

Mediating Religion – Emotional, Material, and Ideological Practices

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That media are intrinsic to religion and that religion can be productively understood as mediation continues to incite fascinating scholarship in a range of disciplinary as well as social and historical contexts. This was again evidenced by an international symposium convened by Monique Scheer of the Ludwig-Uhland-Institut für Empirische Kulturwissenschaft, and Pamela Klassen of the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion. Entitled „Mediating Religion – Emotional, Material and Ideological Practices,“ the symposium drew scholars from across Europe and North America to the historic Schloss Hohentübingen over a few drizzly days in April.

Noting at the outset that scholars are observers of, but, in their teaching and writing, also *participants* in the mediation of religion, Scheer and Klassen called for forays into religious „aesthetics“ which emphasize sensory and embodied processes of perception and communication, and thus engage in a rehabilitated Aristotelianism which sidesteps the dualisms prominent in the „modern“ aesthetics of Hegel or Kant. Such processes were central to many of the papers, surveyed below.

A guiding assumption of the symposium was that religious praxis works to render the invisible visible and the immaterial accessible to the senses. WILLIAM CHRISTIAN (Gran Canaria) gave an in-depth account of one American family's relationship to their belongings which tracked the formation of everyday relics: mundane objects becoming laden with intense memories and thick with connections to other people. Drawing on a series of cures linked to Belgian Marian apparition sites and reported in the 1930s, TINE

VAN OSSELAER (Leuven) provided a fascinating portrait of tactile piety: fragments of tree bark imbued with such healing power that they were zealously sought and even „ordered in“ by those too infirm to travel. GERTRUD HÜWELMEIER (Berlin) presented ethnographic explorations of the ritual burning of paper objects in contemporary Vietnamese ancestor veneration which traced the confluence of emerging market capitalism in Vietnam with the post-revolutionary resurgence of „traditional“ practices. Hüwelmeier demonstrated how technological innovations have produced a corresponding demand for paper representations of consumer goods, burned to satisfy the otherworldly needs of ancestral spirits. In his analysis of extrasensory perception and body imaging devices characteristic of a New Age, PASCAL EITLER (Berlin) argued that visibility is more accurately *enhanced* than made visible for the first time.

Emerging from the symposium as a whole was a strong sense that materials and practices function as particularly potent sites of persuasion, and critical points of ideological clash or contest. WEBB KEANE (Ann Arbor) examined the ways in which the bodily remains of Soviet saints were ideologically mobilized in a clash between bolsheviks and bishops in 1919. The sanctity of supposedly incorruptible bodies of saints made it crucial for both bolsheviks and bishops to co-opt and manage them, even at cross-purposes. Keane noted that the semiotic ideologies at odds here were products of a common social world, which nevertheless afforded a diverse range of assumptions and judgments. PETER COLLINS (Durham, UK) exposed a paradox of Quaker „plaining“ practices: processes of de-materialization rely on the very materiality they seek to efface. AMIRA MITTERMAIER (Toronto) highlighted a similar point: the inherent *instability* of a given medium. Her work on Muslim charities in Egypt showed how serving food to the poor is „a bridge to God,“ but while hyper-visible in this way, the poor are simultaneously evaded, or erased.

Papers by PAMELA KLASSEN (Toronto) and MATT KING (Toronto) both concerned themselves with mediation in missionary encounters. Klassen argued that by way of the

map, Anglican missionaries to the Canadian northwest coast combined indigenous and colonial knowledge to form their version of „spiritual harmony,“ a powerful energy that would help to turn the land into „resources,“ ready to be harnessed for imperial use. King’s paper considered the contrasting „registers of emotional intelligibility“ between a Christian missionary and a Tibetan Lama. King analyzed varying accounts of their interaction to uncover two different senses of what counts as appropriate modes of sociability, certainty, and emotional engagement. Feelings were central again in the paper delivered by MONIQUE SCHEER (Tübingen) which sought to understand the difference between Liberal Protestants in worship and neighbouring charismatic Christians. Scheer contended that feelings are *media* – embodied, social, the result of cultural processes – and as such are authorized by Protestant groups in various ways.

It became clearer throughout that media span visual, verbal, and tactile registers, and can be compellingly charted across transitions. Using images on the floor of a late antique Jewish synagogue, FELICITAS HEIMANN-JELINEK (Vienna) traced a trajectory of increasing abstraction from material temple implements to their pictorial depiction in late antique mosaic imagery, and to the growing preference for script-images in the Middle Ages. VLAD NAUMESCU (Budapest) presented his work on a Russian Lipovan community of Old Believers living on the Danube Delta and showed the gradual transition from rite-centered community to textual community. Naumescu treated the differences in reading and recitation practices by theorizing about the „iconicity“ of sacred books which here hinge on questions of presence and participation. KNUT GRAW (Leuven) contributed a new concept to the symposium: the „affectual,“ to describe the simultaneously affective and effective results of divination among the migrant Senegalese. Graw suggested that we understand divinatory practices as „ritually unfixed,“ not as performances which follow a script, but rather more improvisational, transforming as they unfold.

Concluding discussion at the symposium

noted that the „materiality“ of any given media often emerged vis-a-vis a trajectory of „more“ or „less“ visible, tactile or accessible realities. Not wishing to re-inscribe a limiting binary between the material and immaterial, participants noted instead that „mediating religion“ appears to be intimately bound up with processes of construing (im)materiality – and interrogating the limits which such processes assume and impose.

Inspired by the work of a number of scholars who study material religious practices from an anthropological perspective, including Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Webb Keane, and Matthew Engelke, the papers presented at the symposium covered a wide range of religious (and in the case of Christian’s paper, arguably secular) traditions. They shared the assumption that all religious experience is mediated, even when (as most extremely in the case of Quakers) experience is construed as immediate. Perhaps since materiality presents the greatest hurdle to understanding experience as unmediated, this was the point that was debated most intensely within the traditions presented as well as among the papers themselves. While some sought to problematize a seemingly obvious distinction between the material and immaterial, showing how immateriality and materiality are not given, but performed, argued for, and socially constructed, others built on the notion that the experience of the senses is grounded in a materiality that provides a common ground on which different, sometimes opposing semiotic ideologies are built – as Keane emphasized in his public lecture. Emotions, or emotional practices, were discussed somewhat less intensely, perhaps because there seemed to be a wide range of conceptions of emotions on the table – ranging from sense perception to affect to sentiments and attitudes – making the conversation revolve around such definitional problems. Overall, the symposium demonstrated that to talk about mediation necessarily invokes the material-immaterial binary from which it emerges, a binary toward which actors – religious actors as well as scholars – adopt ideological stances.

Conference Overview:

Section 1: Visibility & Invisibility in the Study

of Materiality

Chair: Monique Scheer

Peter Collins: Quaker Plain and Plaining:
Making the Visible Invisible

Tine van Osselaer: Bits and Pieces of the Divine: Fragments of the 'Sacred' Trees at Belgian Apparitional Sites

William A. Christian, Jr.: The Invisible Connections of Everyday Things in a Midwest Household

Gertrud Hüwelmeier: Cell Phones for the Spirits: Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Vietnam

Webb Keane: Rotting bodies: On the clash of semiotic ideologies (public evening lecture)

Section 2: Texts, Bodies, and the Matter of Religion

Chair: Gabriele Alex

Amira Mittermaier: Islamic Charity: The Poor as Medium

Vlad Naumescu: The Iconic Economy of Old Belief: Towards an Aesthetics of Transmission

Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek: From Visual Image to Script Image: Jewish Rituals of Mediation between the Past, Present, and Future

Matt King: Taming the Mad Elephant: Missionaries, Lamas, and Mediating Conversion

Section 3: Sensation, Emotion, and Space

Chair: Amira Mittermaier

Inken Prohl / Tim Graf: Same Forms - Same Sensations? Zen in Japan and in the West

Pamela Klassen: Maps and the Mediation of the Colonial Spirit

Section 4: Sensible Evidence & Empirical Spiritualities

Chair: Pamela Klassen

Pascal Eitler: Extrasensory Perception: Seeing and Hearing the New Age

Monique Scheer: The Materiality of Protestant Emotions

Knut Graw: Objective Truths: Divination and the Mediation of Ritual Efficacy in Senegal

Final discussion

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