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## **Book Review. Christopher Ocker / Susanne Elm (eds.), Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things**

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Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati

## Book Review

# Christopher Ocker / Susanne Elm (eds.), Material Christianity Western Religion and the Agency of Things

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures 32, Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2020, 249 pages, ISBN 978-3-030-32017-1

*Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things* is a collection of essays that focuses on the role of things in shaping religious practices, identities and thinking. The chapters analyse different dimensions of materiality from various disciplinary perspectives – e.g. history, history of art, theology and religious studies, South Asian studies – bringing together approaches and methodologies from a broad range of epochs and cultures. In this sense, the title is misleading, since the spectrum of case studies is broader than Christianity or Western religion, which remains a diffuse category. Highlighting the crucial role and effect of things on practices and beliefs, the book shows in an exemplary way how detailed analysis of individual or shared religious ritual and thinking in past and present resists academic generalisations and conceptualisations.

The volume is organised into two distinct parts. The essays in the first part are categorised under the title “Bodies”. In her contribution on “Cimabue’s True Crosses in Arezzo & Florence”, Henrike Lange analyses crucifixes at the heart of various material practices. Lange considers selected works, following their long histories through phases of material degeneration and restoration. The case of the crucifix is particularly significant since this object performs visually and materially the incarnation of Christ, the material practice at the core of Christianity. Christopher Ocker, who is also a co-editor of the volume, analyses in “Resacralising the Media of Grace” the role of materiality within

various streams of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Focussing on the tension between objects and symbols, between imagination and the physical world, between memory and real presence, he highlights the role of bread and wine in articulating new and controversial approaches to the body of Christ. Within the structure of the book, these first two contributions are complementary, since they deal with different material agencies that shape the relationship between believers and Christ as well as the practices of forming, regulating and controlling the effects of things in the relationship between communities and the divine. Mark A. Peterson's contribution, "Puritanism and Refinement in Early New England: Reflections on Communion and Silver", analyses silver objects used in a religious tradition that is not usually associated with refinement and splendour. In comparing the recurrence and function of precious objects in both religious rituals and domestic practices, he questions scholarly assumptions about the radical condemnation of luxury. The article shows how a culture of refinement was compatible with Puritanism because the objects could express a communitarian and personal link to revelation. Samuel F. Robinson's "The Problem of the Flesh: Vegetarianism and Edible Matters" focusses on controversial interpretations of food practices in the 17th and 18th centuries. Discussing vegetarian diets promoted by Roger Crab and later by Thomas Tryon, the chapter shows how readings of the agency of food relate to various theologies of the body in the early modern era.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to "Spaces". In "San Diego the Pamatácuaro: A Mountain Shrine in Colonial Mexico", Martin Austin Nesvig discusses the role of materiality in a devotional practice in a remote location. By erecting a shrine, a late 16th-century community unfamiliar with the political, religious and linguistic culture of the colonial power shaped the cult of the Catholic saint associated with their town. The result is a peculiar form of devotion based on the needs of and beliefs rooted in this place; material agency led in this case to the autonomous agency of the inhabitants. The following chapter takes the readers to a different place and time: leaving early modern Mexico they arrive in contemporary California. In "Labyrinths as an Embodied Pilgrimage Experience: An Ignatian Case Study", Kathryn Barush reflects on the relationship between the spatial materiality of a labyrinth – an obligatory, delimited path with strong metaphorical significance that has been used in Christianity since the 4th century – and the bodily experience of walking as a form of religious reflection. The last two chapters are dedicated to the intriguing question of pantheism from the perspective of philosophy of religion. Raphael Lataster and Purushottana Bilimoria, in "Pantheism and

Its Place in the History of Religion”, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, in “Pantheism Monstrosities: On Race, Gender, Divinity and Dirt”, explore concepts of pantheism and ask whether resisting the clear separation between an external divine entity and the world could change how we look at materiality. Following such pantheistic worldviews, material agency and its efficacy cannot be considered mere products of humans but stand rather as independent entities in religious meaning-making processes.

These short summaries of the essays collected in this volume emphasise the challenges linked to fundamental questions about how we describe, reconstruct and conceptualise religion. First, the volume shows the crucial significance of historical and contemporary case studies for understanding the agencies of things, individuals, collectives and religious experts in constituting religious practices and beliefs. In doing so, it highlights the challenge of defining appropriate categories for comparing particular and unique constellations in order to achieve a general reflection on material agency. If material agency is to be taken as independent of human activity, concepts like “religion” or “tradition” will need to be discussed anew. Along this line, the volume notes the problematic role of anthropocentric scholarly approaches throughout the history of research into religion and religious history. Thus the editors argue: “The issue moves from a question of how religion reflects social order, human imagination, and culture, to a question of how religious things and performances belong to an ecology that produces human nature, society, and culture. For culture is no longer the mere product of human action and phantasy. Like self and society, it is generated simultaneously by willful people acting in space and time *and* by physical things” (9).

The case studies gathered in this volume are not linked by a common theoretical approach or methodology and from this point of view, the book is no more than a collection. Nevertheless, it offers an intriguing contribution to a new approach to the study of religion where concepts that are often taken for granted, such as “agency”, “subject” and “object”, are opened up for new consideration. “Religion” becomes a less and less clear concept to delimit anthropocentric constructions of transcendence and the divine. Rather, it is transformed into a conceptual map with which one can order and connect questions about practices that characterise cultures and societies. The book as a whole can be used as an introduction to the field of material studies in religion; the individual contributions may also be of interest to scholars familiar with the specific contexts.