

# Epilogue

*Caroline Walker Bynum*

Ever since John Toews' essay 'Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn' in the *American Historical Review* in 1987, cultural historians have seen themselves as turning, re-turning and turning beyond.<sup>1</sup> Recently the turning has speeded up, sometimes propelling us from one turn to another so quickly that we hardly have time to consolidate the advantages of a new emphasis. Nonetheless, turn we must, and surely this volume, ably compiled by Suzanna Ivanič, Mary Laven and Andrew Morrall, represents in two elements of its very title ('materiality' and 'world') what might be considered the most important new directions of the past twenty years: the material turn and the global turn.<sup>2</sup>

In a productive re-evaluation of what we should focus on in studying culture, anthropologists, art historians, historians, sociologists and students of religion have turned not to reject textual evidence but to add to it what they variously call 'thing theory', 'the material turn' and 'object-oriented ontology'. Building on the ideas of the anthropologist Alfred Gell, whose most influential work on the agency of objects appeared just after his untimely death in 1997, and the approach of sociologist Bruno Latour, who seemed to reject many current ideas of a division between subject and object, this turn propelled scholars to new definitions of what they studied. For art historians, the new theories broadened what was once understood as art (painting, sculpture and sometimes decorative or decorated objects such as cabinets and altar-pieces) to include all crafted things and indeed some (such as Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades) that are not reworked by an artist or craftsman but simply relocated and relabelled.<sup>3</sup> For students of religion, the focus involved a move away from the study of doctrines (which not all so-called 'religions' seem to have) to consideration of practices, performances and rituals (which seem to be found in some form in all

1 Toews, 'Intellectual History'. The linguistic turn was, of course, far older than the turn beyond it. See Rorty, ed., *Linguistic Turn*.

2 At the time I wrote this epilogue I had not seen the essay by Vivian B. Mann, who graciously stepped in at the last minute, and so could not incorporate it in my discussion.

3 Proponents of new approaches, such as object-oriented ontology, thing theory and various sorts of 'new materialism', do not agree on what this material turn should be. I discuss this and give a bibliography in the introduction titled 'What's New about the Medieval?' in the new edition of my *Resurrection of the Body*, see esp. n. 15.

societies, perhaps even primate ones). The approach thus avoided a reduction of 'religion' to a set of beliefs, an approach that had been rejected somewhat confusedly as 'Protestant-izing', by scholars going back at least to Wilfred Cantwell Smith.<sup>4</sup> It also gave new importance and agency to objects, for it is difficult to imagine a ritual without objects (whether the skewers with which dervishes pierce their cheeks or the amber beads with which some early sixteenth-century Lutherans still prayed – cases discussed in Sara Kuehn's and Rachel King's essays above). In an impressive recent study by historians of Europe and the Mediterranean, even natural objects such as dust or stone (for example, the bits of rock from the Holy Land now revered at the Vatican as relics) are included in the theorizing of religion.<sup>5</sup>

Broadening the understanding of culture to place increased emphasis on material things has quite naturally fed into the global turn. The study of trading networks, like the new interest in how bodies of water connect regions, inevitably involves questions about the transport and movement of objects.<sup>6</sup> How, for example, do silkworms and silk and the textiles woven from it join together far-flung points not only through the physical contacts of producers, merchants and traders but also through the information and the skills that travel with objects? <sup>7</sup> How is culture transferred and absorbed – as well as destroyed and buried – through war and conquest, a process clearly seen in figures such as the Virgin of Copacabana (discussed in Gabriela Ramos's essay above) that fuse the desires and values of very different cultures in complex ways. The global turn has political roots as well. Painfully aware of how distorting such concepts as, for example, 'the Orient' or 'Japanese feudalism' can be when they impose European models as normative or universal, historians of Europe have over the past twenty years struggled to pay greater attention to the rest of the globe while avoiding a Eurocentrism that uses European categories and concepts to analyze it. Such self-awareness of necessity brings with it new sophistication about the nature of comparison.<sup>8</sup> When Ulinka Rublack writes a book on clothes in the renaissance, she considers parallels to Chinese dress, with due attention to differences in chronology between East and West.<sup>9</sup> The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the *Lutherjahr* of 1517 required attention to a global reformation that carefully differentiates influence, borrowing, resistance and parallel developments.<sup>10</sup>

It can be argued that both the new turns are especially appropriate not only for analyzing but also for characterizing the early modern period. I have argued that the late Middle Ages, especially the fifteenth century, saw increased anxiety over

4 See Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture*, and Smith, *Faith and Belief*.

5 Bartal et al., eds., *Natural Materials*.

6 On the recent interest in studying bodies of water as connecting cultures, see Bynum, 'Perspectives, Connections'.

7 See, for example, Weigert, 'Interwoven Globe', and Nagel, *Some Discoveries of 1492*.

8 On the stimulus to rethink comparison, see Bynum, 'Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology'.

9 Rublack, *Dressing Up*.

10 See, for example, Marshall, *Reformation*, and Hawley, 'Four Churches'.

religious materiality as popular, lay groups such as the Lollards in England attacked images in the fear that they not only diverted attention from the inner response to God's word but also might well be inhabited by demons. Catholic preachers castigated both disrespect for and excessive reliance on images and relics of the saints. Surely such reactions raged with increased force in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries all over Europe and abroad in the mission fields. By the seventeenth century, religious objects such as stained glass in Christian churches and the statues of Mezo-American tribes were smashed and their adherents sometimes executed, yet the 'idols' of the heathen (such as Philip II's jade from the new world discussed by Kate E. Holohan above) were often appropriated with confidence in their power. In Protestant churches, where doctrinal considerations sternly forbade images and objects, placing confidence above all in the preached word, the material crept back again in the form of Commandment tables, shaped into elaborate figural compositions that look like nothing so much as the forbidden chalices or crosses.<sup>11</sup> Whether as Islamic calligraphy, Christian amulets or the palm-leaf books of Buddhism, the textual itself became material. People died – and killed – for it not only as an idea but also as a thing.

In these essays, the global turn can also be understood as responding to a distinctive characteristic of the early modern world. Although scholars now realize that there was more travel, exploration and colonization of the 'Other' in the European Middle Ages than a conventional picture suggests, there is no question that what used to be called 'the age of exploration' in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries was characterized by the greater connection of the regions of the globe. Objects transported and challenged cultures in new ways.<sup>12</sup> So interconnected did societies become that, as Abigail Krasner Balbale argues above, Arabic could be interpreted to provide a Christian pre-identity for early modern Spain and, as John-Paul A. Ghorbrial's essay shows, the seventeenth-century compilation by a Capuchin missionary, pseudonymously known as Febvre, could use the practices of Eastern Christians and Muslims in the Ottoman Empire as ammunition against European Protestants. In the early modern world, practices of far-flung geographical areas could seem less 'other' than some practices at home.

Nonetheless, there is an underlying question that this volume also raises, a question that recent scholarship has addressed only obliquely or implicitly. What makes 'materiality' 'religious'? In other words, put very simply, how do we choose what objects to include in a study of 'religious materiality'? Clearly not every object qualifies for inclusion, but why, therefore, have *these* things been chosen? Several of the essays in this collection self-consciously test the limits of the category. Suzanna

11 See the Commandment table from Roggenstede, reproduced in Hamburger, *Script as Image*, 58. For other examples, see Barber and Boldrick, eds., *Art under Attack*, 50–51.

12 See Findlen, ed., *Early Modern Things*. The collection reflects the global turn in early modern studies.

Ivanič's discussion of the *Kunstkammer* of Rudolf II impels us to ask whether a quartz statue of Mary Magdalene is 'religious' because the woman it represents is known through Christian stories. Wisely, Ivanič's answer is not that the figure is religious because of references in a Christian text but rather that the Mary figure is religious because thinkers in the period, using neo-Platonic and astrological conceptions of the universe, understood all things as imbued with the power of the heavens. This is an acute perception of a certain strand of early modern thought, but it then poses the question of whether we must say that any object collected in Rudolf's 'wonder cabinet' – or indeed any material object at all – is religious, because, according to such a philosophy, all objects are imbued with a more than mundane significance? If this were so, we would perhaps need to search for 'religious objects' in whitewashed Calvinist churches that explicitly rejected such things, for Calvin too had a lyrical and profound sense of God as revealed in the entire natural world.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, we can ask, as Rachel King's study does, at least implicitly, whether we understand the amber beads that become necklaces and bracelets in later sixteenth-century Prussia as 'religious' because they carry some trace of their former use as prayer beads or because (a very different argument) all objects valued as conspicuous consumption have a heightened aura.

These are not easy questions to resolve, nor can they be answered by studying any single case. What these essays suggest, however, is that we seem to assume that 'religious materiality' describes *significant* objects, objects somehow charged, active, powerful, saturated with meaning, such objects as the wax or wooden or paper ex-votos that represent the site of a cure or carry its story, the ashes or bodies of the dead whether in Venice or Tibet, the book or box in which some instantiation of the holy is understood to reside.<sup>14</sup> We must then ask why we study these things rather than ashes from the fireplace, the wax of birthday candles, or the boxes in which matches or soap powder or cigarettes come? What makes these particular ashes or boxes, this wax, powerful? Does the repurposed spice-box the editors speak of in the opening pages of this volume become religious – that is, change in some way ontologically – when it is repurposed as a reliquary, or is the repurposing merely an example of common or ordinary reuse? How would we know? To ask such questions is not, of course, to ask: is there a god operating through this stuff? Rather it is to ask: how can we characterize the charge or significance or power these things have that soap powder or fireplace ashes or ordinary boxes don't have? And can we enumerate, even partially, the characteristics in them or attributed to them that might induce in the culture that employs or reveres them a recognition of their special power or significance?

13 Calvin, *Institutes*, I, bk. 1, chs. 1–6, pp. 35–66.

14 As I discuss further below, other collections of essays such as Morgan's (see note 4) and Daston's (see note 17) raise the same question.

Perhaps we can begin to answer the question by considering the variety of ways in which the authors of these essays understand the objects they study to be, or to become, or to be made powerful. For it is one of the achievements of this volume that each author takes the materiality he or she studies with full attention to its specific characteristics. We understand the significance of the stuff itself with and in which individuals or groups or societies enact significant moments. Wax can mimic the tint and malleability of flesh (healthy, healed or dying). Colour (the gold of amber, the greenish yellow of New World jade, the grey-to-blue gradations in quartz) can signal specific kinds of political authority or medicinal effects. The sensuous shapes of Arabic letters (even when illegible or in fact gibberish) can be understood to transmit theurgic power. Ulinka Rublack and I have claimed for the later Middle Ages and Renaissance that ‘many [...] artefacts [in this period] gained their significance and attractiveness by drawing attention to the features of their matter’.<sup>15</sup> To give only a single supporting example from this volume: Rachel King describes the rosaries she studies as activating a response by their very tactility.

As a number of art historians have recently shown, the nature of the physical itself – gold, light, smoke – can impel or empower. Cognitive scientists have even argued that certain materials can be demonstrated to have specific effects in the brain. Yet not only does such research leave many questions unanswered; it is clear that the stuff of things does not act without mediation, enhancement or activation.<sup>16</sup> As Mary Laven, Maria Alessandra Chessa and Alexandra Bamji understand, the physical characteristics of wax, wood and paper display charged life events only when they are used or performed within complex social and ritual ways. Although writings and symbols may enhance the sacrality of the paper *ex-votos* Chessa describes or the amulets Balbale studies, writing and the texts which embody it bestow power only to those in some way familiar with them. The book Spaniards revere as holy, indeed as proof of their religious power, is, in Ramos’s account, simply tossed aside by the Andean chieftain Atahualpa who is unfamiliar with such things. It is not only what things are but what they do, and what is done with them, that makes them religiously powerful. The dog’s tooth in the popular tale described by Hildegard Diemberger in this volume is effective not because of the DNA of the enamel but because of the devotion of the mother who worships it as the Buddha’s tooth. Indeed, as John-Paul Ghobrial points out, it is often fear of or ambivalence about power as well as power itself that matter signals. The wax of the death masques Bamji studies bodies forth the paradoxical existence of the recently dead body as both self and no longer self.

<sup>15</sup> Rublack, ‘Matter in the Material Renaissance’, 43, quoted in Rachel King’s article, n. 61. And see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*.

<sup>16</sup> See note 3 above.

These essays thus tell us much about how religious materiality both acts and is itself empowered. Traditionally a number of religions have included rituals of consecration by clergy, elders or ritual specialists – the setting aside of materials either to be offered to the gods (for example, some of the meat of sacrifice described in the Hebrew Bible) or to be especially empowered to convey their aura (for example, the bread and wine blessed by Christ at the last supper). Diemberger refers to ritual consecration of Buddhist relics by princess Chokyi Dronma and their distribution as ashes (*tsa tsa*) – an act parallel to Catholic Christian consecration of the eucharist (much fought over in the sixteenth century by Protestant reformers) and, by the late Middle Ages, of the relics of Christian saints as well. Rituals of consecration are mentioned in these essays infrequently, but they are often crucial in the activation of religious materiality (not to mention in the maintenance of social and religious hierarchy). The power not only to possess but also to activate holy matter could spill over to rulers, missionaries and elites but it could also, in social and religious reversal, make it possible for the relatively humble – such as Yupanqui, who carved the Virgin of Copacabana in Ramos's essay – to gain status in the world.

These essays mention many other performances that give agency to matter. Indeed, the Virgin of Copacabana herself needed a miracle to activate her power by turning her from what the Spaniards (and perhaps the Andeans as well) saw as crude to what they understood as beautiful. Direct intervention by the holy can activate stuff, with or without ritual preparation. The authors of our essays, however, detail many ritual acts, especially those associated with burial and worship, that enliven objects through prayer, preaching or song. In her essay, which contains the richest trove of types of religious materiality in this volume, Diemberger refers to diverse ways in which holy matter is activated. The distribution of body parts (ashes or bits of bone of saintly followers of the Buddha) is understood as conveying the power of the whole – a religious move sometimes referred to in the Western relic cult as 'the devotional logic of presence'. In parallel to Christian Catholic understandings of the eucharist as eating god, power is spread by actual incorporation of a body into other matter (blood added into ink). Bodily contact, as when people are touched by books or relics, also spreads sacrality. In Diemberger's account, even sound activates matter; recital and reading aloud bring a text to agency. In Kuehn's account of dervishes, we also find the activation of matter by sound (not only song but also weeping) and discover as well another example of the extreme performance of ingesting the holy. The amulets Balbale studies and the Turpiana parchment and Lead Books of Sacromonte that imitate them are activated by the scripts and symbols on them – that is, they have their own aura – but they also create the identities of those who receive and employ them. Thus, religiously significant objects can only be understood if historicized and located in space, yet there is something special, charged, active, about them all.

How then should we characterize religious materiality? Can we say anything in general about how it is used or how it acts in the world? Recent theorizing of objects and things offers less aid in answering the question than we might expect. All too often cross-cultural studies of religion seem to rest content once they assert that religion is performance or practice more than (or other than) belief, text, theology. But what is it about these particular things that makes them revered, contested, performed with, fearfully consumed or rejected? In the introduction to a collection titled *Things that Talk*, which is similar to this volume although focused on significant cultural objects generally, Lorraine Daston has written: 'Their thingness lends vivacity and reality to new constellations of experience that break old molds [...] [T]he new thing becomes a magnet for intense interest, a paradox incarnate. It is richly evocative; it is eloquent. Only when the paradox becomes prosaic do things that talk subside into speechlessness.'<sup>17</sup> While this description may, as others have pointed out, make the metaphor for a significant object too verbal and textual, removing the thingy-ness of things by the analogy to speech, the passage at least provides a clue about what we need conceptually in order to characterize the religiously charged object: the idea of paradox. For religious materiality is intrinsically paradoxical.

As David Morgan has perceptively pointed out, things are instruments we use but they are also recalcitrant.<sup>18</sup> We employ them to affect and effect our goals in the world, but they push back against us in their thingy-ness, challenging our expectations of society and culture. They present the world to us and enable us to manipulate it exactly because they are what they are. Amber is tactile and gold; blood is life when it circulates in the body and danger when it is spilled. Yet they are not only, or primarily, their whatness. Amber is wealth and glory, a mineral special to one region, not many; blood is lineage and power, yet it is also pollution and death. The layers of meaning that are laid upon things by human invocation and ritual, by nature in all its diversity and power, or by the gods themselves through miracle or creation, are contradictory and simultaneous. That is what paradox is – self and other, presence and absence – inhering together, not seriatim. What the verbal or textual can never fully be because it must be in some sense linear and narrative (although ritual often struggles to overcome this), the thing is. For example, preaching and praying may necessitate reference to the dead person as present or not; but the wax of the death masque can be the person still, both palpably gone and yet here. Even for Puritans in Europe, who struggled to erase the stuff-ness of religion, replacing it by 'the word and The Word', text tended to become thing, as if thingy-ness is necessary to the encounter with the other that the holy must always be.<sup>19</sup> Whether the *tsa tsa* of

17 Daston, 'Introduction: Speechless', in Daston, ed., *Things that Talk*, 24. I have written about the importance of paradox in analysing religion in Bynum, 'Why Paradox?'. See also *Christian Materiality*, 37–44, 284–86 and 293–94, n. 32.

18 Morgan, 'Materiality, Social Analysis, and the Study of Religion', 73.

19 See note 11 above for examples of how the non-material word becomes material in early modern Protestantism.

a follower of Buddha, a tiny paper amulet eaten to take in its power, jade that may heal both because of its colour and because of the face of the idol carved on its end, or the footprints left in a cave by a Buddhist spirit master or on the Mount of Olives by the ascending Christ – these things are all encountered in themselves as stuff. But they all not only signal but also embody a something beyond – something departed yet present, destroyable yet permanent. I think Lorraine Daston is right; significant things lose their charge, their power, when they become prosaic rather than paradoxical, when we no longer see them as anything other than what they ordinarily are. Perhaps the spice-box our editors describe becomes religious, sacred, holy, when something holy is placed inside. But we must remember that the holy so placed is itself material. It is a bit of a saint or of some cloth or earth or liquid that has touched that saint. Religious materiality is stuff that is simultaneously stuff and not stuff.

The range of papers in this volume tells us something about the challenges an early modern world experienced because of new access to material things. It also helps us to make some progress toward theorizing religious materiality itself.

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## About the Author

**Caroline Walker Bynum** is Professor Emerita at the Institute for Advanced Study and Columbia University. Her most recent book is *Christian Materiality* (2011). Recent articles include 'Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology; or, Why Compare?', *History of Religions* 53 (2014); "'Crowned with Many Crowns": Nuns and their Statues in Late-Medieval Wienhausen', *Catholic Historical Review* 101 (2015); 'Are Things Indifferent? How Objects Change our Understanding of Religious History', *German History* 34 (2016); and 'Holy Beds', *Gesta* 55 (2016).

