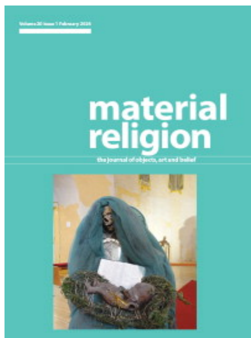

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From Objects to Larger Material Structures / From Belief to Practices

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from objects to larger material structures

katja rakow

An object is a very concrete thing. It can be described in detail, including its production, distribution, and use if such data is available. Indeed, many submissions to *Material Religion* focus on discrete objects, detailing their historical trajectory and religious meaning according to iconographic tradition. However, that is just half of the story. If we take the statement seriously that materiality is foundational to religious expression and experience and thus at the heart of religious studies, then scholars must push further than a mere description of religious objects and their iconographic interpretation. How are these objects put to use? Who is doing what with such an object and for what purpose? What do these objects accomplish for their users? How do the users make sense of them?

Almost 17 years ago, during my PhD research on German practitioners in Tibetan Buddhist meditation centers, I had a key experience. One of my fieldwork sites was a very small Shambhala Buddhist meditation group located within a much larger transnational organization. At that time, the spiritual head of the organization had commissioned a new scroll painting (*thangka*) that would eventually become the centerpiece of the new shrine design in all centers around the world. The new image depicted the Primordial Rigden King, the enlightened ruler of the mythical kingdom of Shambhala. In preparation for the changes ahead, the group watched a DVD that documented the making of the new *thangka* and explained its meaning in detail. It took the small group almost a year to raise enough money to buy a large replica of the new *thangka* and a large enough glass frame to hang the image (Figures 1 and 2).

After installing the image above the shrine, the members of the group assembled for the first sitting meditation in front of it. Concluding the evening, the meditation leader mentioned the Rigden King and gestured towards the new *thangka*. Suddenly, one of the members asked, astonished, "Wait, is that not the Buddha in the painting?" The meditation leader nodded in agreement, which caused the questioner to exclaim, "Does that mean that we no longer have a Buddha on our shrine?" Another member tried to alleviate the confusion by remarking that the tiny figure depicted above the large image of the Rigden King would surely represent the Buddha. The meditation leader nodded again, and everyone, somehow, seemed to be relieved. While putting away the meditation cushions, everyone expressed how happy they were about their new *thangka*, how beautiful it was, and how wonderful it was to know that their shrine design now aligned with the shrines of other centers around the world.

Besides officially available interpretations of the *thangka*, the group members showed only marginal knowledge of the iconography. Nevertheless, they invested time and money into acquiring the painting. For the group, the meaning of the *thangka* was not primarily encoded in the iconographic details. To most members of the group, it was sufficient that the image clearly showed generally recognizable Buddhist imagery. This general notion of the Buddhist nature of the new *thangka* was important for the identity construction as a Buddhist meditation group. Most members primarily attended the group for the purpose of sitting meditation. At this stage of their practice, most of them were not particularly interested in Buddhist doctrine. Therefore, precise Buddhist knowledge was not a necessary condition to be part of the group as long as there was an image that could function as a Buddhist identity marker. The new Primordial Rigden Thangka clearly fulfilled that role. In addition, the installation of the new *thangka* firmly situated the meditation group within a larger transnational network of Shambhala-Buddhist centers. Simultaneously, acquiring the painting fostered group cohesion and solidified a relatively small yet fragile group through the collaborative effort and investment required for installing the new image. From then on, the jointly acquired painting not only formed the aesthetic centerpiece of the Shambhala Buddhist shrine room and the focus of various meditation and recitation practices but also functioned as a material anchor of the local group within a larger transnational network.

For me, the object becomes relevant only in relation to its users and the practice setting in which it is used—may it be looked at, touched, kissed, held, worn, carried, worshiped, invested with meaning, or shunned with disgust. It is embedded in a material assemblage of someone handling it in the context of a specific religious practice or setting. Such an assemblage, in the simple, literal sense, involves several materialities, including the object, the handling body, the space in which the practice happens, but potentially other objects, bodies, sounds, smells, and more. The complex

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FIG 1
Old Shambhala shrine with new Rigden Thangka next to the shrine (photo by the author).

embeddedness of an object in practices and human-nonhuman networks of production, distribution, consumption, or use is what David Morgan (2017) had in mind when he suggested a nine-fold approach to material analysis. Such an analysis includes the objects, the handling by religious practitioners, and their function in mediating religious worlds. Another way to go beyond the singular object is the concept of "sensational forms" suggested by Birgit Meyer (2013, 2020). Sensational forms are "authorized forms through which the transcendent is being generated and becomes somehow tangible" to religious practitioners (Meyer 2013, 8). Such sensational forms are complex material-corporeal assemblages or in Meyer's words are made of "composite media" and various materialities and can feature objects, images, texts, and larger structures such as buildings or more intangible things such as sound or smell (Meyer 2020, 8, 21).

FIG 2
Installing the new Primordial Rigden Thangka (photo by the author).

These two eminent material religion scholars have offered avenues to take specific objects or media as an entry point for analyzing the material and corporeal dimension of religion. But there are other theoretical approaches out there that can be just as useful for an analysis of the material and sensual aspects of religion because they bring the object or the material world more generally in relation to human users and larger practice settings. Examples are Ian Hodder's human-thing entanglements (2011), practice theory's engagement with materiality (Schatzki 2010, 2019), or the aesthetics of religion, which focusses on the sensorial, perceptible formations in religious practices (Grieser and Johnston 2017; Koch and Wilkens 2019).

Most of the objects analyzed in the context of material religion are easily categorized as religious objects—devotional, sacrificial, ritualistic, sacred items, or objects that illustrate religious narratives and ideas. What our journal receives less frequently are articles dealing with the not so obviously religious objects and non-religious materialities involved in religious practices, which nevertheless

are an important part of the everyday material infrastructure that enables religious practice or a pious life. What about a refrigerator that features a so-called Shabbat mode and allows Orthodox Jews to use household appliances without violating their religious laws? What about the use of streaming, audio, video, or light technologies in houses of worship and their impact on how worship is structured, orchestrated, and experienced? What about the use of computers, apps, smartphones, or robots in religious practice settings and the impact on religious practitioners? What about the material structure and spatial set-up of a certain neighborhood in which different religious organizations mingle and/or compete with each other? These materialities, technologies, and spatialities are object-like, material stuff, and at the same time more than the classical discrete object. They are extended objects, "hyperobjects" (Arab, Hughes and Plate 2023), and larger material structures that shape the experience and expression of religion.

More recently, scholars have invoked the "infrastructural turn", which will align well with a material religion perspective. It might offer fruitful avenues for research on religion in settings of religious diversity and how religion is shaped by urban structures, and, in turn, religious material culture may impact such urban spaces (Burchardt 2019, 2022; Hoelzchen and Kirby 2020; Kirby Forthcoming; Rocha 2021). Sarah suggests that we should explore the entanglement between materiality, power structures, and social, cultural, and political history in the context of museum practices. We can also consider museums as material infrastructures entangled in hegemonic discourses and practice regimes that influence what is deemed art or religious objects worthy of display.

If the discrete object was once the primary entry point and ideally needs to be placed in conjunction with users and practices, it might be time to expand beyond the discrete object. This expansion should encompass two key aspects: firstly, the material elements that are essential for religious practice, even if they are not strictly considered religious in nature, and secondly, the larger material structures that should be included in our analysis and understanding when studying material religion.

from belief to practices

I think "belief", the third term in our subtitle, is the most contested one and the stickiest. There are good reasons to get rid of the term and its many problematic implications—from a strong Protestant bias to notions of belief as primary and all material expressions as secondary illustrations of religious ideas that still prevail (Lopez 1998; Morgan 2010; Bivins 2016). But I agree with Duane that we might lose more than we gain if we simply throw out the term.

The term appears in the form of a noun, which is the most problematic aspect for me. As a noun, it takes on a seemingly rigid quality, which, of course, "belief" does not possess. The processual, malleable, and changeable quality of believing, as something actively done by religious practitioners, becomes obscured. Coming from a practice-centered perspective, I think of religion not just as something that religious actors believe, but something that they do. I conceive of religion not primarily in terms of beliefs and the perceived, unchanging contents of these beliefs as codified in official religious doctrines, but as a practice. Birgit Meyer (2020, 16) more specifically described "religion as a practice of mediation between humans and a—professed, imagined, construed—transcendent." Here, I would like to center our conceptualization of religion on the more general notion of practice—what people do and how they act—while decentering the idea of belief.

Practices are the connecting element between bodied agents, i.e. religious practitioners, and the non-human material world. In practice theory, practices are materially anchored in both human bodies and nonhuman artifacts (Schatzki 2001). If practice becomes the central concept, then automatically two things follow: first, religious actors as embodied agents are tuned to and grounded in the material world they engage; second, they develop and cultivate the practical and propositional knowledge they need in order to attend to the matter and artifacts involved in religious practices (Schatzki 2019, 57). I would like to think of practices as the nexus where bodied religious agents, their actions, the material world, and their belief(s) intersect. With such a perspective, we can understand how religious practices are informed by beliefs and, at the same time, how practices shape the beliefs that people hold.

Focusing on practices rather than belief would fully bring into view the sensory dimension—sound, smell, touch, etc.—and the emotional dimension—awkwardness, disgust, boredom, excitement—mentioned by Alyssa. The choice of which sets of practices a scholar wants to focus on depends on their research questions; it does not have to be limited to ritual or devotional practices in the narrow sense. It could also be the production and distribution of religious goods, ideas, and services, and the actors involved in these practices. Some or all of these practices might relate to, make claims about, or invoke certain notions of belief as *part* of their practice.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Material, matter, and materiality are as broad as it gets and any subtitle that we might come up with will have the disadvantage of narrowing it down to something less broad and more specific. Using concrete terms in the subtitle has the advantage of making the journal discoverable by potential authors from different disciplines and, thus, it can serve as the interdisciplinary forum for the study of material religion it was intended to be. My own preferred subtitle *The Journal for Religious Material Culture and Practices* might not necessarily achieve the same outcome.

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