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Vasudha Narayanan
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Index
This volume is a product of several scholars who have all worked in the field of religion and materiality for a very long time. We wanted to collectively come up with a volume where the chapters have analytical depth and the book as a whole would have comparative breadth, cover multiple traditions, geographical foci, and time periods, in addition to showcasing diverse expressions of religious materiality. The result has been a set of chapters where the topics have been carefully researched, rigorously analyzed, and presented through a wide array of disciplinary lenses.

It is a pleasure to thank the many people who have made the production of this volume possible. Several people at Wiley helped in seeing this book through its many stages. I am particularly grateful to Rebecca Harkin for initially suggesting this idea, to Juliet Booker for all continued help, and to Rajalakshmi Nadarajan for her efficient and professional attention to all the details and diligent work in the last stages of the production.

Manuel Vásquez did the heavy lifting for the editorial work when the chapters started to come in. He has also written the introduction, highlighting the contributions of each chapter and skillfully connecting them with the cutting-edge theoretical and methodological debates informing the turn to materiality in religious studies and, more broadly, in the humanities and social sciences. And finally, a big “thank you” to the many authors in this volume for their scholarship and for their patience during the several years it took to see this volume come out.

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CHAPTER 1

The Persistence, Ubiquity, and Dynamicity of Materiality

Studying Religion and Materiality Comparatively

Manuel A. Vásquez

1.1 The Persistence of Materiality

On 26 February 2001, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan under the leadership of the Taliban issued an edict regarding the destruction of religious images. It noted the presence of multiple ‘statues and non-Islamic shrines located in different parts’ of the emirate. ‘These statues have been and remain shrines of unbelievers and these unbelievers continue to worship and respect them. God Almighty is the only real shrine [taghit] and all fake idols should be destroyed.’ Thus, the edict concluded: ‘as ordered by the ulema [the council of religious and legal scholars] and the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan all the statues must be destroyed so that no one can worship or respect them in the future’. Arguably, the most high-profile and controversial enactment of the edict was the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas. Standing at over 150 ft tall at the foot of the Hindu Kush in the central highlands of Afghanistan, the statues were not only amongst the world’s largest figures of the Buddha, but also material evidence of the widespread circulation of Buddhism along the Silk Road, a transcontinental network that connected the Mediterranean with India and China. Built in the fifth century CE in the Greco-Indian Gandhara style developed by the descendants of Greek artists who came to the region with Alexander the Great, the statues also underscored the key role of materiality in the encounter and cross-fertilization of cultures and religions along the Silk Road. A Taliban spokesperson characterized the efforts to demolish the Bamiyan figures in military terms, almost suggesting that the statues actively resisted the attempts: ‘Our soldiers are working hard; they are using all available arms against the Buddhas.’ After 20 days of trying through various means to weaken the structures, including the use dynamite, anti-aircraft guns, and tank shells,
the figures were finally destroyed, along with many smaller statues of Buddha housed at the National Museum in Kabul.

The demolition of the Buddhas brought widespread condemnation, not only from the West but from neighbouring Muslim countries, as well as those with large Buddhist and Hindu populations. The United Nations’ General Assembly was ‘appalled’ by the Taliban’s edict and actions and adopted a resolution stating that ‘the artifacts being destroyed in Afghanistan, including the Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, belonged to the common heritage of humankind. Their destruction was an act of intolerance that struck at the very basis of civilized coexistence and was contrary to the real spirit of Islam’. The resolution also ‘strongly called upon the Taliban to protect Afghanistan’s cultural heritage from all acts of vandalism, damage and theft. It also called upon Member States to help safeguard the unique Buddhist sculptures in Bamiyan, using appropriate technical measures, including, if necessary, their temporary relocation or removal from public view’.1

We start the volume with this case not to stress the radical iconoclasm of the Taliban, a strategy that, notwithstanding the UN’s General Assembly’s assertion that the destruction of the Buddhas ‘was contrary to the real spirit of Islam’, can easily be co-opted by a ‘clash of civilization’ geopolitical gaze to portray Islam as not coeval with us, as a barbarian, uncivilized, and intolerant religion driven by a pre-modern tradition-alism contrary to modern notions of human rights and universal cultural values. To begin with, the Bamiyan Buddhas and surrounding Buddhist monasteries were attacked before the arrival of Islam by Hephthalites (also known as White Huns), for example, who worshipped Hindu gods, such as Vishnu and Shiva, and Zun, a merging of a local mountain deity and classical Shaivism (Wink 1990, pp. 117–119). Moreover, the giant Buddhas had co-existed with Islam for centuries, surviving the Mongol, Mughal, and British empires and the Soviet intervention. While there is indeed a proscription in the Qur’an against *shirk* (the elevation of anyone and anything to Allah’s singular pre-eminent place), Jamal Elias (nd, 14) notes ‘that there is no clear islamic [sic] condemnation paralleling the Biblical ban in the second commandment. Qur’anic condemnations are nowhere as explicit, perhaps the clearest being “And Abraham said to his father Azar: Do you take idols (*aṣmān*) as gods? Indeed I see you and your people in manifest error’” (6:74).2 Finbarr Flood (2002, p. 652), furthermore, shows that historically Islam is not characterized by ‘a timeless theology of images’. He points to the waxing and waning of iconoclastic ‘moments’ within Islam in response to socio-political and cultural complexities, a similar dynamic that one can find in other religions, like Christianity during the Byzantine era, the conquest of the Americas, and the Protestant Reformation (see Kolrud and Prusac 2014).

Flood’s and Elias’s points dovetail with Webb Keane’s observation that with its mistrust of institutional and ritual mediation and its emphasis on *sola fides* and *sola scriptura*, the Protestant Reformation reinforced an iconoclastic ‘entextualization of world’ (2007, p. 68), as part of a ‘creed paradigm’ that made the voluntary declaration of faith by the autonomous religious subject the core of authentic religion. ‘In the pre-Reformation era, collective recitation of a creed was often linked to the penitential system that reformers rejected. The reformers instead stressed the sincerity and privacy of the creed. Religious materializations such as rituals, offerings, priesthods, sacred
sites, relics, communities, holy books, and bodily disciplines persisted but usually in a position subordinate to that of statements of belief” (p. 75). James Simpson (2010) goes further, arguing that in its professed aim of breaking radically with tradition, of shattering the prejudices and idols that kept humanity from exercising autonomy on the basis of rationality, Western modernity was driven from the outset by a strong iconoclastic impetus. More specifically, the Kantian separation of pure reason (science), practical reason (ethics), and aesthetics (art) into autonomous spheres, each operating with its own ‘transcendental’ principles, a separation at the heart of the Enlightenment and Western secular modernity, had profoundly de-materializing effects. For ‘transcendental’ here meant not just principles not derived from revelation (religion), but also that these principles are a priori conditions of human experience, conditions not affected by the contingencies and particularities of embodied existence.

We shall have more to say about the sources of what is, at the very least, a profound ambivalence towards materiality in Western modernity and in the discipline of religious studies, which is, after all, a modern regime of knowledge. But notice here that iconoclasm cannot be unproblematically attributed to the barbarism of the pre-modern religious Other. ‘[I]conoclasm is not “somewhere else.” Instead, it lies buried deep within Western modernity, and especially deep with the Anglo-American tradition. This tradition insistently and violently repudiates idols and images as dangerous carriers of the old regime’ (Simpson 2010, pp. 11–12). Thus, we see how French revolutionaries spurred by the universal ideals of fraternity, equality, and solidarity set out not only decapitate the leaders of the ancien régime, but also its icons (Gamboni 1977). Comparisons of this sort demonstrate that when it comes to materiality, it is much too simplistic to oppose irrational, iconoclastic tribal religion to a rational, tolerant, and cosmopolitan modernity. While answers may differ widely, from various forms of iconoclasm to the celebration of the ‘threatening, yet glorious’ ‘power of the material as material’ (Bynum 2011, pp. 121–122), the question of materiality is an enduring and vital one across religions and cultures.

Flood argues that at the local level, there has been a far more nuanced management of religious materiality in Islam. The physical obliteration of religious images has been rare. Far more common has been ‘re-purposing’ of images in prescribed ways through defacement, decapitation, mutilation, and substitution with ‘safe’ depictions such as those of gardens and trees. Thus, to the extent that local and historical resources allow any generalization, ‘iconoclastic practice in the medieval Islamic world... was less an attempt to negate the image than to neutralize it’ (Flood 2002, p. 647). Furthermore, the “‘deanimating’ [of] existing images by depriving them of a soul (ruh)’ (p. 648) involved an implicit recognition of their potential efficacy. This reading certainly makes sense of the Taliban’s spokesperson alluding to the Bamiyan figures as resisting their
military efforts to destroy them. The figures themselves had agency, evincing an obduracy that affected the Taliban’s actions. This reading also explains all the rich materialities that accompany Islam, from architecture and calligraphy, to textiles, particular styles of dress (see the chapters by Banu Gökariksel and Anna Secor, and Victoria Rovine) and the embodied practices, landscapes, and infrastructure involved in the Hajj – the donning of the ihram garments, the prayers at the massive encampment at Mina, the stoning of the devil at the three Jamarat walls, the circumambulation and kissing of the Ka’aba. The dynamic assemblage of these materialities and activities is key to the practitioner’s experience of Islam as an efficacious religion.

If the challenge is not the outright denial of matter but rather the contested (im)proper deployment and management of what various materials afford us, we can also understand Michael Sells’s point that the Taliban themselves depend on particular forms of materiality. For Sells, these include religious and financial networks that have made possible the transnational spread of rectificationist versions of Islam, such as Wahhabism. They also include the global media through which the Taliban made a spectacle of their act of iconoclasm. If they are going to claim authority as the defenders of the purity of Islam, this act must be disseminated globally to members and non-members of the ummah. This is why Sells concludes that the Taliban are not a pre-modern or anti-modern form of traditionalism. Quite the contrary, they are the product of a late modern, or perhaps postmodern, globalization, driven electronic media.

Positing that what is at stake is the power of and over materiality also foregrounds the contradictions in the United Nations’ response to the Taliban’s edict and actions regarding the destruction of images. Flood rightly takes to task the ‘contemporary iconolatry’ (2002, p. 651) that undergirds this response, an iconolatry that is paradoxically iconoclastic in the sense that it expunges the religious valence of the Buddha figures and elevates them as the animated material expression of the Geist of a particular people or even of the entire humanity. This is an operation of disenchantment and re-enchantment that bears striking similarities with the re-purposing of icons in Islam and of Catholic images and relics by Protestants in art museums. The Buddha figures become so special, thus so ‘sacred’, to draw from Ann Taves’s definition of what counts as religious, that they have to be protected by a special international organization or ‘relocated’ – even if temporarily – to a museum in the metropole. Here, the UN’s contemporary iconolatry must contend with the legacies of colonialism and Orientalism, which as Sylvester Johnson shows in his chapter in the Companion functioned through a simultaneous denial of embodiment of the colonizer (making himself a universal sovereign subject) and an intense interest in the utter materiality of the colonized. In the Orientalist gaze, the colonized is so primitive, so immature, so tied to her body and her immediate environment that she cannot legislate herself through universal values disclosed by Reason. She must be civilized; but to train her body, we must extract truth for it, summon texts, codes, and artefacts that enable the colonizer to elucidate her essence. To be sure the colonial process of subjection and subjectivation was not a one-way, top-down process. David Chidester speaks of a ‘triple mediation’ in the production of imperial knowledge. This mediation brought together ‘metropolitan theorists’ like Max Müller and James Frazer, who ‘deployed a comparative method that inferred characteristic of the “primitive” ancestors of humanity from reports about contemporary
“savages” living on the colonized peripheries’, with ‘European observers, primarily travelers, missionaries, and colonial agents’ who mastered local language and provided accounts of indigenous life, and ‘local experts’, who served as ‘nameless translators, or converts at remote mission stations’ (Chidester 2004, p. 72). Nevertheless, these complex mediations were undergirded by one-sided power asymmetries and by relations of exploitation disguised by the benevolent paternalism of the mission civilisatrice. The Taliban challenged this hypocritical paternalism when they pointed to the fact the West (in this case the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) offered money to purchase and relocate the statues of the Buddha but not to feed the starving children of Afghanistan.

Throughout all the twists and turns of this case, what remains constant is the pervasiveness of materiality. And we have not even discussed the avowed anti-materialism of Buddhism. Isn’t the essence of Buddhism to seek release from samsara, the cycle of life and death, from the impermanence and illusory existence of materiality, including our own bodies? What are we to make of the colossal statues of the Buddha, the sheer size and physicality of which were marks of the success and prestige of Buddhism in the region? As John Kieschnick (2003, p. 4) observes, ‘Buddhist teachings are suffused with a suspicion of sensual pleasure and a tendency to denigrate and renounce the material world’. Nevertheless, Kieschnick warns, ‘there is a danger of giving too much weight to the role of ideas in the formation and development of material culture. Many things are employed according to traditions of religious behavior rather than as outgrowths of well-defined doctrinal precepts’ (p. 14). Indeed, ‘if...we leave the world of recondite doctrine and statements of principle and look instead at the way Buddhism has been practiced, we find material goods everywhere’ (p. 5). Pointing to the ubiquity of stupas containing relics of Bodhisattvas, numinous statues of the Buddha, and Buddhist rosaries and sacred texts carried by merchants and monks in their travels, as well as the networks of economic and political patronage that enabled the growth of the sangha, the formation of canons and schools, and the establishment of monasteries, Kieschnick demonstrates that ‘[c]ertain objects could be harnessed for the greater cause of the rejection of the material world, but to do so required meticulous attention to detail and adherence to codes of behavior in their manufacture and use’ (pp. 5–6). No wonder, then, the painstaking regulations regarding monastic life, down to ‘the cut and hem of the monk’s robes, the material from which his alms bowl was to be made, and the length of his walking staff’ (p. 5).

Given the stubborn presence of materiality, whence comes the entrenched representation of Buddhism as an other-worldly philosophy? Gregory Schopen (1997) has shown how early European scholars of Indian Buddhism, imposing misreadings of Darwinian evolution and their Christian assumptions that a legitimate religion must have established universal doctrines and sacred texts, disregarded material culture – bones, stones, coins, statues, inscriptions, caves, and footprints – in the study of how Buddhism was practised in daily life in various local contexts. For example, every time scholars of Buddhism ‘encountered evidence that even suggested that monks and nuns owned personal property, they first signaled their surprise...and then immediately invoked either explicitly and implicitly the rules in the canonical monastic code against it, to assert in one way or another, that they were not really seeing what they saw. Either
that, or they neutralized what they were seeing by attributing it to a “late change” or implied “decline” within the tradition (Schopen 1997, p. 4). After all, in their crude attachment to materiality, personal property among monks and nuns as well as popular everyday practices and objects of devotion betrayed the lofty life-transcending core teachings of Buddhism, teachings that seemed to be an alternative or even an antidote to modernity’s ‘iron cage’, which included the expansion and deepening of Western capitalist materialism. These Western scholars ‘axiomatically assumed that the textual ideal either was or had been actually in operation, that if it said so in a text it must have been so in reality’ (p. 4). We will have more to say about the hegemony of textualism in religious studies, but in this case, the texts upon which scholars relied to construct the ideal of Buddhist monasticism came rather late in the development of the tradition and ‘may not have been even known to the vast majority of practicing Buddhists – both monks and laity’, let alone ‘fully implemented in actual practice’ (p. 2).

Donald Lopez is even more specific, pointing to Eugène Burnouf, the chair in Sanskrit at the Collège de France and author of Introduction à l’histoire du Bouddhisme indien (1844), as the source of ‘our image of the Buddha, of the simple teacher of morality, seated beneath a tree’ (Lopez 2012, p. 87). Whereas a wider consideration of sources shows jostling appropriations of the Buddha as an idol known by many names or as multiple gods, it is this Enlightenment-based, Kantian view of the Buddha as an ethical teacher that ‘has remained largely unchanged in the European imagination, or at least in the scholarly imagination’, informing a Buddhism that ‘became a model against which the various contemporary Buddhisms of Asia were measured and generally found to be lacking, not only by Europeans but eventually by Buddhist elites in Asia as well’ (p. 88).

Thus, what appears prima facie to be a simple case of double iconoclasm – the elimination of the icons of an iconoclastic religion by another iconoclastic religion – offers, in fact, a clear example of the persistence and ubiquity of materiality. After all, as Kolrud and Prusac (2014, p. 6) write, ‘Iconoclasm depends on the power of the image, in as much as a neglected image, which is no longer the object of worship or hatred, remains an unlikely target’. One of key goals of the turn towards materiality is developing a richer understanding of the power of images beyond traditional modernist approaches which see it as the result of naïve, erroneous, or pathological human projection. This is certainly how Marx and Freud, building on Hegel, saw them (Vásquez 2016). Whether we understand the power of religious bodies, objects, and landscapes as emerging from their dynamic interaction with various other bits of materiality, as those influenced by Bruno Latour and Actor-Network theorists do, and/or as afforded by the inherent potency of matter, the aim is to take seriously the centrality of matter in the practice of religion, even when (or especially when) that centrality is actively denied.

The doggedness and ‘everywhereness’ of matter has led some prominent voices in the turn towards materiality to make some bold ontological and epistemological claims. As Keane puts it: ‘that religions are material is non-trivial’ (2008, p. 231). For ideas and beliefs ‘are not transmitted telepathically. They must be exteriorized in some way, for example, in words, gestures, objects, or practices, in order to be transmitted from one mind to another’ (p. 230). As such, ‘[m]ateriality is a precondition for the social circulation and temporal persistence of experiences and ideas. This is true, of course, not just
of ideas but of any materialization, including rituals, institutions, altars, icons, offerings, bodily habits, and so forth’ (2008). Recognizing the primacy and necessity of materiality, Birgit Meyer states unequivocally that ‘the idea of an immaterial religion is a fiction: even a semiotic ideology that denounces religious things and pictures cannot do without material forms’ (2012, p. 319).

As contributors to the turn towards materiality, we also affirm the latter’s inescapability, and we do so not only by acknowledging the unavoidable materiality of mediation in the production and circulation of meaning, but also by embracing the embodiment of both the religious practitioners and the scholars who study them. This embodiment involves a material being-with, being-amongst, and being-through materiality (Vásquez 2011) that has binding consequences for how we practise religion and how we study it. Nevertheless, we share Bruno Reinhardt’s concern with not turning materiality into another totalizing framework and falling into the same trap to which the otherwise fruitful linguistic turn succumbed, becoming a suffocating textualism. According to Reinhardt, anthropologists, and we would add religious scholars, ‘have progressively recast materiality as an immersive environment with no outside position’ (2016, p. 78). This would make materiality just the inverted image of the overweening idealism behind the most simplistic readings of Derrida’s declaration that ‘il n’ya pas hors de texte’. Indeed, if ‘all religion is material religion’ (Engelke 2011, p. 209), in what sense is the persistence and ubiquity of materiality a non-trivial insight? Or as Reinhardt (2016, p. 78) asks: ‘What is not materiality after all?’ In answer to these questions, Matthew Engelke (2011) argues that the task is ‘understanding what precisely constitutes the materiality of material religion, what makes religious materiality either significant or religious, and according to whom’. In other words, we need to explore how what religious practitioners often understand and refer to as transcendent, immaterial, uncanny, supernatural, and the ultimate Other comes to be experienced immanently, rendered materially present for embodied beings like us and, potentially, non-human animals, as Anna Peterson challenges us in her chapter. Adapting from Engelke’s work among African Christians, we can say that from the point of view of materiality, the fruitful question to investigate comparatively is how various religions negotiate boundaries and tensions between presence and absence, which can often be paradoxically simultaneously present (Engelke 2007, pp. 11–16, see also Jessica Boon in this Companion).

Given the tensions and paradoxes involved, for us, the turn to materiality is more a mode of problematizing, an open and flexible critical framework for asking (new) questions and recovering certain kinds of data that approaches which have privileged ideas, beliefs, creeds, and texts have excluded. In that sense, the turn to materiality is driven by a ‘limit-attitude’, to borrow from Foucault (1984, p. 45), a will to think critically and act transgressively at the limits of the field, so as to continue to expand the on-going conversation about religion.⁴ We agree with Reinhardt that ‘material religion is... not an empirical field waiting passively for more and more ethnographic coverage’, a sort of positivist position that would imply that now that we have finally broken through textualism, we can capture religion in its ‘essence and appearance’ once and for all. Rather, the non-reductive materialist study of religions is more like a ‘field of problematization’, a strategic epistemological intervention which generates ever new ways of approaching religion(s) with rigorous-yet-fallible methods that enable its proper contextualizations – the
placing of the religious practitioners and practitioners of religious studies in the multiple cultural and natural contexts from which they have evolved, on which they depend and through which they create their life worlds. It is a disciplined engagement with religion that foregrounds the multiple ‘conditions of felicity’, the materials, agents, processes, practices, dispositions, relationalities (including inclusion, exclusion, domination, resistance, forms of disciplining self and other), mobilities, spaces, affordances, and affects that go into making particular religious phenomena legitimate, authoritative, and efficacious. This engagement is also keenly aware of the conditions of felicity of the theories it generates, of the materializing effects of these theories.

1.2 Sources of the Ambivalence Towards Materiality

If materiality is constitutive of religion and life itself, how come it has been so repeatedly denied or ignored, particularly in religious studies? While, the denial of materiality in religious studies has a particular genealogy connected to the discipline’s rise out of Protestant Christian theology and Western colonialism, materiality poses an unavoidable existential paradox. On the one hand, it is the essential ingredient for the self to live, to exercise transcendence, to engage in transformative practice upon him/herself and his/her environment. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it, before the thinking self, which Descartes posited as the irreducible foundation of knowledge, there is the embodied ‘pre-reflective’, ‘tacit’ cogito, the flesh of our bodies touching and being touched by the flesh of the world. This dynamic reversibility of flesh ‘coiling over’ flesh, of flesh summoning flesh, makes possible the emergence of the representations through which we come to think about the experience of our enfleshment. In Merleau-Ponty’s words:

If, reflecting on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is one with my existence as body and with the existence of the world and, finally, because the subject which I am, taken concretely is, inseparable from this this body and this world. (2012, p. 408)

If materiality enables selfhood, it also discloses our finitude, the transitory and protean nature of our bodies and the world, making us utterly vulnerable to pain, suffering, loss, and death, just as it affords the possibility of attachment, joy, the experience of abundance, presence, and satisfaction. Different traditions and schools of philosophy have sought to resolve the tension between the possibility of transcendence and the experience of radical immanence that the materiality affords, but a preferred strategy in Western thinking has been to deny or seek to overcome the radical immanence, finitude, and changeability – read corruptibility – of materiality and to affirm transcendence one-sidedly, by detaching the latter from its material conditions of possibility and positing it as a more foundational, essential, and real reality. This has certainly been the case since Plato’s reading of the ultimate meaning of Socrates’s life and death: that all the vicissitudes of his mortal life made sense as part of a search for universal and unchanging forms like Goodness, Beauty, and Justice. The search for detached, foundational transcendence would recur, in Descartes’s cogito, Kant’s a prioris, Hegel’s absolute
knowledge, Husserl’s transcendental ego, and so on. It is true that one can be a materialist and still be consumed by the search for unchangeable foundations and totalizing viewpoints, as evinced by physicalism and certain reductive versions of Marxism. However, these materialisms do not do justice to the creativity, vibrancy, polymorphousness, and complexity of matter. In fact, these materialisms have been part of the problem, re-inscribing static and simplistic dualisms and casting the focus on materiality in a bad light, leading Marx to complain rightly that

> the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, it happened that the active side, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism, but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. (Marx 1978, p. 143)

We, thus, need a materialist framework that foregrounds becoming – process, historicity, alterity, tension, entanglement, and relative (in)determinacy – as nature’s most salient feature (Connolly 2011).

While the quest for foundations, essences, and totalizing systems has allowed for rewarding expressions of transcendence, it has also set up intractable dualisms – between body and soul, matter and spirit, materialism and idealism, particularity and universality, contingency and necessity, finitude and eternity, humanity and God, nature and culture – that have vitiated Western thought and action, and the discipline of religious studies within it. Materiality (including our bodies), although a condition for the emergence of dualistic thinking itself, has been denigrated as the inferior pair, always to be derived from or explained through terms associated with detached transcendence.

But the disparagement of materiality is not just the result of philosophical attempts to cope with the paradoxes of materiality. Because materiality entails change and contestation – the possibility that a particular thing, body, and landscape may function or be appropriated differently in accordance with the context – it unavoidably raises issues of power. Materiality involves what Keane terms ‘bundling’: ‘the contingent coexistence of an indefinite number of qualities in any object, which always exceeds the purposes of the designer... Bundling gives to material things (including linguistic forms) an inherently and irreducibly open-ended character’ (Keane 2008, p. 230). In social fields marked by power relations, the open-endedness of things leads to attempts to stabilize them, to freeze them within self-evident larger configurations and regimes of value, as regulated by rules that are universal and, thus, go without saying. Hence, the construction and maintenance of orthodoxy often goes hand-in-hand with the assertion of a de-materialized and de-historicized transcendence.

Building on Marx’s concept of ideology, Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1991) asserts that religious elites often present their ideas, practices, and the institutions they lead as given for all times and places, as standing above the constraints of nature, society, and history, constraints that would relativize them, opening them to contestation. A key component of ‘the religious labor carried out by specialized producers and spokespeople’ within the religious field, is ‘the principle of ideological alchemy by which the transfiguration of social
relations into supernatural relations operates and it is therefore inscribed in the nature of things and thereby justified’ (Bourdieu 1991, p. 5). Through this ideological alchemy, religious elites also endeavour to show that the ideas, practices, and institutions of their rivals in the social, cultural, economic, and religious arenas are determined by narrow material interests. In other words, materiality necessarily opens up struggles around the legitimate boundary between transcendence and immanence, between presence and absence, between the sacred and profane, between what is ritually efficacious and what is not. No wonder, then, that it is in the interest of religious elites to deny materiality as much as possible, as Protestant missionaries in Africa and Oceania tried to do by presenting a belief and text-based faith against local ‘animist’ and ‘fetishistic’ religions. Since denying materiality altogether is not possible – as the denial requires the deployment of other material practices, as we saw in the case of both the Taliban and Buddhists in the Silk Road – the next best thing is to sacralize a particular regime of management of materiality or to purify certain objects, practices, bodies, and landscapes from profane ‘accretions’ and ‘superstitions’ in order to forestall struggles (Keane 2008, p. 231). This explains the Vatican’s efforts to control local popular devotions and practices throughout the Catholic world. In response, these local devotions invariably flaunt their materiality, the sheer reality and unruly abundance of crying statues, Holy Hosts that turn into blood, the healing power of water and dirt, in order to assert their legitimacy.

To the extent that religious studies uncritically takes for granted the narratives of religious elites, it reproduces the denial of materiality, an operation that also legitimizes the discourses of the discipline by obscuring the material conditions of their production. Materiality is troublesome for all involved; better neutralize its effects!

The close connection of materiality with orthodoxy and heterodoxy, with domination and resistance, goes a long way towards bringing down to earth the denial of materiality in the modern study of religion. Scholars such as Talal Asad (1993), Matthew Engelke (2011), Webb Keane (2007), and Birgit Meyer (2010) trace this denial to the Protestant Reformation’s emphasis on sola scriptura and sola fides, which generated a representational economy characterized by a suspicion of mediation other than the Bible and the voluntary profession of faith by the autonomous and self-transparent subject. In an effort to curb the abuses of Catholicism, the Reformers challenged the efficacy of images, objects, relics, and rituals, any form of materiality which might give the clergy a privileged access to sacred and, thus, legitimize their power as sanctioned mediators. Granting power and agency to these materialities was, at best, superstition at odds with the authority that secular modernity had given to rationality as the arbiter of truth; at worst, it was idolatry, an accusation that would take a particular force during colonialism, in the violent encounter with indigenous practices.

It is not as if phobia towards materiality started out of the blue with the Reformation. There were intense iconoclastic controversies in Byzantine Christianity in the eighth and ninth centuries, partly in response to the spread of Islam, that contributed to the schism with Western Christianity in 1054.8 And there is, of course, Catholicism’s entanglement with colonialism. The word fetish, after all, comes from feitiço (from feito, something made by humans [for the purpose of witchcraft] rather than having life and raison d’être of its own), which Portuguese explorers used to identify autochthonous beliefs and practices that, in their eyes, misattributed power and agency to materiality,
particularly human artefacts, setting them apart from and making them inferior to legitimate forms of Catholic sacramentality. This ‘denial of coevalness’ (Fabian 1983), in turn, legitimized the Portuguese and Spanish colonizers’ destruction of ‘savage’ local traditions and the forcible conversions to the true, civilized religion. Tomoko Masuzawa has shown how the founders of *Religionswissenschaft* inherited and reproduced this prejudice against fetishism. She notes that in the eyes of the discipline’s founders, fetishism was associated with ‘absolute materiality’, representing a form of consciousness even baser than idolatry and totally opposite to true spirituality. She observes: ‘Fetish is materiality at its crudest and lowest; it points to no transcendent meaning beyond itself, no abstract, general, universal essence with respect to which it might be construed as a symbol’ (2000, p. 248). As such, ‘the fetishist is not only mistaken, she denies her own agency. To surrender one’s agency to stones, statues, or even written texts is to diminish one’s responsibility’ (Keane 2007, p. 77), a responsibility that is critical for the voluntary and authentic acceptance of Jesus Christ as one’s saviour.

Herein lies the semiotic transmutation promulgated by the Reformation: it unleashed a ‘process entextualization’, a ‘dematerialization of meaning’ (Keane 2007, pp. 14, 62) that predicates the authority and authenticity of religion upon the sincere expression of one’s inner belief – a confessional form of subjectivation in Foucaultian terms (see Asad 1993) that has a close elective affinity with modern notions of sovereignty and citizenship – through the profession of a creed. According to this new ‘semiotic ideology’ (Keane 2008, pp. 16–21), in the most evolved and, thus, ‘true’ religions, this creed is enshrined in the abstract, universal theology of the great sacred texts. We have seen how this textualism has dominated the study of Buddhism and, Richard King (1999a) and Sharada Sugirtharajah (2003) among others have made the same point about how scholars in the metropole such as William Jones and Max Müller constructed a timeless, universal, spiritual, and scripturally-based essence of Hinduism (see Patrick Olivelle’s chapter on the Dharmashāstra, which points to the materialities of everyday life even in the texts and laws). Meyer (2010, p. 746) also notes this process of dematerialization in Weber’s comparative sociology of religion, which, despite his ambivalence towards the iron cage and disenchantment brought about by modern capitalism, privileges ‘content and meaning above form’, considering Protestantism’s this-worldly asceticism as more transformative than ‘magical’ forms of religiosity that invest materiality with agency. Critiquing the failure of sociology to offer nuanced, non-reductive readings of the global proliferation of Pentecostalism and other spirit-centric forms of Christianity that see no contradiction between salvation in the beyond and health and wealth in the now, that engage as exorcism of possessing evil spirits (see Simon Coleman’s piece on spiritual warfare), Meyer rightly complains that ‘Max Weber’s analysis of Protestantism as a salvation religion that moved beyond reliance on concrete material forms has served as a distorting lens even in the study of Protestantism’ (2012, p. 9). Weber suggests a parallel between the religious devaluation of art and the devaluation of the magical, orgiastic, ecstatic and ritual elements of religiosity in favor of ascetic and spiritual or mystical elements. The higher religion develops, the less it depends on material forms. Obviously this view echoes typically Protestant criticism of Catholicism and, for that matter, ‘paganism’ as ‘idol worship’, as being steeped in a magical attitude that falsely attributes a spirit to inanimate matter (p. 10).
In that sense, Robert Orsi is correct in pointing out that religious studies’ inability hitherto to place materiality front and centre is deeply connected to theological and political struggles between European Protestants and Catholics over the issue of presence (and absence) of the supernatural in nature, struggles that found their most poignant expression in debates over the Eucharist, over transubstantiation versus consubstantiation and symbolic remembrance.

‘Religion’ is derived from ‘Protestantism’. This is the dominant view among scholars of religion today, but it is only partially accurate... it is historically more accurate – and theoretically and historiographically more generative – to say that ‘religion’ was the creation of the profound rupture between Catholics and the varieties of Protestantism over the question of presence, of the ongoing and intensifying caricatures of each other’s theologies and rites of presence and of their mutual denunciations of practicing what in their respective judgments were not really ‘religion’. (Orsi 2016, p. 32)

Orsi further argues that these sectarian struggles, the religious and political identities and borders generated by them, were carried to the colonies, where missionaries and administrators sought to impose them upon their subjects. No wonder, then, that ‘the fissure of presence/absence has run through the center of Western culture and through all of the modern world wherever the armies, missionaries, and merchants of Protestant and Catholic empires landed, which is to say almost everywhere’ (p. 45).

As compelling as this totalizing reading is, it neglects that struggles over presence and absence, over materiality and immateriality, over transcendence and immanence did not just take place in the ‘West.’ For example, Indian philosophy and theology contain a variety of perspectives involving ‘different kinds of “matter-s” and different meanings attached to them’ (Narayanan 2016, p. 345), from the dualism of Samkhya, which sets up a tension between spirit and matter similar to Aristotelian hylomorphism – the notion that Platonic forms and matter are inextricably linked in the process of bringing existence forth – to Shankara’s Advaita (non-dualist) Vedanta.10 Yet, even in Samkhya, purusha (pure consciousness) has to interact with prakriti (nature) in order to come to know its own essence. Purusha is, in fact, inactive and devoid of all qualities, while prakriti is generative. It is matter as driven by forces (‘strands’, gunas) that gives purusha pure potency, the power to become through periods of equilibrium and disequilibrium. In turn, Shankara’s assertion that God is Brahman, the eternal, infinite, and ultimate reality of all there is, entails a pantheism that cannot malign materiality without contradiction, even if liberation means achieving the realization that bodies and things are merely transitory and illusory, that, at bottom, Brahman is their unchanging essence. This cosmology, moreover, opens the way for the qualified non-dualism of Ramanuja, who saw the material world as Brahman’s body. Ramanuja ‘materializes’ Advaita Vedanta: the universe is the glorious manifestation of Brahman and Brahman is in all things, yet Brahman exceeds and grounds the universe. Thus, devotion (bhakti) to a personal god (Vishnu) through embodied practices, including puja, darshan, the recitation of the divinity’s name or mantras, festivals like Navaratri, and gatka performances, and through sacred objects and places, such as murtis, prasad, rivers, groves, and temples, so widespread in ‘lived Hinduism’ is not only a valid path to Brahman, but