

Foreword

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Materiality is an integral part of culture, which is shaped by humans and in turn shapes humans and their experience. “Material culture is part and parcel of human culture in general,” writes Christopher Tilley (2006, 4), an anthropologist and archaeologist by training and one of the foremost material culture scholars of our time. If we follow his argument, then material culture is a constitutive part of religious cultures and life-worlds as well. Consequently, material religion scholars view materiality as fundamental for the expression and experience of religion and thereby as foundational for the study of religion. Understanding the religious worlds people create, inhabit, and experience means exploring how these are materially mediated and how they are embodied and materialized. Anthropologist Matthew Engelke (2012, 9) pointed out that “all religion must be understood in relation to the media of its materiality.” Quite obviously, it includes material *things*, but also less thing-like materialities such as actions, words, sounds, or smells “which are material no matter how quickly they pass from sight or sound or dissipate into the air” (Engelke 2012, 9). All religion is material because it depends on material media – such as images, objects, clothes, food, incense, liquids, spaces, and sounds – but also on the acting, sensing, and experiencing human body engaging the material world the religious actors inhabit. All these materialities – we material religion scholars call them ‘media’ broadly understood – are used to render the sacred tangible to the human senses. Without these materialities that mediate and materialize the more-than-human that various religious traditions refer to as ‘the Sacred,’ it would be impossible to “make the invisible visible” as religious studies scholar Robert Orsi (2012, 147) has put it. The beauty of an icon, the skillful recitation of Quranic verses, the rhythmic drums of a ritual, the smell of burning incense, the gnawing hunger during fasting periods, the exertion during an extraneous pilgrimage, the darkness of a prayer cave or the imposing glory of a cathedral – all these have different material qualities. Space, objects, bodies, and practices work together in mediating divine presence and shaping religious subjects, sensibilities, and convictions.

The re-evaluation of the material dimension of religion happened in the context of a broader paradigmatic shift within the humanities and social sciences often referred to as “the material turn” (Joyce and Bennet 2010, 7). With it came the realization that material things are neither just illustrations of

social facts and relations nor secondary expressions of ideas and doctrines. Developments such as material culture studies, visual culture studies, the anthropology of the senses, and new materialism had a lasting impact on how we study religion. They stimulated new approaches in which material culture, everyday practices, and the body became much more central, such as the study of lived religion and material religion. Similar developments can also be observed in other disciplines and area studies. Islamic studies like religious studies have a strong philological expertise and orientation, but recent publications and volumes – the present volume *Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters* prominently among them – show an active engagement with material approaches and the corporeal and sensual dimension of Islam, in this case Shi'i practices and materialities.¹ The editors and authors of *Religion That Matters* engage various aspects of Shi'i materialities ranging from the visual to the sonic dimension, looking at religious things and corporeal regimes, and how affect and emotion play out in the encounter and engagement of religious materialities in devotional, ritual, and memorial practices. This broad interrogation and analysis of Shi'i materialities places the volume squarely in the field of material religion studies. In this regard, the present volume differs from other edited works that focus on specific material aspects of Islam or the more thing-like quality of materiality – for example the (devotional) object (e. g., McGregor 2020; Bigelow 2021). The volume covers a much broader terrain of materiality, what religious actors do with material things, and which effects such “human-thing entanglements” (Hodder 2011) have on the religious actors, their communities, or the social contexts in which they happen. The contributions address different religious materialities (grave soil of more-than-human figures, holy water, foodstuff, religious images, statues, etc.) and how these mediate *praesentia* – as the editors have put it in their introduction; but they also discuss how religious materiality is entwined in processes of boundary making and identity politics *vis-à-vis* a dominant religious or political other. Other chapters tackle how certain materialities and related practices are contested or how materiality plays into contestations of memory cultures, officially sanctified and authorized narratives of events, and commemoration practices, and how such configurations play out in processes of heritagization. In their breadth and diversity, the contributions show what

1 For example, see the special issue on *Sensory History of the Islamic World* (ed. by Lange 2022), the edited volumes *Islam Through Objects* (ed. by Bigelow 2021) and *Islam and the Devotional Object: Seeing Religion in Egypt and Syria* (ed. by McGregor 2020), or Natalia Suits' (2020) *Qur'anic Matters* to mention a few recent contributions in the intersecting fields of material religion and Islamic studies.

a material approach to Shi'i Islam has to offer if broadly understood and not narrowly confined to the religious object. With such an approach, the editors connect to recent works in the field of material religion which emphasize the role of religious materiality in the political arena – may it be the formation of heritage, the politics of authentication, identity, or persuasion (van de Port and Meyer 2018).

From the outset, the field of material religion was an interdisciplinary one, in which scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds were brought together by a shared interest in the material aspects of religion (Meyer et al. 2014, 105). With its rich and diverse compilation, the present volume continues the interdisciplinary tradition of material religion studies. Among the contributors we find scholars from Islamic studies, Iranian studies, art historians specialized in Islamic art or architecture, and anthropologists working in different Shi'i communities. The title of the volume – *Shi'i Materiality Beyond Karbala: Religion That Matters* – is programmatic, as it includes diverse geographical contexts beyond the Arab world and ritual repertoires and practices including but also going beyond Muharram rituals. A focus on materialities tallies well with such a program, as it allows the editors and authors to explore and highlight the diversity and richness of Shi'i religious life worlds and practices across various regions. It was the editors' intention to probe "into the real, material world of Shi'ism in order to understand how Shi'i Islam appears and becomes tangible in the world and how it is lived and experienced through material cultures and forms of religious expressivity" (Marei and Shanneik this volume). The contributors were invited to "investigate the somatic, corporeal, and visceral experiences instantiated by material things" and to not just simply ask "what things *mean* or *symbolize* but also what they *do* in and to their socio-political ecosystems" (Marei and Shanneik this volume). The volume does not intend to present a uniform picture of Shi'i Islam nor what kind of materiality Shi'ism might share in all its historical instantiations and localities. The volume takes materiality in its complexity and diversity as the central entry point to Shi'i religious life worlds, practices, and experiences without claiming to provide a complete and full representation of everything that could be said about Shi'i materialities – how could that ever be accomplished in one single volume given the multiplicity of materiality and its centrality to human culture and experience in general? The programmatic introduction and the twelve chapters provide a rich landscape for the reader to traverse and demonstrate that Shi'i materiality is neither incidental nor something solely belonging to "folklore" or "popular religion." Rather, each chapter is a material witness to the fact that materiality rests at the heart of Shi'i Islam due to its "capacity to (inter) mediate between human and more-than-human beings" as the editors state in

their introduction (Marei and Shanneik this volume). With such a vision, the editors point to the heart of the matter of what the material religion approach stands for, namely taking materiality serious as the *sine qua non* of not just of Shi'i Islam, but religion and religious practice in general.

All contributions clearly demonstrate the centrality of materiality in its diverse and varied forms and expressions in Shi'i Islam, and by that, they demonstrate the centrality of materiality for religious cultures more generally. In the future, there is still more ground to be gained by studying the use of non-religious materialities in religious contexts, and some of the contributions are already moving into that direction (e. g., the chapter on religious statues in Kuwait and the repurposing of Halloween hands in those statues; or the chapter on the uniforms of fallen soldiers, which acquire a religious meaning). Such a future direction would mean not solely focusing on clearly marked religious or sacred objects and spaces but also the mundane or profane materialities that are used, re-used, or introduced in religious settings. Another future avenue in material religion studies will be the study of complex material assemblages and the (profane) infrastructures that make religious practices possible (e. g., Burchardt 2019). That means again moving beyond the study of discrete religious objects towards analyzing complex "aesthetic formations" (van de Port and Meyer 2018, 22) and the creation and transformation of religious spaces and atmospheres and the rather mundane techniques and technologies that might involve (e. g., Rakow 2020). Finally, material approaches mean not just studying the outside material world of objects, but also the sensing human body situated in that material world who encounters and engages that world in social and religious practices. A material analysis should ideally include all three aspects.

The present volume on Shi'i materialities brings together interdisciplinary scholarship on Shi'ism studied through the lens of its material, visual and sensual aspects, which makes it a rich conversation partner and meeting ground for researchers working on the intersection of religious studies, Islamic studies, anthropology, and material culture studies.

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