman Catholics, about an inch or

an inch and a half square, join them by the corners with two strings or pieces of tape about sixteen inches long, throw this over your head, and make one of the bits of cloth lie jupon your breast, and the other upon your back, keeping them next your skin: There is not a better secret for recommending yourself to that infinite Being, who exists from eternity to eternity.[33]

Hume saw such technologies or bodily techniques as perversions of genuine religion. And he sounded very much like Calvin (he was, after all, a Scot raised in the Presbyterian Church) when he described the mental basis of religious superstition and idolatry as error. Religion begins in the human ability to grasp what Hume called the "unknown causes" of human woe in nature. Human nature transforms them into something else, into divine beings that can be negotiated with. He described the process as follows: "By degrees, the active imagination of men, uneasy in [the] abstract conception of objects . . . begins to render them more particular, and to clothe them in shapes more suitable to its natural comprehension. It represents them to be sensible, intelligent beings, like mankind: actuated by love and hatred, and flexible by gifts and entreaties, by prayers and sacrifices. Hence the origin of religion: And hence the origin of idolatry or polytheism."[34]

Although the Christianity of his day failed to satisfy his criteria for true religion inasmuch as it stressed supernatural revelation, miracles, and faith over reason, Hume avoided direct criticism of it. What he could say in its defense was that, unlike "ancient religion," it was "scriptural," that is, set down in written form that enabled the formulation of "fixed dogmas and principles," which served as the basis for theological reasoning.[35] Thus, like Calvin, he disparaged imagination and, like Plato, insisted that discourse and reason were the way to truth. And for Hume that meant that religion remained problematic: "The empire of all religious faith over the understanding is wavering and uncertain, subject to every variety of humour, and dependent on the present incidents, which strike the imagination."[36] Put more directly, "Ignorance is the mother of Devotion."[37] It is better, he concluded his essay, to "happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy."[38] And in this he recalls Saenredam's engraving of the Allegory of the Cave (see fig. 12): to the left, a group of what appear to be priests from a variety of religious traditions gather beneath the flame that projects the shadows of the statuary. They peer

at the fire and discuss it among themselves but do nothing to inform the crowd. Nor do they join the distant figures who have left to cave to gaze directly upon the Sun, the real source of knowledge in the allegory. Like Plato, Hume looked to philosophy rather than religion as the surer demonstration of truth.

Scripture, myth, doctrine, and belief have formed the enduring core of the definition and study of religion for many scholars and theologians well into the twentieth century. Indeed, for many theologians and religious scholars, they still do. Belief as an interior, mental, or volitional state of avowing as true a tenet or body of formulations is a common way of defining religion. One reason for this is because religion has often been understood as a matter of private opinion, which the legal tradition produced by the American Constitution seeks to protect from incursions by the state. The idea that religion is private opinion readily accommodates the Christian conception of the affirmation of or belief in creed, dogma, and doctrine as summarizing a Christian's identity, that is, what one holds in common with all other Christians of a particular sect. This led to viewing all other religions in a comparable way. Thus, Buddhism is a body of distinctive beliefs, as is Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Native American religions, and so on.

It is clear that this approach to defining religion has little need for the material aspects of religious practice. If you want to know what a religion is, ask what its proponents *believe*, not what they do or how they do it. Yet a material approach to the study of religions errs if it abandons belief entirely. The fact remains that belief is a part of any religion, though not in the same way it may be for many Protestants. Most religions do not have creeds or even scriptures. And "faith" is an idea that is at home in Christianity but not in most other religions, if by faith one has in mind a form of trust grounded in a covenant established by a merciful parent-god. That aptly characterizes how many Christians experience their relationship with their god, but it has little to do with most other religions, especially those that have no interest in salvation as Christianity does.

And yet it seems true that if we mean by belief the acquired disposition to pray by posing the body in a certain manner, to dress in prescribed ways on ritual occasions, to eat certain foods and not others, to seek the merit of suffering or of offering alms, to recognize the power of devotional images to convey petitions to the sacred persons they represent, to venerate holy sites, or to bury the dead in a particular way, then belief is a relevant cate-

gory in the material study of religions. Belief in these instances and many more is not comparable to reciting a catechism or publicly avowing a creed but consists of performances that generate their own value. Doing them is an act of material belief, the efficacy of which may depend not at all on what one thinks or intends but on the very act of doing of them. That idea may offend those who treasure a highly intentional conception of religion. But the point I wish to make in this chapter is that intentionality characterizes how some religious practitioners render invisible or marginal the material means and settings that are nonetheless present and active in their religious practices. Not only is their rejection of other religions unacceptable to the academic study of religion, but their tendency to ignore the material coordinates of their own practices generates misconceptions that are not helpful. For years, I studied the images that Protestants reproduced in their devotional and instructional books, displayed in their Sunday School rooms, and in their homes and workplaces, only to hear again and again from some Protestants that they had no use for imagery.[39] Clearly, that was not the case. I was intrigued by the ideological myopia that tended to conceal images from them. Scholars of religion need to balance ideas and objects, intentions and practices, in a material conception of belief that does justice to the lived reality of religions. We need to do more than read what people say; we need to watch what they do.[40]

The Study of Religion at Present

We have seen so far the prominence of language as the focus and primary data of religion as it has been treated by theologians and philosophers for a very long time. In chapter 6, we will explore the power of words and taxonomies to affect the perception of the world. But a material approach to the study of religions urges us to dismantle the underlying dualism at work in language-based approaches. Reality is not composed of a stark split between mind and matter. Words, ideas, feelings, sensations, objects, spaces, and atmospheres intermingle. When we speak, we utter sonic waves that rebound through the material medium of air, bouncing off of walls. Words and their utterance are shaped by bodies, history, use, and physical setting. A mind or consciousness is not a different substance from everything else but a certain version of the physical universe, enormously complex and subtle, to be sure, but a physical reality that comes into existence and one day ceases to exist. And the signs we use are not simply arbitrary signifiers. We fashion a very comfortable and deeply felt

connection with the words, objects, images, spaces, clothing, and food we rely on in everyday life. Signs are more than abstract symbols—they have a history of formation that undermines claims about their arbitrariness. And there are other forms of signs than symbols. The philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce counted dozens but, most importantly, grouped them under three categories: symbols, icons, and indexes.[41] Icons are signs that resemble what they represent; and indexes, or traces, are signs that bear the evidence of their cause, such as a scar, as the sign of an injury, or a hole in a window, which signifies the object that flew through it. Signs, in other words, are motivated by usage, by history, by events, by the process of their own making, by what they repeat, even by the system of rules or grammar that may generate them, as in the case of symbols. This makes the use of signs less whimsical and more social—a medium that joins human beings as communities of sign-users.

But what is critical to grasp in this for the material study of religions is that language is not the only way people assemble meaningful worlds. Of all the theories of religion that threaten to dematerialize it the most, poststructuralism is the most menacing. Poststructuralism is a philosophical and largely literary approach to signs that stresses their indeterminate and contingent reference.[42] One dominant model of what is called social constructionism relies heavily on language to fashion worlds of human experience and value. According to this approach, concepts, expressed as words, are the primary tools human beings use to make sense of what they experience, indeed, to produce the meaning that they claim to find there. In describing how differently people regard the same thing, one scholar of religion, Craig Martin, author of a thoughtful introduction to religious studies, puts it this way: "What the world looks like to them—what they see—depends on what concepts they use to look at the world."[43] The truth of this claim is considerable: we do not see things-in-themselves, as if in some pure and universal state. We see them as they matter to us, as our ideas and preferences, cultural dispositions, tastes, and interests condition them. And we commonly ignore what we have no interest in seeing. And yet, things are also there, separate from us. Not, to be sure, identical to what we think or imagine them to be, but we do not in most cases simply invent them with our words or ideas. Things have properties that impinge on us, that resist us, push back, even threaten or harm us. This is another way of saying that their materiality matters. Thus, when Craig Martin turns to explain his observation, his claim takes a strongly *imma-*

terial turn: "To my knowledge, the best metaphor is to think of the stuff of the world like a roll of cookie dough. What cookies are contained therein? Of course that depends on what cookie cutters we select. For all practical purposes, we can consider concepts as cookie cutters: with them we bring into relief the stuff of the world for us. If we use different concepts, we get different results."[44] Martin is surely correct that the interpretations we get depend significantly on the tools (cookie cutters) we use to achieve them. But is the material world no more than blobs of unvarying cookie dough, a gooey, passive uniformity whose structure depends entirely on the concepts we use to shape it? Material culturalists will find this idea absurd because it utterly ignores what they call the *recalcitrance* of matter, that is, its resistance to human appropriation. Try to carve granite with a spatula or scoop water with a sieve or mix concrete with a toothpick. Is the failure in each case due only to the nature of the tool? Hardly. The result is a combination of material *and* tool. Change the tool, and the result is more successful because the right tool engages the medium with much greater efficacy. Any medium has its own *affordances*, that is, intrinsic features that lend it to particular uses and processes of manufacture.[45] We use pavement for making roads because its mixture of materials is enduring, relatively easy to apply, and able to provide conditions for safe driving in a variety of kinds of weather. Walking is an act that depends on more than having a pair of legs: it is successful only when one's feet meet with a surface like pavement that accommodates this form of locomotion. Walking through thick mud is a different matter. The characteristics of materials are part of the matrix or network of conditions that coordinate the agency of the actors (human and otherwise) that compose it.

Different kinds of materials afford different treatments and uses, resulting in meaning or value that is not merely imposed by concepts of the viewer but produced in a much more integral manner. Materiality matters, and tools are one important way of proving that. Reality is not a blob of cookie dough but a vastly varied range of material media, objects, and contexts. And that is not all that is required to understand the production of value. To medium and instrument, we can add skill and intention. And to those we must annex additional conditions: the market for acquiring materials, for selling them, and for displaying them. And then we must consider audiences—those who see the result, discuss it, and develop tastes and ideas about it, often diverging from one group to another. All of these contribute to the object's career. We need to thicken the idea of

"social constructionism" to include a much fuller range of factors. Martin's approach might be better dubbed "conceptual or discursive constructionism." As such, placing undue stress on what human beings say and think, it fails to account for the much fuller range and integrative character of factors that produce human value.

Giving Matter Its Due

The recalcitrance of matter requires that we look beyond words and ideas in order to understand how value is constructed. And the first step is to recognize that the recalcitrance of matter does not simply mean resistance to human will. In a much larger sense it means the tendency of matter to behave in certain ways, depending on its physical features and the environments in which this or that kind of material is found. The tradition of humanism developed in ancient Greece and Rome and hailed during the Renaissance inspired the rise of republican ideals in the modern era and invested in human beings as self-determining citizens of the modern state. Obviously, humanism produced something that is still valued today. But the shadow side of that recognition of the inherent value of the human individual is a tendency to place human beings at the center of nature, regarding the species as the pinnacle of the natural world. Religious traditions readily endorse this tendency with a variety of mythical narratives such as the Bible's story of creation. Yet this anthropocentrism comes at considerable cost, as the modern technological-industrial world shows in the impact on the environment, the extinction of a wide range of species, and the constant toppling of ecological balances that reduces the variety of species in order to accommodate the interests of one—human beings. In addition to the ecological cost, the understanding of human worlds is skewed by this anthropocentrism. Human beings emerge as the one, big agent at work in the world, marginalizing the rest of it as lifeless objects for human manipulation.

A number of writers in recent years have developed a strong ethical and politically minded critique of this disposition and in doing so have sought to recognize the agency of things and environments as distinct from human needs or interests. One of them, Jane Bennett, a professor of political theory, says in her most widely read book that she seeks to develop the idea of what she calls "thing-power" to describe "that which refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge."[46] She notes that this is comparable to certain theological treatments of the abso-

lute, the divine, the "radical otherness" of what some theologians charac-
terize as God. This kinship signals something of the character of Bennett's
ecological project. Ecology is not only a descriptive term but a passion-
ately ethical one. By removing human beings from center stage, Bennett
and others seek to bring forward not so much the divine but the mar-
ginalized, instrumentalized, exploited character of nonhuman things as
active agents in the world around us. Recognizing the vitality of things is
for these writers a kind of political liberation that will change our under-
standing of the world at a critical moment.

Thing-power is a useful way to register the elusive, indeterminate na-
ture of things, their capacity for resisting the imperial claims made by
human concepts and the nomenclature of knowledge production. Our
words, but also our conceptions and uses, are never equal to the richness
of things, which are not discrete, finite, inert entities waiting to be dis-
covered and dominated by human objectification. According to object-
oriented ontology (OOO), a school of philosophical thought developed
since the 1990s, "the external world exists independently of human aware-
ness," meaning that the being of things is never exhausted by human
knowledge of them and that they are more than their components and the
effects they exert on other objects.[47] Like posthuman studies generally,
OOO refuses to make a dualistic distinction between human knowledge
and the universe. A related way of thinking called actor-network theory
(ANT) regards things as active, evolving, unfinished networks of many
participants, actors, or "actants," as ANT theorists have termed them in
order to avoid privileging human actors or imposing subjective agency on
inanimate things.[48] As I noted in the Introduction, one powerful sense of
the word *thing* is able to convey the mysterious nature of those things that
surpass specification, that is, refuse to be reduced to a comprehensible
object that human beings can understand and manipulate. Of course,
humans insist on objectifying such mysteries because they want the bene-
fit of a useful relation to the power that some mysteries emanate. We will
consider an example shortly.

New materialism is the term that has emerged over the past decade or
so to describe a large and developing sensibility that has devoted itself to
pushing human interests from the center of how causation and agency are
understood.[49] The new materialism is sometimes discussed by scholars of
religion as part of what is referred to as the material turn, one among sev-
eral such changes in the focus of method, theory, and subject matter that

periodically sweep through the academic world like an intellectual fashion wave.[50] There is a stream of such turns: the linguistic turn, the ethnographic turn, the visual turn, the material turn, the spatial turn, the affective turn, and more.[51] Yet such change is not merely frivolous. Scholarship is always a form of conversation that bears its own history. Scholars are always talking with one another through their work and their profession. In the case of the new materialism in the study of religions, the turn follows a broader shift over the past few decades toward material things and practices as primary evidence. The new materialism amounts to the recognition that things are not inanimate, passive, and neutral but driven by their own interests, affordances, and material characteristics to interact with other things to produce the results they do. These results may include human beings as other forms of agents or actors but not as the end or point of their existence. Humans are not *the* story. They act among a cloud of other actors. The point is to enrich our accounts of causation but also to temper the exploitative and myopic nature of anthropocentrism.

There are important consequences for the way scholars study religion. Let us consider three. First, though religions are eminently human constructs, they are riddled with nonhuman actors such as insects, animals, oceans, mountains, earthquakes, floods, meteors, comets, star clusters, eclipses, the lunar cycle, winds, droughts, and rain. As storied as each of these becomes in religious art and myth, none of them is merely a human projection, a discourse draped over neutral physical circumstances. The material reality of all of these nonhuman agents resists such passivity. As omens or forms of divine punishment, they kill, maim, doom, warn, starve, or otherwise harm human communities on many occasions. They are actors in religious dramas but also actors whose performance can be so inscrutable that human beings must struggle with their recalcitrance. Humans must constantly adapt to what can be the harsh treatment they receive from the physical worlds in which they live. Yet it is exciting to ponder how our approach to understanding religions will change as we begin to recognize the diversity of agencies at work in the production of religious practice, belief, narrative, and ideology. It is possible that taking materiality seriously will lead us down very new pathways, changing the landscape of explanation in dramatic ways.

The second implication that thing-power and the new materialism enjoin in material studies is the importance of considering how things resist objectification. By asserting recalcitrance, things may in turn act on

humans and others. For example, when the material basis of a thing fails by breaking or wearing out, it no longer performs the function on which various actors had relied. Its status as an identifiable, reliable object— a wrench, river embankment, sturdy soil rooting a massive tree—gives way, thus changing the configuration of parts that constituted the situation. Another instance of recalcitrant thingness is anything that eludes measure or apprehension, thus defying specification and use. The resulting mystery may inspire fear or awe. As we will see in chapter 6, another example of thingness coming to the fore is the mismatching of names and things. What we do not recognize, we are likely to misinterpret, calling it by a name that fails to situate it within the ecology that accounts for it. In each case, things push back, resisting our attempts to colonize, control, and exploit them.

The third implication for how we study religion as a material reality emerges from the recognition of the plurality of agents at work in any event of religious value. As I noted in the Introduction, the task is to describe as many of them as possible in order to assess their various roles in making something come to pass. Many scholars have found useful for this task the idea of the assemblage, a temporary, interactive networking of any number of human and nonhuman actors whose effects on one another may be synergistic. At the very least, agency is distributed among the players, all of whom contribute in varying ways according to their material affordances and the dynamics of their interaction. But how does the network bring power to the devotee? What I have called a *focal object*, often in the form of an image or artifact, may provide interface with the extended network of agents.[52]

Consider a familiar devotional image such as *Our Lady of Fátima* (fig. 13). Three children tending sheep originally described an unidentified figure, a small lady, who appeared to them in 1917 with a flash of light and boom of thunder, hovering over an oak shrub on the hilly flank of a mountain range in Portugal. For a few moments on several occasions over the course of six months they saw her in dazzling veils of light. Eventually, the figure identified herself as Our Lady of the Rosary. But devotional response from local Catholics was immediate. The children struggled to articulate what they saw and heard as pilgrims gathered each month at the site to catch a glimpse of the apparition they believed to be from heaven. By 1920, a sculptor named José Ferreira Thedim had been commissioned to produce an image that was informed by the descriptions offered by the

FIGURE 13. *José Ferreira Thedim,* Our Lady of Fátima, *1920, polychromed wood, with crown installed in 1946, height 40 in., Chapel of the Apparitions, Fátima, Portugal.*

children. The sculpture (fig. 13) was placed in a small chapel erected on the site of the apparition, where it remains today. It quickly became the official image of devotion to Fátima and was widely reproduced in devotional literature and postcards. Yet the only child of the original three to survive childhood, Lúcia dos Santos, who went on to become a nun, eventually expressed dissatisfaction with the appearance of Our Lady in figure 13. When Thomas McGlynn, an American priest and artist, visited her in 1946 with his own artistic conception of the apparitional figure, Sister

Lúcia also took issue with its appearance, conveying to Father McGlynn that what she remembered seeing was not the compact character of a solid object: "There were two waves of light, one on top of the other."[53] When McGlynn asked her about what Thedim had treated as a golden line on the mantle, Lúcia replied that "it was like a ray of sunlight all around the mantle." And McGlynn's own simple translation of the luminous effect as tangible forms in the material language of sculpture also failed to do justice to the thing she saw: "No matter what you do," Sister Lúcia told him, "you won't give the impression of the reality."[54] As a focal object, the image does not capture the full reality of the mysterious thing it portrays, but it does serve as the compelling point at which devotees may address themselves to the mystery.