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Introduction: key words in material religion

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**introduction:
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crispin paine, and
s. brent plate**

Over the past six years, the editors and a variety of contributors to this journal have reflected on definitions of material culture, on the materiality of religions, and on the sensory characteristics of religious practices.¹ Doing so is important if we want to achieve theoretical insights that inform scholarship and advance the field of the material culture of religions. The challenge is to learn how virtually every aspect of the study can benefit by materializing religion. When we reflect on the methods, theories, and prevailing ideas at work in recent writing in this journal and far beyond, a number of key terms quickly emerge as instrumental in organizing the discourse on the materiality of religions. In this issue, we have sought to explicate the emergent nomenclature by asking prominent practitioners to contribute brief essays on nineteen “key words.”

Readers will find a list of terms that cuts across geographical regions, historical epochs, religious traditions, and methodologies important to authors published in these pages as well as writers around the world. The editors do not intend this as a definitive or canonical lexicon, but as a working tool that captures some of the best thinking today. Inevitably, concepts of equal importance have been omitted due to limits of space. We originally compiled a list twice as long, but were compelled to winnow it down to the present number. Our guiding aim has been to represent the breadth of investigations underway by selecting words that have received recent and significant treatment in the literature or that are, in our view, indispensable in addressing material religion.

Several obvious words do not appear on our list. One that does not appear is “religion.” Nor do we include “materiality.” We felt these concepts were so large, yet so important to begin to corral that we determined to approach them indirectly. These terms are perhaps best

apprehended today by creating a network of interrelated concepts. For instance, defining “materiality” may be more effectively pursued now by configuring such words as “body,” “sensation,” “thing,” and “touch.” For many, if not all contributors to the journal and to the larger conversation about the material culture(s) of religion(s), an abiding interest is the opportunity to reconceptualize “religion.”

What does “materializing religion” mean? We hope this collection of key terms can begin to answer that question in at least a provisional way by offering a constellation of terms such as “belief,” “ritual,” “fetish,” and “spirit.” But there is no reason to stop there. The concentration on embodiment is fundamental to our project. Any treatment of religion that fails to consider bodies is guilty of ignoring the materiality of religions. *Material Religion*, as we stated in an editorial in the first issue, “sets out to consider religion through the lens of its material forms and their use in religious practice.” More recently, we claimed, “Materializing the study of religion means asking how religion happens materially, which is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful question of how religion is expressed in material form. A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to a religion, but rather inextricable from it” (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). We have consistently sought to put materiality at the forefront of the understanding of religion, whether that comes from humanistic, social scientific, artistic, curatorial, or other perspectives. With these essays on key words, we hope to offer tools for scholars who have long worked in the field as well as those newer to material religion studies.

“Key Words” and “Critical Terms” publications are a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of intellectual movements and scholarly publishing, though all derive more or less from Raymond Williams’ landmark book (Williams 1985 [1976]). Recent volumes are at once self-conscious about the impossibility of comprehensive “encyclopedias” that marked an earlier age, even as keywords collections still help chart and create an order of things. Because this sort of volume does not claim to be exhaustive, it relies on a subjective approach based on the expertise of the individual authors, although the point is to have recognized experts expound on the terms. Consider the personal tone of the opening sentence to Suzanne Preston Blier’s entry on “Ritual” in *Critical Terms for Art History*: “My mother raised four children, and a greater number of dogs” (in Nelson and Schiff 2003: 296). Or the self-reflective aspects in Daniel Boyarin’s beginning

of “Gender” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*: “Ten years ago, an essay of this type would have begun with a confident explanation of the distinction between sex and gender as analytical concepts . . . The task of writing the entry would have been much simpler in those halcyon days . . .” (in Taylor 1998: 117). It is more honest to affirm openly the personal angle due to the unavoidably arbitrary selection of nineteen words when one might easily include forty. The personal and self-reflective dimensions also indicate the “lived” nature of the concepts. The key words are themselves embedded in particular life worlds and thought styles.

Another feature in keywords collections that bears comment is the frequently quotidian character of the terms themselves. Many of the terms found in various academic publications are those used in daily workaday conversation: body, time, space, sacrifice, image, memory, beauty, media, culture, etc. These are not, in and of themselves, highly specialized words, or even difficult to pronounce. Further, several of the terms in the present pages show up in other collections of key words/critical terms. *Critical Terms for Art History*, co-edited by one of *Material Religion*'s board members, Robert Nelson, shares several terms with this present collection: sign, word and image, fetish, and ritual. *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture* (Morgan 2008) also gathers several (image, culture, sound). *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* shares the terms belief, body, image/icon, and includes entries on territory and performance (ours includes space and movement). *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (Mitchell and Hansen 2010) also overlaps the terms body, image, senses, and space. This overlap should not be surprising. It documents the interdependence of many discourses in the humanities and social sciences today. Variation in the terms and their definitions also shows the malleability of language, the necessity of material contexts to make meaning, and the shifting nature of discourse, academic and pedestrian. What is meant by “fetish” in an art historical context may not be what is meant in the material religion context; much is shared, but the differences are key in helping further delineate the field and to engage in a meaningful interdisciplinary conversation. Ideally, perhaps, every field of knowledge in cultural studies broadly conceived would produce occasional reflections on “key words” for the purpose of comparison within and beyond the individual discourse.

The words we have selected are not part of an idiolect. They are the shared property of a collective discourse. These words represent intellectual ideas and practices that a large number of scholars find influential. We think there

is much to gain from an organized reflection on the field that these concepts roughly assemble. Such a list will look different five years from now. So we here offer a snapshot that might operate as a benchmark of the field for future consideration.

The Editors

notes and references

¹ See, for instance, the editors' statement in issue 1.1 as well as the discussion of several authors in forums presented in "In Conversation," 4.2 and 5.3; and an important essay by Peter Pels 4.3.

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