UNDERSTANDING RELIGION

Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies

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9

BODIES

Material Religion, Embodiment, and Materiality

IN WHICH WE EXPLORE:

The field of material religion and regimes of bodily discipline
The concepts of embodiment and materiality
How the material signifies what counts as religion, magic, or superstition
Case studies exploring perceived miracles related to material structures, and embodied practice and regimes of bodily discipline at a Christian shrine

INTRODUCTION

The material aspects of religion—such as buildings, actions, or clothing—may seem peripheral, or simply physical reflections of beliefs or spiritual experiences (see box 8.5). Globally and historically, many religions have downplayed the physical world, seeing it as dependent upon a "transcendent" power (see box 1.10) or as a bond that keeps us from contemplating "higher" matters. This can be seen as paradoxical, for spiritual aspirations are always embedded in material artifacts.[1] Moreover, insofar as we can study religion, all we have access to are the physical, or phenomenal (material, available to the senses), aspects:

- Doctrines or beliefs often exist as texts (bits of paper, papyrus, stone tablets, etc.).
- Oral teachings need an embodied person speaking to other embodied persons.
- Religion involves diverse material aspects such as rituals, buildings, and so on.

Hindu temple gate showing the spiritual represented in material form, Sri Mariamman Temple, Singapore.

Therefore, to study religion, however we envisage it, is to study material or embodied religion. Religion is embodied, emplaced, and enacted.[2]

This chapter is not focused solely on the physical stuff of material religion; seriously considering material religion forces us to acknowledge the centrality of human embodiment in our knowing and thinking. Western thought has often assumed that knowledge is first and foremost an intellectual and almost disembodied process (see box 9.1). However, the material turn, a recent focus on the significance of the material, suggests that our knowledge does not primarily begin in our minds, language, or social interactions. All these are dependent upon the realm of physicality, which forms the basis of subsequent human experiences and linguistic and social contemplation, notwithstanding that we only conceptualize the world through social and linguistic structures of thought.

Taking the material world seriously will lead to three important points, addressed sequentially in this chapter:

BOX 9.1 IDEALISM, EMPIRICISM, AND LOGOCENTRISM

Stretching back to what are often seen as the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece (though the ancient Greeks saw wisdom originating in Asia or Africa; see box 7.7), we see two poles exemplified in Plato (ca. 427–347 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE). They, respectively, represent the traditions of idealism and empiricism:

- An idealist worldview says that our understanding of anything first arises in the mind, and that pure ideas (such as mathematical formula like 2 + 2=4) are the only secure and certain form of knowledge. For Plato, our knowledge was grounded in a transcendent realm of "Ideas" or "Forms." For him, our bodies were a prison that ensnared us (see box 10.1).
- An empiricist worldview says that our understanding of anything always begins with sense experience of the world. We know 2 + 2=4 first as an experience, because we have two apples and then add two more apples. Ideas and thoughts are secondary, based on study of the world. Aristotle dismissed Plato's realm of "Forms" and argued that we can only know by examining the world around us.

However, Western philosophy in either camp has arguably been focused upon disembodied ideas and words.[1] This emphasis assumes that knowledge is primarily something in our minds that can be disassociated from our embodied self.[2] This can be expressed through the term "logocentrism": *logos* is Greek for "word" or "reason"; adding "-centrism" emphasizes seeing language/linguistic reasoning as central. However, focusing on language or reason (alone) as our source of knowledge is misleading. Emotions are central to how we think, while our physical experiences also shape our thoughts: tension, anger, or tiredness are all factors in how we respond to arguments, data, and ideas. Taking embodiment seriously reconfigures how we view human understanding and reason (see box 9.10).

Note: Logocentrism is associated with Jacques Derrida (1930–2004).[3] For Derrida, logocentrism stressed that Western philosophy gave priority to the spoken word over the written word. However, in our usage, Derrida's own thought remains logocentric because it still assumes the priority of language over embodied knowledge.

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1 Arguably, this is true of many traditions; however, the so-called Western philosophical tradition has most influenced contemporary academic thought.

2 See Vásquez, *More Than Belief*.

3 "Logocentrism" was first used by Ludwig Klages (1872–1956). See Jack Reynolds, "Jacques Derrida (1930–2004)," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (n.d.), www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/; and Michael Harrison, "logocentrism," *Chicago School of Media Theory* (blog) (2018), https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/logocentrism/.

1. Focusing upon material religion is not simply about thinking about material things (books, buildings, behavior, etc.) instead of immaterial things (beliefs, experiences, etc.). This chapter can be seen alongside chapters 1 and 3 in moving away from certain traditional notions of religion often termed the world religions paradigm (WRP) (see chapter 1 and box 2.1). Studying material religion is not just thinking about different things, but thinking differently about what we term "religion."
2. Our embodiment (see box 9.2) is not itself a neutral or natural given. It is regulated through social structures, what may be termed "regimes of knowledge." This includes the classification of bodies as gendered, raced, or otherwise ranked by systems of colonial, patriarchal, or other orders of control (see chapters 5, 7, and 10).
3. Taking embodiment seriously has important consequences for how we think about thinking. This includes how we conceptualize what we term "religions" and how we make sense of conflicting data and worldviews.

THEORIZING MATERIAL RELIGION

BEING EMBODIED

The material turn has meant that a number of scholars of religion stress embodied practice or materiality.[3] This shifts our focus to religion as performative, corporeal, and ephemeral: physical things do not last; they decay. It contrasts with the WRP, which regards religion as cognitive, disembodied, and an essence, and therefore being framed as eternal.

Here, we can reinforce an important point: this is not simply about changing the object of study, for example, from books and teachings to rituals and practices. Rather, it is about altering the nature of study: to religion *as* embodiment, that is, understanding how religion is first and foremost something enacted, not ideas later given some physical form (see box 9.2).

We must remember that embodiment has real consequences:

- It is implicated in divisions based on gender or race (see, respectively, chapters 10 and 7).
- It means that our world is not simply socially or linguistically constructed, but fundamentally underpinned by our being-in-the-world.

RITUAL: SYMBOL OR ACTION?

A significant aspect of material religion is ritual (see chapter 12). We can discuss ritual as a form of bodily practice, or what Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) termed "techniques of the body."[4] Mauss argued that specific bodily forms of practice are not simply physical but also social and psychological. The phrase draws attention to what we do (not just what

BOX 9.2 WHAT ARE EMBODIMENT AND BEING-IN-THE-WORLD?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) stated the following about our situation as human beings: "Insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent on my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way that I do not choose."[1]

For Merleau-Ponty, it is not so much that we have beliefs, or make intellectual choices, that affects our being-in-the-world (see below). Rather, this happens in reverse. It is our situatedness as embodied creatures who have the state of being-in-the-world that determines what kinds of thoughts, beliefs, and ideas we can have, although the way our culture has conceptualized material things also affects how we see and understand them. In short, as thinking, acting, and social creatures we cannot escape the limitations and realities of our bodies, which bind us to life within a material world that affects who and what we are.

"Being-in-the-world" (from German, *Dasein*, literally, "being there") is employed here to refer to the way that we exist in an embodied and all-encompassing physical environment that is not simply of our choosing. The term was coined by the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), but we employ it without taking on a specifically Heideggerian philosophy.[2] Our being-in-the-world is both social and cultural, yet also physical and embodied. We cannot exceed the limits of our embodiment, while this is also prescribed in various ways by our social conditioning. Heidegger spoke of it as "being thrown," meaning we are placed in a certain context in which we must exist.

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1962 [1948]), 440.
2 See Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2011), 2.2.3, available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/.

we think), but also notes how our actions are not separate from, but are implicated in, our self-presentation and our worldviews.[5]

Meredith McGuire argues that disputes between Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth-century Christian Reformations (see box 9.3) had important ramifications for the conceptualization of rituals, which continue to today. For reformers such as Martin Luther (1483–1546), the Eucharist was simply symbolic. In Catholic theology, the doctrine of transubstantiation, or the "real presence," argued that the bread and wine "actually" become Jesus's body and blood, if not literally, then at least in their "essence" (see box 12.6). In other words, before the Reformation, a ritual was seen as a form of effective action; that is, a ritual enacted a particular effect upon the world. This understanding was portrayed by Protestants as "superstition." This, McGuire argues, was an aspect of the demarcation of medieval ways of seeing the world from modern ways of seeing the world. It helped distinguish between what was termed "magic" or "superstition" and what was termed "religion" (see box 9.4).[6]

BOX 9.3 **THE CHRISTIAN REFORMATIONS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES**

Conventionally dated to 1517, based on actions attributed to Martin Luther (1483–1546), the Protestant Reformation was a wide movement across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which developed from medieval Catholic Christian thought and caused significant ruptures in what had gone before.[1] Moreover, the Protestant Reformation was not unified: Martin Luther and John Calvin (1509–1564), founded, respectively, Lutheranism and Calvinism/Presbyterianism; the Mennonites, Quakers, Amish, and others also emerged.[2] The Protestant Reformation also inspired a "Catholic Reformation," exemplified in the important Council of Trent (1545–1563, actually a series of councils or meetings).[3]

These Catholic-Protestant disputations have had ongoing implications for Western, and therefore global, thought. Arguably, Protestantism was associated with moves toward the modern nation-state, individualism, and the merchant-based capitalist economy; rather than being a cause, per se, it gave the rising middle classes and princes a role of leadership and identity that was religiously legitimated.[4] Further, the polemics that demarcated Protestants from Catholics became influential in defining religion today as it was mainly in northwestern European states and later North America, where Protestants were ascendant, that modern Western scholarship arose (see chapter 1). Whether thinkers were religious or not, the worldview of Protestantism permeated normative categories of thought.

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1 See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (London: Penguin, 2005).

2 For a brief overview of some major Christian traditions, see Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Chichester: Wiley, 2015), 199–219.

3 See Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 190–95.

4 See Linda Woodhead, *An Introduction to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 162–69.

The Protestant conceptualization of ritual has consequences for modern thinking. Religion has become conceptualized through the lens of symbols, doctrines, and concepts of the transcendent (see box 1.10). These take precedence over the embodied and material world. Three examples can help demonstrate how such theorizing hides the inherent materiality of religious practice:

Christian Eucharist: A ritual reenactment of Jesus's "last supper" with his disciples before his execution, the Eucharist links Christians with the wider body of "saints" (in this sense, all Christians living and dead) and seeks reconciliation with God. Those involved will variously sit, stand, or kneel (see case study 11B), with particular postures exemplifying attitudes of devotion. In Catholic traditions, you will also see the elevation of the host—where the

BOX 9.4 THE MATERIAL DISTINCTION OF MAGIC, SUPERSTITION, RELIGION, AND SCIENCE

The terms "religion," "magic," "superstition," and "science" are often taken to be quite distinct spheres (see boxes 7.8 and 12.2). Probably, when you hear them, you have a sense of what types of things would fit under each. For instance, where would you place the following?

- acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)
- alchemy
- animal sacrifice
- astrology
- astronomy
- Bible reading
- Buddhist meditation
- chemistry
- dowsing (for water)
- palm reading
- prophesies

Possibly, you categorized things which seemed "inward" or "spiritual" as "religion"; specific "secular" disciplines as "science"; and things related to the material world which did not seem "scientific" as "superstition" or "magic." This marks a general trend in modern thought which draws from Protestantism (see box 9.3):

Religion: The Protestant emphasis on symbols, inner experience, and preaching dominate how we see religion. They are private and internal.

Modernity: "Secular" and "religious" spheres were separated as the modern period progressed. The former is public and physical; the latter private and interior (see chapter 16).

Science: Secular modernity demarcated a distinct sphere of (physical) science (a category that has been contested and created),[1] separate from religion.

Superstition/Magic: The point where the physical/secular meets religion became a site for labeling practices as "superstition," especially those not deemed "rational."

Non-Protestants: Catholic ritual became classed as superstition; likewise, any "religion" beyond Protestant Europe was characterized as "superstition," "magic," or "primitive" religion (see box 7.8).

1 See Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

bread that represents Jesus's body (the host) is held aloft—which is often seen as a "spiritual" highpoint. In some traditions, acts such as kissing texts, bowing at various points, and genuflection (a type of bow that involves going down on one knee to show deep respect) are also performed. Though the Eucharist is spoken of as spiritual feeding, participants engage bodily: to be devout, one performs acts of devotion (techniques of the body). Community aspects are often stressed, emphasizing being embodied among other bodies.

Buddhist Meditation: Generally seen as focused on the "inner" life of the practitioner, Buddhist meditation involves correct bodily positions as prescribed by Buddhist textual sources (see box 9.5).[7] An upright sitting position is common, while many basic meditations begin with a focus on the meditator's breath. She should first become aware of this: the breath as it comes in and out. Arguably, meditation purifies both mind and body, because in Buddhist anthropology (here meaning the conception of humanity) we are composed of what are termed the five "heaps/aggregates" (*skandhas*), which are both mental and physical, including consciousness, perception, and the body.[8] Bodily posture, breath, and awareness of one's body emphasize the embodied nature of Buddhist meditation.

Islamic Prayer (*salat*): For many Muslims, strict devotion involves praying five times a day, with precise injunctions of routinized bodily practice. In the Sunni tradition, the five prayers (*salat*) are performed as follows in a set number of cycles: standing, arms folded (often reciting verses from the Quran); bowing from the waist; standing; prostration; sitting; prostration. While it is when standing or sitting that more verbal prayers or textual verses are recited, it is in prostration "when one is closest to God, expressing utter selflessness, devotion and obedience," while the postures should "generate humility and self-awareness of one's own finitude in the presence of God."[9] Importantly, particularly on Fridays, the prayer should be communal, stressing embodied presence among others.[10] In Islamic prayer, the physical movements are what are seen to exemplify and even generate the mental/spiritual attitudes (see box 9.6).

THE SPIRITUAL AS PHYSICAL

Some may remain unconvinced that everything that we see, know, and think about as religious or spiritual is mediated through the body. We are generally culturally bred to believe that such matters are essentially about some "inner," "transcendent," or "spiritual" aspect. But, if people say they have met a "holy" person, any description will entail a physical quality (see box 9.7). Likewise, when people describe a "sacred place" (see chapter 17), they often say they see it in the landscape or building. Even feeling "inspired" by

BOX 9.5 **BUDDHIST SITTING**

The Discourse on the Applications of Mindfulness (Satipatthana Sutra), while stressing mental awareness, discusses bodily awareness, noting that "a monk gone to the forest . . . sits down cross-legged, holding his back erect, and establishes mindfulness in front of him."[1] The bodily posture seems integral because it is what awareness is based on. Seated, standing, lying, and walking postures are discussed in various texts.[2] In Japan, Zen master Dogen (1200–1253) wrote a text entitled "How Everyone Can Sit," describing meditation as primarily an activity of the body, hence accessible to all.[3] In Zen Buddhism, meditators may sit in the traditional Japanese kneeling (*seiza*) meditation position for hours at a time; meditation periods exceeding three hours are not uncommon. This can entail intense pain: try kneeling with your back straight for just one minute and you will probably start to feel considerable discomfort. Finding ways to be aware of, but not focused on, the pain is part of the discipline.

1 Satipatthana Sutra, cited in *Original Buddhist Sources: A Reader,* ed. Carl Olson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 69–77, 70 (see also 70–73).

2 See Shaw, *Buddhist Meditation,* 16–17; Shaw, *Introduction to Buddhist Meditation.*

3 Eihei Dogen, "Fukanzazengi: How Everyone Can Sit," trans. Yasuda Joshu Dainen and Anzan Hoshin (1986 [ca. 1227, revised ca. 1233 and 1242]), White Wind Zen Community, https://wwzc.org/dharma-text/fukanzazengi-how-everyone-can-sit.

BOX 9.6 **IS ISLAMIC PRAYER AND TRADITION A FORM OF SELF-CULTIVATION PRACTICE?**

Falun Gong is a Chinese form of self-cultivation practice (see case study 1A and box 1.11), and calling it a "religion" may lead us to neglect certain things. Likewise, describing Islam as a "religion" may lead us to neglect aspects of its physical practice, which includes traditions around physical health (i.e., eating dates and other food, and fasting practices), and embodied spiritual practice (i.e., prayer, pilgrimage, and fasting). The fast is a discipline of the body, but it is intended to discipline the "spirit" (inevitably intertwined with physical practice). Indeed, some Muslims point to recent studies suggesting that fasting has health benefits as a sign that God (in Arabic, Allah, literally, "the God") prescribed something good for the Muslim community.[1] Given the centrality of embodied practice to lived Islam (see chapter 3), does describing it as a self-cultivation practice rather than a religion help? (On comparison, see chapter 11.) This would make physical practices integral, instead of a WRP representation, which typically stresses doctrine.

1 Sartaj Ahmad, K. Goel, K. Maroof, P. Goel, M. Arif, M. Amir, and M. Abid, "Psycho-Social Behaviour and Health Benefits of Islamic Fasting during the Month of Ramadan," *Journal of Community Medicine and Health Education* 2.178 (2012): 1–4.

BOX 9.7 **"SPIRITUAL" BODIES**

The Hebrew Bible recounts "divine" encounters affecting the body of the person. When Moses descended from the mountain after being given the Ten Commandments, he is described as "shining" (Ex. 34:29). The Israelite people at first cannot look directly at him. Here, an encounter with the divine enacts a physical transformation. In Orthodox Christianity some *staretz* (holy people/saints) have also been described as appearing to shine following particular religious experiences or as part of their closeness to deity.

In Buddhism, early texts describe a physical transformation of the Buddha after his experience of awakening/nirvana. Between Bodhgaya (where he was awakened) and Sarnath (where he delivered his first teaching), the Buddha met a spiritual seeker who stopped him and asked what he was (human or deity), because he was like no other human. At Sarnath, his old disciples initially shunned him (they believed he had renounced the path of a true ascetic), but they also *saw* he had changed and so sought his teaching.[1]

1 See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2006), 19–29.

reading a "sacred book" is a physical act: touching the text or seeing words. We come to know what is termed the "religious," "spiritual," or "transcendent" always and only through our embodied experiences.

FRAMING OUR WORLD

Drawing on the work of scholars Eric Goffman and Eric Gombrich,[11] Daniel Miller has approached materiality by focusing on the way we frame our world.[12] In particular, Gombrich spoke about the way that in an art gallery we typically see pictures in frames, but it is not the frame—the most omnipresent artifact—that we look at. Rather, the work of the frame is to be invisible. A good frame, one suitable for the picture, means that we typically do not notice it. Miller's argument is that much of the material framing of our world is like this: it is the obvious, the everyday, the mundane items which are essential to (what we may term) things-being-in-their-place (see box 12.3 on matter out of place) that we overlook. This insight is significant when we discuss material religion, because many everyday aspects of religion which are part of regular practice may be overlooked or unnoticed. But it is often these techniques of the body which help frame, or regulate, religious (or non-religious) lives, practice, beliefs, and behavior. They form a large part of our being-in-the-world. Framing, following Goffman, concerns the way that our world is shaped or constructed in ways we hardly notice: it is "framed" such that it appears "natural" to us (see chapter 5).[13]

THE REGULATION OF BODIES

GREEKS AND MODERNS

Bryan Turner states that "our bodies are regulated and administered for the benefit of the social order,"[14] often framed in ways we hardly notice (especially in our own culture; see chapter 5). Think about ways we behave at school or the office, or the etiquette for riding the train or bus, standing in queue at the supermarket checkout, or greeting people by bowing, shaking hands, rubbing noses, or high-fiving.

Much regulation, in Western forms of Christianity, follows from the logocentric perspective of Western thought (box 9.1). The body has been subjected to the spirit in various disciplines and regimes, with the material often seen as lower and needing to be made subject to our rational or spiritual self, something which is often gendered (see box 10.1). This has resulted in certain bodies being seen as more exalted or significant than other bodies.[15] This has prevailed under various representations of soul and body. Many early and medieval Christians saw these as intimately entwined,[16] but in the early modern period, following an interpretation of René Descartes (1596–1650), the mind and body were envisaged as distinct, referred to as "Cartesian dualism."[17]

Michel Foucault (1926–1984), especially in his work on madness and sexuality, argued there was an increased regimentation and disciplining of the body in modernity.[18] Starting from around the eighteenth century, the body becomes the object of precise calculations and measurements. Our bodies are today quantified in ways that have never happened before. Turner notes that Foucault offers a further insight from Mauss and Merleau-Ponty, who both focused on the individual as an actor, and lacked the historical and sociological lens that Foucault brings.[19] Mauss's "techniques ["disciplines," in Foucault's language] of the body" need supplementing by Foucault's recognition of the regulation of populations.[20] Embodiment, in other words, is both individual and social. Importantly, embodiment, while a constant in some ways (a body today is much like a body a hundred years ago), is also malleable and changing over time (how we think about our bodies today is not how our ancestors thought about them) and location. Turner argues we need to see how the personal and social factors combine.[21] Today, the body and religion are often framed as essentially private, as opposed to the realm of reason, which is part of the public secular arena (see chapter 16). However, the body is often publicly regimented, seen clearly in colonial contexts.

COLONIAL BODIES

In imperial regimes, bodies have been classified into various groups to be controlled and regulated. This has affected the conceptualization of the religion of the classified groups. From the early modern period and beyond (circa sixteenth to nineteenth centuries), an evolutionary scheme was used to classify races, cultures/civilizations, and religions.[22] This graded them into ranks from higher/more advanced to lower/less advanced. This

disciplinary classification was often related to the bodies of those classified. Hence, it was held that "higher races" had higher religions and civilizations, while "savages" were without civilization and with degraded or no religions (see chapter 7 and box 18.6). Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007) has discussed what he describes as "the myth of the lazy native," with European colonialism creating racial classifications.[23] Indigenous groups were often originally seen as industrious and hardworking, but when no longer economically valued by colonizers they were deemed inherently "lazy." Aníbal Quijano (1928–2018) sees both race and gender as historically constructed terms that allowed exploitation and domination of non-European bodies.[24] In many colonial accounts, the bodies of non-Westerners were deemed "feminine," harking back to Plato (see box 10.1), and rendering them inferior to the "masculine" Western body (see chapters 7 and 10). Whether based upon such issues as race, class, gender, or other qualities, we see hierarchies of material bodies. Representations of corporeal nature and religious authority were often woven together. In the Cameroon Grassfields of the 1890s, conversion to Christianity could involve "young men and in particular young women . . . quite literally changing their bodies."[25] These colonial divisions are an embodiment of ideology: we do not simply divide the world into ideas, but into precise physical forms.

We should not see such classification as unique to Western colonialism. It reflects how all groups classify others (see chapter 6 and box 7.4). Especially where we do not understand the other's culture or language, their body is often "read" or "imagined" to gain understanding (see box 9.8). For instance, Japanese scholar Kato Hiroyuki (1836–1916), a committed materialist, argued that Christianity as practiced was "superstitious,"[26] while a group of Japanese visitors to the US in the early twentieth century were shocked that a very "modern" society was infused by displays of spiritualism and Pentecostal Christianity, which they likewise saw as "superstition." Nevertheless, today, Western colonial and neocolonial regimes of bodily classification remain most intensely potent.

REGIMES OF EMBODIMENT: SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS

We do not see all regimes of bodily discipline in negative terms. In contemporary Western societies, we tend to see the "secular" (see chapter 16) disciplines of athletics, healthy eating, and dieting or exercise to attain a "beach body" as positive endeavors (often mediated via advertising). These things are not themselves "good": representations of idealized bodies, especially excessively thin female models or uber-macho male models are linked to feelings of inadequacy and illnesses in the population, which often goes alongside fat-shaming.[27] There is also overlap between "secular" and "religious" disciplines of the body with such things as yoga, mindfulness,[28] Tai Chi, or acupuncture often labeled as "spirituality" (see boxes 5.6 and 2.8), though others may see them as "superstition" (see box 9.9). There may also be tensions. Religious discourse may valorize fasting over dieting, that is, periods of not eating or drinking for religious ends (see box 9.6). Indeed,

BOX 9.8 **IMAGINED BODIES**

If you have ever been in a foreign country not knowing the language, you may have paid more attention to the bodies and actions of the local people (see chapter 2). We do this to gain a window into their world in lieu of linguistic understanding. British missionaries (and other explorers and colonial administrators) did this to understand Chinese religion.[1] Eric Reinders argues that, based on their own cultural conditioning, these Protestant Christian missionaries made—generally negative—assumptions about the religion and worldview of the Chinese:

- Performing a kowtow meant people were obsequious and servile.
- Using incense meant they were superstitious.
- Chinese religion was empty of meaning or sense.
- The Chinese were "inscrutable."

Many of these assumptions were based on the way that Protestants had negative attitudes toward Catholics (see boxes 9.3 and 9.4), which they simply read onto Chinese religion.[2] While often wrong, these assumptions established persistent stereotypes.

1 Eric Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

2 In relation to Daoism, indigenous Confucian traditions abetted Western misinterpretations; see case study 4B.

disciplines of religion that cause pain or discomfort can be seen as extreme. Nevertheless, potentially harmful activities may be seen as positive when undertaken by sportspeople or performers to attain "peak performance." Our ideas of what forms of bodily discipline are "normal" vary considerably. Importantly, religious disciplines are often portrayed as positive forms of "training" or "discipline" that bestow benefits (rather than as punishment). Discipline/mortification of the self/soul/spirit is always a form of bodily practice.

EMBODIMENT, MATERIALITY, AND KNOWLEDGE

THINKING AS EMBODIED BEINGS

The material turn means that we cannot simply see concepts as based in immaterial thoughts: our thinking is embedded in embodiment. By emphasizing embodiment, we are not suggesting that it is a "given," a brute fact. Certainly, there are natural laws and brute facts of existence, but we experience them as being "thrown" into a certain cultural context which is part of our being-in the-world (see box 9.2). For instance, it is a natural and universal fact of embodiment that we age. Yet how we envisage such things as infancy,

BOX 9.9 ACUPUNCTURE: SUPERSTITION OR SCIENCE?

Many Westerners associate acupuncture with "superstition" or "magic" because they find the worldview behind it alien, with its basis in Chinese cosmology and health regimes (see box 1.11).[1] However, a growing body of peer-reviewed scientific evidence in medical journals suggests that acupuncture has verifiable effects; in short, it is as "scientific" as antibiotics, brain surgery, or other mainstream Western medicinal practices.[2] Arguably, by being peer reviewed, acupuncture moves from "alternative" medicine to "mainstream" medicine. This change in status relates to neocolonialism (including in academia), where Western ways of knowing and doing assume a "superior" ground (science, scholarly theory, etc.), whereas non-Western ways of knowing and doing can be dismissed as inferior (as superstition, or not as theory, but as data for study, etc.) (see chapter 7).

1 See David Robertson, "Magic and Modernity," Religious Studies Project (2018), https://religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/magic-and-modernity/.

2 See NIHR, "Acupuncture Shown to Have Benefits for Treatment of Some Chronic Pain," National Institute for Health Research (2017), https://discover.dc.nihr.ac.uk/content/signal-000426/acupuncture-shown-to-have-benefits-for-treatment-of-some-chronic-pain. For a debate between doctors, see Mike Cummings, Asbjørn Hróbjartsson, and Edzard Ernst, "Should Doctors Recommend Acupuncture for Pain?" *British Medical Journal* (2018), https://www.bmj.com/content/360/bmj.k970.full.

childhood, youth, middle age, and old age are cultural forms. Again, society gives significance to certain bodies, such as that of the monarch/ruler: touching, or in some places even seeing, the ruler may be taboo, or it may transfer (divine) blessings and power. We need to think how our socially constructed world and our physically given world relate.

Merleau-Ponty "showed that the consciousness of being, and of being in the world, comes through the body."[29] Our idea of self is related to our embodied sense of identity and other bodies. We think about things as being above us, behind us, and so on—we think as beings in space (see chapter 17). From a biological point of view, the body not only precedes language, in that it evolved first, but also forms a basis for our language. Contrary to the influential Sapir-Whorf thesis,[30] which suggests that everything we experience is a linguistic construct, we need to consider the material world as significant, including our evolutionary heritage (see chapter 8). As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) once remarked, we cannot even describe the aroma of coffee.[31] Simply stated: we have many experiences we do not have words for. We can experience things without being able to name them. Indeed, many experiences are predominantly prelinguistic: pain is an example (if you have ever burned your hand on a hot pan or hit a nail into your finger—I hope you have not done either—you will know this). We are aware of certain experiences without some priority of naming. This is simple biology. The parts of the brain that experience and respond to these things are prelinguistic—they evolved

earlier than the frontal temporal cortex, where linguistic skills sit. In slightly inaccurate but helpful terms: here is the reptilian part of our brain, rather than the mammalian or primate part of our brain.[32] This part of the brain goes back to our more primal urges, often expressed as the four *F*s: fight, flight, fornicate, fodder. Indeed, these bodily experiences overrule our normal rational mind and ways of thinking: have you ever tried studying when you are angry, afraid, horny, or hungry? My guess is that you find it difficult. We all do. Embodiment, as recent studies show, is far more dominant in our intellectual lives than we like to think. In a sense Plato was right: our body is a snare for our rational selves. In less pessimistic terms, Confucian anthropology stresses our embodiment as part of our natures.[33] This stress on embodiment does not deny the role of linguistic construction: when we think about specific experiences of pain—whether we regard it as beneficial or harmful, whether we go to a hospital or priest for treatment, and so on—it becomes social and linguistic. To stress only one aspect is lopsided,[34] and stressing only the construction of categories within discourse without considering their application and utilization is problematic.[35]

MATERIALITY, KNOWING, AND POWER

In terms of theorizing what materiality means, scholars influenced by the material turn have grappled with the issue of how we know. Various scholars have employed the term "materiality" (see box 9.10) to address the sense of the significance of our embodiment and the material world for thinking. In particular, they have challenged some common understandings of social constructionism (see chapter 5) seen in phrases such as "it is discourse all the way down." This suggests that we never encounter the physical world, only social or linguistic realities. Taking the material turn seriously, this book concurs with scholars such as Manuel Vásquez, who stress the importance of the material. This includes understanding that a decolonial approach takes us beyond the Western logocentric emphasis on the primacy of social and linguistic construction.[36]

Developing from the issue of decoloniality (see chapter 7), we can take a wider stance to include issues of gender (chapter 10) and class to note the significance of these in considering materiality and questions of power, in three consecutive points:

1. The material turn is not simply abstract philosophy, but accords with issues picked up by feminist and decolonial/postcolonial scholars. For those oppressed by various regimes of discourse, embodiment and regimes of disciplining bodies shape actuality. Experiencing our material limits is a very real fact. A Black body on a lynching tree is not (primarily) a social construct to other Black bodies.
2. The idea that we and our world is simply a social/linguistic construct is based upon a white, male, Western, middle- (or upper-) class normativity. It assumes that we can make ourselves anew, be infinitely adaptable, and

BOX 9.10 MATERIALITY: BEYOND MATERIAL CULTURE

Focusing on material culture may simply change what we study, but by the term "materiality" scholars such as Daniel Miller have argued we need to more radically think about how we understand. Material culture has often been used for the study of specific human-constructed objects and artifacts, but this has until recently been regarded as a focus upon somewhat vulgar or peripheral things, and not the "higher" pursuit of abstract ideas and social and linguistic concerns.[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) has been influential for theorizing the significance of the body and material things, while Miller has shown the significance of Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) and Bruno Latour in studying materiality. Bourdieu observed how people are educated into the normative expectations of their society (see chapter 5).[2] Miller notes this is always about physical regimes of embodiment. However, while social constructionism focuses upon the social and linguistic regimes that determine how we see things, materiality stresses that everything is embedded within physical domains (regimes of embodiment) that cannot be escaped. The physical forms the basis of our knowing and thinking: if our embodiment were otherwise, we would think/perceive the world in different ways.[3] Human values, cultures, and social forms only exist objectified in material forms or human performance.[4] In this sense, we can see social forms as only a specific form of a wider material culture. Latour has noted that much traditional Western theory tends to miss what we can term the agency of the nonhuman and material world.[5] Michael Rowlands has argued that taking theory such as that by Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) seriously entails realizing that our self-realization is tied to material reality: we cannot simply have a socially constructed sense of freedom unless it is also physical and material.[6] Power is not embedded in simply controlling social and linguistic patterns—though this shapes how we see material realities; material conditions themselves inscribe and are inscribed in people, places, control of resources, and so on (see chapters 7 and 10). Understanding that social realities (see box 1.9) exist at the juxtaposition of both social construction and material facts is imperative. Materiality is not denying social constructionism, but realizing that it is embedded in systems of material embodiment that control and delimit our actions and understandings.

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1 See Miller, "Materiality."

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

3 See Tim Ingold, "Materials against Materiality," *Archaeological Dialogues* 14.1 (2007): 1–16. Ingold's basic premise is the need to take physicality seriously; however, he argues that many theorists of materiality distance us from the material through an overload of abstract theory.

4 See Daniel Miller, "Why Some Things Matter," in *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter,* ed. Daniel Miller (London: University College London Press, 1988), 3–21.

5 For a short account, see Bruno Latour, "On Interobjectivity," *Mind, Culture and Activity* 3.4 (1996): 228–45.

6 See Rowlands, "A Materialist Approach."

have no natural limitations. This theory is not a neutral description, but comes from a stance of unreflexive privilege. Perhaps a Californian executive in the IT business can visualize the world this way, but not a female peasant farmer in Myanmar.

3. Therefore, any supposedly critical theory or social constructionism that does not include the material turn is liable not to be truly decolonial. In the words of Audre Lorde: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[37]

SCHOLARSHIP IN RELIGION, LOGOCENTRISM, AND BEYOND

Turner observes that talking about the body is not the same as partaking in the material turn and rejecting logocentrism. Turner suggests this applies to Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), both of whom talk about the importance of the body.[38] But they do not, like Merleau-Ponty, recognize that embodiment shapes how we know and experience. They valorize language over embodiment. David Morgan suggests that even critical scholars of religion are implicated in this:[39] the modern Protestant Christian sensibility is deeply embedded in scholarship.[40]

Some scholars of religion have taken materiality seriously. Based in comparative work on renewal in charismatic Catholic Christianity and the American Navajo tradition, Thomas Csordas combines embodiment theory alongside Bourdieu's concept of habitus (see box 5.3) to stress what he terms "the preobjective character of bodily being-in-the world."[41] Csordas stresses embodiment's significance in wider social networks in ways that accord with Foucault's priorities. Vásquez has heavily theorized a new form of phenomenology, and his thinking accords in large part with arguments in this book.[42] Finally, Morgan argues that Charles Sanders Peirce's (1839–1914) semiotics allows us to rethink language as other than simply a set of arbitrary signifiers (see box 9.11) against some interpretations of social constructionism (see box 5.8).

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CASE STUDY 9A. WEEPING GODS AND DRINKING STATUES

We look at two examples of "miracles"[43] mediated through the material, which are for others "superstition." Both have resonances with lived religion (chapter 3).

THE DRINKING GANESH STATUES

In 2008, first in India and then globally, reports started circulating that statues (*murti*) of certain Hindu deities, primarily Ganesh (the elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvarti), were drinking milk. Videos went viral and the global media covered the story.

BOX 9.11 **SIGNIFIERS, LANGUAGE, AND EMBODIMENT**

In contemporary linguistics and epistemology (theories of knowledge), it is recognized that there is no direct correlation between words and things. For instance, the word "rose" has no direct relation to a particular flower. Our words may be termed "empty signifiers," though in technical usage by Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) this does not mean they are arbitrary.[1] They are "shifting signifiers" tied to a chain of meanings, implicated in regimes of power to exclude, for example, race or gender (see chapters 7 and 10), and negotiated in discourse. David Morgan also suggests the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) shows that not all language is arbitrary. Peirce argues we should move from semiology (which stresses language as textuality) toward semiotics (which can help add embodied elements).[2] While each word may be arbitrary, they fit into patterns of symbolic meaning. Indeed, some things may be said to make more sense as symbols. For instance, if a rock symbolizes stability, it is not entirely arbitrary, but is what Peirce terms an icon relating to what it represents. A bullet hole in glass is what Peirce terms an index that points to the bullet that was shot through it (we know something made the hole). But it is not a direct correspondence; perhaps we are mistaken; maybe an arrow made the hole. Nevertheless, Morgan argues that to suggest that every signifier is arbitrary does not do justice to our being-in-the-world as embodied creatures.

1 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).
2 Morgan, "Materiality," 274.

Within a week or so of the phenomenon starting, it died down. Sporadic outbreaks of this phenomenon have occurred both before and after this. For devotees, it was a "miracle."

In Hinduism, when a statue is enshrined at a temple, a ceremony invites the deity into the statue, enabling worship (*darshan,* "seeing" and "being seen" by the deity). While many Hindus are clear they do not worship the physical statue, but rather, the divine spirit represented, the statues are, for many, an actual locus of divine presence. It is in the physical statute that the divine is embodied and seen.

For skeptics, a variety of explanations were employed to explain this "superstitious" belief. In some of the videos (viewable online), it appeared that a bowl of milk placed to the mouth, or trunk, of the statue allowed much liquid to simply slip away (on white marble maybe not always so clear). Others suggested that quite a few of the statues were made of porous materials, and the milk or other liquids was absorbed. Certain examples seemed ambiguous enough for both skeptics and believers to claim that the other side failed to explain the evidence of people's eyes. Significantly, while we are discussing "facts," they are contested by people's perceptions and interpretations.

A WEEPING JESUS

In Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India, in 2012, a large statue of the crucified Jesus in the grounds of a church started to "weep." "Tears" were seen to come down the face of the statue and these were collected by eager devotees. The parish priest declared this "a miracle." The "tears" were collected and distributed. Some drank the "tears," and it was believed that miracles, especially healing, could result for those who came in contact with this "holy" liquid.

Others were not convinced that they were witnessing a miracle. Indeed, one Indian skeptic went to the church to investigate. What he discovered was a leak in some pipes above the statue, allowing liquid to seep down. Worryingly, his research discovered that it was not simply water but sewage. He therefore notified the church and others to warn them about the danger of consuming these "tears." He also asserted it was not a miracle. The response was not quite what he expected. Under India's blasphemy laws, he was charged with offending the religious sensibilities of the Christians. The skeptic had to flee India with the threat of legal action and jail hanging over him. What he considered as seeking a "scientific" explanation to dismiss this "superstition" ended with him accused under another category: "blasphemy." We should note that while the local priest recognized this as a miracle, the hierarchy of the church did not give it that designation.

REFLECTIONS

A series of questions will help us think about this situation:

1. As a Hindu or Christian devotee, who accepts these alleged miracles, how would you respond to suggestions that your religious beliefs were simply superstition? How would you frame them to assert their credibility?
2. Does the fact that such miracles cross into areas which can be explored scientifically make them readily open to accusations of superstition? Is it primarily their connection with physicality and the material that makes these examples seem superstitious to many?
3. These examples show the manifestation of religion in material form. Consider the regimes of knowledge that determine what physical forms counts as religion, superstition, magic, or science.

CASE STUDY 9B. EMBODIED PRACTICE AT A CHRISTIAN SHRINE

This case study considers architecture and pilgrimage. Our focus is not simply on these as physical structures, but the associated regimes of bodily discipline.

CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE AND THE GOTHIC

In nineteenth-century Britain, architects following Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852) valorized the Gothic style as the epitome of Christian architecture, leading

to what is known as the Gothic Revival.[44] The Gothic style,[45] typical of medieval European church architecture, employs pointed arches, and is found in various styles. It probably developed from influences from Islamic Spain (Al-Andalusia) and from the earlier Romanesque style. The first Gothic cathedrals developed in France. The cathedrals of Notre Dame (literally "Our Lady," signifying dedication to Jesus's mother Mary) in Chartres and Paris are classic examples.

Gothic was not simply an architectural style, but also a theological ideology. Compared to the older Romanesque style, Gothic cathedrals and churches were filled with light, and allowed (because their pillars could carry more weight) grand designs that soared to the sky. This was theorized in terms of a "theology of light," where the material world (directly) represented divine glory. In the new grand spaces, bathed with colored windows from stained glazing, the devotee should feel as though they were already in the "heavenly Jerusalem" (heaven envisaged as a city, specifically Jerusalem). The soaring ceilings and columns were also intended to overwhelm the visitor with their own insignificance. The scale of the building represented the might of deity. The very physicality of the building was meant to invoke a "religious" realization. Similarly, the length of the cathedral meant that the high altar (in the sanctuary, where the priest presided over the eucharist) was far away from the main body of the church (nave), where the general congregation stood. (Seating was not generally introduced until at least the sixteenth century or later.) The transcendent holiness and separateness of deity, as well as church authority, was emphasized. This was further signified by a (rood) screen, either of stone or wood, that separated the nave from both the priests (seated in the quire, an area beyond the rood screen but before the sanctuary) and the act of the Eucharist. Sometimes this would be hardly visible to the congregation. The Gothic cathedral was not, therefore, simply a pretty building design. It was an embodied regime of discipline in stone. Through their embodied interaction with the building, worshippers were expected to get a better sense of the religious realm, and their lowly position in relation to it.

PILGRIMAGE AND EXPERIENCING

Many of these medieval cathedrals became sites for pilgrimage. Among the most famous was Canterbury, in the South of England. Here, Archbishop Thomas Becket (ca. 1119–1170) was killed by knights acting for (if not directly ordered by) King Henry II. Thomas was enshrined as a martyr (somebody killed for their faith). It was believed that martyrs were close to God and so their relics (bones and items associated with them) were seen as potent sites of divine blessing or miracles. Stories of miracles related to Becket's relics (his body, or especially popular was his blood sold in diluted form) made Canterbury a wealthy and popular shrine. However, the cathedral was not designed to receive these thousands of pilgrims, nor the devotion in the crypt where Becket's bones were first housed. Therefore, from the pilgrim donations, a large new shrine was built at the far

east end of the cathedral, allowing pilgrims to enter through one door and exit via another—essentially, medieval crowd control. In the midst of this was the magnificent shrine to Becket, which over time became increasingly adorned with the gold, silver, and precious gems left by grateful recipients of believed miracles, or hopeful recipients of future miracles.[46] The design was intended to instill in devotees a sense of the prestige and power of the shrine, and to manage their bodily movements. Before the shrine, it would be expected that pilgrims would bow, kneel, or prostrate themselves to show their devotion. Moreover, ordinary pilgrims only had access to certain areas. Regimes of physical discipline are often associated with worldviews or ideologies (religious, cultural, or otherwise), and are given shape through the physical environment.

REFLECTIONS

Some questions will help us think through these issues:

1. In what ways does a building you are familiar with encourage certain regimes of physical discipline?
2. Merleau-Ponty suggested that the fact of our embodiment meant that "I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent on my decisions." What do you understand by this? How do you think interaction with the physical environment of a medieval Gothic cathedral (or comparable structure) creates "intentions" that go beyond your decisions? Is this partly determined by having a worldview that relates to the structure? Or, even if your worldview is different (or even contrary), might you still be impelled to behave or experience in some ways by the design?
3. The medieval Gothic cathedral was explicitly built to reflect a "heavenly Jerusalem." Is it possible to convey ideas of an afterlife or transcendent realm that is not physical? Are our perceptions of what is religious always and only mediated in embodied form?
4. To what extent do you think beliefs and ideas are embedded in the physical performances related to those beliefs? If somebody had a belief which had no (potential) embodied action associated with it, would it be meaningful? In what way?

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QUESTIONS AND CONNECTING THOUGHTS

The themes of this chapter intersect with other chapters, such as lived religion, which is often embodied (chapter 3), concerns with the lived environment and geography (chapter 17), and ritual (chapter 12). We also see theoretical crossovers with feminist thinking, which often stresses embodiment (chapter 10); postcolonialism, which notes how certain bodies have been valued more than others (chapter 7); and social constructionism (chapter 5). In

these terms, we also recognize the way that imaginaries of religion have stressed privatized and disembodied forms (chapters 1 and 16), which has real political consequences (chapter 18). Some questions will help us think through the issues raised:

1. Philosophical thought experiments often ask us to imagine that we are only "brains in vats," or similar. However, this arguably betrays an extremely logocentric conception of what we are, how we interact with other people, how we know, and how we experience the world. How central do you think embodiment is to who you are, what you know, and how you know it?
2. Would you agree that religion, and whatever we might consider spiritual/transcendent reality to be, is only encountered or represented through embodied form?
3. What do you see as the main differences in thinking about religion after the material turn compared to via the WRP?
4. Is the difference between religion, magic, superstition, and science only culturally based? In what ways may we be able to meaningfully employ these terms in any coherent academic sense?

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