

# Afterword

## *Things for Thought*

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This ambitious volume is situated in between the scholarly fields of ‘conflict studies’ and ‘material religion’. Both are quite different kinds of fields, the former characterized by a thematic focus on occurrences of conflict and violence, the latter referring to an approach in the study of religion aimed to redress the longstanding, structural neglect of materiality. The volume arises from a discontent with how conflict and violence are conceptualized and approached in relation to religion. As the editors point out in their thoughtful introduction, conflict studies tend to purport a mentalistic approach that privileges (religious) concepts, ideologies and worldviews as the prime factors that fuel conflict and violence, while materiality is neglected empirically, and above all, conceptually. This critique matches the critique launched by scholars with regard to the conventional study of religion who champion a material approach to religion (e.g. Morgan 2021). Doing so does not imply a simple switch from a mentalistic to a materialistic take on religion. The point is to develop an approach that develops a synthesis of the mental and the material, thereby leaving behind the straitjacket of the facile dualism of mind versus matter in which the study of religion has been trapped for a long time. As a scholar who has been active in fleshing out a material approach to religion, I think that it is necessary to foreground materiality by way of critique, with the aim to ultimately fold it back into the study of religion.

Current work in the field of material religion pays much attention to the importance of material and corporeal forms in religious practice. In my own work, cited by the editors, I have called attention to the materiality of meditations between humans and the professed unseen – the divine, the realm of spirits – and tried to develop a deeper understanding of how the unseen is imagined and imaged, rendered present through images and artefacts that may be taken to operate as some kind of access points for the unseen by believers. On my part, this implied a keen interest in struggles around the use of images and objects in and within various religious traditions. The editors of this volume acknowledge the importance of this work but wish to expand our scholarly attention beyond iconoclasm and offensive images. I find their call to apply the material approach to religion to the field of conflict studies very important; it makes me realize my own shortcomings in paying attention to

the multiple ways in which religion is implied in conflicts and violence. Just as materiality has been pushed to the centre of the study of religion in the wake of the material turn, Lucien van Liere and Erik Meinema make a case for taking conflict and violence as being at the core of research on religion.

They do so by launching the notion of thing of conflict, for which they offer a non-substantive definition: "A thing of conflict can be anything that is part of the religious infrastructure and contributes to understandings of social networks" (p. 24). This statement comprises the gist of their project. Situating things of conflict in grounded religious infrastructures, they propose that a focus on such things offers a pathway to a better understanding of the social networks that comprise not only different kinds of people, but also other actors, including things. The non-substantive definition of things of conflict resonates with Émile Durkheim's open definition of the sacred. But while his idea of the sacred – which can also be anything – focuses on the cohesive effects of the shared worship directed towards a 'totem', which we might call a thing of cohesion, Meinema and van Liere make another move. They, firstly, broaden our take on how and what things matter in a religious setting from a focus on collective worship to all sorts of other collective acts, and secondly, call attention to tensions and conflicts, which are at the flipside of cohesion.

In my view, this important move is of great help for our attempts to study conflicts within and about religion/s in contemporary plural societies, in which people with different ethnic and religious affiliations coexist with each other. It cannot be stressed enough that this plurality is to be taken as the default in our research, rather than as an exception that digresses from an assumed homogenous group that worships itself and maintains its boundaries and identities. Even with regard to Europe with its long history of nation-building, such an idea of a bounded national community with its own space and temporality, as highlighted by Christoph Baumgartner (this volume), is not given. This idea is a product of longstanding processes of synchronisation orchestrated by the nation-state that preserves and protects Christian feast days, while not granting other religious traditions the same rights and even vexing secular citizens with this Christian bias. Attention to things of conflict leads us to the intersections or in-between spaces in which people clash with each other as well as about and with each other's' material forms and raises many questions with regard to the ways in which nominally secular states regulate religious plurality. It is important to realize that potential for conflict, and violence, thrives everywhere, and that states play a lead role not only in appeasing, but also in triggering it. Since conflict is enshrined in any form of living together, as scholars we do well to spot it in its nascent material forms, even before certain full-blown clashes arise that hit the news and form the core business of conflict studies.

## 1 Things of Conflict from the Angle of Theory

The editors propose “that more emphasis on the materiality of conflict situations, conflict dynamics, and conflict effects, could contribute to a sharper analysis of how, when, and why conflict turns violent” (p. 9). In his programmatic reflexion, Joram Tarusarira endorses this point and extends it to peacebuilding and reconciliation. For all three, materiality is omnipresent and yet often overlooked in scholarly analysis. To redress this shortcoming, they take things as entry points or guides to access broader networks and infrastructures that engender nascent and full-fledged conflicts. In this sense, the focus on things is a methodological move towards a recognition of materiality as an unalienable dimension of everything, religion included, and hence indispensable for a full analysis of conflict situations. In terms of method, as I will point out below, this is a viable, eye-opening pathway.

The question arises where “more emphasis” on materiality will take us in a theoretical and epistemological sense. How will it impinge on the ways in which knowledge about the conflict-religion nexus is produced? The editors clearly invoke materiality to criticize overtly mentalistic or mere discursive approaches, but in their appraisal of things they do not end up as proponents of New Materialism or Object-Oriented Ontologies. They reject the reduction of things to human intentions (reason why they prefer the term thing to object), yet still write about things as charged with meaning and as employed in negotiating social relationships. Things are granted some degree of “agency”, but for the editors this is ultimately an effect of human attribution. “Thus, things may be special, but they are not alone” (p. 14), they insist, stressing that things, while made out of matter, are subject to human signification and are situated in socio-historical contexts and networks. Their point is to transcend the tension between the “agency” and the “meaning” of things so as to work towards a synthesis of discursive and material approaches, and thus to acknowledge that words and things are to be taken as entangled. How to conceptualize the relation between both is not only an empirical question. It is also a major conceptual issue of how to synthesize theoretical strands geared to explore the construction of meaning (discourse analysis, hermeneutics, semiotics), on the one hand, and strands such as New Materialism, Actor Network Theory and Speculative Realism that place the material above the discursive, on the other.

While most of the contributors are less outspoken about their theoretical stances towards this thorny question, Younes Saramifar offers an elaborate critique of the reduction of things to mere carriers of “meanings, functions and attributes” (p. 38) in approaches to conflict in anthropology. Advocating Speculative Realism, he is up against “prioritizing human perceptions and

meaning-making systems over everything else” (p. 38) and introduces things, such as weapons, as collaborators with a certain autonomy “that remains independent of human minds and socialities” (p. 42). His position is a welcome provocation to think harder about how words and things, discourse and materiality, intersect. How far to go in our ‘emphasis’ on materiality? Is there a limit? And how much power and agency to grant to things in general, and to things of conflict in particular?

Personally, I find it difficult to think about matter and things in-themselves. Even in stating that they ‘remain independent’, it is me who thinks that this is so. The question of how to know matter beyond a human bias is dazzling and huge. My own position (Meyer *fc*) is that we can only know the material world of which we are part through culturally and socially constituted forms that function as signs. These are themselves material (see also Krech 2021), yet can refer only to particular aspects of the material world. Matter always exists in excess of what humans can apprehend of it. I take the current emphasis on materiality as a reminder of the material dimension of everything and, given that it exists in excess of what we can say about it, also as a reminder of the gap between matter as it is, and our always limited understanding of it. The potential and limits of materiality in the construction of knowledge will certainly occupy us for years to come. For now, like the editors of this volume, I endorse a pragmatic stance that strives for grounded theory, based on fresh empirical research.

## 2 Things of Conflict from the Angle of Method

The current, long overdue emphasis on things of conflict is an incentive to locate materiality in spheres and situations in which it has conveniently been overlooked. This is the main concern of this volume. Indeed: “How does discursive attention, the arrangement of things at places, and social projection create a ‘thing of conflict’ out of matter?” (p. 15). Foregrounding the “how”-question, the main merit of the volume is that it offers a method to the study of conflicts related to religion that transcends the reduction of conflicts to religious ideologies and processes in human minds. Opening up to things offers surprising insights and directions for further research. Five issues stand out here.

One, as noted, anything can become a thing of conflict. But this is not all. The call to scrutinize conflict situations from a material angle also shows that things relate to conflicts in multiple ways. Of course, there are things that destroy (weapons, bulldozers) and things targeted for destruction (material

expressions of religious identities), things that represent conflict (war photographs) and things hidden from view (such as certain markers of religious identities under siege), as well as things that irritate (as the imposition of silence on Good Friday) and things for making peace (as the Ring of Peace formed around the Oslo synagogue by Muslims). What is designated as a conflict is made up of many different elements, and what I appreciate about the volume is that it invites us to think about how all the things, through which conflicts become tangible, interrelate.

Second, the rise of things of conflict is tied to the ways in which states govern religious plurality and regulate how, and the extent to which various religious groups can express themselves materially and build material infrastructures. This is the point made by Christoph Baumgartner's analysis of the silent holiday of Good Friday as a thing of conflict in a secular, democratic society as Germany. Things of conflict arise even more markedly in settings in which states assume a stronger grip on the public environment. There is a "real-world material politics at play" (Oostveen, p. 63) that must be grasped before scholars turn to internal religious ideologies and potentials for conflict and violence. A secular state as China that officially recognizes different religious traditions still privileges Buddhism above Islam, enabling Buddhists groups to gain state support in developing their religious infrastructures, whereas Muslims – especially Uyghurs – are systematically hampered in materializing their worship in public space. Similarly, Tammy Wilks places the bulldozing of the Kibera neighbourhood in Nairobi, Kenya, as an instance of state violence, through which the state renders "itself real in society" (p. 73), overruling a living religious infrastructure by constructing a bypass cutting through the area. Things of conflict, these examples show, are to be situated against the backdrop of the material politics of a state and its structural violence.

Third, things of conflict may be systematically avoided so as to eschew suspicions of witchcraft and terrorism, as is the case in Malindi, Kenya, where Giriama traditionalists, Muslims, and Christians coexist in a hierarchized configuration. While state actors profile Christianity as a "civilized religion that is compatible with modern statecraft" (Meinema, p. 130), the other two groups are regarded as potential threats. Meinema's analysis offers a powerful reminder that things of conflict may not be immediately present to the researcher's eye, yet are to be looked for so as to crack the politics of revelation and concealment that underpin political hegemonies and bar certain things of conflict from the public eye.

Fourth, a focus on things of conflict such as Jawad's weapon or Nasad's framed three-quarter portrait employed for his future remembrance as a mar-

tyr alerts us to how people are socialized “*in violence*” (Saramifar, p. 38) and decide to fight, as is the case with the Shia armed combatants in Iraq and Syria. The research done by Saramifar in the heat of actual war zones is incredibly difficult and involves high safety risks for the researcher. While such research is not an option for most anthropologists, its insights are of great importance to understand how conflict and violence are normalized in the many war zones in our contemporary world, alerting us to the shortcomings of scholarly perspectives that tend to regard violence as exceptional. His first-hand analysis contrasts markedly with the ways in which conflict and violence are mediated towards audiences far away from the actual situation. As pointed out by Lucien van Liere, representations of conflict and violence require much more attention to the ways in which war photographs, as iconic actors, rely on basic structures of victimhood and rescue, and trigger sensations by tapping into a longstanding archive of religious images of pain and suffering.

Finally, if things matter in the rise of conflict and violence, they also matter in attempts to achieve peace. As pointed out by Joram Tarusarira, projects aiming at reconciliation tend to be geared to abstract ideas, and thus fail to be grounded in “the materiality of people’s lived experiences” (p. 166). For post-conflict healing to occur, this failure must be avoided. Hence his plea to take materiality, which for him also encompasses emotions and affects, much more seriously both in policy and scholarship. Margaretha van Es also focuses on a material performance, the Ring of Peace performed around the Oslo synagogue, intended to “enact an imagination of peaceful coexistence and interfaith solidarity” (p. 202). Her detailed case study shows in an exemplary manner how a focus on the material, corporeal and affective dimensions of this ritual performance spotlights the potential and limitations of interreligious events for the position of the Muslims and Jewish minorities in relation to mainstream society. A thing of peace, such as the Ring performed, may easily be a thing of conflict at the same time.

To conclude, in this afterword I have spelled out the things for thought that I, as a scholar working in the field of material religion, carry away from this stimulating volume. Obviously, scholars from the field of conflict studies would bring to the fore other remarkable aspects. While I am used to study religion from a material angle, the lessons learned for me lie in the realization that things of conflict (and peace) are the basic stuff that shapes how humans live and relate to each other.

## References

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