

# Religion and Materiality: Food, 'Fetish' and Other Matters

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## Abstract

Why is it rewarding to analyse religion from a material angle and which future research directions emerge? This chapter firstly conceptualizes materiality in dialogue with incentives offered by new materialism and, secondly, assesses which forms of material religion have so far received too little attention. Thirdly, inspired by Feuerbach's gastro-philosophy, I argue that food is an existential material form through which humans are enveloped into a grounded exchange with the world. Finally, introducing a collection of "hungry" legba-figures in the Übersee-Museum Bremen, Germany, I call attention to feeding spirits as a prime religious practice. Religion should be rethought from the stomach.

## Keywords

materiality – food – fetish – Feuerbach – gastro-philosophy – feedings spirits

## 1 Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the empirical, conceptual and methodological possibilities that arise by taking a material approach to religion have become apparent. Turning to the material culture of various religious traditions has opened our eyes to modes of 'lived' religion, beyond a text-centred focus on doctrines and beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Appraising the material dimensions of religion is not limited to a focus on things as such, but takes them as perceived, sensed, interpreted, made and used by, as well as having effects on humans. Hence the attribute material refers to the physical and corporeal dimensions of religious

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1 Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

practice.<sup>2</sup> The material turn went along with a rising awareness that religions entail multiple material media – other than texts alone – that are distinctive for and authorized within particular religious traditions and inform religious ideas and practices.<sup>3</sup> Broadening the theoretical and methodological scope of the study of religion by embracing materiality has facilitated fresh interdisciplinary conversations with scholars in, for instance, anthropology, archaeology and art history, and participation in broader debates about actor-network-theories, object-oriented ontologies and new materialisms.

Conducted by a wide range of scholars from various backgrounds and with different interests, the study of religion from a material angle is a thriving field.<sup>4</sup> My own interest in the material turn was triggered by facing conceptual limitations in my research on colonization and evangelization in West Africa, when trying to grasp the stakes of clashes between Africans and Europeans over the nature, role and value of things<sup>5</sup> – including the use of the categories of the ‘fetish’ and ‘idol.’ Gradually, I realized that a focus on things challenges conventional frameworks and offers an exciting entry point for remapping our scholarly mindsets and de-centring knowledge production about religion.<sup>6</sup>

In line with the aims of this volume, in this contribution I want to ‘step back’ from the research on material religion I witnessed so far – both as a researcher

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- 2 E.g. Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, “The Origin and Mission of Material Religion,” *Religion* 40 (3) (2010): 207–211; David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012); Manuel A. Vázquez, *More than Belief. A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford [Eng.]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
  - 3 Birgit Meyer, “Religion as Mediation,” *Entangled Religions* 11 (3) (2020a).
  - 4 For important overviews, see Peter J. Bräunlein, “Thinking Religion Through Things: Reflections on the Material Turn in the Scientific Study of Religion’s,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28 (4/5) (2016): 365–399; Sonia Hazard, “The Material Turn in the Study of Religion,” *Religion and Society: Advances in Research* 4 (2013): 58–78; Inken Prohl, “Material Religion,” in *Religionswissenschaft*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012).
  - 5 I employ the term thing to unhinge the subject-object binary that defines objects in terms of their use and utility. Things, as pointed out by Bill Brown, exist in excess of this binary, and call attention to “their force as a sensuous presence” (Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1) (2001): 5, see Birgit Meyer, ““There is a Spirit in That Image: Mass-Produced Jesus Pictures and Protestant-Pentecostal Animation in Ghana,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52 (1) (2010): 103–104; see also Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman, “Material Religion – How Things Matter,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 16; David Morgan, *The Thing about Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religion* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).
  - 6 Meyer and Houtman, “Material Religion,” 15–23; Birgit Meyer, “Remapping our Mindset: Towards a Transregional and Pluralistic Outlook,” *Religion* 50 (1) (2020b): 113–121.

and long-time (2006–2019) co-editor of *Material Religion* – and ‘look beyond’ it so as to identify some issues to pursue for the future. Why is it at all necessary and rewarding to thematise religion and materiality? Certainly, the ‘and’ between these terms does not signal an addition of the latter to the former, but spotlights the conceptual problem that religion and materiality have long been conceptualized as being antagonistic.<sup>7</sup> This conceptualization is grounded in the fierce nineteenth-century debates triggered by the rise of scientific and dialectical materialism, which launched a critique of idealism. Religion was criticized by materialists as being a domain of misguided illusions about an unseen spiritual sphere that would have to be replaced by rational insights into the real material nature of things.

And yet, it is obvious that religion cannot exist outside of or beyond material forms and bodies.<sup>8</sup> Invoking the relation between religion and materiality therefore should be seen as a productive provocation with the aim to drive home the obvious point that ‘material religion’ is not an oxymoron. The point is to engage in a thorough rethinking of how we understand religion by taking seriously its physical and corporeal dimensions – the “other side of religion”<sup>9</sup> – that have long been pushed to the margins of scholarly attention and reflection. In other words, while it is productive to think about religion *and* materiality at this point in time, ultimately the aim is to fold materiality back into a new understanding of religion, making it unnecessary to mark materiality explicitly any longer because material analysis has finally become part of the default.

This is the background against which the religion-materiality nexus is explored in this chapter, which proceeds in four steps. Firstly, I address the question of how to conceptualize materiality, in dialogue with incentives offered by new materialism, especially regarding its emphasis on connectivity and relationality. Secondly, the concept materiality is further unpacked and operationalized, noting that images, objects and buildings, in particular, have gained a lot of attention, while other material forms – including food – have been relatively neglected. Thirdly, addressing Feuerbach’s ideas about the stomach as the basis for his materialist philosophy, I argue that food is a material form that allows us to throw new light on the physical and corporeal dimensions of religion. Lastly, I explore the possibilities for research that arise from a focus on food by turning to a collection of *legba*-figures that were taken from their site

7 Meyer and Houtman, “Material Religion.”

8 Matthew E. Engelke, “Material Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 209.

9 Bräunlein, “Studying Material Religion,” 370.

of origin among the Ewe in Ghana and Togo to the Übersee-Museum Bremen, Germany. So, step by step, the questions I am raising will be narrowed down, fleshing out what a material approach to religion offers both conceptually and empirically, and showing how food – as a material form at the core of how humans relate to and are part of the world – is a key focus for future research aiming to fold materiality back into our understanding of religion.

## 2 Conceptualizing Materiality

Though in principle the term material has a number of opposites, in the framework of the material turn in the study of religion its privileged counterpoints are ‘mental’ (used as a container term for processes in the mind and epitome of the Cartesian ‘cogito’) and ‘spiritual’ (used to refer to the imagination of invisible entities and spheres). One of the main assets of the material turn is to approach religion as a mundane and practical endeavour, emphasizing that it is humans who *do* religion with their bodies and senses and by using all sorts of things to evoke a sense of the presence and reality of the divine. Thinking along this materialist line, of course, does not imply that religion is to be reduced to sheer matter, so that the imaginary that is left after such stripping could be unmasked as a mere illusion. Religion is to be analysed as a social-cultural phenomenon that ‘matters’ in the world because it assembles people around a shared imaginary, which points beyond the here and now towards the transcendent, and yet is present through all sorts of material forms which are perceived, sensed, acted with and thought about in the immanent.<sup>10</sup> These material forms are at the heart of ‘religious matters’ arising in this ever more entangled world.<sup>11</sup>

10 I do not employ the binary immanent/transcendent in the sense of two categories pertaining to distinct realms, but understand the transcendent to be called upon within the immanent and with immanent means. For me, this binary does not involve a theological or metaphysical distinction between two separate realms. This binary is part of an understanding of religion as a layered phenomenon that mediates between the ‘world’ and a professed ‘beyond.’ This means that scholars of religion are to take the professed transcendent into account, without taking it as existent ontologically (see for a more extensive exposé Meyer, “Religion as Mediation,” 18–20).

11 Religious Matters in an Entangled World is the title of a research program directed by me at Utrecht University ([www.religiousmatters.nl](http://www.religiousmatters.nl)). Grounded in a material approach to religion, this project takes the presence of material religious forms, and the matters of debate and concern arising around them as entry points into the dynamics of co-existence in plural societies (especially in Northern Europe and West Africa).

The attribute 'material' has proved to be well suited to develop new possibilities for research. But if it were merely employed as a permanent opposite to 'mental,' the binary into which both terms are trapped would be reproduced, only switching 'material' to the privileged side. The point rather is a dialectical understanding of 'material' that signals the need to transcend (or sublimate, in the sense of *aufheben*) the material-mental binary (and related binaries such as matter-spirit, object-subject).<sup>12</sup> Taking as a starting point the concrete study of material forms in religious settings, the aim is to unhinge the mental-material binary through a critical reflexion about religion and materiality that ultimately recaptures materiality as intrinsic to religion.<sup>13</sup> Such a dialectical process of moving, via a focus on concrete material religious forms, to an understanding of materiality as intrinsic to a revised, broadened concept of religion, raises complex conceptual issues that often remain implicit. In the following I will explicate some of them.

What makes the material turn in the study of religion timely and intriguing is that it challenges a dualistic, old-fashioned idea about matter, and the

12 See Peter J. Pels, "The Modern Fear of Matter: Reflections on the Protestantism of Victorian Science," in *Things: Material Religion and the Topography of Divine Spaces*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). For an illuminating discussion of the debates about historical materialism and the use of dialectics as a method among Marxists in the early 1920s and 1930s, and Walter Benjamin's engagement with materiality, see Jan Loheit, "Benjamins Material. Oder der Stoff, aus dem die Wunschbilder sind," in *Material und Begriff. Arbeitsverfahren und theoretische Beziehungen Walter Benjamins*, ed. Frank Voigt, Nicos Tzanakis Papadakis, Jan Loheit & Konstantin Baehrens (Hamburg: Argument, 2019). In my view, the material turn in the study of religion could have benefited – and still benefit – from the insights developed in this sophisticated historical materialist line.

13 Recapturing materiality as intrinsic to religion does not imply that I would deny that the spirit-matter and the related mind-body distinction is mobilized by many religious traditions, including Christianity and Buddhism. But as scholars we should take some distance from these binaries so as to avoid that academic epistemologies are predetermined by them, while at the same time studying how these binaries play out in certain theological conceptions and religious practices. My point is that materiality can also be found in what is framed as spirit or mind, in that these are embodied phenomena. It may be impossible to fully get rid of such binaries (as also argued by Jojada Verrips, "Body and Mind: Material for a Never-ending Intellectual Odyssey," in *Religion and Material Culture. The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan (London and New York: Routledge, 2010)) so as to express and imagine a state before the distinctions on which the binaries rest, have been made. And yet, I think that indigenous religious traditions, such as the one I encountered among the Ewe, may not contain these same binaries. The idea that this is the case may rather be a product of problematic translations. It is exactly for this reason that research on such traditions may offer illuminating insights into how a notion of spirit – such as the Ewe term *gbogbo*, which means 'breath' – challenges scholarly mindsets and conventional translations, opening up new possibilities.

concomitant hubris about modern humans' capacity to arrange the world according to their will. As David Morgan explains succinctly:

We cannot understand the relevance of materiality to the study of religion unless we learn to look beyond the idea that matter is a dead, passive neutral substance manipulated by the sovereign subject of the human mind. Materiality is not like pliable clay or cookie dough in which we impress our will. It is how the world pushes back against us, needs or shatters our ideas, joins with us to make something bigger or longer lasting than our bodies. Agency does not belong only to human beings, but is shared by all kinds of things. Tools are things people make to extend the efforts of their bodies. But everything that composes our worlds exerts influence on us by interacting with our bodies, whether it was fashioned to do so or not.<sup>14</sup>

Morgan's plastic phrasing asserts the need to develop a more synthetic and materially grounded understanding of humans and religion in the world that challenges the long held modernist idea of humans as mastering matter.<sup>15</sup> He offers fresh methods for material analysis that situate religious objects in the midst of assemblages.<sup>16</sup>

While the material turn in the study of religion converges to some extent with the thriving current of new materialism, so far there have been few explicit and extensive exchanges between new materialists and scholars working on 'material religion.'<sup>17</sup> Both are rather separate fields, with different matters of

14 Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, 9.

15 This concern has become ever more pressing through climate change and the realization that human interventions have triggered the onset of the Anthropocene, as well as through the unsettling exposure to the Coronavirus pandemic. It reminds us of the basic entanglement of humans with each other and other species which offers a viral highway for the spread of the Sars-CoV-2 across the globe (Birgit Meyer, "Religion und Pandemie," in *Jenseits von Corona. Unsere Welt nach Der Pandemie – Perspektiven aus der Wissenschaft*, ed. Bernd Kortmann & Günther Schulze (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020c)); there is much to focus on here for the study of religion.

16 David Morgan, "Assembling Interferences in Material Analysis," in *Religion and Materiality*, ed. Vasudha Narayanan (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2020a); Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, 101–180.

17 Important authors discussing intersections between these strands and pleading for more synergy are Hazard (Hazard, "The Material Turn") and Ioannides (George Ioannides, "Vibrant Sacralities and Nonhuman Animacies: The Matter of New Materialism and Material Religion," *JASR* 26 (3) (2013): 234–253; George Ioannides, "The Matter of Meaning and the Meaning of Matter: Explorations for the Material and Discursive Study of Religion," in *Making Religion: Theory and Practice in the Discursive Study of Religion*, ed.

concern and thematic foci. Scholars in the study of religion, as noted, seek to develop a materially grounded understanding for their research that, in contrast to nineteenth-century scientific and historical materialism, does not dismiss religion as a mere illusion or ideology. Grosso modo they are interested in new conceptual tools and methods for concrete empirical research on religion as a double-layered phenomenon that gestures towards an unseen sphere with material means. New materialists seek to articulate a new realist ontology that resonates with insights from contemporary natural sciences, especially the new understanding of matter in theoretical physics (e.g. particle theory, chaos theory, quantum theory), and draws out its consequences for the social and cultural sciences, and ethics.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, this new materialism re-negotiates parameters for knowledge construction and the relations

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Kocku von Stuckrad & Frans Wijsen (Leiden: Brill, 2016)); this is discussed critically by Bräunlein (Bräunlein, "Thinking Religion Through Things"). See also works on religion from a theological or philosophical angle that embrace new materialism (Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubinstein, "Introduction: Tangled Matters," in *Entangled Worlds: Religions, Science, and New Materialisms*, ed. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubinstein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Joerg Rieger and Edward Waggoner, *Religious Experience and New Materialism: Movement Matters* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan US Imprint: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), with an excellent introduction by Tamsin Jones). See also the contributions by Bräunlein (2019), Burchardt (2019), Hazard (2019) and Tamimi Arab (2019) to an In Conversation of *Material Religion* titled "Material Approaches to Religion' Meet 'New Materialism'" (Birgit Meyer, 2019a), and Bräunlein's response (Peter J. Bräunlein, "The Moral Narratives of New Materialism and Posthumanism," *Religious Studies Project*, 2021) to an interview with Paul-François Tremlett on the site of the Religious Studies Project.

- 18 As Coole and Frost point out in their much-quoted introduction, the key concern of the emergent field of new materialisms is a new understanding of matter as agentic and vibrant. This understanding is grounded in the critique that in the history of philosophy, materialism and matter tended to be marginalized in favour of various permutations of idealism that privileged language, the subject, and the mind. Such idealist remnants, Coole and Frost argue, still inform the critical intellectual project of constructivism, with its strong emphasis on the power of language and discourse and its "allergy to 'the real'" (Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialism," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010, 6)). By contrast, stating that matter is all there is, new materialists strive for "an ontological reorientation that is resonant with, and to some extent informed by, developments in the natural sciences; an orientation that is posthumanist in the sense that it conceived of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency" (Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialism," 6–7). I do not see it as a task for scholarship in the study of religion to work towards stating how things are and how matter matters, but see a great potential for new materialism on the level of method (Bräunlein, "Thinking Religion Through Things," 373–382).

between the disciplines in the early twenty-first century. These concern first and foremost the striving for a new, realist ontology with its own vocabulary.

New materialism offers stimulating insights for the study of religion from a material angle, but I also see some problems with regard to its implementation. One concerns the issue of ontology, especially regarding the presumed existence of God. Stressing the entangled nature of the universe, new materialists see connections and “intra-action”<sup>19</sup> between all sorts of elements that are usually kept apart due to the use of binaries (of subjects and objects, organic and non-organic matter, nature and society, and even matter and spirit). In the introduction to their volume *Entangled Worlds* Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, a theologian and a philosopher,<sup>20</sup> appreciate new materialist theorists (such as Karen Barad and Jane Bennett) for breaking down “the very subject-object, observer-observed binary that constitutes ‘religion’ as a mere object, and which renders any form of religion objectionable.”<sup>21</sup> The new materialism in their view is non-reductive towards religion and thus can speak about God as an entity: “Relieved of impassive transcendence and immateriality, what sort of body might ‘God’ signify?”<sup>22</sup> The issue how “God” matters from a scholarly perspective inspired by the new materialism is up to further reflection and debate,<sup>23</sup> but in my view Keller’s and Rubenstein’s appraisal may easily slide into a theological or religionist stance according to which these entities are taken to exist. As we can only study how humans imagine, act upon, perceive, sense, and communicate with such entities, these entities should not be taken as given.<sup>24</sup> Even though my own material turn is grounded in a wish to understand how figures of God, gods and spirits become present and real for people and how their realness shapes their being in the world, I would avoid

19 Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2007).

20 Grounded in Spinoza and Deleuze, new materialists embrace a monist, non-dialectical materialism that is close to pantheism (as is also the case with Keller and Rubenstein, who advocate a “new religious materialism” (Keller and Rubenstein, “Introduction: Tangled Matters,” 5)).

21 Keller and Rubenstein, “Introduction: Tangled Matters,” 5.

22 Keller and Rubenstein, “Introduction: Tangled Matters,” 10.

23 See also Ioannides, “Vibrant Sacralities and Nonhuman Animacies.”

24 Of course, the difference between a religionist and a distanced stance towards religion, and the negotiation of insiders’ and outsiders’ perspectives, is a permanent theme in the study of religion (e.g. Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, “A Matter of Perspective? Disentangling the Emic – Etic Debate in the Scientific Study of Religion\|s,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28 (4/5) (2016): 317–336).



switching sides (except as by way of method during the research) and writing ‘with’ these entities, and rather focus on the humans for whom they are real.

This brings me to the second issue: anti-anthropocentrism. I agree that it is mistaken to attribute to humans a special mastery over matter and sovereignty over the world. Hence I appreciate the concept of assemblage, although I am more interested in the relative stability and historical transformation of “groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts,” than in their “ad hoc” emergence.<sup>25</sup> Religion may well be understood as a set of practices and ideas that organize ways of being in the world through which humans are enveloped into assemblages which involve relations – on the level of the human imagination and experience – between human and non-human actors, including gods and other spiritual entities. In fact, the study of religion offers a fascinating archive of pre-modern, non-Western assemblages. What makes religion special and intriguing is that it calls forth a sense of the existence of transcendent entities such as gods and spirits *in* the immanent and *with* immanent means.<sup>26</sup> In other words, concrete material forms are employed to evoke a sense of presence of such entities.<sup>27</sup> To grasp the making and operation of material portals that open up – in an authorized manner – to a professed beyond, I coined the concept sensational form.<sup>28</sup> Pointing at the more or less intensely experienced bonds between people and such a professed beyond that arise by gathering different kinds of ‘agents’ and practices in one authorized form, the concept of sensational form to some extent covers the same ground as the concept of assemblage. As a concept, sensational form refers to those assemblages that are made to operate as portals and generate a sense of presence of the transcendent for its human actors.

A salient difference between new materialists’ understanding of assemblage and my own take on sensational forms concerns the vantage point taken for research. Of course, new materialists are right to foreground the complex entanglements of humans in and with the world, and their mutual influences and effects, and to unhinge the idea of the human by thinking of human beings

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- 25 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 23. The point is to locate assemblages historically and spatially. See Janeja (Manpreet Janeja, *Transactions in Taste. The Collaborative Lives of Everyday Bengali Food* (New Delhi, London: Routledge, 2010)) for an inspiring take on assemblages and networks of diverse elements around food that are embedded in specific historical and regional biographies and their (post)colonial transformations.
- 26 Meyer, “Religion as Mediation,” 19; see also Volkhard Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion: ein soziologischer Grundriss* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021).
- 27 See also Diana Espírito Santo and Jack Hunter (eds.), *Mattering the Invisible. Technologies, Bodies and the Realm of the Spectral* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2021).
- 28 Meyer, “Religion as Mediation,” 7.

on the level of bacteria or as part of machines. And yet, a critique of anthropocentrism along this line should not make us think that we can analyse assemblages ‘from within’ or ‘as such,’ that is, from beyond a human perspective.<sup>29</sup> This pertains to both the (emic) perspective of humans participating in assemblages we study, and our scholarly analysis thereof. Acknowledging the embeddedness of humans in wider assemblages does not imply that one should pursue an extreme anti-anthropocentrism, certainly not on the level of research. Being part of matter, humans still sense, think, speak and feel *about* matter and thus about themselves in the world, and it is this human existential endeavour and the role of religion therein that I still want to grasp.<sup>30</sup>

My basic point here is that, in contrast to new materialists, I do not think that focusing on entanglements and assemblages would allow us, as scholars, to at long last get hold of the ‘real’ ground of existence that is taken as ontologically ‘there.’<sup>31</sup> The material world of which humans are part by virtue of their embodied being can only be grasped (in the sense of the German *begreifen*) through socially and culturally constituted forms (signs, categories, concepts). These forms – on the levels of everyday life and of academic knowledge – are at the base of the social and cultural construction of reality in which religion partakes, and which scholars in the social sciences and humanities try to understand. As explained elaborately by Volkhard Krech, who developed a full-fledged materialist semiotic approach to religious sign systems, the forms employed are themselves material.<sup>32</sup> And yet, the ensuing construction of

29 See also Bräunlein, “The Moral Narratives.”

30 Transcending the subject-object dualism and analysing humans’ being in the world from the angle of embodiment in the footsteps of Merleau-Ponty (see also Vásquez, *More Than Belief*), phenomenology offers a suitable conceptual framework that may well be further developed from a material angle. I do not agree with Hazard (Hazard, “The Material Turn”) and Ioannides (Ioannides, “Vibrant Sacralities and Nonhuman Animacies”) that phenomenology is too human-centred to account for the ways in which material forms shape human existence.

31 Jane Bennett distinguishes her thinking from that of Hent de Vries, whose “formulations give priority to humans as knowing bodies, while tending to overlook things and what they can do,” and states that instead she “will shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology, from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter)” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3). Here I would rather side with de Vries (see also Birgit Meyer, “Picturing the Invisible: Visual Culture and the Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (4–5) (2015): 337) and stay with the language of epistemology. As one of the architects of the research program *The Future of the Religious Past*, De Vries took things as one of the concrete “singulars” or “particulars” to study religion from a “deeply pragmatic attitude” (see Meyer & Houtman, “Material Religion,” 3–4).

32 Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion*, 45. Integrating semiotics and system theory, Krech holds the basic assumption that signs break the continuum of matter-energy and bridge the

reality differs from what one may call sheer matter or “matter-energy.”<sup>33</sup> Our human approach to matter (with which we are enmeshed *and* which we perceive and sense as an object to be understood and acted upon) is always mediated through material forms.<sup>34</sup>

Matter exists in excess of human possibilities to deal with, sense, act upon and think about it. Reality is constructed out of and with matter, but differentiated from it through language and embodied practices and thereby sensed and rendered meaningful.<sup>35</sup> Hence, as a concept, materiality is not congruous with what is referred to as ‘matter’ in a broad, all-encompassing sense. Materiality is *about* matter and seeks to *approximate* it conceptually, but ultimately matter in the broad sense cannot be fully captured by (and thus not be congruous with) human modes of sensation and signification. So there remains a gap.

The fact that humans may long for bridging this gap while never being able to do so in full, offers a fruitful entry point for analysis. This sense of a gap – and a sense of being at a loss with regard to a professed unknown, what Mattijs van de Port calls “the Rest-of-what-is”<sup>36</sup> – is a prime scenario mobilized by religions in past and present, albeit in varying ways. As scholars, we can study (and feel attracted to) such scenarios, but still cannot help but ‘mind the gap’ that remains between matter and signs (as recognized in semiotics) or the symbolic

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breaks within a sign system through which reality is constituted. He argues that both the signifier and the signified are material: “that to which a material sign refers is also a material state of affairs, that is, an object. Objects can be things, states of affairs, concepts or persons. They, too, are part of the continuum of matter and energy. However, in semiosis – that is, in the process ‘in which something acts as a sign’ (...) only certain aspects of those objects to which the signs refer gain relevance” (translation BM). Original: “das, worauf ein materielles Zeichen hinweist, ist ebenfalls ein materieller Sachverhalt, nämlich ein Objekt. Bei Objekten kann es sich um Dinge, Sachverhalte, Begriffe oder Personen handeln. Auch sie sind Teil des Kontinuums von Materie und Energie. Jedoch werden in der Semiose – das heißt innerhalb des Prozesses, ‘in dem etwas als Zeichen fungiert’ (...) nur bestimmte Aspekte jener Objekte relevant, auf die Zeichen verweisen” (Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion*, 45). The point here is that matter exists in excess of signs. Conversely, signs themselves are material, but only refer those aspects of matter that are foregrounded in communication. See Keane (Webb Keane, “Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things,” *Language & Communication* 23 (2003): 409–425) for a similar argument, also grounded in Peirce.

33 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

34 In principle, this also pertains to the natural sciences, where methods and procedures take part in producing empirical outcomes (Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993)), but unlike scholars in the humanities and social sciences, natural scientists are not expected to undertake such critical epistemological reflexions.

35 Krech, *Die Evolution der Religion*, 18–19.

36 Mattijs van de Port, “Dat wat rest...: over sacralisering en de ongerijmdheden van het bestaan,” Inaugural Lecture, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2010.

order and the 'really real' (as recognized in psychoanalytical approaches). It would be a scholarly illusion to think that religionism or new materialism would transport us to the side of 'real' matter, however conceived. The most we can do is to dwell, conceptually, at the edge where thought and understanding vis-à-vis matter in the broad sense reaches its limits, and try to rethink our being in the world from there. This is what makes notions as entanglement and assemblage exciting and useful for the study of religion from a material angle and in comparative manner.

### 3 Unpacking Materiality

The concern of the material turn in the study of religion is to allow for fresh, detailed and conceptually challenging empirical research that lends itself to comparison. As a concept, materiality signals the importance to situate humans in their relations to a broad set of material forms, with which they engage through their bodies and senses when 'doing' religion and through the use of which they are shaped and develop a particular habitus. So far, our understanding of materiality in the study of religion has been mainly developed through the study of material culture, taken as entry point into assemblages and entanglements. The prominent focus on human-things relations has yielded important insights into a broad array of possible modes of agency and relational dynamics that move beyond a conventional idea of humans as subjects dominating the object world. Following Latour,<sup>37</sup> networks of different kinds of actors can be identified, while Hodder calls attention to the path-dependency of human-things entanglements and entrapments across time.<sup>38</sup> The category of things, and the possibilities for agency entailed by them in multiple assemblages,<sup>39</sup> is subdivided into artefacts, buildings and images as prominent sub-categories. In the framework of the material turn in the study of religion, each of these sub-categories has generated original research, interdisciplinary conversations and, conversely, helped to develop and refine the concept of materiality.

In my own research, which has been much inspired by Morgan, I have extensively worked on religious images and visual regimes. This was of special

37 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

38 Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

39 Morgan, *The Thing about Religion*, 9.

interest so as to correct the text-focus that long dominated the study of religion empirically and conceptually. Echoing a Calvinist-Protestant appraisal of aniconism as a normative default, the study of religion offered little room for a thorough analysis of images and visual culture. Conversations with scholars in art history and, especially, German *Bildwissenschaft*, made me think about images as media employed to imagine and picture an invisible realm. The image itself, as pointed out by Hans Belting, is a material form with an intrinsic property of generating presence in and through a pictorial medium.<sup>40</sup> Such a take on images as material media to achieve iconic presence ensues a deeper understanding of the figuration and sensation of the unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and beyond.<sup>41</sup> The work on religious images and visual culture has been important in re-conceptualizing religion from a material angle. Similarly, a focus on buildings and objects has allowed for new empirical foci for research, and instigated a deeper understanding of how religion matters, for believers and outsiders, by virtue of being present in the world through concrete material forms.<sup>42</sup>

As a concept intended to approximate matter, materiality ultimately is about everything. This somewhat dazzling realization may be the reason why materiality is often referred to in an abstract sense. At the same time, we can only get the material dimension of religion into the picture via a pragmatic stance that focuses on certain categories of material forms – with material culture forming an obvious focus to begin with – for the sake of empirical insights

40 Hans Belting, "Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions," *Material Religion* 12 (2) (2016): 235–237.

41 Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen (eds.), *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Contested Desires* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

42 E.g. Uta Karstein and Thomas Schmidt-Lux, *Architekturen und Artefakte. Zur Materialität des Religiösen* (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2016). Our research programme *Religious Matters in an Entangled World* shows that taking images, objects and buildings as foci for research contributes to a deeper analysis of tensions about the presence and representation of religion in public spaces in our increasingly plural societies (Daan Beekers, "Sakrale Residuen/Sacred Residue," in *The Urban Sacred – Städtisch-Religiöse Arrangements in Amsterdam, Berlin und London/How Religion Makes and Takes Place in Amsterdam, Berlin and London. Ausstellungskatalog/Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Ed Susanne Lanwerd (Berlin: Metropol, 2016), Pooyan Tamimi Arab, *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape: Religious Pluralism and Secularism in the Netherlands* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); see also Marian Burchardt, *Regulating Difference: Religious Diversity and Nationhood in the Secular West* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020)). At this moment we focus on food, while the final phase of the programme will look at texts from a material angle, with the aim to synthesize their material and hermeneutic dimensions (see also James W. Watts, "Books as Sacred Beings," *Postscripts* 10 (1–2) (2019): 144–157).

and grounded conceptual reflexion.<sup>43</sup> However, materiality encompasses more material forms than the strong focus on images, artefacts and buildings might suggest. Scholarly work inspired by the material turn should take into account a broader array of material forms than those that gained prominence so far, so as to be able to unpack more and different facets of materiality, and ensuing assemblages and sensational forms, in relation to religion.<sup>44</sup>

Materiality is an umbrella concept<sup>45</sup> that must be further unpacked for the sake of empirically and conceptually innovative work. Materiality refers to a range of categories that differentiate the domain of things (artefacts, images, buildings, as well as, for instance, stones, machines, texts, dress, food), substances (water, light, air, blood, milk, alcohol, etc), flora, fauna, micro-organisms (viruses, bacteria) and digital forms. These intersecting categories group certain material forms that consist of natural or human-made materials, or composites thereof, which have their specific affordances.

Despite this, material forms should not be reduced to the materials of which they consist. Tim Ingold criticizes anthropologists talking about materiality for being unable to say what it actually means,<sup>46</sup> asking “What academic perversion leads us to speak not of *materials and their properties* but of *the materiality of objects*?”<sup>47</sup> I would retort that rather than playing off materials against materiality, the latter is important as a concept to think about matter and materials. Materials, in my view, do not offer privileged access to matter.<sup>48</sup> Taking materiality as a concept, rather than as matter as such, it is important to be alert to the fact that people apprehend, use and assign value to material forms through “semiotic ideologies,” i.e. “basic assumptions about what signs are

43 Hent de Vries, “Introduction: Why Still ‘Religion’?,” in *Religion: Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5–6.

44 For instance, recently Jeremy Stolow and I have called attention to the nexus of religion and light (Birgit Meyer and Jeremy Stolow, “Light Mediations: Introduction,” *Material Religion* 16 (1) (2020): 1–8; Jeremy Stolow and Birgit Meyer, “Enlightening Religion: Light and Darkness in Religious Knowledge and Knowledge about Religion,” *Critical Research on Religion* 9 (2) (2021): 119–125). We can also think about viruses, animals, plants and, crucially, air (see Maria José de Abreu, “On Twisted Logics and the Pandemic,” *Religious Matters*, 2 January 2021), as foci for research on religion from a material angle.

45 Beinhauer-Köhler (Bärbel Beinhauer-Köhler, “Religionen greifbar machen? – Der *material turn* in der Religionswissenschaft,” *Pastoraltheologie* 104 (6) (2015): 255–265) rightly stresses that materiality should be employed as an umbrella term (*Oberbegriff*) that covers a broad field of medial signs (*mediale Repräsentationen*).

46 Tim Ingold, “Materials against Materiality,” *Archeological Dialogues* 14 (1) (2007): 2.

47 Ingold, “Materials against Materiality,” 3.

48 See also Birgit Meyer, “How to Capture the ‘Wow’: R.R. Marett’s Notion of Awe and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (2016): 12–13.

and how they function in the world.”<sup>49</sup> The categories and semiotic ideologies employed by scholars are predominantly grounded in Western classification systems; hence the need to be alert to the intricacies and fallacies of intercultural translation.<sup>50</sup> Material forms are also assigned value through appreciative categories, which may be positive (art, devotional object, heritage) or dismissive, as is the case with categories of “bad objecthood” such as ‘totem,’ ‘fetish’ and ‘idol’ that have been employed to pinpoint problematic human-things relations in which the former are under the spell of the latter.<sup>51</sup> This is particularly important for scholars working on former frontier zones of European colonial outreach. What may at first sight intuitively be qualified as an artefact – or even as a ‘fetish’ – may be approached quite differently by its original users, and thus crack the framework of material culture. I see it as a prime task of scholars studying religion to engage in translation across different cultural settings, so as to question and possibly broaden existing categories around thingness<sup>52</sup> and other material forms, thereby surpassing a modernist idea of material culture in terms of dead, non-animate objecthood that still resuscitate an obsolete subject-object binary according to which the former are in control of the latter.

Studying religion from a material angle, it is time to extend our analytical scope of material forms. The point is not to include as many as possible, but to focus on categories of material forms that foreground modes of corporeal and sensorial engagement which have so far received little attention. One especially promising category is food. As I will show in the next section, a focus on food can substantially expand our understanding of the religion and materiality nexus by spotlighting ingestion/digestion as a prime mode of corporeal and sensorial engagement.

49 Keane, “Semiotics,” 419; see also Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 16–17.

50 William F. Hanks and Carlo Severi, “Translating Worlds: The Epistemological Space of Translation,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (2) (2014): 1–16; Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

51 W.J. Thomas Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 188.

52 Amira J. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, “Thinking through Things,” in *Thinking through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, ed. Amira J. Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (London: Routledge, 2007).

#### 4 Food: Feuerbach's Gastro-philosophy

Of course, in the study of religion there has always been an interest in food, yielding studies of taboos and dietary laws, sacred animals and plants, fasting, sacrifice, communal meals, and so on. Across the vast field of Food Studies, food has also been increasingly highlighted as a prism to study the potentials for conflicts and conviviality in plural religious environments.<sup>53</sup> My concern in this section is not to survey this growing field, which partly overlaps with the anthropology of food,<sup>54</sup> but to think about food as a central domain of material religion.<sup>55</sup> A focus on food can help us understand how humans, in their practices of cooking, feeding, eating, drinking, digesting, and so on, are part of the material world. Against this backdrop, I appreciate David Chidester's remark that "religion is often more like cooking than like philosophy."<sup>56</sup> But we could go a step further, as a focus on cooking may yield a philosophy that sets off from the stomach.

Here it is compelling to turn to Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1874), whose work as a prime advocate of nineteenth-century materialism shows intriguing parallels with current debates about materiality.<sup>57</sup> He made the well-known

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- 53 Rashida Alhassan Adum-Atta, "The Politics of Purity, Disgust, and Contamination: Communal Identity of Trotter (Pig) Sellers in Madina Zongo (Accra)," *Religions* 11(8) (2020): 421; Rachel Brown, "How Gelatin Becomes an Essential Symbol of Muslim Identity: Food Practice as a Lens into the Study of Religion and Migration," *Religious Studies and Theology* 35 (2) (2016): 185–205; Manpreet Janeja, *Food, Feeding, and Eating in Plural School Environments: Conundrums, Contestations, Negotiations*, Presentations at the Religious Matters Workshop, KNIR Rome (May) and the conference Gastro-Politics & Gastro-Ethics of the Sacred & Secular Conference, Meertens Institute Amsterdam (November), 2019; Manpreet Janeja, "Food Matters in an Entangled World," *Religious Matters*, 13 February 2020; James Staples, *Sacred Cows and Chicken Machurian* (Washington: Washington University Press, 2020); Shaheed Tayob, "Islam as a Lived Tradition: Ethical Constellations of Muslim Food Practice in Mumbai," Utrecht University, Dissertation, 2017; Margreet van Es, "Roasting a Pig in Front of a Mosque: How Pork Matters in Pegida's Anti-Islam Protest in Eindhoven," *Religions* 11 (7) (2020): 359–375.
- 54 Janeja, *Transactions in Taste*; Jakob Klein and James L Watson (eds.), *The Handbook of Food and Anthropology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).
- 55 Food has received relatively little attention in *Material Religion*, a digital search (conducted in June 2021) via the journal site shows that there are only 3 articles that have food as a keyword: <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/doSearch?field1=Keyword&text1=food&SeriesKey=rfmr20&SeriesKey=rfmr20>.
- 56 David Chidester, *Religion: Material Dynamics* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 53.
- 57 Interestingly, in her chapter "Edible Matter," Jane Bennett investigates food as "conative body" and "actant" inside a person's body, and their grouping in an assemblage she calls "American consumption" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 39). Stating that in the nineteenth



statement that “the human being is what he/she eats” (“*der Mensch ist, was er isst*”). Behind this statement lies Feuerbach’s less well-known anti-idealist philosophy which takes the stomach as its anchor point, or, as German philosopher Harald Lemke called it poignantly: his “gastro-philosophy,”<sup>58</sup> so as to build a ‘new’ philosophy. Feuerbach articulated this new philosophy in his polemical essay “*Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution*” (*Natural Science and the Revolution*, 1850),<sup>59</sup> in which he discussed the book *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel für das Volk* by Jakob Moleschott (1850).<sup>60</sup> Born in the Netherlands and trained in Germany, Moleschott (1822–1893) was a materialist philosopher and physicist who mobilized the natural sciences to criticize religion (and its uses by the establishment).

For his part, Moleschott was influenced by Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841, English version 1854),<sup>61</sup> a work that proposes a human-centred rather than God-centred understanding of religion. Taking God as a human creation, Feuerbach viewed God as mirror of the human (“*Gott ist der Spiegel des Menschen*”). As a materialist grounded in Spinoza, he strove to think through and demystify religion in such a way that it would become obsolete: “Religion is abolished where the idea of the world, of so-called second causes (*Mittelursachen*, BM), intrudes itself between God and man.”<sup>62</sup> He argued that the idea of second causes as developed in Christian theology betrays an ambivalent relation to matter (*Materie*), understood as that what is in-between humans and God:

Religion derives the idea of the existence of second causes, that is, of things which are interposed between God and man, only from the

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century “it was fairly easy to find a philosopher who believed that food had the power to shape the dispositions of persons and nations” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 43), she introduces Nietzsche, but not Feuerbach and Moleschott who preceded him. As I will show, Feuerbach is a new materialist *avant la lettre*.

58 Harald Lemke, “Feuerbachs Stammtischthese oder zum Ursprung des Satzes: ‚Der Mensch ist, was er isst,‘ *Aufklärung und Kritik* 1 (2004): 117–140.

59 Ludwig Feuerbach, “Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution.,” in *Ludwig Feuerbachs Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Bolin and Friedrich Jodl (Stuttgart: 1903–1910; original 1850), x. Band, 3–24. New Adaptation by Werner Schuffenhauer in a Publication of the Akademie-Verlags: Ludwig Feuerbach, *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin, 1971), Kleinere Schriften III, Bd. 10, 347–368.

60 Jacob Moleschott, *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel für das Volk* (Erlangen: Verlag von Ferdinand Enke, 1850).

61 Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by George Eliot (1854); English translation of *Das Wesen des Christentums*. *Gesammelte Werke*, first published in 1841.

62 Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, chapter XIX.

physical, natural, and hence the irreligious or at least non-religious theory of the universe: a theory which it nevertheless immediately subverts by making the operations of Nature operations of God. But this religious idea is in contradiction with the natural sense and understanding, which concedes a real, spontaneous activity to natural things. And this contradiction of the physical view with the religious theory, religion resolves by converting the undeniable activity of things into an activity of God. Thus, on this view, the positive idea is God; the negative, the world.<sup>63</sup>

Nature and matter can only be known through the senses. But this is denied from a Christian viewpoint that takes God as the ultimate operating force in the world, from which He, however, is held to be removed at the same time, implying that for believers the world, and matter, become secondary. In this idealist construct, the trouble faced by nineteenth-century theology with regard to matter and the world – undeniably present and yet to be tuned down so as to maintain an idea of God as all-transcending spirit –, comes to the fore clearly. The secret of religion for Feuerbach, however, is that the nature of the divine is identical with the nature of humans. According to his materialist analysis, which exposes his impressive theological expertise, religion knows about world and matter, albeit in a mystified manner. For this reason, the study of religion from an anthropological rather than theological angle is able to lay bare *human* needs, affects, and perceptions as grounded in matter. Proposing to analyse religion from the middle ground, the world, Feuerbach scrutinizes religious beliefs and doctrines for the truths they contain with regard to matter. His materialist stance does not simply demystify religion so as to break it down, but takes the material engagement with the world in between God and humans as a starting point. From this material approach, he also thought about the Eucharist as a sensorial religious act, through which food was valued as divine and sacralised, and ingested. The Host becomes the flesh of Christ in the imagination, but the Host or bread, once eaten, is transformed into human flesh. So, in a way, the Eucharist affirms the truth of chemistry, in that the bread humans eat becomes their flesh.<sup>64</sup>

This take on religion stimulated Moleschott. He and other scientific materialists strove for a societal reform program based on insights from the

63 Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, chapter XIX.

64 See also John Hymers, "In Defence of Feuerbach's Moleschott Reception: Feuerbach's Open Dialectic," previously published in German as "Verteidigung von Feuerbachs Moleschott Rezeption: Feuerbachs offene Dialektik," in *Identität und Pluralismus in der globalen Gesellschaft. Ludwig Feuerbach zum 200. Geburtstag*, ed. U. Reitemeyer, T. Shibata, and F. Tomasoni (Muenster/New York: Waxmann Verlag, 2006).

natural sciences. Scientific materialism rejected the assumption of congruence between the laws of being and the laws of thought that underpinned Hegelian metaphysics. Asserting that human strength and vitality depend on the materiality of food, Moleschott criticized that the right to eat good food – for him this had to include meat, as provider of protein – was denied to the poor. Metabolic processes have impact on human behaviour and thought. Hence his famous dictum: “Ohne Phosphor kein Gedanke” (“without phosphorus no thought”) (1850: 110).<sup>65</sup> Inspired by Moleschott, Feuerbach further developed a materialist philosophy that takes the stomach as its anchor point.

His essay *Natural Science and the Revolution* (1850), published at a time when in Prussia philosophical works that criticized religion and politics were repressed while the natural sciences were not subject to such censorship, praises Moleschott's book.<sup>66</sup> Seeing the revolutionary potential in the natural sciences, as a materialist Feuerbach was interested in the study of nutrition and metabolism. As mentioned, he draws a difference between an “old philosophy” that “started with thought” and left people without bread, and a “new philosophy” that “begins with food and eating.”<sup>67</sup> This is how he challenged the old idealist philosophy:<sup>68</sup>

How much have the philosophers puzzled their heads over the question about the relation between the body and the soul! Now we know on scientific grounds what the people long knew from experience, that eating and drinking hold the body and the soul together, that hence the relation looked for is food. How has one fought over native ideas or ideas coming from outside, and how contemptuous has one looked down at those who derive the origin of ideas from the senses (this and subsequent translations BM).<sup>69</sup>

65 Moleschott, *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel*, 110.

66 Feuerbach notes that the Prussian state curtailed and censored critical philosophy (especially with regard to religion and politics), while the natural sciences were promoted. And yet, according to Feuerbach the latter have a strong revolutionary potential, as was shown exemplarily in Jakob Moleschott's book.

67 Orig.: “Die alte Philosophie begann mit dem Denken, sie ‘wusste nur die Geister zu vergnügen und liess darum die Menschen ohne Brod;’ die neue beginnt mit Essen und Trinken.”

68 For a short version of this section see my blog “Der Mensch ist was er isst” (Birgit Meyer, “Der Mensch ist was er isst,” *Religious Matters*, 24 August 2019 (2019C)).

69 Orig.: “Was haben sich nicht sonst die Philosophen den Kopf zerbrochen mit der Frage von dem Bande zwischen dem Leib und der Seele! Jetzt wissen wir aus wissenschaftlichen Gründen, was längst das Volk aus der Erfahrung wusste, dass Essen und Trinken Leib und Seele zusammenhält, dass das gesuchte Band also die Nahrung ist. Wie hat man sich nicht

And:

How did not the concept of substance vex philosophy? What is it? Me or non-me, mind or nature, or the unity of both? Yes, the unity. But what does this say? *The food only is the substance*; the food is the identity of mind and nature. Where there is no fat, there is no meat; but where there is no fat, there is no brain, no spirit: and the fat comes only from food. The food is the Spinozistic Hen kai pân, the all-embracing, the essence of the beings. Everything depends on eating and drinking (emphasis in the original).<sup>70</sup>

He approvingly cites Moleschott's statement "Das Leben is Stoffwechsel,"<sup>71</sup> which can be either translated as "life is metabolism," but also, more radically yet true to his argument, as "life is material exchange."<sup>72</sup> Finally, towards the end of his essay he makes the well-known statement already cited above:

The food becomes blood, the blood becomes heart and brain, and thoughts and ethos. Human food is the foundation of human education and ethos. If you want to improve the people, give them better food instead of declamations against sin. *The human being is what he/she eats*. Who enjoys only vegetable-diet is also only a vegetating being, has no energy (*italics BM*).<sup>73</sup>

Feuerbach pursued and refined his idea that humans are what they eat in subsequent works, also in relation to religion. In his essay "The Mystery of Sacrifice or Man is What He Eats" he stressed that he has "made an object of gastrology

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sonst über eingeborene oder von aussen gekommene Ideen gezankt und wie verächtlich auf die herabgeblickt, welche den Ursprung der Ideen aus den Sinnen ableiteten!"

70 Orig.: "Wie hat nicht der Begriff der Substanz die Philosophie vexirt! Was ist sie? Ich oder Nicht-Ich, Geist oder Natur, oder die Einheit von beiden? Ja, die Einheit. Aber was ist denn damit gesagt? *Die Nahrung nur ist die Substanz*; die Nahrung die Identität von Geist und Natur. Wo kein Fett, ist kein Fleisch; aber wo kein Fett, da ist auch kein Hirn, kein Geist: und das Fett kommt nur aus der Nahrung. Die Nahrung ist das Spinozistische Hen kai pân, das Allesumfassende, das Wesen der Wesen. Alles hängt vom Essen und Trinken ab."

71 Moleschott, *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel*, 6.

72 Hymers, "In Defence of Feuerbach's Moleschott Reception," 11.

73 Orig.: "Die Speisen werden zu Blut, das Blut zu Herz und Hirn, zu Gedanken und Gesinnungsstoff. Menschliche Kost ist die Grundlage menschlicher Bildung und Gesinnung. Wollt ihr das Volk bessern, so gebt ihm statt Deklamationen gegen die Sünde bessere Speisen. Der Mensch ist was er isst. Wer nur Pflanzenkost genießt, ist auch nur ein vegetirendes Wesen, hat keine Thatkraft."

(theory of the stomach, of the palate) straightaway into an object of theology, and admittedly, an object of theology, on the other hand, into an object of gastrology.<sup>74</sup> In this essay he analyses religion from the angle of nourishment as that which is life,<sup>75</sup> and extends his idea of eating as the basic life activity to seeing (“eating with the eyes”) and hearing (“eating with the ears”).<sup>76</sup>

While he was derided for his take on food by his contemporaries and subsequent philosophers, who saw him advocate a crude materialism, presently his approach is rediscovered as a powerful statement against the Cartesian body-mind binary and a reappraisal of Spinoza’s thesis of unity of body and mind, that prefigured the “core theoretical points made by (Robertson, BM) Smith and taken up by Durkheim, Freud, many of their contemporaries and students of sacrifice down to the present.”<sup>77</sup> As mentioned, the German philosopher and historian Harald Lemke<sup>78</sup> appraises Feuerbach for developing a gastrosophic anthropology of existence.<sup>79</sup> I find these gastro-philosophical openings of great relevance for a conceptual valuation of food from the angle of a material approach to religion. Feuerbach’s materialism, with its somewhat reductionist idea of religion, may to some extent appear old-fashioned. But a closer reading, especially of his work on food outside of religion, shows remarkable resonance with current debates about materiality. I agree with the point made by the American philosopher John Hymers that “Feuerbach’s position is not the reduction of thought or human activity to matter, but rather an interesting discussion of the fundamental unity between the human being and the objects from which he lives.”<sup>80</sup> In thinking humans’ relation to the world through the stomach, Hymers argues, Feuerbach’s ideas about food prefigure Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, and I would add, resonate with new materialism:

We exist as an opening to the world. The open dialectic of mutual influence thoroughly permeates our being. Breathing, eating, and drinking best illustrate this porous promiscuity: breathing is the mixing of air with

74 Ludwig Feuerbach, “The Mystery of Sacrifice or Man is what he Eats,” translated by Cyril Levitt (2007), 7; English translation of “Das Geheimnis des Opfers oder der Mensch ist was er isst,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, first published in 1862.

75 Feuerbach, “The Mystery of Sacrifice,” 24.

76 Feuerbach, “The Mystery of Sacrifice,” 25. See here the translation and introduction by Cyril Levitt: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.456.2161&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

77 Feuerbach, “The Mystery of Sacrifice,” 4.

78 See Harald Lemke, <https://www.haraldlemke.de> (accessed 19 August 2021).

79 Lemke, “Feuerbachs Stammtischthese,” 119.

80 Hymers, “In Defence of Feuerbach’s Moleschott Reception,” 1.

our bodies; eating is the mixing of solids with our bodies; drinking is the mixture of fluids with our bodies. But what we breath, eat, and drink also flows from our bodies and re-enters the objective world.<sup>81</sup>

I offered this extensive discussion of Feuerbach's gastro-philosophy because in my view it is of great use as a conceptual ground for future research on food, as a specific sub-category of material forms, in the study of religion. Its attraction lies in the fact that food (next to breathing)<sup>82</sup> is related to being in the most basic, existential sense that can be imagined. There are many possibilities to relate his idea about food as being at the centre of the material exchange that defines life (*Stoffwechsel*), from the angle of a material approach to religion. As the basic material form that people must ingest and digest to live, food involves detailed classifications and serves as a symbolic marker of identity and belonging. Religion plays a central role in shaping what and how people eat, while food also plays a crucial role in human exchanges with the divine, whether this concerns sacrifices and other ways of feeding the gods<sup>83</sup> or, for example, the Eucharist as an act through which Christian believers ingest the divine<sup>84</sup> or Islamic medicine to ingest the holy Qur'an.<sup>85</sup> The study of religion from a material angle can certainly be enriched empirically and pushed conceptually, by thinking through the domain of eating and drinking from the standpoint of "religion in the kitchen,"<sup>86</sup> or more broadly, the relation between religion and agriculture.<sup>87</sup> But food need not necessarily come in as a new focus per se, it

81 Hymers, "In Defence of Feuerbach's Moleschott Reception," 11–12.

82 See Abreu, "On Twisted Logics."

83 Gertrud Hüwelmeier, "Feeding the Spirits: Cooking, Offering and Reclaiming *lộc* in late Socialist Vietnam," *South East Asia Research* 29 (1) (2021): 108–125; Elizabeth Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen: Cooking, Talking, and the Making of Black Atlantic Traditions* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Jojada Verrips, "Ik kan je wel opvreten. En(i)ge noties over het thema kannibalisme in westerse samenlevingen," *Etnofoor* 4 (1) (1991): 36.

84 Heike Behrend, *Resurrecting Cannibals: The Catholic Church, Witch-Hunts, and the Production of Pagans in Western Uganda* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 2011); Anselm Schubert, *Gott essen: eine kulinarische Geschichte des Abendmahls* (München: C.H. Beck, 2018); Mirella Klomp, Peter-Ben Smit, and Iris Speckmann (eds.), *Rond de tafel maaltijd vieren in liturgische contexten* (Berne: Berne Media, 2018).

85 Hanna Nieber, "Drinking the Written Qur'an: Healing with Kombe in Zanzibar Town," Dissertation, Utrecht University, 2020; "About Ingestion: Drinking the Qur'an, Annemarie Mol's 'Eating in Theory,' and Fusion Cooking as Method," *Religious Matters*, 20 August 2021.

86 Pérez, *Religion in the Kitchen*.

87 David Morgan, "Religion, Food and Agriculture," in *Religion and Materiality*, ed. Vasudha Narayanan (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2020b).

may also offer a new angle to the study of religious practices such as prayer and worship, making us realize the extent to which such practices involve food in manifold ways. Many possibilities for research arise, and I hope that my line of reasoning so far will trigger more research that will bring home the relevance of a focus on food for fleshing out the concept of materiality in the study of religion. As I will exemplify in the final section of this essay, attention to food also offers a fresh look at the vexing phenomenon of the so-called 'fetish' and has gained strong relevance in my own future research.

## 5 The Spirits Are Hungry

As pointed out, my own interest in the material turn was triggered by feeling at a loss with regard to the figure of the 'fetish' or 'idol' that was applied to Ewe *legba* (pl. *legbawo*) figures in the West African frontier zone. These are categories of judgment employed to dismiss and classify as inferior African modes of dealing with the spirit world through matter. Employing these terms betrays an ideological standpoint that affirms a mentalistic stance with regard to religion that is grounded in Calvinism and rejects the worship of human-made gods in the name of the Second Commandment.<sup>88</sup> The critique of semiotic ideologies that misconstrue certain human-made things as 'fetishes' and 'idols' was of crucial importance in claiming more conceptual space for materiality in the study of religion and played a central role in triggering the material turn.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, the strong focus on deconstructing the categories of "bad objecthood,"<sup>90</sup> into which were put human-made things held to be wrongly attributed with a will, risks a neglect of the things themselves. This, at least, pertains to my own attempts to understand how the mapping of the category 'fetish' on figures called *legbawo* by the Ewe distorted these figures in

88 Birgit Meyer, "Idolatry Beyond the Second Commandment. Conflicting Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen," in *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Birgit Meyer & Terje Stordalen (London: Bloomsbury, 2019b).

89 Keane, *Christian Moderns*; Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Patricia Spyer (ed.), *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Places* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Peter J. Pels, "The Spirit of Matter: On Fetish, Rarity, Fact and Fancy," in *Border Fetishisms. Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York/London: Routledge, 1997).

90 Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 188.

the Christian and scholarly imagination.<sup>91</sup> But, to paraphrase W.J.T. Mitchell,<sup>92</sup> what do the *legbawo* want?<sup>93</sup>

This question became pressing through my new research project on a missionary collection of *legba* figures assembled by missionaries of the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* during their activities among the Ewe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in particular by the missionary Carl Spiess (1867–1936). The *legba*-figures are kept in the museum's depot, with some on display in the *Schaumagazin*.<sup>94</sup> I approach these objects as 'religious matters' that enshrine colonial and post-colonial entanglements of people, objects and ideas in Africa and Europe. The idea is to track and unpack these entanglements by following the stations of their trajectory,<sup>95</sup> from their origin and use among the Ewe in what is now Southern Togo and South-eastern Ghana, to their dismissal as 'fetishes,' 'idols' and 'charms' by the missionaries and early Ewe converts, and their valuation as ethnographic objects that exemplify religion at a low stage by scholars, to the conditions of their acquisition and provenance, their shipping from Africa to Bremen, to their being put 'at rest' in the depot.

In January 2020, together with Angelantonio Grossi, I spoke to the Ewe priest Christopher Voncujuvi.<sup>96</sup> I showed the priest some photographs of these

91 So far, I paid much attention to missionary preaching among the Ewe, which exposed a downright negative stance towards 'fetishes' and 'idols.' These terms have different genealogies, but both were used as synonyms and made to refer to *legbawo*: figures manly consisting of clay that were placed in public spaces and private homes, and employed as sites where spirits dwell and can be summoned. My earlier work (Meyer, *Translating the Devil*) on the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century activities of missionaries of the NMG among the Ewe in colonized Togo and Gold Coast, tracked how the *categories* of 'fetish' and 'idol' have continued to live on in African Independent and Pentecostal churches up to our time.

92 Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*

93 I like this tongue-in-cheek question, with which Mitchell does not want to indulge in some kind of animism, but get close enough to the objects and images vested with a certain power to understand their spell on humans. This is exactly the position anthropologists (of religion) adopt in their research. Taking this position does not imply conceptual animism.

94 I am thankful to Silke Seybold, curator Africa at the Übersee-Museum Bremen, for participating in and opening up the depot for this collaborative research, which also includes Kodzo Gavua, Sela Adjei, Malika Kraamer, Kokou Azamede, Mawussé Ohini Toffa and Angelantonio Grossi.

95 See also David Morgan, "Place and the Instrumentality of Religious Artifacts," *Kunst og Kultur* 3 (99) (2016): 122–131.

96 Angelantonio Grossi conducts research on the use of new media by traditionals including Voncujuvi, in Ghana (see Angelantonio Grossi, "Vodu and Social Media in Ghana," *Religious Matters*, 30 July 2017).



figures and objects in the depot. He has similar *legba* figures in his own shrine. We discussed all the pictures of *legbawo* in the collection I had with me. For him, the items were not mere things that had moved through a long trajectory in the course of which they transited from being religious objects that harbour spirit power to mere museum objects. For him, the *legbawo* in the museum were alive and likely to be hungry, eagerly awaiting to be called by a priest and fed.

Let me quote from our conversation:

Christopher (C): And these things, honestly, they are hungry, ooo.

Angelantonio (A): hungry

Birgit (B): Hungry? Hungry?

C: Yeah, they have not been fed for ages.

B: No, more than 100 years

C: even some are inside baskets.

B: more than 100 years

C: yes, but we need to do a simple reading (a summoning of the spirits, BM) to find out whether they are still active.

B: but how do you find out?

C: we can

B: how?

C: even by looking at the picture, we can connect

Christopher Voncujevi pursued his point by suggesting that the museum should call in an African to feed the spirits. I retorted that, as a secular institution, the museum might not be prepared to do that. For Christopher this is still a necessity, as he was concerned about the spirits being hungry:

C: No, no, they (the museum people, BM) have to call some African, invite someone to come over there, pray to the spirits and feed them. They can keep them. But just to feed them to be active. Because spirit is spirit, it is not going to die, but it is going to be there.

B: But I think that in their thinking they don't see them as spirits, they see them as objects. You see? (laughs)

C: The point is that someone has to let them understand that these things were not just objects for Africans, they were spiritual objects.

So, the answer to the question what the *legbawo* want is: being fed. That the *legbawo* might be hungry was an amazing realization for me. All I had been concerned about in my scholarly imagination were the *category* transitions the

*legba* figures underwent during their trajectory. In so doing, I did not think about the limits of the object-category as such, other than criticizing their categorization as ‘fetish’ or ‘idol.’ Christopher Voncujoivi’s remark that the spirits that are in and part of the *legba*-figures are hungry and await being fed, opened my mind to the importance of feeding as a central religious practice. Feeding the spirits involves particular forms of food – such as mashed jam mixed with red oil, fowls or goats, and certain forms of alcohol (which Voncujoivi did not specify), that would have to be administered in a ritual setting. Looking at the pictures with Voncujoivi I started to notice that the figures themselves have absorbed the food that has been put there as part of their regular feeding, and annual sacrifices. In a way, the food offered to a *legba* becomes inextricably connected with it, and this can be seen as indicating how materially spirits are constituted as parts of the world through clay and food.

Scholars have paid much attention to the ‘fetish’ as a thing-with-a-will – and hence the messing up of the distinction between objects and subjects, dead matter and humans. This deconstruction is of course important, but my encounter with Voncujoivi alerted me to the crucial importance of food and feeding as a basic practice through which humans relate to the spirit realm. In retrospect I am surprised that I managed to overlook this obvious point for so long. With hindsight, as the conversations with Voncujoivi affirm, traditional priests feed the spirits with specific food stuffs,<sup>97</sup> so as to ensure that they are active and can be summoned to work (such as, heal and protect people, find stolen things, take revenge). With increasing Christianization many traditional shrines have been abandoned, implying that the spirits would not be fed any longer, thus going hungry and getting angry. Voncujoivi told us about various cases in which families were struck by mishap, which he attributed to a neglected, starving spirit. Peace could only be regained by offering food. While throughout the twentieth century, in Ghana many indigenous spirits on

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97 What exactly is fed to a spirit depends on its preferences, which are known by the priests. As I noticed during my research in Peki (in the period between 1989 and 1991), there are different occasions of feeding the spirits, from the annual jam festival celebrated to honour the spirits, to day-to-day offerings, to special sacrifices (sheep, goat, dog, snake) made for certain ends (such as achieving protection, or appeasing pollution). See Montgomery (Eric J. Montgomery, “They Died in Blood: Morality and Communitas in Ewe Ritual,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 32 (1) (2018): 25–40) for a compelling list of sacrificial offerings for Ewe *vodun* (gods), and Adjei (Sela Kodjo Adjei, “Philosophy of Art in Ewe Vodun Religion,” University of Ghana, Dissertation, 2019: 147–148) for the feeding of Ewe gods. The issue of feeding the spirits will be explored in more detail in my future research, taking particular inspiration here from Hüwelmeier’s work on feeding the spirits in Vietnam (Hüwelmeier, “Feeding the Spirits”), thereby aiming at sound comparison.

the village and family level were abandoned,<sup>98</sup> the practice of feeding spirits did not cease; it was extended to cars, in analogy to canoes.<sup>99</sup> Offering food is found necessary to make a car or canoe pass safely through all sorts of dangers in Ghana's traffic jungle or at sea.

So, my point here is that while the deconstruction of the figure of the 'fetish' has been crucial for rethinking a presumed dominance of humans over 'mere objects,' it is time to take another step. The 'fetish' forms an entry point into a complex sensational form, in which the relation between humans and spirits, as they are held to dwell in for instance a *legba*-figure, is maintained through an exchange of food. Humans are to feed the spirits, and spirits in turn are to ensure the growth of crops, rain, and good harvests – a cycle. I think that Ewe uses of food point to what Feuerbach, citing Moleschott, described as life being material exchange. In this metabolism religion is a crucial player, organizing this material-spiritual exchange through worship, rituals and performances. Ewe religion, and similar indigenous religious traditions, is grounded in the relationality of and exchange between humans, natural forces and spirits (which, for Christopher Voncujevi *are* energy) that is organized around food.<sup>100</sup> This exchange involves exchange and sharing along vertical and horizontal lines. As Feuerbach remarks, in the Old Testament idols are dismissed as "the manufactured, dead gods" – a view that was certainly repeated in the preaching of the NMG missionaries to the Ewe whose gods and spirits were dismissed as idols, and that is still reiterated up until today by Christian preachers, who also recur to New Testament passages that dismiss the food offerings made to 'idols' (e.g. 1 Corinthians 8: 1–7).<sup>101</sup> But indigenous Ewe certainly knew better

98 Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

99 Jojada Verrips, "Ghanaian Canoe Decorations," *Maritime Anthropological Studies (MAST)* 1(1) (2002): 49.

100 The term for food in Ewe is *nuɖuɖu* (something to eat). It is employed to refer to food both in a concrete sense and figuratively, as something to be ingested. In this sense eating (*du*) may also refer to being in the world, as in *Me-du agbe kpo*, meaning "I ate life before. (I have once enjoyed life)" (Gladys Sevor, "A Linguistic Analysis of Ewe Metaphorical Expressions," University of Ghana, M. Phil. Thesis, 2015). There is a rich field of food-related terms, such as pot (*ze*) and stomach (*dome*), that are employed in proverbs about life and death (also understood as something that is ultimately swallowed; Sevor, "A Linguistic Analysis," 77–78) and employed to express strong sensations and emotions (of which the stomach is the seat; Sevor, "A Linguistic Analysis," 111–112). Food is also key to how witchcraft is held to operate among the Ewe, and more broadly in West- and Central Africa as an aggressive eating of the life energy of the victim in a witchcraft 'in the spiritual' (see also Peter L. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997)).

101 See Adjei, "Philosophy of Art," 121.

that, as “eating is thus the sign of a true, living god,”<sup>102</sup> the *legbawo* too are *alive*, thereby unhinging the typical missionary binary according to which idols were dead, whereas only the Christian God would be alive.

This relationality established through feeding was challenged by Christian missions in the course of colonization, and traditional exchanges that involved food – feeding the spirits, sacrificial offerings, pouring libation – were banned for Christian converts. The gods were to be starved. While this process is, of course, irreversible, echoes of indigenous Ewe uses of food as prime religious material form to relate to spirits and other humans still can be heard today. A focus on food and the practices around it offers exceptional insights into the operation of indigenous assemblages and their being in the world, and thus also opens up alternative possibilities for imagining religion as a material presence in the world, grounded and enmeshed with life itself. This, in turn, has repercussions for inquiries into colonial collections of figures such as the *legbawo* in the museum and debates about their provenance and future. According to people from their communities of origin such figures may prove resilient to being ‘fetishized’ (in the sense of being turned into an ethnographic artefact that displays a ‘fetish’ or power object) and thus have not been transformed into mere museum objects. Bursting out of the secular frame of the museum, they simply are hungry and want to be fed and taken care of.

## 6 To Conclude: Food for Thought

With this contribution, I sought to *step back* to assess the potential and limitations of the material turn as it has been unfolded so far. Spelling out that the study of religion from a material angle does not involve a mere focus on material culture and does not imply an understanding of materiality as congruous with matter, I advocated a dialectical approach that employs materiality as a concept. Its use is a necessary requirement to transcend a mentalistic approach to religion which is still indebted to idealism. So far, however, research inspired by the material turn (including my own) mainly focused on particular forms of material culture, especially images, objects and buildings.

*Looking beyond and ahead*, I find that it is time to further unpack materiality so as to spot material forms related to the reproduction of life itself – especially food, flora, fauna, earth, air, light, and water. These require more systematic attention as aspects of material religion in future research. In this chapter I foregrounded food, which I see as a basic, existential material form through

<sup>102</sup> Feuerbach, “The Mystery of Sacrifice,” 24.

which humans are enveloped into a grounded, material exchange with the world. Taking Feuerbach's gastro-philosophy as a source of inspiration offers food for thought for including the incorporation of food, and practices of eating, drinking, feeding, fasting, starving, into our understanding of the religion and materiality nexus.

While ultimately it is my aim to fold materiality back into our understanding of religion, for the near future I opt for a further unpacking of materiality into multiple material forms beyond the category of things, that has already received so much attention. Depending on their affordances and authorized religious use, material forms are employed and embodied in the habitus in different ways. Food is not only subject to signification, but also ingested as a substance, and hence fundamental to existence not only in a symbolic but also in an existential sense. A focus on basic matters such as food will further a deeper understanding of the qualities and intensities of the relations between humans and material forms in all sorts of assemblages and sensational forms.

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