Ivan Strenski

Ivan Strenski is the Holstein Family and Community Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside. In addition to being the North American editor of Religion*, he is the author of five books and approximately fifty articles. His most recent books are*
Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism and Social Thought
(2002) and
Durkheim and the Jews of France
(1997).

Outside the venerable field of archaeology of religion, a relatively small troop of pioneering colleagues have developed the field of study of the *materiality* of religious life. Here, I list the likes of Colleen McDannell, Thomas Kselman, Lionel Rothkrug, Rosalind Hackett, J. Z. Smith, Richard Hecht, Roger Friedland, Caroline Walker Bynum, Gary Laderman, and Peter Brown, among others. I wish to pay tribute to them by pointing out some of what I take to be implications of their work, and to offer the beginnings of some theorizing of this work. I omit Eliade from this list, but certainly not because we cannot learn about certain modes of organizing time and space from him. We can. I omit him because his gaze was always fixed elsewhere than on this world, far over the horizon of "things." While Eliade was particularly sensitive to religious space, and to a riotous array of concrete sacred objects, such as trees, ropes, rocks, and such, I would be prepared to argue that he never really accepted religious materiality on its own terms, in the
religiousness of its material historicity
. For Eliade, material things were religious in spite of being material — because they transcended their historicity and materiality in being symbols of divine archetypes. But for the present author, at least, the materiality of religion needs no external justification to affirm its religiousness. Religion is fully and legitimately material — whatever else it may be — because religion is, at the very least, part of being human for many, if not all, people. No excuses therefore need to be made to focus on material religious culture. Instead, we need aggressively to exploit the vast resources that exist for understanding religion by studying material religious culture. Within the brief compass of this essay, I shall attempt both to make some theoretical points about the study of material religious culture and to show some preliminary results of how I have tried to operationalize some of these theoretical viewpoints in the classroom.

Reluctance about taking seriously the materiality of religious life is furthermore stunning when one considers the tremendous quantity and quality of these resources. Take first material religious culture of a *visual* sort. Consider the masses of data from the graphic, plastic, or electronic arts — both popular and "high," the scads of artifacts of all sizes and shapes — the

sculptures, scapulars, phylacteries, prayer rugs, and more, the masses of architecture — everything from the Cathedral of Chartres to the Ka'aba, from heiaus to stupas, the numerous sacred sites — whether "spaces" or "places" — the holy cities, holy lands, and holy territorial domains, the sacred springs, mountains, and precincts, the pilgrimage routes and their destinations, and so on.

Moreover, while *visual* materials and media have a way of pushing to the forefront of our perceptions, we also need to extend the notion of material religious culture to include all *tactile* or *sensate* religious entities and events. The study of material religious culture would therefore include all that we access by way of our auditory abilities, e.g., music or the sound of one's breathing in Vipassana meditation; or by way of our olfactory capacities, e.g., the smell of incense, the "odor of sanctity"; or what we take in by means of taste and touch, e.g., the bite of bitter herbs, the slickness of sweet rice, the vapors of communion wine, the feel of the eternal stone of the Wailing Wall or the Ka'aba, or that sudden, if brief, chill of a ritual bath or baptism, or the sharp blow on the back as one sits in imperfect zazen. Material religious culture is composed of all the *sensate* entities and events of religion. Until recently, by contrast, we have been spending most of our time thinking about thought.

This neglect of a wholehearted embrace of the material dimension of religion is not surprising, given the somewhat iconoclastic, certainly intellectualist and textualist, Reformation roots of the modern study of religion. Linked as it naturally is and was with a so-called "spiritual" — bloodless — conception of the nature of religion, most of the nineteenth century founders of the study of religion decried those religions in which materiality thrived. Albert Réville, that well-placed contemporary of Durkheim and founder of the "science of religion" in France, for example, would often rail against "religious materialism." Any implication that "religious forms" were "indispensable receptacles of the divine reality" was to be rudely rejected. For Réville and other Protestant founders of the study of religion, this condemnation of the "religious materialism" of ritual really amounted to a theological polemic against Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and all the other "pagan" kindred religions that embraced ritual. Any expression of religious materialism, such as ritual, was always more or less "superstitious." In the spirit of what sometimes seems like a still-vital Victorian moralistic religiosity, Réville argued that a really religious person would inform their sensibility with a religious "spiritualism," which results from a "more elevated moral and religious sense." "Real" religion was a matter of "spirit and truth." An appreciation of material religious culture is, therefore, set totally against these spiritualist assumptions about the nature of religion. Tellingly, these condemnations of materiality in religion are sometimes linked explicitly with a familiar list of terrors concerning the body, sex and all the rest. For Albert Réville, ritual, in general, was judged as dangerously "sensuous!"

The nineteenth century Catholic cult of the sacred heart drove Réville into a perfect frenzy of sexual terror about its deviant psycho-physical causes. It represented to him a clear clinical "case...of mania erotico-religiosa, superinduced by a very hysterical constitution." [Réville, "Contemporary Materialism in Religion: The Sacred Heart." *Theological Review* 44 (January 1874): 138-156, see especially pp. 148-152].

"Imagination Is Funny..." and Essential

How, then, do we exploit the materiality of religious life for the study of religion? The first task before us is, I would claim, to provide a conceptual and theoretical framework within which to generate durable thinking about material religious culture. How should we begin, at least, to locate material religious culture within a larger conceptual and interpretive framework? And, how would we do that in such a way that it would put such thinking into fruitful relation with the other dimensions of religion, such as myth, beliefs, social organization, experience, ritual, and morality? Perhaps because of the hold that the visual has on our consciousness, the modality of the "arts" seems particularly to recommend itself as a place we might begin. For me, this natural-seeming affinity with the arts recommends that we begin to think about material religious culture in terms of its being a product of the imagination. We speak readily of the aesthetic imagination and even of the moral, civic, sexual, commercial, and political imaginations and so on, so why not take seriously the *religious imagination*? Why cannot religion be as much a locus in which the imagination can be seen to operate as many other domains of life?

In this light, the materiality of religious life presents no great mystery or puzzle. When people imagine things, they typically realize their imaginings in media. We can readily recognize how religious beliefs have been a medium in which creative religious thinkers have done a great deal of imagining. There are Four Noble Truths. But why four, and not eight, like the Noble Eightfold Path, or three, like the Three Body Doctrine, and so on? Similarly, in material terms, why are stupas made in great mounds and not four-square blocks like the Ka'aba? And why then, in East Asia, are there not those familiar South Asian burial mounds, but those brilliant multistoried pagodas? When the monks of old Ireland fashioned their hermitages, they did so in beehive shapes, rather than in block houses or pyramids. Was this only an accident of limitations imposed by the building materials? Or, is something else going on? And, what might that be? The religious imagination is "funny" this way. It can be as amazing and unpredictable, but nonetheless as effective as the imaginative choice of a cigar by Churchill or the three-cornered hat by partisans of the Enlightenment. A good place to start to understand material religious culture then is to see its contents as the playing out of an imagination that is religious. What are its rules? Why do some imaginings work, and others fall flat on their faces? Why do some things "capture the imagination" and other fail so to do — and for whom? Some sacred music keeps getting sung year after year, and not, one supposes, just out of inertia, but because it resonates in some important ways with some folks. A celebrated new cathedral has risen in Los Angeles at the cost of many millions of dollars and under the direction of a world-class European architect. Some, however, have judged it dead on arrival, and will only resort to it because there

is no alternative. Why? Many, therefore, are the creations of the religious imagination, but many as well are those that fall into oblivion. Which ones? Why these and not others, and so on? These are only some of the questions that seeing material religious culture in terms of the imagination might raise. Other theoretical "*takes*" will raise other kinds of questions. That to me is all to the good.

Interrogating Material Religion with a "Proactive Mind"

Implied in my putting questions or "problems" to the fore is that we need to do much more than simply to present the data of religion's materiality. Yet, since it would be easy to become seduced by the ravishing imagery of the religious imagination or grounded in place by contact with real religious objects, we must take care not to fall prey to the heresy of the Immaculate Perception. The theoretical and conceptual dimension of our work should go hand in hand with the empirical. And, so, I am urging that we prepare students for coming to the *data* of material religious culture with a "
proactive mind
."

Where teaching is concerned, we all recognize that students will unavoidably come to the data with their own "takes," with their own principles and/or prejudices, with their own set of questions and problems, and at the risk of seeming pretentious, with their own *theories*. Their perceptions will not be pure and innocent, nor need they be. But, we must strive to make these a prioris explicit by expressing them in some objective form — a course journal entry, a short "reaction" paper, an in-class "brainstorming" assignment in which lists are made in order to elicit the preperceptual data of the
minds
of the students — as far as that is possible. Exposing students to material religious culture, then, should not be like dumping them at the local antique shop, pleasingly cluttered with assorted curios. They should be sent in with a "shopping list" of some sort, whether of their own or of the instructor's making. We might as well accept that they will have a secret list anyway. So, we might as well train them to acknowledge and encourage the
proactive
mind. One way to do this would be to do an inventory that would require formulating questions about the data
before
the data are encountered.

Interrogating Material Religion: A Check-list

Let me refer the reader to the specific assignment that I use in a course on the sacred and taboo that I have taught for the past two years to undergraduates at the University of California,

Riverside. Students are required to do a field visit to a sacred site and to write a short paper addressed to the question of how its sacredness is engineered by the manipulation of space and selection of place. (Students are also encouraged to supply their own questions.)

In terms of this specific interrogation of material religious culture, I first concentrate on getting students to “see” what they are “looking” at — carefully to observe the sites chosen by them. To do this, I simply pose a series of questions that force them to think in material terms about the places and spaces visited. This initial interrogation also invites students to incorporate the theoretical reading they will have already done — but at this stage in an informal way. Systematic thinking can be left until a little later. Here is a selection from the present list of over two dozen questions that I provide to students about the overall descriptive character of the site being observed. First are a series of questions about the overall site: its setting, location, and situation:

- What makes it obvious that this space or place is a sacred space or place?
- What’s nearby? What’s conspicuously far away?
- What is the elevation of the site — high ground, low ground? Mounded, depressed or flat?

- Is it bounded? How are boundaries marked? Against what do the boundaries protect? Are they (merely) symbolic or do they prevent entry/escape?
- Is the site open and public? Or restricted, private, closed? Free entry or an admission charge? If a charge, who gets the proceeds? If free, who subsidizes the site?

Then come questions about the insides of the site, its contents:

- How is the space within configured? Any contours?
- Is there decoration or lack thereof? How are these used, designed, situated?
- What is the social context of the contents of the space? Who is it for? Who is included, who excluded? Who owns it? What are the terms of ownership? What about the economic value of the contents — cheap, expensive?
- What senses are engaged? Is it quiet or noisy inside? Is it light or dark inside? Any odors typical of the place? Tastes? Colors? Images? Tactile surfaces?

Finally, all students are required to answer two fundamental questions about the sacred status of the sites chosen. Here, of course, is where they are in effect being invited to employ and defend various theoretical viewpoints in answering this final pair of questions. I ask them to consider the following questions in terms both of their own idea of sacred, in terms of our society’s general and common ideas of sacred, and in terms of any of the authors we have

read:

- What would make this site or some aspect(s) of its interior more sacred than it is now in its present condition?
- What would make this site or some aspect(s) of its interior less sacred — more *profane* — than it is now in its present condition, even to the point of a total loss of sacredness?

Remarks on Some Results of Interrogating Material Religion

In their assignments, most students chose standard sacred sites such as churches, California mission sites, local temples, mosques, synagogues, cemeteries, and such. Others have gone off on more original ventures, such as focusing on roadside accident site shrines that are so common here in the Southwest. Another student explored the sacredness of the family dinner table — a particularly charged site given the widespread practice today of individual family members drifting off with their individual trays of supper to sit alone gazing at their own individual TV sets!

Notable here is how the students displaying the most originality in selecting their projects revealed how fruitful it is to study religious materiality as a work of the imagination. Religion can emerge in unexpected and novel forms, and it is the creative student who will observe it. Such a student grasps the way the religious imagination works and is open to its often unprecedented efflorescence. Indeed, religious folk themselves may be among the last to comprehend the fuller extent of much of what they are doing. Historians of Christianity, like Peter Brown, have shown how popular pre-Christian spiritual fashions for visions or care of the dead have at times had a great vogue, were then taken up by Christians and, as it were, “baptized” into respectability, only later to fade as the religious imagination turned towards other devices.

In this connection, let me draw the reader’s attention to a project undertaken along with this course on the sacred and taboo. This is the Spontaneous Shrines website and digital project, located at www.shrines.ucr.edu . Funded by the University of California, Riverside’s Information Technology grant, this site has begun to assemble and archive the data of what I call “spontaneous shrines,” such as became so much a part of the national reaction to the attacks of September 11. Although the website is still under construction, major parts of it are ready for visits. There, readers will find not only World Trade Center images from New York City and Venice, California, but also a set of images of a spontaneous shrine from Honolulu in honor of a beloved local citizen. In coming months, in addition to links and interpretive tools, I shall also be adding a collection of images taken by one of the students from my sacred and taboo course depicting roadside accident spontaneous shrines in the Inland Empire region of Southern

California. The site is open and I invite interested parties to contribute postings to the site or just to visit the site to view our work as it progresses.

The main point to be noted in connection with popular material religious culture is again its often unpremeditated character. Just as there is a pop art or folk art that simply and spontaneously appears in public spaces — like certain fashions in dress and personal adornment (backwards hats, piercing, long or short hair, etc.), or the graffiti art of modern cities — so there is also a parallel phenomenon of spontaneous, mostly urban, popular folk religion. Like these representations of popular imagination, folk spirituality or religion just "happens" too.

One theoretical consequence of my approach in the spontaneous shrines project is to destroy the distinction, often touted popularly these days, between religion and so-called "spirituality." Thus, although "spirituality" is often opposed to "religion," their similarities strike one as far more prominent than their supposed differences. Both move in a world that honors reverence, sacredness, and holiness, or the transgressive, taboo, and forbidden; both suggest realms of being not exhausted by the world of everyday quantifiable life; both imagine a cosmic, rather than merely local, frame of reference for human action, whether that be the karmic realm of samsara and release from it, the universe, natural world, or some other vast reference of existence. For this reason, I consider "religion" and "spirituality" sufficiently related terms, and leave it to others to quibble about the differences.

A second distinction that this approach offends is that between the so-called "fine" religious artifacts from that abundance of humble, often mass-produced artifacts of the "popular" religious imagination. I believe it is necessary to take seriously literally everything from the "fine" gravestones or lavish shrines of "high" religious culture to their poor "cousins" such as "plastic Jesuses" or Kuan-yin playing cards. Each has a role to play in making up the sum of religious data, the tangible expression of the religious imagination. For these purposes, the distinction between "fine" and popular art, useful perhaps in other contexts, serves no purpose. By paying little or no heed to this distinction between "high" and "popular" religion, we are also well placed to exploit the insights of radical movements in the study of religion, such as the Collège de Sociologie, and its investigators of the "sacredness of everyday life," Michel Leiris or Roger Caillois.

Practical Problems: The Incredible Heaviness of Material Religion

Material religious culture can thus be so attractive as data, both for research and teaching, that it may be easy to overlook its drawbacks. This is to say that a major practical problem encountered in studying the products of the *material* religious imagination is, of course, its very

materiality
. Anyone who has ever envied one's colleagues in art history or film studies, for example, with their ability to transfix students with lectures enhanced by colorful images and cinematic drama, only needs to spend some time with them as they labor to map strategy about what materials to use, how to sequence them, how to shift between lecture and visual presentation, and so on. Most of us are, of course, familiar with these issues. But, with the increased reference to material religious culture, the problems we already comprehend here will only magnify and proliferate in often unpredictable directions. With the data of material religious culture, unlike that of beliefs, for instance, we encounter
inventory
and
stocking
problems. Slides and videos may be problem enough. But what of family Bibles, censors, ghee, frangipani blossoms? Where do we stash this stuff that "has weight and takes up space," as our high school physics textbooks were keen to remind us? Who lugs it to class, and so on? We may even be tempted to revert to simple talk, with all its blessed lightness of being, and to those tried and true, eminently portable texts. Some may even be tempted only to talk about religious talk (beliefs, texts, and such) and forget cumbersome material religious culture altogether. Various strategies will simply have to be devised to manage these problems, knowing full well that there is no way in advance to judge whether advantages outweigh problems. We will want to be alert and to plot how these two curves — advantages and drawbacks — intersect and veer off in their own directions.

One strategy to deal with the problem of the "incredible heaviness of material religion," is to transform it into a lighter medium. While there's nothing quite like the "really real," sometimes the *virtually* real is the best one can do. We sometimes need therefore to overcome the inconvenience of the very materiality of religion that we seek to represent. If I cannot visit Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, California, because I am in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, I would at least like to be there virtually." If I do not have the Rustavi choir from Georgia around the corner, I would at least like to be able to hear them "virtually." This, if anything, is a job for digital technology — for the digital camera and video, for MP3 technology, and for all the possibilities now being unleashed for web-based publishing. The Web includes an increasingly growing list of possible kinds of "sites" — not only the standard "bulletin board" where information is posted, but digital media albums, here the sights and sounds of religion in material form can be accessed, or "tours" of actual or imagined places, ideally in three-dimensions, whether interactive or not. Overcoming the incredible heaviness (and, often, long distance) of material religious culture, my Spontaneous Shrines website and digital project may serve as an example of one way that I have tried to make things better for students of religious materiality.

Resources

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