



“Material Approaches to Religion” Meet “New Materialism”: Resonances and Dissonances

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“material approaches to religion” meet “new materialism”: resonances and dissonances

birgit meyer

As a platform for the study of “material religion,” for more than 15 years this journal has showcased the innovative potential of material approaches to religion through detailed historical or ethnographic studies evolving around religious artifacts, bodily regimes, and sacred topographies. The theoretical concern of this endeavor is to re-materialize scholarly conceptualizations of religion by approaching it as irreducibly corporeal and physical. Against this backdrop it is quite surprising that so far scholars working on material religion (in this journal and beyond) have rarely engaged with the work of new materialists. Together with related approaches that foreground the materiality and corporeality of being in the world (including ANT, STS), the ideas and insights developed by new materialists have strong repercussions in the broader humanities and social sciences. For scholars working on religion from a material and corporeal angle, synergies with new materialist ideas can be easily recognized. These are due to a common critique of a longstanding materiophobia in the humanities and social sciences (including the study of religion), the anchoring of research in the materiality of being in the world, and the productive use of the notion of assemblage as including people, objects, and even gods. In order to explicate a stronger theoretical underpinning of “material religion,” it is important to engage with this strand by drawing out both resonances and dissonances.

It is the aim of this section to kick off such a long overdue engagement. It features four scholars in the study of religion, three of whom have explicitly engaged with new materialism in their previous

work (Bräunlein 2016; Burchardt and Höhne 2015; Hazard 2013).¹ Of course, new materialism forms a vast, differentiated and heterogenous field, that cannot be framed as a single paradigm and that eschews generalization. As rightly pointed out by Hazard, critiques of new materialism tend to project a “conceptual solidity” which their object does not have. Based on their position and specific interests as researchers in the study of religion, the contributors to this section chart resonances and dissonances with regard to new materialist thinkers and concepts. The resonances are obvious, as mentioned above, and are grounded in a crosscutting understanding of “materiality as generative” (Hazard). All contributors acknowledge, each in their own way, the innovative potential of new materialism to think about and study religion otherwise, for instance by tracing the “profane materialities” of religion in urban environments in a South African township (Burchardt). But in so doing, they also point at a number of conceptual and methodological issues: by turning to Spinoza as a key figure in a yet to be acknowledged common genealogy of new materialism and the material religion approach (Tamimi Arab), by pointing at problems and paradoxes arising from the application of new materialist concepts – such as Jane Bennet’s “enchanted materialism” – for social-anthropological research on religion (Bräunlein), by problematizing new materialist notions of agency (Burchardt) and its undertheorizing of the category of the human (Hazard). And yet, pointing at such dissonances is not intended as a dismissal of this important strand, but rather as a call for further debate. As Hazard points out, de facto new materialism can be found everywhere as a mode of thinking and being in the world, most certainly also in the field of research on religion which, after all, offers a rich archive of accounts about animated beings and non-human agency. It is high time to bring this archive into play in further, transdisciplinary exchanges with new materialists and other scholars embracing materiality. Taken together, new material approaches to religion and new materialism(s) could then contribute to a fundamental critique of mentalistic stances that underpin Eurocentric presumed universalisms, and open up towards recognitions of alternative forms of knowledge production, for instance from the Global South.

Note and references

¹ This set of essays is based on a panel convened by me during the 9th Annual Conference of the New Materialisms on “Urban Matters” (Utrecht University 20–22 June, 2018), with presentations by Peter Bräunlein, Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Marian Burchardt. Their presentations triggered animated debate, revealing certain cleavages and misunderstandings between the

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two fields the panel set out to bridge. The somewhat fraught conversation unleashed during the conference all the more affirms the need for a thorough engagement with new materialism, first among scholars studying religion from a material angle, and hopefully latter also with new materialists. The essays presented here have been revised in the light of the panel discussion. In addition, I invited Sonia Hazard, who explicitly engaged with new materialism (2013) as a religious studies scholar, to contribute a fourth essay.

Bräunlein, Peter. 2016. "Thinking Religion Through Things. Reflections in the Material Turn in the Scientific Study of Religion." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28 (4-5): 365–399.

Burchardt, Marian, and Stefan Höhne. 2015. "The Infrastructures of Diversity: Materiality and Culture in Urban Space – An Introduction." *New Diversities* 17 (2): 1–13.

Hazard, Sonia. 2013. "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion." *Religion and Society* 4(1): 58–78.