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Materiality of Writing

Reconsidering Religious Texts

Editorial

Before we can understand norms or read texts, as human beings we are in touch with things – we are born into a world full of objects.¹ In the last few decades, the relationship between humans and things has attracted the attention of many disciplines and approaches to culture in the humanities. The material turn has also influenced anthropological reflection within fields that specialise in religion, such as theology and the comparative study of religion.²

Looking for things, their agencies, and material practices arising from the interaction between humans and objects allows more comprehensive insight into religious symbols systems, religious communities, and religious traditions.³ The substance, form, and colour of an artefact, the techniques for producing it, the possibilities for using, touching, wearing, or looking at it, the practices involving it, the ways of preserving, restoring, and destroying it or of passing it from one generation to another are fundamental aspects for us to consider when analysing and interpreting religions. Furthermore, a thing is not necessarily manufactured: materiality includes nature, organic and inorganic matter, vegetal and animal (including human) bodies. Analysing material culture as a crucial aspect of religious communities, symbols, rituals, traditions, and diffusion processes means considering more than just the discursive power of words. Religion is not primarily a system of reflection and philosophical pondering by means of texts; it is an existential experience. Religious beliefs and practices provide orientation around emotional, sensorial, corporeal, and aesthetic experiences. Yet, sacred texts and the commentaries they have inspired (and the related canonisation processes) have been

1 Samida/Eggert/Hahn 2014, 1.

2 See e.g. King 2010; Morgan 2010; Promey 2014; Chidester 2018.

3 On the terminological debate in conceptualising material things see e.g. Barad 2003; Lynch 2010.

considered the core of a religious tradition. Sometimes this approach to holy scriptures has even been completely – and uncritically – identified with the religious system as a whole. Research on theological and comparative approaches to religions has long been biased towards the concept of the text, including text production and text reception, yet this perspective has proved insufficient, not only in light of the findings of historical-critical exegesis but also as a result of the constraints of our respective languages, which have demonstrated considerable limitations in expressing the individual religious experience.

Under the influence of cultural studies approaches, the field of religious studies has broadened its epistemological horizon and reconsidered previously neglected dimensions of religious communities and traditions. Moreover, it has encouraged the reshaping of concepts like “sources” and “languages” – in the plural – “symbol” and “communication”, “space” and “time”, “body”, “memory”, and “tradition”, which have proved key points in the debate.⁴

This issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* stands at the crossroads of approaches to religion and offers a speculative exploration of texts that considers both procedures and results in researching material religion.⁵ Two questions inspire this collection of articles: How does the materiality of a text influence meaning-making processes? How does its materiality impact the multi-layered communication processes in which a text is involved during its long-term transmission? In addressing these issues, we benefit from the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character of religious studies that characterises this journal. Fundamental and systematic theology, biblical studies, and the study of religion have developed common methodological procedures to address the materiality of texts, and although they each have particular foci and explore particular facets, they are part of a mutual exchange. This introductory note highlights a number of essential topics that arise from a cross-reading of this collection of essays. According to Jan Assmann, a text can be described as the practice of recording a message. A text is storage for a communication that is wrested from its particular context in time and space and thus made available for potentially infinite re-enactments in new contexts. Addressing the material side of a text, understood in light of its storing and re-enacting of messages, we look at the particular codes used to secure

4 e.g. Plate 2015.

5 Hilgert 2016; Pöttler 2015; Ortlieb 2018; Ritter-Schmalz/Schwitter 2019.

that text: manuscripts, printed books, graphics, embroideries, tattoos, sheet music, and electronic codes are all forms of writing, of fixing a text into a material medium.⁶

The materiality of writing is always linked to the immateriality of communication, and thus the material medium retains the double quality of being a *thing* and a *stored communication*. Within religious traditions, this double quality of writing is evidently a crucial aspect when we recognise that sacred books are media by means of which divine revelation is made available in our world. Materiality alone can link the very idea of the communication of transcendence to the human life and world. This idea is represented in different forms in different religions, yet functions as a common motif – for example the Tora and the prophets of Israel, the Qur'an, and the incarnated Logos in Jesus of Nazareth all enfold the concept that materialization of divine revelation is a prerequisite for being perceived by mankind. Focusing on particular media and their quality as storage for a text raises the question of how a particular form of materiality influences the communication process that is activated by encoding the fixed code. This issue is discussed in the contribution by Erich Renhart, "Materiality of Religious Books. A Brief Sketch of Sometimes Disregarded Aspects of Book Culture". Renhart notes with reference to the Second Vatican Council⁷ that multiple aspects precondition the fabrication of religious books and manuscripts, in particular their perception as works of art in their material quality, in calligraphy and illustration. This quality has to refer to the content of the respective holy or venerable book.

Mark K. George's approach to the topic of this issue concentrates on the cultural, political, and religious effects of materiality. In "Writing, Affordances, and Governable Subjects", George discusses the role of the technology of writing in the book of Deuteronomy, looking at the impact of writing in constructing and normalising a concept of Israel, of people, and of governability.

The materiality of writing shapes and is shaped by spatial practices. Two contributions explore the entanglement of the materiality of texts and place. In "Born under a Lucky Star. Interpretations of Woodcuts of Pseudo-astrological Birth Amulets from German-Jewish Printing Houses in the 18th Century", Alisha Meininghaus presents and discusses astrological illustrated printings that on the one hand allude to the relationship between the cosmos and life on earth and on the other hand serve to protect the places occupied by the

6 Assmann 2007, 130.

7 *Constitution* 1963, 122.

new-born child. Christos Kakalis' article "In the Orality/Aurality of the Book. Inclusivity and Liturgical Language" explores the effect of decoding writings in a contemporary Christian-Orthodox liturgy in Scotland. The transformation of texts and symbols stored in books into sounds and songs creates a transitory liturgical space where different Orthodox traditions amalgamate.

The contribution by Christian Wessely "Material Traces of a Religious Trial. The Case of Ludwig Teschler", reconstructs a case of witchcraft accusation in 17th century Styria. While it re-collects various facets of this complex story, the article focusses on the role of materiality in transmission processes. The manuscripts it analyses, discovered by chance, are the only trace of this occurrence. Moreover, the material aspect and the kind of writing affect the contemporary researcher in various ways: not only does the message need meticulous decoding, but also it conveys an emotional status and – in its very materiality – the traces of the centuries. Time has rendered parts of the documents unreadable and therefore in need of reconstruction, which will be a product of the researcher's context. The second, "Reading *The Book of Joseph*. A Communication-Oriented Analysis of *Far Cry 5*", considers the various meanings of the representation and materiality of a book that was originally created in a computer game. The *Book of Joseph* travels between digital and analogue spheres, adapting its effects and meaning-making processes to the media in which it is materialised. These varied studies are united by a common interest in the effect of the materiality of writings in diffusion processes through time and social spheres.

A further topic emerging from cross-reading this issue concerns the relationship between the materiality of writing and identity practices. "As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely'. Samplers as a Religious Material Practice" by Daria Pezzoli-Olgianti deals with the autobiography of a lower-class woman, composed in silky red cross-stiches in 19th century England. The author reviews her life and organises her feelings and memories as she evokes moral texts and songs and prayers, as well as biblical quotations. These reflections are articulated by means of the slow, precise writing technique that today affects readers through its literal threads. The textile work discloses a struggle for identity mediated through female skills that were taught to unmarried women, necessary at that time for making a living. Ulrike Luise Glum in "The Tattoos of Armenian Genocide Survivors. Inscribing the Female Body as a Practice of Regulation" explores the relationship between writing and identity by considering tattoos as a practice of humiliation and assimilation as well as exclusion. The use of tattoos in the context of the Armenian Geno-

cide exemplifies the persistence of writing involving ink and the human body. Indelible, the tattoos transformed the faces and hands of female genocide survivors in a permanent, publicly readable medium documenting dramatic, extreme processes in which religious identity played a crucial role.

While we were editing these articles, the inauguration of the 46th President of the United States took place. The swearing-in of Joe Biden was the heart of this ceremony and involved a Bible held by the First Lady. In 2013 Barack Obama took his oath by placing his hand on two Bibles, which belonged to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. Donald Trump also chose Abraham Lincoln's Bible, along with his own, while Joe Biden preferred a large, 128-year-old family Bible. In this political ritual, the Bible is used as a thing, as a kind of materialisation of divine legitimation. Depending on the features, size, history, and owner of the book, the narratives evoked by this object are different: continuity in tradition, authenticity of faith, dignity of the office, political programme, and visions of the world are condensed in an oath practice that is transmitted and received worldwide. In such a ritual, material and immaterial dimensions – the characteristics of the book as a stored text with a particular material appearance and the book's relationship to spatial practices and transmission processes as well as its links to identities – converge. Here was a striking illustration of the relevance of the questions we explore in this issue and motivation to research religious texts beyond the words they contain – as performing things.

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