



Material Religion

The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief

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Introduction

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introduction

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In 2010, the editors of *Material Religion* articulated their vision, legacy, and provocation—they argued that the study of material religion was to focus on bodies, things, places, and practices. *Material Religion* exists in relationship to art history, archeology, anthropology, and religious studies but as the progeny of these fields it crystallized by stomping on and remixing the priorities of these disciplines. To art history, material religion argues that there cannot just be a focus on “production, form, style, and artistic intention.” From archeology it inherited an appreciation for objects, and the “taxonomies of design,” “processes of production, and genealogies of influence,” but argued that there was much more to do after dating an object and discerning its design, origin, and style (Meyer et al 2010).

Material Religion saves its biggest challenge for its progenitor, religious studies, in arguing that religion is not primarily a domain of belief. There is no religious experience, belief, feeling, or idea that does not rely on the material. Instead, beliefs and their related communities are “configurations of material things, practices, individual bodies and social bodies” (209). Icons, buildings, the fleshy bodies and their inner skeletons that partake in ritual movement, books, voices, are the stuff of belief. The editors argued, to study religion without attention to and regard for the material is to “mistake creeds for the worlds that forged them” (209). So with this bold statement, the editors declared “material religion’ is not another subfield, but located at the very heart of religious studies.” And yet, in 2024, the American Academy of Religion does not have a Material Religion Unit. Indeed, ritual studies, anthropology of religion, and other units have featured work on material religion, there

remains no heart to gather scholarship on material religion that cuts across the silos of subfield, traditions, geographies, and time periods. Material Religion the journal remains the heart of this scholarship, but more needs to be done.

In 2020–21, the editorial board of Material Religion underwent major change. The journal’s founding editors departed and a new generation of scholars took the helm. This handover happened not only in the tumultuous and uncertain context of the global Covid-19 pandemic, but also in a tumultuous time for the journal as it expanded its global reach—particularly in Africa, India, China, and South America. The leadership change and the changing face of our journal’s contributors have prompted a productive and ongoing identity crisis: what is the study of “material religion” today and what is *Material Religion’s* relationship to it? We, the new editors of Material Religion, are taking this opportunity to offer our own vision, reflect on our own legacies, and offer our own provocations for the future of the study of material religion.

In particular, we’ve become troubled by our subtitle: *The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief*. Are we still a journal animated by the study of objects, art, and belief? Would a different troika of terms better capture the new directions of material religion’s scholarly methods, fields, and interests? Below, the editors offer some reflections on *Material Religion’s* key terms.

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