Routledge Handbook of Christianity and Culture

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Material Christianity

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INTRODUCTION

The question of materiality has been present in Christianity from the very beginning. The questions over God becoming human and flesh in Jesus, the miracle of the empty grave, and that of resurrection, all involved negotiation and rethinking of the nature and boundaries between the visible and nonvisible, the material and the nonmaterial. In later centuries many of these questions having to do with materiality were at the heart of Christian theological discussion and schism.

The centrality of materiality has not been only a question of theological contemplation. From rosaries to cathedrals, and from fasting to flagellation, Christian practice and Christians as embodied beings are inescapably part of the material world. It was these visible instances of Christian praxis that first generated an interest in Christian materialities outside theological scholarship. The focus on materiality also gave rise to discussion on the role of belief, for long considered the heart of Christian religion. It was noted, that, in fact, '[r]eligions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms (Keane 2008: 124; see Orsi 2015). To date, this social scientific and humanistic study of Christian materialities has grown, hand in hand with the broader field of religion and materiality, into a wide multi- and interdisciplinary research field focusing on Christian understandings of and challenges experienced with matter both in historical and present-day contexts. The field has also recently started turning its attention back to theological research in an effort to further enrich research through interdisciplinary discussion.

This chapter will map the field of social scientific and humanistic study of Christianity focused on materiality. It will center on the questions researchers as well Christians themselves have asked about materiality and matter. The author having background in anthropological study of religion, the chapter will emphasize research on contemporary Christianities unavoidably at the expense of historical and archaeological approaches. The chapter will, however, introduce certain landmark studies with a historical focus, too. It will also attempt to look beyond Euro-American research contributions in the field of material Christianity. This effort is, however, inevitably biased as examples are drawn mainly from South American geographical context, with which the author is most familiar with.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Albeit irresistibly present and visible in Christian praxis, in social scientific and humanistic research on Christianity the material aspect became of an interest only relatively late. As recent research has shown (Masuzawa 2000), this long neglect of the topic has its history in the socio-cultural and religious transformations of the 16th and 17th centuries, and more broadly, in the so-called 'modern fear of matter' (Pels 2008).[1]

Modern Western approaches to materiality have usually been traced down to the separation of spirit and matter in Reformation and the Protestant iconoclasm. The Reformation of the 16th century has been understood to have 'purified' Western Christianity from Catholic 'anomalous' mixing of spirit and matter taking place in practices such as relic veneration and indulgence trade and embedded in devotional and liturgical objects (Taylor 2007). Also Catholic (and Orthodox) rich iconographic and

[1] In theological research materiality has remained a fundamental issue throughout centuries although the understanding of the relationship of materiality and immateriality or nonmateriality and of mind-body, subject-object and spirit-matter conceptual dualisms has changed over time. Therefore, as Ocker and Elm (2020, 11) note, the "narrative of cultural-intellectual progress is partial and selective at best". One major identifiable landmark, however, was the 19th century turn from phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches to historical-critical method in study of religion in general and Christianity in particular, which opened the path for novel ways of understanding Christianity and materiliaty.

visual programs were trashed out or eliminated for the same reason. In short, the Reformation has been understood as purifying the spirit from polluting matter.

The problematization of the intertwinement of spirit and matter was not, however, something that begun with the Reformation. The often-cited anecdote demonstrating the suspicion toward such intertwinement concerns the Portuguese colonialists' experiences in Western Africa already in the late 15th century. The Portuguese understood the West Africans they encountered to attribute false agency to man-made objects, which they called 'fetishes' (originally from Latin term *factitious* meaning manufactured, artificial). They understood these objects to be void of any real spiritual power and viewed the Africans falsely 'believing in' their power (Latour 2010; Masuzawa 2000; Meyer and Houtman 2012: 15). According to Peter Pels (2008), such fetishism is based on what he calls the 'modern fear of matter' – the view according to which the material cannot have social agency without animation by humans or divine beings.

The suspicious approach to matter was therefore characteristic of Western thinking already before the events of the Reformation started avalanching during the second decade of the 16th century.[2] In addition to colonial politics and theology, for example, it is understood to have impacted social scientific and humanistic research in many ways hitherto (Masuzawa 2000). An understanding following these lines and with far reaching consequences for research on material Christianity, was what is considered to be the Weberian (1958) view of Protestant relationship to matter. According to this view, which again locates the roots of the 'modern fear of matter' in the Reformation, it was especially Protestantism, which emphasized spirit over matter and rationality over senses, and which thereby largely impacted European socio-economical life (see Meyer 2010: 743; Meyer and Houtman 2012: 10–11).

[2] In the history of Christianity, such suspicion can, of course, be traced all the way to many Biblical stories such as those of Lazarus, the Empty Tomb, and the Road to Emmaus, for example, and further to pre-Christian cultural traditions.

Disregarding the question of origins of the suspicion over matter, this Weberian view, the 'Protestant lens', adopted by many, has had a distorting effect in study of Christianities. First, in research on Protestantism it has led to overemphasizing Protestant purification leaving the material side of Protestantism veiled. Second, it has bundled together all forms of Protestant Christianity disregarding its internal variance. Luther, for example, had a much less suspicious approach to materiality than Calvin or Zwingli. (Opas and Haapalainen 2017: 6–11.) Thus, the Protestant lens should, in fact, be better understood as 'Reformed lens' (Meyer 2010: 743). Third, the lens has also had the effect of researchers either downplaying the meaning of materiality also in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox and Pentecostal contexts or over-emphasizing it. The distortions caused by such lens started to be straightened out only in the past decades with the increase in research on different forms of Christianity as lived. Scholarship on lived or everyday religion was particularly interested in paying attention to details of people's religious praxis, and was therefore capable of nuancing our understanding of Christianities: not all Christian denominations, groups, or individuals viewed materiality through the same lenses.

The Protestant or Reformed lens and the underlying modern fear of matter were not the only factors that hindered social scientific and humanistic research on material Christianity from taking off and growing. It also owed to the fact that in the fields of anthropology of religion and study of religion at large, Christianity became of interest as topic only very late. This had three interrelated main reasons. First, Christianity was for long too familiar to western researchers to be considered an interesting topic of study (Robbins 2003). Even if encountered in distant and 'exotic' places, Christianity did not attract researchers' attention. Second, Christianity was considered by many the 'repugnant other' (Harding 2000) – in addition to being too familiar, it was something too restrictive, especially as scholarship at the end of the 20th century was moving toward postmodern and post-structuralist approaches. Third, Christianity carried a certain stigma of anti-reason colliding with the requirements of academic research, and researchers were therefore reluctant to be

associated with it. Whereas in many other topics self-reflection and self-positioning was encouraged, religion and especially Christianity was for long considered something that inevitably decreased the objectivity and reliability of research.

It was especially the global-scale great increase in Charismatic and Pentecostal forms of Christianity that started turning the tide in social scientific and humanistic research on Christianity at the end of the 20th century. These forms appeared odd enough to attract attention and alien enough to not to cause researchers to easily become personally associated with these traditions. The rise of Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity was, of course, also such a significant phenomenon that it's causes and effects needed to be understood.

Another important factor behind this newly risen interest was also the material and bodily turns in social sciences and humanities, which also affected research on Christianity and also made it more easily approachable as a topic (e.g. Hazard 2013). These turn grew out of the dissatisfaction with constructivist and poststructuralist approaches, on the one hand, and those prioritizing identities, on the other (Houtman and Meyer 2012: 5; see also Bräunlein 2016: 366), which were critiqued for ignoring human bodily experiences and reducing the 'material world to effects of discourses, expressions of signs or symbols, ideas or ideologies' (Bräunlein 2016, 366). In the sphere of research on religion, such turning of the focus away from doctrinal questions and beliefs as primary constituents of religion, brought peoples lived religion, their material religious practices to the front.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE RESEARCH FIELD

The development of the scholarly field of material Christianity is closely related to the wider interest in study of materiality in culture and religion outlined above. The term 'material culture' was taken into use in the nineteenth century archaeological and anthropological research focusing on the study of artefacts (Buchli 2002; see Williamson 2014: 65; Bräunlein 2016: 368; see Miller

2015: 4) but it was, especially the so-called material turn beginning in the 1980s that set forth the development of the study into a research field. An important milestone in material culture studies was the establishment of the *Journal of Material Culture* (JMC) in 1996, which worked to identify the field and enabled interdisciplinary exchange. The first editors of the journal, anthropologist Daniel Miller and archaeologist Cristopher Tilley, have been key figures in developing the field of material culture into the broad interdisciplinary field it is today.[3]

Related, but a more specialized field is that of study of material religion. The beginning of this vein of study is usually dated back to 1995 and the publishing of Colleen McDannell's book *Material Christianity*: *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, which also worked as a ground for the development of the research field of Material Christianity. The book, which focused on the relationship between religion and mass consumption from the 19th century onward, increased scholars' interest in the embodied and sensory side of religion. Scholar of religion Peter J. Bräulein (2016: 370) describes McDannell's study as having been 'in equal measures a precursor, a symptom, and a stimulus of the growing interest in the study of material religion.' The book has been influential also in generating interest in the study of lived and everyday religion more generally.

By the beginning of the 21st century the research on religion and materiality had attracted significant research interest and time was ready for a journal focusing on the topic. *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* was founded in 2005 to answer the need for an inter-disciplinary discussion forum on religion and materiality. In addition to material culture studies, the journal had two other scholarly bases: visual culture studies, and museum studies (Meyer et al. 2010: 207). It was interested not only in materiality as 'production, form, style and artistic intention,' but also as praxis and more generally as lived experience. As the editors of the

[3] On the field of material culture, see Miller 1998; 2005.

journal note, '[m]aterializing the study of religion means asking how religion happens materially, which is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful question of how religion is expressed in material form' (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). The observation on materiality being much more than an expression of religion has been central to the research in this field and has guided discussions on material religion also in less formal discussion platforms such as the *Material Religions blog*[4], for example.

One measure of the maturing of any given field of study is the publishing of edited volumes[5]. In the field of material religion edited volumes started blooming in the 2010s with the publication of volumes such as *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (Morgan 2010); *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (Houtman and Meyer 2012); *Making Spirits: Materiality and Transcendence in Contemporary Religions* (Espirito Santo and Tassi 2013); *Key Terms in Material Religion* (Plate 2015); *Materiality and the Study of Religion: The Stuff of the Sacred* (Hutchings 2017); and *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Materiality* (Narayanan 2020).[6] In 2017, first book series, *Bloomsbury Studies in Material Religion*, focusing on materiality and religion saw light. Later, also other book series on religion and materiality have been launched, such as *Studies in Material Religion and Spirituality* (Routledge).[7]

Alongside the increased interest in materiality and religion in social sciences and humanities grew also an interest in Christian materialities. After and around the publication of McDannell's seminal book *Christian Materialities* (1995), the question of materiality was raised to the fore in many disciplines studying Christianity. Edited volumes focusing on material Christianities include *Aesthetic Formations* (Meyer 2009) focusing on questions of mediation and senses; *Christianity*

[4] Material Religions blog (materialreligions.blogspot.dk), grew out of a 2014 conference in the Department of Anthropology at University College London.
[5] There are also several special journal issues on material religion and also material Christianity, but they are not listed here.
[6] On volumes focused on historical materials, see Ivanic et al 2019.
[7] See also book series Visual and Material Culture, 1300 –1700 (Amsterdam University Press).

and the Limits of Materiality (Opas and Haapalainen 2017) dealing with different Christian understandings of and problems with materiality; and *Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things* (Ocker and Elm 2020) offering art-historical, historical, and philosophical approaches to Christian materiality as cultural problem. Much of research on Material Christianities is, however, published as monographs or journal articles.

A few key questions characterizing social scientific and humanistic research on material Christianities can be identified. First, the problem of presence, perhaps most clearly spelled out by the anthropologist Matthew Engelke (2007) in a book with the same title, deals with Christians' concern with the distance between the transcendent and the worldly: how can the divine, which is beyond human sensory capabilities, be perceived to be present through the material, and how can true divinity be discerned from its material expressions?

Second, the question of mediation also deals with the same problem of the mundane's relationship with the transcendent but approaches it from slightly different angle. Questions with mediation, arising in with the so-called mediation turn of the beginning of the 21st century (Hovland 2018; Boyer 2012), focus on the ways in which humans and the divine can relate to one another, how Christians can communicate with the divine, and how different media and mediations affect formation of Christian communities and social life.

Third, and underlying the two questions above, is the question of the nature of matter. How do Christians understand matter and its qualities, and what significance does question of materiality play in their lives and religious praxis? Such questions often arise in people's daily practice of Christianity, but are found to arise especially in missionary contexts when local people encounter with Christianity and modernity.

Finally, what kind of matter matters for Christians and why and how do Christians form their lives materially? That is, why certain forms of materiality become important in a given Christian context,

and how are these priorities related to the given socio-historical context and dogmatic understandings?

In what follows, I will examine social scientific and humanistic scholarship in material Christianity under four general topics, which all in their own way involve and approach the key questions presented above. First, I will focus on aesthetic and semiotic approaches; second, I will examine research on things and objects, and third, spaces and places in Christianity, that is, research linked in one way or another to the material turn. Fourth, I will conclude the chapter with looking into research on Christian corporeality and embodiment. Such selection of topics, by necessity, leaves various themes deserving attention – such as ritual materiality and digitality – too briefly or not at all discussed. Hopefully, however, it will help the reader get to grips with the large and multi-faceted field of study of material Christianities.

AESTHETICS AND SEMIOTICS

Images, statues, devotional objects and souveniers, as well as other visual and material representations often become focal points of people's daily Christian praxis. As scholar of religion David Morgan (1998; see also Morgan 2005) has shown, they are not to be regarded as merely illustrative of some higher meanings or believes, but play an important role in forming and organizing Christian social and religious life through what Morgan calls 'visual piety', the capability of images to convey and co-constitute meanings.[8] With an additional focus on the questions of divine presence and mediation, research on Christian visuality and materiality has employed the approaches of *aesthetics* and *semiotics* to understand Christian engagements with the material world.

[8] On Christian visual expressions see also Hamburger 1998.

The notion of aesthetics, which in the 19th century in Kant's wake referred narrowly to the 'beautiful' in art and nature, has again been taken into wider use in the 20th century. Basing rather on the Aristotelian notion of *aesthesis* designating 'our corporeal capability on the basis of a power given in our psyche to perceive objects in the specific constellation of sensations as a whole' (Meyer and Verrips 2008: 21; see Meyer 2009: 6–7), the notion of aesthetics can thus better 'account for the affective power of images, sounds, and texts over their beholders' (Meyer 2009: 6) and has been found useful in analysing the often subtle or ambiguous experiences of people's daily lives. In study of material Christianities, it has become employed in attempts to understand both the 'unknown terrain' or 'relational zone' (Whitehead 2020) between humanity and divinity, and the power of imageries and materiality in general to constitute social worlds.

Focusing on the 'unknown terrain', the art historian David Freedberg (1989; see also Hanganu 2010: 45) employed the term *aesthetics of presence* in trying to grasp the significance of the nature of Orthodox icons as connectors between the beholder and the deity. Such aesthetics referred to the two-fold nature of divine presence and human sensory ways of capturing it in moments of veneration. The scholar of religion Birgit Meyer (2009; see also Coleman 1996), on the other hand, employs the Aristotelian view of aesthetics in studying relationality. Through the notion of *aesthetic formation*, she examines the role of religion and mass media in the forming of human collectives (formations) joined by certain sensorially and bodily appealing aesthetics – images, things, practices, and styles. Furthermore, to yet take better hold of the concrete manner in which 'religious mediations address and mobilize people and form them aesthetically', Meyer has introduced the notion of *sensational form* (Meyer 2009: 13; 2006). These are condensations of 'practices, attitudes, and ideas that structure religious experiences and hence "ask" to be approached in a particular manner' (Meyer 2009: 13). One example of such sensational form is the above-mentioned Orthodox icon, which organises believers' access to the transcendental and generate grounds for the formation of similarly experiencing collectivity. Increasingly in the present-day world, such sensational forms

are derived from the material expressions of popular culture and mass media. Through such sensational forms – the visual, audible, and tangible expressions – Christianity has also the power to influence societies and politics and blur the boundary between the secular and the religious (Meyer 2009: 19). Christian aesthetic formations formed around certain sensational forms may therefore, especially in the so-called global south, be of major societal significance.

In addition to aesthetics, the semiotic approach has been found to offer useful tools for examining Christian materialities. Semiotics studies signs and their meanings, and the approach was adopted to other social sciences and humanities from Saussurean linguistics. An influential figure in this respect was Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), whose three-partite division of signs into symbols, icons and indexes – against Saussurean dyadic division into signifier and the signified – has helped scholars also to rethink also the webs of Christian significations (Peirce 1931–58; see Atkin 2022).

Webb Keane (2005:191) has approached the role and significance of materiality in Christianities through the notion of *semiotic ideology*, by which he refers to people's background assumptions 'about what signs are and how they function in the world'. These assumptions also involve ideas on the kinds of agentive subjects inhabit the social cosmos. In his study of colonial missionary encounter of the Calvinist missionaries with local population in Dutch East Indies and independent Indonesia, Keane (2007) shows how clashes between semiotic ideologies revealed how the missionaries understood themselves to be modern (viewing materiality as purified form agency) and construed the local people as the other of modernity (with fetishist understandings of materiality). The semiotic approach has been employed also to understand Christian engagements with objects and their perceptions of what proper Christian bodies should be like. Matthew Engelke (2012: 61) has introduced the term *thingification*, by which he means 'process through which an object is invested of an "immateriality"' and therefore making it dangerous as a misunderstood site of presence of spiritual powers. Such thingified things are dangerous because they may fall out from

the general local Christian understanding of what is possible for objects, things and matter. Opas (2017), on the other hand, has coined the notion of *de-indexification* to refer to Christian's uncertainty and doubt over the strength of their belief, which somatic and material evidence does not support. In the case of Amazonian Indigenous Yine Evangelicals, the absence of an inner bodily sensation of being a believer caused the Yine Evangelicals to doubt their faith. Such doubts over authenticity of faith and its bodily expressions – the sincerity of the body – are a common among Christians throughout the world (see e.g. Robbins 2004).

THINGS AND OBJECTS

From clothing and crucifixes to baptismal water, things, objects, and substances are central for Christian ritual and daily praxis. Even when Christians would be committed to a project of immateriality, as shown by Mattehew Engelke (2005; 2007) in the case of the Zimbabwean Masowe Apostolics, materiality cannot be escaped. The Masowe Apostolics want a religion in which things do not matter, but the more they strive to break free from the chains of materiality, the more important certain things – in their case honey, pebbles, and water – become for making the divine present and 'alive' for people.

As discussed above, the different 'turns' in research have greatly influenced the study of Christianity. The visual, semiotic, mediation, material, new materialist, and ontological turns, for example, have all left their footprint in scholarship on Christian materialities. Especially approaches such as the actor-network-theory, New Materialism, and Thing Theory, that emerged from the post-structuralist, post-constructionist, and post-modern thinking, have helped in re-thinking Christian ways of engaging with matter.[9]

[9] On discussion on the differences between these different approaches, see e.g. Harman 2021.

Research on Christian materialities drawing on these approaches has examined especially the agency of things (Ocker and Elm 2020; Stolow 2013; Whitehead 2020). On what premises and to what extent can devotional objects, for example, be understood to have agency on their own? The question itself, central to Christian lives throughout centuries, is not new for research. Already in the 1970s Victor and Edith Turner (1978) studied Marian shrines and asked whether the 'power of the divine is compressed within and hence generated by the image, or whether the image simply represent the power of the divine.' (Norget et al. 2017: 71.) They end up understanding these shrines and other devotional objects as 'outward vehicles' for symbols, which are closely tied up with the human sensory processes of signification. Turner's analysis did not as such grant direct agency to devotional objects, but it did lay grounds for later study especially in context of Catholicism, but later also in those of Orthodox, Protestant and Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianities.[10]

As recent research has indicated (Morgan et al. 2015), the answer to the question of agency of objects is not yes or no, but somewhere in-between. When the division to objects and subjects becomes dissolved, objects can be understood to have some subjectivity, and subjects objecthood. In his research on Swedish Word of Life congregation belonging to the Faith movement Simon Coleman (2006: 179), shows how the self can be 'externalized in both [thinglike] words and money'. For members of the Word of Life, words and money are inalienable from the believer and thus constitutive of their body and spiritual self. They both, when given away to circulation, have effects on the world and on the believer themselves. In this process, '[t]he recipient of a linguistic or monetary gift is made a potentially (though not always) anonymous part of an economy of salvation that seeks for the believer the best of both this world and the next.' (ibid.: 181).

[10] Caroline Walker Bynum's study *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (2011) opened up the discussion on materiality among medievalists and historians at large. In her book, Bynum discusses religious materiality through the problems miracles – the material objects of devotion 'coming to life' for pilgrims in the period between 12th and 16th centuries – posed for the church and the faithful.

The agency of Christian objects has been approached also from the semiotic-ontological point of view *mimesis*. For anthropologist Michael Taussig (1993), who played a key role in taking the notion into use in ethnographic analysis, mimesis is 'a space between sameness and otherness, of identity and alterity'. Jon Mitchell (2015) has analysed Maltese Catholic statues and visions from this perspective as points of encounter between this world and the transcendent. A statue of Mary occasionally found weeping/shedding tears is not to be understood merely a representation of Mary and thus repetition of prior cases of such miracles. The statue transcends simple representation, because even though it does imitate and therefore represent, in its 'mimetic presence' it also becomes a party in a relationship. As such, the statue can be understood not to be mere object but to have some agency and subjectivity. Such attempts to overcome the supposition that spirit and matter, subjects and objects, belong to ontologically different regimes has been conducted in relation to research on Christianity and technology (Stolow 2013), and on Christian material mediations, at large (Bielo 2018; Blanton 2015; Meyer 2009).

Another widely employed approach in the study of things and objects in Christianities is biographical. As anthropological research has shown (Appadurai 1986; Barry and Bloch 1989; Thomas 1991) objects acquire social and cultural biographies through circulation and use. They also acquire meanings, which may and often do change over the course of the objects' 'life' as they move through circuits of exchange and in different cultural context agency is granted differently to objects. This vein of research strives to better understand the multiple meanings and the impact certain things have for Christians and their ways of interacting with these things.

David Morgan (2017) offers a three-partite division for studying the lifecycle of an object comprising the phases of production, classification and circulation. These phases demand material analysis, with which Morgan (ibid.: 15) refers to 'a series of inquiries that move from consideration of the concrete features of an individual object to comparison with other objects like it to its circulation and use and finally to what the object does and how it may be understood to perform

different kinds of cultural work.' Along similar lines, Gabriel Hanganu (2010: 51; see also Kenna 1985; Herzfeld 1990) argues in relation to Orthodox icons, that 'a full biography of an icon can be seen as the product of a collaboration of various categories of agents (animate an inanimate, human and nonhuman, visible and invisible). It consists of the interlaced biographies of four distinct elements (1) producers, (2) audiences, (3) prototypes (spiritual beings depicted on icons and invoked in religious devotion), and (4) materials included in the icon's "Body"'. According to Hanganu, in order to fully understand icon veneration in Orthodox context, both anthropological and orthodox theological views on the icon biographies therefore need to be taken into account. Christian objects accumulate layers of relationship throughout their existence, which is something only a biographical approach can reveal.

An earlier influential discussion on role of circulation of objects in Christianity is presented by the anthropologist Micheal Taussig (1980). His discussion on fethisism among South American miners and plantation workers deals, in its own way, both with the above-mentioned biographical and agency-focused approaches to objects, as well as the question of the nature of matter. Taussig sees the pacts made by Bolivian tin miners with the Catholicism influenced image of the devil called 'Tio' (English: uncle) as fetishization of evil. Drawing on Marxist theory, Taussig juxtaposes these pacts bartering the miner's soul for illusory power and material wealth given by Tio with the way in which capitalist production alienates workers from the commodities they produce. In this Andean vernacular Catholicism, then, the unjust process of wealth being channelled to bosses instead of producers gets its fetishized material expression in Tio, whose figures are found across the Bolivian mining region.

SACRALITY OF PLACES AND SPACES

In research on Christian engagements with spaces and places a central question has concerned sacrality: what makes a site, space, or landscape, for example, sacred, and what implications do such designations have in people's lived Christianities? Answers to such questions have varied, in the first case, for example, from 'God's self-communication' making places holy (Inge 2003), to attributing holiness to the people and practices taking place in a given site or location (Coleman and Eade 2004; Harris 2013; Preston 1992).

One vein of this research has focused on churches as institutions, on the one hand, and buildings, on the other, and has shown how Christians not only practice their religion through their interactions with these material forms, but the material forms also frame, guide, and enable certain kind of praxis, suppressing others. (Capredón et al. 2023; Handman and Opas 2019; Knott et al. 2016). Scott MacLochlainn discusses, how Philippine Methodists attempt to live in the midst of two opposing views of their multiple churches as material entities: one depicting them as mediating forms of Christian collectivity, the other as juridical entities for purposes of state regulation of religion. These opposing views generated a problem over whether the Methodist churches as material entities were divinely informed or not, that is, whether or not they should be left outside state control and reorganisation requirements. (MacLochlainn 2019.)

The question of sacredness of Christian institutions has recently been examined also in contexts in which church buildings have been turned into other uses such as into bars, hotels, and mosques. Sacred places appear to be considered somehow to possess sacredness, accumulated in the materiality of the building over the decades and even centuries of its usage. Similarly as with different objects accumulating layers of relationships, the buildings become charged with various layers of memories and emotions (see Knott et al. 2016; Beekers and Arab 2016; Groop 2019). This sacredness, which Daan Beekers (2016) has called 'sacred residue', that is, the sacredness pertaining and lingering in the building, becomes revealed most clearly in situations of transforming the purpose of the church building. The transformation or repurposing of a church or other religious

site can therefore never be complete, and the 'residue' inevitably also affects people's future ways of using the building.

In examinations on Christian relationship with the environment, landscapes, and significant places such as shrines the central question has also concerned the generation of sacrality through human interaction with the environment. A significant part of this these discussions has been conducted under the frame of study of pilgrimage.[11] This research has shown, how landscapes and sacred sites acquire their sacredness or become sacredly charged through devotional practices and performances, that is, human interaction with the place (Maddrell et al 2015: 5). In pilgrimages these practices involve mobility and movement, which interlaces the human embodied experiences with landscape. People sacralise the landscape and route by walking it (Coleman and Eade 2004: 3; Frey 1998; Gunzburg and Brady 2020; Maddrell 2011; Maddrell and della Dora 2013; Orsi 2008: 14). The meanings and sacredness thus generated also involves historical layers of myth and experiences of pilgrims previously travelling the same route. Landscapes and routes are therefore best understood as cumulative, historical matrixes of myth, spiritual objectives, and physical movement and experiences (see Allerton 2009; Huerta 2017).

CHRISTIANITY, CORPOREALITY AND THE SENSES

The bodily turn in social sciences and humanities has especially since the 1990s motivated researchers to examine the ways in which humans, as corporeal beings, go about living their lives, the relationship between human bodies and subjectivities, and how human bodies interlace with politics, economics, education, health and basically every sphere of human existence, including religion. Research on Christian corporeality was at the heart of the early calls for directing focus on

[11] For theological approaches to pilgrimage see Walton 2015.

bodies and bodiliness in research. Scholar of religion Meredith B. McGuire (1990) and Cultural historian Caroline Walker Bynum (1991) suggested that the body should be understood as coincident with identity, selfhood, and being.[12] For them, the body is central for study of social aspects of religion; it is the agent in our engagements with the world and through its materiality, it is linked with other material realities (McGuire 1990: 284).

A topic, which attracted much early attention in research on the role of corporeality in Christianity, and which has continued to interest researchers, is healing practices. In the context of Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity especially the healing powers of relics and icons, and their effects on believers' bodies has been studied (see Salter 2021; Scott 2010). The study of Protestant, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian healing has gained even wider attention. Thomas Csordas' work (1994a) on Catholic Charismatic healing practices was one path-opener in this research. Drawing on Merley-Ponty's phenomenology and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, he studied the sensory imagery and processes of embodiment taking place in healing and argued for the role of these bodily experiences in creating a 'sacred self'. Later, central questions in this branch of scholarship have been the concrete ways in which healing practices are considered to work, and the relationship between spirituality and bodiliness in these processes: how is illness understood and how is it related to sin and to the spiritual realm? (See e.g. Brahinsky 2012; Brown and Cox 2011; Csordas 1994b; 2002; Duffin 2009; Klassen 2011; Wainwright 2006.) Similar questions have been presented in the study of Christian ways of disciplining the body in asceticism, fasting, and dieting (Griffith 2004; Lester 2005).

The study of senses in Christianity inherent in these discussions has been studied also apart from the contexts of healing and disciplining of the body. Christians often describe their relationship with God in sensory language: Holy Spirit 'touches' them, they hear God's voice, or feel God's presence

[12] Bynum's monograph (1987) on the role of food in medieval Christian devotion paved way for her later focus on bodiliness and materiality.

as warmth, for example. Scholars have examined how Christians rehearse their bodies and minds to sense the divine presence, but also how they struggle with the spirit-body dualism in so doing (Bialecki 2011; Bielo 2004; Brahinsky 2012; Coleman 2006; de Witte 2009; 2017; Opas and Haapalainen 2016). Sometimes, the solution is found in what is called the sixth sense or spiritual sense capable of reaching beyond the human material existence (Gavrilyuk & Coakley 2012).

The limitations of the human body to sense and communicate with the transcendent was taken up in the volume *Christianity and the Limits of Materiality* (Opas and Haapalainen 2017). The editors identified three central modes in which Christians conduct boundary-work in order to (temporarily) solve the problem of divine presence and access to the transcendent. *Doubting* refers to processes, in which Christian's end up doubting matter and the human body as spiritually trustworthy. An example is the Ghanaian Charismatic Pentecostals' uncertainty at the face of the authenticity of somatic experiences of the presence of God (de Witte 2017). *Sufficing* addresses the question of quality of materiality: what kind of matter is adequate and capable of constituting faith? This question arises for example in relation to using a digital Bible: is the digital Word of God equally authentic as the printed Word? (Rakow 2017.) Finally, *unbinding* refers to the processes of opening or dissolving postulated boundaries. The 18th century Radical Pietists attempted both to fix the Spirit in their material bodies to make them Christian, and at the same time to dematerialise it to discern it so that the Spirit could impact their bodies positively (Heinämäki 2017).

The body has been found the key in defining a person's Christian status also in Indigenous Christian contexts. Following the launching of the notion of perspectivism at the end of the 1990s (Lima 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1998), especially in lowland South American contexts the Christian condition has been theorized to be inseparable from and, in fact, equalling, the human body. Brazilian anthropologist Aparacida Vilaça (2009; 2016) has conceptualised Indigenous Wari' people's conversion to Christianity as a bodily transformation. In a percpectivist social cosmos, Vilaça shows, where bodies, rather than minds, are the locus of subjectivity, transformation to

Christianity takes place as a transformation of the body. Similary, conversion from one form of Christianity to another in Amazonia best understood as a bodily transformation (Opas 2019; see also Bonilla 2009; Grotti 2009). Christianity, therefore, is something thoroughly material, it is a bodily condition.

As the social scientific and humanistic research examined above clearly demonstrates, Christianity is – not only in the Amazonian indigenous contexts but more generally – inseparable from materiality. As noted above, Christianity happens materially. It is the different forms of this 'happening' that scholarship on Christian materialities will continue to examine and provide interesting insights into also in the future.

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