

Objects and Objections: Methodological Reflections on the Data for Religious Studies

by Matthew C. Baldwin
Mars Hill University
mbaldwin@mhu.edu

“[S]ome of us stand clustered with the like-minded off to one corner of our big tent, where we whisper — and sometimes intemperately announce — our objections. I don’t object to objections. Far from it. They’re inevitable, and good for this organization” — Thomas Tweed¹

“[D]ata is a function of theory and different theories make different things into data” — Russell McCutcheon²

“I placed a jar in Tennessee, / And round it was, upon a hill” — Wallace Stevens³

I. The Data for Religious Studies

A *datum* is a thing considered as “given”—as evident—but *who* or *what presents it*, who accepts the given as evidence, and as evidence of what? Russell McCutcheon seems right to suggest that the theories we hold (be they explicit or implicit, grand or miniature) generate the data we find.⁴ The things presented as “givens” in research reveal, first and foremost, the

1. Thomas A. Tweed, Presidential Address, “Valuing the Study of Religion: Improving Difficult Dialogues Within and Beyond the AAR’s ‘Big Tent,’” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84:2 (2016) 287–322; quote from 289.

2. Russell T. McCutcheon, “A Brief Response from a Fortunate Man,” Chapter 5 in *Entanglements: Marking Place in the Field of Religion* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2014) 68. “A Brief Response” was originally published in *Culture and Religion* 1:1 (2000) 131–140; it is slightly edited and printed with a new introduction in *Entanglements*.

3. Wallace Stevens, “Anecdote of the Jar” (1923) from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1990). Reprinted online at *Poetry Foundation*. URL: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/14575/anecdote-of-the-jar>

4. McCutcheon is at least in part referring to definitions; recently he has written that our “definitions

theoretical perspectives of the researcher. We do not start from randomly observed “facts,” only to decide later that some of the observations we have recorded happen to illuminate a matter of professional significance. We are already in motion before we begin. We set out from particular places with particular questions, carrying our assumptions as cargo and tools, in the company of colleagues, knowing beforehand what will count as significant, how to look for it, and where to find it. We should, therefore, exercise all due self-reflective caution in our expeditions. After all, Columbus found a way to his India, with lasting consequences for the world.

In scholarship, we present data as *data*, assuming that our claims about the world will be accepted as *given things*, by using methods such as careful record keeping, description, and reporting, meticulous documentation and citation of sources, *et cetera*. All of these practices assume the possibility or even the inevitability of disagreement. They acknowledge that one researcher’s proposed givens may wind up as another’s contested matters. For this reason it seems good that Thomas Tweed does not object to objections. Objecting to objections would involve the scholar in an arrogant self-contradiction! We presume, therefore, that Tweed spoke from a place of good humor. And yet, one might well object to his characterization of some objections as “intemperate,” or to his implication that the objections he notices have originated with “like minded” (read “close-minded”) cliques gathered in a “corner” away from the vital center of the “tent.” We might also wonder about his claim that objections are “good for the organization;” this appears to presume a pragmatic account of progress in the human sciences, not to mention assuming in advance that “the organization” will continue as the institutional space in which such progress takes place. Neither progress nor the organization seem inevitable—as much as I would like to embrace a pragmatic account of progress in science—but it does seem right to recognize that objections, as such, are “inevitable.” Can we all begin, then, by agreeing to this? There is disagreement. Disagreement is a thing. This is my proposed initial *datum*, my jar placed in Tennessee.

are theories in miniature,” describing them as “actively stipulative and not merely passively descriptive.” See “The Category ‘Religion’ in Recent Publications: Twenty Years Later,” *Numen* 62 (2015) 119–141; see 120 n. 2.

Religious Studies as a Social Formation

To borrow a term from Bruce Lincoln, I take it as a given that “Religious Studies” is an “ethnonym,” that is, a name for what may be metaphorically described as a tribe of people.⁵ I would not wish to claim, as Lincoln did for “History of Religions,” that “Religious Studies” may be termed a “disciplinary” ethnonym. The members of our loosely governed tribe practice many disciplines. Some misleadingly refer to Religious Studies as “interdisciplinary.”⁶ It is, rather, “multidisciplinary.” For that reason a better designation than “discipline” may be “field of study.”⁷

The people of this “field” known as “Religious Studies” are a sub-tribe of academia, united by their recognizable genealogy in professional association, and in cognate institutional practices of research and teaching, including overlapping curricula and subject areas, and other shared modes of discursive self-construction. In other words, “Religious Studies” names a “social formation,” however loosely gathered its constituents may be in “society.”⁸

This ethnonym has several synonyms, among them: “Study of Religion.” Again modeling my analysis on Lincoln’s, I suggest that the ethnonym implies that field practitioners possess an “object of study” (religion), though the ethnonym commits them to no particular methodology.⁹ After all, the word “study” signals nothing at all about what technologies or

5. Bruce Lincoln, “Theses on Method,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 17:1 (2005) 8-10; 8. This is a reprint of 8:3 (1996), 225-227; 225.

6. See e.g. Harold G. Coward, “Taking its Interdisciplinary Heritage Seriously: the Future of Religious Studies in Canada,” *Studies in Religion* 35:3 (2006) 403–412.

7. See e.g. Don Wiebe, “Religious Studies: Toward Reestablishing the Field,” *Religion* 39:4 (2009) 372–375. Wiebe’s essay appears in a review symposium of Gregory D. Alles, ed., *Religious Studies: a Global View* (New York: Routledge, 2008). Cf. the full title of McCutcheon, *Entanglements: Making Place in the Field of Religion*. Note that McCutcheon’s earlier book *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (New York: Routledge, 2003) embodies (among other things) a critique of the “invention of a discipline” as such (see 54–82).

8. On Althusser’s concept “Social Formation,” see Burton Mack, “Social Formation,” pages 283–296 in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; New York: Cassell, 2000). See also Russell McCutcheon, “Redescribing ‘Religion’ as Social Formation: Toward a Social Theory of Religion,” pages 21–39 in *Critics not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

9. Lincoln’s first thesis reads in full: “The conjunction [sic] ‘of’ that joins the two nouns in the disciplinary ethnonym ‘History of Religions’ is not neutral filler. Rather, it announces a proprietary

ways of scholarship will be practiced, nor much, in fact, beyond the vague idea of “zeal” implied by the Latin root of the word.¹⁰

Recently, many have embraced the “Big Tent” as a metaphor to describe the institutional unity that shelters such diversity in discipline, theory and method.¹¹ What precisely this image might convey about the social architecture of Religious Studies itself remains a matter of debate.¹²

claim and a relation of encompassment: history is the method and religion the object of study” (“Theses on Method,” 8). For the record: “of” is a preposition.

10. This remark is influenced by an anecdote told in section II of the 1989 AAR presidential address of Robert L. Wilken, “Who Will Speak *For* The Religious Traditions?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57:4 (1989) 699–717. See pages 703-704 for his anecdote of encounter with an earnest undergraduate student of religion and his discussion of the nature of *studium*. In this address, Wilken makes quite a bit of the preposition “for,” and proposes specifically, in a way that only the Christian historian of Christianity can really think makes sense, that religious studies scholars must “care for” (McCutcheon might say “be caretakers of”) the tradition they study.

11. See Tweed, “*Valuing* the Study of Religion,” 288–289 and n. 1. Tweed rightly suggests the “Big Tent” metaphor corresponds to “our disagreements about the scope of the academic study of religion.” We are at odds with one another over fundamental issues of philosophy, metaphysics, social theory and methodology. Objections abound, and they go far beyond classic debates between “insider” (confessional) versus “outsider” (scientific) approaches to “religion.” Tweed names three divisions: (a) “humanistic” versus “scientific approaches;” (b) “scholarship alone” versus “advocacy too;” and (c) “theology” versus “religious studies.” The burden of his “*Valuing* the Study of Religion” seems to be an effort to collapse philosophically and methodologically the latter two axes (a move which doubtless causes further objections).

12. In his note 1, Tweed laments the “Big Tent” concept, suggesting we need “a better metaphor, one that does not gesture playfully or dismissively toward circus images.” With all due respect, I suggest that the “Big Tent” does not primarily invoke a “circus” theme. The “Big Top” of circus lore is a different signifier, after all (even if it too is a tent). In the contemporary American context where we find talk of the AAR or the field itself as a “Big Tent,” the more proximate connotation of “Big Tent” is political. Over the past three decades, most often we find the “Big Tent” invoked in arguments about the scope of Republican Party politics. It appears frequently in polemics, used especially by people who find themselves being pushed out of the Republican coalition over litmus tests of various kinds (especially abortion and civil rights for LGBTQ persons). See e.g. Peter Harris, “The GOP Must Be The Big Tent Party,” *National Interest* (2/19/2015) <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-gop-must-be-the-big-tent-party-12283>. (Compare also Wikipedia s.v. “Big Tent.”) Furthermore, it is hard to resist the hypothesis that in an American context the “Big Tent” image has roots in the world of itinerant Protestant Christian revivalism. In that case, the vital center of the tent is the stage from which the “altar call” is issued.

There is Data for the Study of Religion

I take it as another given that, although one can argue, as Gary Lease did, that “there is no religion,” it is not possible to claim that there is no “Study of Religion.”¹³ Though Deans and Provosts may remain unsure, I should not have to argue this point with the membership of the North American Association for the Study of Religion (NAASR). A correlate claim is that, while one can agree with Jonathan Z. Smith, that “there is no data for religion,” it is not possible to claim that “there is no data for Religious Studies.”¹⁴

I intend two senses for this claim, and neither of them are meant to refute Lease or Smith. On the one hand, one can take, as McCutcheon has chosen to do, the social and discursive facts of Religious Studies scholarship as one’s data.¹⁵ As I write these words, many thousands of scholars from around North America and the world are preparing to convene in Boston for the 2017 Annual Meetings of NAASR and the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL).¹⁶ Hundreds of publishers will also show up and fill a massive room with books representing every corner of the field (and several adjacent ones as well). These scholars come from university and college departments of “Religion,” “Religious Studies,” “Religion and Philosophy” (and even “Theology”). Every course listed in their catalogs, every syllabus, every class period, every paper they present, each article or book they publish, or public lecture they deliver; all online and print indices or abstracts of their works; all the topical encyclopedias, guides, and manuals they produce; the subject-headings by which library scientists classify their research; the book sales and citation figures; their blogs,

13. Gary Lease, “The History of ‘Religious’ Consciousness and the Diffusion of Culture: Strategies for Surviving Dissolution,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 20:3 (1994) 453–479. Lease writes: “there cannot be a ‘history of religion’ for the simple reason that there is no religion: rather, such a history can only trace how and why a culture or epoch allows certain experiences to count as ‘religion’ while excluding others” (472).

14. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) xi.

15. See Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and the programmatic essay by Kocku von Stuckrad, “Discursive Study of Religion: Approaches, Definitions, Implications,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25 (2013) 5–25.

16. McCutcheon has expressed doubts about the utility of contemporary fieldwork in “History of Religions” scholarship, but nevertheless has claimed that he considers attending the conferences his form of fieldwork. See, e.g., McCutcheon, *Entanglements*, 70 n. 5 and cf. the skeptical claim on 92.

websites, and social media activity; any or all such things can constitute “data for Religious Studies,” because any of it can serve as evidence of a discernible class of socio-cultural practices within the contemporary world of academia.

On the other hand, the phrase “data for Religious Studies” is also meant to gather together all that “Religious Studies” scholars have put forward as their own givens, their “data,” that is, the things presented in their research. Indeed, there is ample evidence that “Religious Studies” practitioners have trained their learned and specialized attentions on a myriad of objects (events, persons, artifacts, institutions, writings, relationships, languages, culture systems, etc.). Procedurally, they treat these matters as data worthy of research.¹⁷

Pace Gustavo Benavides, the generation of all this “data” does not refute Smith’s famous dictum.¹⁸ We must look beyond the emphatic “six words” and remember their context:

while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.¹⁹

Smith’s statement assumes that diverse and mutually distinct criteria (discourses, definitions and theories) have been operationalized in scholarship, and that through them there has been produced “a staggering amount of data.” Practitioners in the field quite deliberately collect and assemble, curate, collate, establish, preserve, translate, publish and disseminate their “data.”²⁰ Very generally speaking, analysis of this “data” and argument based on it is precisely what

17. The wild variety of terms paired with “religion,” “religions,” or “religious” in the Library of Congress “subject headings” list can provide sufficient evidence to establish this claim. To take two e.g.s, consider “Religion and state — East Asia,” or “Government, Resistance to—religious aspects.”

18. Gustavo Benavides, “There is Data for Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74:4 (2003) 895–903. In a rather obtuse dismissal Benavides contends that Smith’s dictum cannot be true because, if it were, we cannot explain the publication of Hans Kippenberg’s *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte* (Münich: C. H. Beck, 1997; english translation, *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002].)

19. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xi. Emphasis original.

20. See e.g. the presentation of a recently constructed electronic clearinghouse of Religious Studies “data,” in Edward Slingerland and Brenton Sullivan, “Durkheim with Data: The Database of Religious History,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 85:2 (2017) 312–347.

characterizes “Religious Studies” discourses. So there can be “data for Religious Studies,” in this second sense, without necessitating the idea that “there is data for religion.” In fact it is precisely all these reams data which lead necessarily to Smith’s conclusion.

“Religion” as a Field Organizing Category (aka “Object of Study”)

I further take as a given that the category “religion” has itself been the subject of nearly constant scrutiny, contention, and debate in the scholarship of the last five or six decades—a period which corresponds to the rise of contemporary Religious Studies as an independent academic field represented among university departments of study. We have come a long way from Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Jonathan Z. Smith, Timothy Fitzgerald, McCutcheon, Tomoko Mazusawa, Brent Nongbri (and others). It seems inconceivable that anyone in the field would ignore or dismiss the results of this tradition of critical scholarship on “religion” as a category employed in human thought—but another given is that many of our colleagues do ignore and dismiss it.

The results of this tradition of scholarship can be epitomized as follows. Scholarship on the category “religion” has emphasized the long history of the term among peoples for whom Latin has been a linguistic influence. Lexicographical analysis of both popular and elite usage of “religion” (in Latin, French, Spanish, English, and German) shows that the referent of the term has varied widely. We can trace a lineage of uses of the word, from ancient Roman ones signifying ritual obligations to the state and its gods; to the dedication of medieval monastic lives; to Protestant critiques of Catholic practices; to power struggles over ecclesiastical authority in politics (the “wars of religion,” and “secularization”); to neo-Calvinist disputes over the authenticity of the subjective experience of salvation and grace; to generalizing Enlightenment-era political discussions of the inviolability of the rights of conscience and the necessity of “religious liberty”; to the explosion of universalizing discourses about “religion” which begin with the age of exploration and colonization and continue into our own time.²¹

21. The foregoing glosses many individual points made in Benson Saler, “*Religio* and the Definition of Religion,” *Cultural Anthropology* 2:3 (1987) 395–399; Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

From the 19th century onwards philologists and ethnographers have attempted to make sense of the bewilderingly diverse human world which was opened up to European academics as a consequence of the age of exploration and colonialism. These scholars assembled large mountains of “data for Religious Studies,” applying comparative and morphological criteria to the materials of the world in assembling their givens. Benson Saler’s proposal to regard “religion” as a concept based on a Western “paradigm” has at least some heuristic value for thinking about how all this data has been assembled.²² Europeans began the tradition that became “Religious Studies” by classifying the behaviors and social formations of other peoples comparatively, using as a basis for comparison a paradigm of “religion” made up initially of conceptual components that had been extracted from Western traditions.²³ Along the way, in a centuries-long dialectical process, the “paradigm” (which was always a loose assemblage of categories) has been supplemented, extended and stretched to accommodate new experiences, including incorporation of some non-Western categories into the paradigm.²⁴ Ultimately, even

2004) 179–196; originally published in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 269–284; Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); finally, the synthetic overview offered in Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); and compare essays in Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

22. Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (New York: Berghahn, 1999). Please note: I am not endorsing Saler’s *constructive* claim that we ought to think of “religion” as an unbounded, family resemblance type polythetic category which is properly rooted in its Western paradigm.

23. The paradigm includes a jumbled panoply of terms (conceptual categories) representing institutional structures, social roles and offices, postulated beings, practices, material artifacts, substances and properties. An inadequate and incomplete but representative list of this apparatus of terms would include things like: sects, cults, assemblies, churches, communities, orders, priests and priesthoods, monks and monasteries, scribes, docents, teachers, saints, redeemers, gods, angels, demons, souls, spirits, sacrifice, offerings, devotion, ritual, magic, worship, prayer, music, scripture, temples, groves, grottos, altars, implements, lamps, icons, symbols, sculptures, vestments, incense, traditions, creeds, legends, myths, beliefs, theology, doctrine, salvation, purity, holiness, sanctification, sacralization, *tabu*, *mana*, etc.

24. In spite of historically late entrants drawn from other cultural contexts, “Western” (Greco-Roman, European, Christian) terminology dominates the paradigm list (for which see note 23 above). Such dominance reflects the institutional genealogy of “religious studies” itself. There are clearly value judgments embedded in some of the terms. Moreover the relative absence of certain common Western terms which one might well think could have been used in comparison (“synagogue,” for example) tends to reflect the vicissitudes of Christian self-construction in the face of competitors, and the

some “non-Western” groups have adopted the structure of this Western category “religion,” permanently transforming their conceptualization of their own societies.²⁵

By the early twentieth century, there was an acute problem of disagreement about what could or could not be said to constitute “religion.” Scholars began to seek for some metatheoretical unity among the various definitions which had been used in academic research.²⁶ For over a century now, scholars have sought such unity in vain; no proposed definition of “religion” has gained universal assent. And none is ever likely to do so. Under the present circumstances of the field, at best, use of a stipulated definition of “religion” authorizes the self-identified “scholar of religion” to assemble a particular field of socio-cultural data for critical analysis and explanation.²⁷ At worst, a definition functions to separate the authentic and inauthentic in traditions, in service of a caretaker ethos.

In the end, it is fair to say that the results of contemporary research on the category-term “religion” point us toward an interesting problem. All definite (and even more so all

resulting hegemony of Christian discourses.

25. See Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) for a detailed case study of how the Japanese came to embrace the category “religion” in the centuries following their encounter with peoples of European descent.

It is interesting here to imagine an alternate world history, in which our conceptual apparatus for studying “religion” would be quite different. Mutatis mutandis, had something comparable to what we call “Religious Studies” emerged institutionally from South Asia, and been tied to a program of South Asian imperial and colonial expansion, we might all be parties to a field called “Dharma Studies,” or something similar. Indeed, “Western” self-conception of its own social formations might be dramatically different had European peoples been subjected to domination or more effective political and military opposition by South Asians or other “non-Western” civilizations.

26. The psychologist James H. Leuba famously included an appendix on definitions in his treatise *A Psychological Study of Religion: Its Origin, Function, and Future* (New York: MacMillan, 1912); see pages 339–361. In this list he discusses examples of characteristic scholarly ideas of “religion” distinguished into three categories: the “Intellectualistic” (339–346), involving Müller, Spencer, von Hartmann, Hegel and others; the “Affectivistic” (346–351), involving Schleiermacher, Tiele, Simmel, Ritschl and others; and the “Voluntaristic or Practical” (352–361), involving a diverse grab-bag of thinkers of idealist, positivist, and pragmatist bent, including James, Frazer, Comte, Royce, Kant, etc. In my opinion, though it is dated, Leuba’s appendix ought to be required reading in Method and Theory courses (it is in public domain and freely accessible online via Google books). J. Z. Smith suggests the lesson of Leuba’s survey, “which lists more than fifty definitions of religion,” does “not at all” mean it is impossible to give a definition of religion. “The moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways.” See “Religion, Religions, Religious,” 193.

27. This is, I think, the most significant implication of Craig Martin’s argument in “Delimiting Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 21 (2009) 157–176; see especially 170, 174–175.

indefinite) conceptions of “religion” end up positioning the researcher and student over-against the subjects of research in a field of social and interested (some would say *political*) contestation, in which ideological (and often theological) implications are not far to seek.²⁸ Nevertheless, in spite of ongoing discussion and disagreement, the vast majority of scholars in “Religious Studies” (and other fields of human science) continue to employ the term “religion” as if it named an objective entity producing self-evident effects independently of what any particular human might think about it, like one of Jupiter’s moons. What then, are we to make of this putative “object of study” called “religion”?

Legitimation of Scholarship, or, the Management of Surprise

Within our enterprise the term “religion” gets used as an instrument for legitimation of scholarly work. After all, if you work in a Religious Studies program, you have to study “religion”; otherwise, why are they paying you? Luckily for us, the flexibility of this often empty signifier means that everything and anything can be included in our studies. (In this regard, the conjunction “and” is also very useful.) The term “religion” functions like a tax-stamp which permits inquiry into the dazzling variety of matters scholars “discover” in the wild. Thus do the constant reams of “data” generated by our competing activities of definition and theorization continuously pile up, stratifying themselves into an incoherent mountain of facts and claims. What are we to make of all this “data for Religious Studies”? If it is not “data for religion,” then what is it?

Observing from my corner of the tent, and speaking very generally, the “data for Religious Studies” appear to form a record of scholarly surprise. “Surprise” is J. Z. Smith’s preferred term.²⁹ I think we could just as easily speak of wonder, amazement, amusement,

28. See the essays in William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of ‘Religion’* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

29. Smith has repeatedly used “surprise” to describe the initial impetus which leads to data selection and analysis. “The theoretical enterprise, especially modes of explanation, is called forth by surprise” (“A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion,” Chapter Seven in *Relating Religion*, 163). Again: “The particular subject matter provides the scholar with an occasion for surprise. This becomes one point at which the outsider’s view may be privileged over the insider’s view. The outsider’s view has a greater likelihood of being surprised” (“Bible and Religion,” Chapter Nine of *Relating Religion*, 208). And: “Both

bemusement, shock, horror, awe, dismay, disapproval, or commendation.³⁰ This term “surprise” is not meant to imply that our work is ideologically neutral, as if scholarly work was driven by an only too natural drive to record surprising things and share them with others. In light of the critical discovery of the ideological and political implications of the various ideas of “religion,” we suggest that Religious Studies functions pedagogically, as an instrument of the political self-constitution of the various societies and localities which support the institutions in and through which this work takes place.

The scholarly “surprise” driving Religious Studies is thus a reaction that registers across ideological and political frontiers. The resulting discourses (our comparative and classificatory efforts to appreciate, reduce, explain, or translate the unfamiliar) form a record of the normative assumptions and unmarked categories which have defined and constructed various local conceptions of the familiar, the ordinary and the expected. Religious Studies can be thought of as a formalized adjudication of differences, concerned with the management (and creation!) of surprise, the end of which is self-construction through the organization of identity boundaries and moral hierarchies of authenticity and legitimacy.

Let me offer a sole *exempli gratia* which might grant more solidity to this claim. At the end of a substantial review of six significant works on African diaspora traditions “selected for their treatment of the material objects of Afro-Cuban religions,” the author argues that “[f]or scholars of material religion, [these books] offer... ethnographic insight into the hows and

explanations and interpretations are occasioned by surprise. It is the particular subject matter that provides the scholar with an occasion for surprise. Surprise, whether in the natural or the human sciences, is always reduced by bringing the unknown into relations to the known. The process by which this is accomplished, in both the natural and the human sciences, is translation” (“A Twice-Told Tale: The History of the History of Religions’ History,” Chapter Sixteen in *Relating Religion*, 370-371).

30. In an interview, student reporter Supriya Sinhababu once asked Smith, “what got you interested in the religions that you study?” Smith candidly replied, “Because they’re funny. They’re interesting in and of themselves. They relate to the world in which I live, but it’s like a fun house mirror. Something’s off. It’s not quite the world I live in, yet it’s recognizable. So that gap interested me.” See “Interview with J. Z. Smith,” *Chicago Maroon* (6/2/2008) <https://www.chicagomaroon.com/2008/06/02/interview-with-j-z-smith/>

wherefores of devotion which include the ritual manipulation of sacred objects...[,]”
concluding:

Material objects are often marshaled by religious practitioners to display (or at times conceal) religious devotion, to demonstrate religious expertise to members of their community and to would-be clients, to squelch the claims of rivals, and to mark the history and the boundaries of their religious practices.³¹

At first glance this concluding sentence appears to vindicate those who claim that the categories “religion” and “religious” offer little value as analytic terms in academic research. If one removes the “r-words” from this statement, its analytical meaning appears to remain unchanged. What difference does it make here, after all, if these “practitioners,” or their “devotion,” “expertise,” and “practices” are labelled as “religious,” or not? The terms “religion” and “religious” are nowhere defined or delimited in the review, but are assumed, beginning from the third word of the essay, as self-evident labels. Yet on second reflection, it appears that the repetition of the label “religious” does serve an important discursive function. Words operate within (and by continuously reproducing) a systematic net of conceptual differentiations that articulate ideological hierarchies and social relationships. Use of these signifiers classifies the data under consideration in a way that excludes other, less desirable or even potentially hostile (to the scholar no less than to the subjects) classifications, such as “magical,” or “superstitious.” Not only does this mode of discourse authorize the interest of “Religious Studies” in these particular subjects of research (“practitioners” of “popular Catholicism, Spiritism, Santería, Palo Monte, the Abakúá society, and Pentacostalism”), it offers them all a protected status with political implications, prophylactically sealing off practitioners (and their objects) against deprecating and corrosive discourses that one could, realistically, expect to come into play, given the legacies of racism and colonialism, not to

31. Jalane D. Schmidt, “Religious Objects, Objections, and Objectives: Recent Books on Afro-Cuban Religions,” *Material Religion* 2:3 (2006) 383–388; quote from 388. I wish to apologize to Schmidt for the appearance that I have appropriated elements of her article’s title for my own. A friend helped me to compose my own title based on the theme of this essay, and I only became aware of Schmidt’s review some months after having submitted my proposal.

mention the continuing hegemony of North American Protestant assumptions about what is or is not “religion.” This is the management of surprise at work.

II. The Material Turn in Religious Studies

“If it doesn’t offer the opportunity to lick something, kiss something, eat something, or put something in your mouth, it’s not a religion” — Robert Orsi³²

The Phenomenological Approach Redivivus

The example discussed above was not chosen randomly, but was selected to facilitate a transition from presenting what I take to be the “givens” regarding “the data for Religious Studies,” to analysis of the popular new trend in Religious Studies known as “material religion” (while also touching on the closely allied approach known as “lived religion”). Because the approach to “Religious Studies” called “material religion” has in recent years gained enormous currency and influence within the field, the movement merits attention by anyone concerned with methodology in the Study of Religion. Russell McCutcheon has suggested dismissively that the “turn toward material and embodied religion sounds suspiciously like a reborn form of phenomenology of religion.”³³ In this second part of this essay, I want to assess and unpack the implications of McCutcheon’s critical judgment, or objection, concerning “material religion.”

In the Humanities and Social Sciences the past two decades have been marked by a so-called “material turn,” in which a “new materialism” has been developed alongside older, more discursive trends in modern and postmodern scholarship.³⁴ In an early notice of the trend,

32. “Robert Orsi at the NYS Writers Institute in 2013,” YouTube video of lecture at New York State Writers Institute Researching New York 2013 Conference, posted Dec. 3, 2013 by NYSWI; quote is from Q & A at 37:09-16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnFQu7ukAAy>.

33. McCutcheon, “The Category ‘Religion’ Twenty Years Later,” 121.

34. A more thorough investigation of the history of the term “material turn” is outside the scope of this project, but phrase “material turn” began to appear in the literature a little more than twenty years ago. The earliest examples I could find were in Gosewijn van Beek, “On Materiality,” *Etnofoor* 9:1 (1996) 5-24 (from a special issue on “Words and Things”) and John M. Sloop, Review of *Twilight Zones*:

anthropologist Gosewijn van Beek described the “material turn” as a postmodern response to “the continuing debate on the epistemological status of our perception of this cultural world,” but one whose direction is “perpendicular” to that of the “linguistic turn.”³⁵ Recent scholarship which explicitly invokes the “material turn” as a matter of theory has addressed a diversity of matters of interest, attempting to reorient academic approaches to literature,³⁶ the body,³⁷ clothing,³⁸ garbage,³⁹ and art education,⁴⁰ to cite only a few illustrative examples. In religious studies, the “material turn” manifests as a reaction against intellectualist, cognitive, and other thought- or language-oriented accounts of “religion” (both in modernist modes and in those following the postmodern “linguistic turn”). Scholars of “religion” following this turn embrace the study of what is usually termed “material culture,” developing a new methodological and theoretical orientation to the work that today goes by the self-designation “material religion.”

This new orientation has quickly become one of the most interesting and successful trends in our field. The journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief*, which commenced publication in 2005 and is now in its thirteenth volume, has positioned itself as the vanguard of the larger trend.⁴¹

As described on the publisher Taylor and Francis’ website, the journal “seeks to explore how religion happens in material culture.” Glossing the “material culture” of “religion” as

The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J., by Susan Bordo, *The Southern Communication Journal* 64:1 (1998) 86-88. The ProQuest Arts and Humanities database currently lists 101 articles containing the phrase “material turn,” though a number of these are merely juxtapositions of the two words (often separated by a period or comma).

35. Van Beek, “On Materiality,” 5-6.

36. Jane Grogan, “Style, Objects, and Heroic Values in Early Modern Epic,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 57:1 (2017) 23-44.

37. Iris Clever and Willemijn Ruberg, “Beyond Cultural History? The Material Turn, Praxiography, and Body History,” *Humanities* 3:4 (2014) 546-566.

38. Michiko Suzuki, “Reading and Writing Material: Koda Aya’s Kimono and its Afterlife,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 76:2 (2017) 333-361.

39. Tim Jelfs, “Matter Unmoored: Trash, Archaeological Consciousness, and American Culture and Fiction in the 1980’s,” *Journal of American Studies* 51:2 (2017) 553-571.

40. Emily Jean Hood and Amelia M. Kraehe, “Creative Matter: New Materialism in Art Education Research, Teaching, and Learning,” *Art Education* 70:2 (2017) 32-38.

41. The journal is published by Taylor and Francis. See <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rfmr20>.

“images, devotional and liturgical objects, architecture and sacred space, works of arts and mass-produced artifacts,” the journal intends to provide a venue for assessing “material forms,” especially within “the many different practices that put them to work,” including “[r]itual, communication, ceremony, instruction, meditation, propaganda, pilgrimage, display, magic, liturgy and interpretation.” All these can be described as the means “whereby religious material culture constructs the worlds of belief.”⁴² In a relatively short span of time, *Material Religion* has become an important forum for expert area specialists focusing on material artifacts. Many of the more than six-hundred studies (articles, reviews, and notes) which the journal has so far published so far are sophisticated presentations of specialized inquiry into material elements (“objects”) associated with particular social formations that are identified by one criterion or another as “religious.”

In a ten-year retrospective article, the editors of *Material Religion* admit that the term “‘material religion’ was not in common usage” when the journal began its publication.⁴³ But now, they opine, “the phrase ‘material religion’ can be used without explanation or justification... around the world.”⁴⁴ They contrast their own work with the “many studies that stress the intellectual contents, arguments, [and] doctrines of religions” or describe “‘religion’” as “a set of abstract beliefs.” The journal takes a special interest in the “hybrid” intersection of “bodies, practices, and things;” these are “the proper focus of religious materiality.”

We may wish to concede to *Material Religion* the status of vanguard in the current “material turn” of Religious Studies.⁴⁵ Its editors and authors have defined the movement’s

42. See “Aims and Scope” on the Taylor & Francis site: <http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=rfrmr20>

43. Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, “*Material Religion’s* First Decade,” *Material Religion* 10:1 (2015) 105-111; quotes from 105.

44. Meyer, et al., “First Decade,” 105. It is questionable whether this phrase “material religion” has as much currency outside of “Religious Studies” as Meyer et al would like us to believe. The ProQuest Arts & Humanities database employs “material culture” as a subject heading, and currently lists 326 titles as belonging to that subject; among these items 17 titles are also classified in the subject “religion.” “Material religion” is not a subject header in this database.

45. One mark of its status is that Plate has edited the new handbook *Key Terms in Material Religion* (New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). *Key Terms* includes thirty-seven alphabetically arranged single word title articles spanning both classic topics in religious studies and more specialized

parameters and staked out this new territory with aplomb. Validating the approach, *Material Religion* has been joined by various other new “centers,” “institutes” and publications similarly dedicated to studying the “material culture” of “religion.”⁴⁶ The “new” movement is succeeding.

And yet, something about these claims for the significance of the movement seems to be awry. “Material religion” purports to correct an imbalance in religious studies methodology, and to offer a much needed counterpoint to intellectualist approaches to “religion.” But the story cannot be so simple, because, in point of fact Religious Studies has, throughout its long history, often focused on “material objects” in its investigation of “religions.” For nearly a century and a half, since Müller first coined the term “Religionswissenschaft,” the field has enjoyed the participation of classicists, anthropologists, archaeologists, art historians, museum curators, archivists, numismatists, epigraphers, palaeographers, diplomatists, codicologists, papyrologists, collectors, and even hobbyists who have focused on the analysis and interpretation of material artifacts.⁴⁷

Perhaps the difference is that today’s “material religion” is determined not only to correct an intellectualist bias in Religious Studies data selection, but, at least in some of its forms, to offer a correction to theoretical conceptions of “religion” that discount the importance of “materiality,” or that denigrate the material objects of “religion” as primitive atavisms when compared to the philosophical spirituality of the postmodern world.

concepts useful to “material culture” studies.

46. For example, Yale University now houses the “Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion” (<http://mavcor.yale.edu>) the first cycle of which began in 2008 with a diverse array of scholars as fellows. They have recently commenced publication of the on-line, open-access peer reviewed journal *MAVCOR* which at present has published only the first issue of its first volume. More interestingly, *MAVCOR* is building and maintaining an online database known as the “Material Objects Archive,” which houses digital representations (pictures) of objects from a variety of traditions, along with curatorial information. The database offers advanced search capacities, and at present includes hundreds of instances. It also includes the “MAVCOR Giga Project,” which is using 360° camera technology for “documenting sacred spaces.”

47. To cite only one early example uniting a number of these disciplines, consider Adolf Michaelis, “Sarapis Standing on a Xanthian Marble in the British Museum,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 6 (1885) 287–318.

How Objects (Do Not) Get Theorized in 'Religious Studies'

Although the word “object” appears everywhere in social scientific literature—including in the literature produced by students of “religion”—the term itself is rarely subjected to explicit theorization by the members of our field. The words “object” or “objects” occur in nearly 43% of articles in the 2005 second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.⁴⁸ However the *Encyclopedia* contains no general article on either term.⁴⁹ Indeed, “object” is almost never listed as a topic in the indices of significant works in Religious Studies.⁵⁰ Unlike many other theoretical and methodological terms of art, among scholars of religion the concept “object” is not often treated as a “subject” in its own right, worthy of exposition by theorists.⁵¹

Nevertheless, in the specialist literature of Religious Studies (including Theology), the words “object” and “objects” appear quite often in titles of articles, chapters, and books.⁵² In

48. At GALE Virtual Reference Library, a “basic search” for “object or objects,” limited to the publication “Encyclopedia of Religion” (the 2005 second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*) yields 1,442 results. The whole *Encyclopedia* contains 3,3375 entries.

49. It does, however, contain articles on “Relics” (John S. Strong), “Art and Religion” (Diane Apostolos-Cappadona), “Fetishism” (Jay Geller), “Icons” (Virgil Cândea), “Museums and Religion” (Crispin Paine), “Images: Images, Icons, and Idols” (John E. Cort), “Images: Veneration of Images” (Richard H. Davis), “Visual Culture and Religion: An Overview” (David Morgan), “Iconography: Iconography as Visual Religion” (Hans Kippenberg) and other related topics.

50. At the beginning of this project I conceived the idea to compile a list of significant Religious Studies books which *do not* list “object” or “objects” in their indices, but determined such an appendix would be excessive. The term is usually entirely absent. A near exception are occasional entries for “object relations” or “objectivity.”

51. Collections of essays in method and theory, as a rule, have not treated “objects” as a topic. In Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) the topics which approach closest are “Body,” by William LeFleur; “Image” by Margaret R. Miles; and “Relic” by Gregory Schopen. None of the essays in Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon, eds., *Guide to the Study of Religion* (New York: Cassell, 2000) directly approach the topic; nor do the essays in their *Introducing Religion* (London: Equinox, 2008). The topic is similarly submerged in John Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (2nd edition; New York: Routledge, 2010). Interestingly, even S. Brent Plate’s recent collection *Key Terms in Material Religion* lacks a general article on “objects.”

A very important recent exception to this rule is Karl-Heinz Kohl, *Die Macht der Dinge: Geschichte und Theorie sakraler Objekte* (München: C. H. Beck, 2003). Kohl’s historical and linguistic/semiotic approach to object-theory differs significantly from much work being done in the North American and British “material religion” trend. For more see the cautiously appreciative review by Gustavo Benavides, *Numen* 53:1 (2006) 120–124.

52. As of this writing the *American Theological Library Association* database lists 939 examples. 667 of the results date from 1819 to 2009. From 2010 to the present, we find 272 results (almost 29% of total results).

ATLA also includes the word “object” in a number of subject headings, including “Liturgical objects”

keeping with popular usage, the term as used in the literature is polyvalent. In many cases the word “object” as employed in titles registers the sense of “goal” or “focus.” In numerous other cases it is used as a verb. Certain other typical usages appear with marked frequency including (allowing for variations): “object relations,” “transitional objects,” and other psychologically informed uses; Christian education’s “object lessons;” various noetic or focal “object of” phrases, especially with reference to “faith,” “hope,” “desire,” “belief,” “knowledge,” “cognition,” “consciousness,” “study,” “science” or “research;” there are many papers on grammatical “objects,” frequently studies of Near Eastern philology; scores of studies of archaeologically discovered “objects” and artifacts made of “clay,” “leather,” “bone,” “stone,” “iron” etc.; plenty of articles on “physical” or “material objects;” treatments of “objects” in “museums,” and as “art;” and, of course, recurrent treatments of “religious,” “devotional,” “liturgical,” “sacred,” “cult,” “ceremonial,” “votive” and “ritual objects.” Finally of course there are the articles (mostly theological and pastoral, but also literary, epistemological, and anthropological) bearing titles that in some way juxtapose the terms “subject” and “object.”⁵³

The vast majority of studies of material culture in “religion” do not focus on offering theoretical or methodological reflections on “objects” per se. But there are rare exceptions. Most recently, scholars associated with “material religion” have begun to offer some more substantive reflections on “objects” and materiality in “religion.”

Managing editor of *Material Religion* S. Brent Plate is one of the most visible theorists of “material religion” working in the field. Although his book, *A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects*, should not be objectified as the representative of the whole movement, nevertheless a brief examination of it could help to flag some of the more problematic ideas that are today associated with the “material religion” approach.⁵⁴ In the subtitle of his book, Plate indicates that his purpose lies in “bringing the spiritual to its senses.” Many of the studies which have

(220 items), “Object (Philosophy)” (127 items), “Unidentified Flying Objects” and “Unidentified Flying Object cults” (115 items), “Devotional Objects” (129 items); cf. the frequently cross-listed subject “Material Culture” (314 results).

53. ATLA lists 37 examples.

54. S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to Its Senses* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).

been published in *Material Religion* appear to share this intention. The subtitle playfully personifies “the spiritual” as a figure in need of revival. This appears to point towards a practical-theological motivation for the “material religion” project.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the book’s main title is also misleading regarding the data considered and the methods used. Plate’s “five” objects are not particular material “objects” at all, but rather classes or categories of objects: “stones,” “incense,” “drums,” “crosses,” and “bread.” These are chosen because these types or kinds of objects relate to each of the five senses of the knowing subject (the 1/2 object of the title). But rather than investigating the situated, temporal, interested and human uses of individual material objects approached through a careful “historical” method of contextualization (or through presenting thickly described ethnographic detail) Plate’s chapters devoted to these five object-types each present a breezy cross-cultural kaleidoscope of instances. The survey aims to demonstrate (against an intellectualist or cognitivist account) not only that the senses are involved in “religion,” but that each “object” (or kind) acts inherently as a bearer of sensual, non-discursive spirituality. These nearly ubiquitous substances or figures are represented, using this quasi-phenomenological method, as practically universal manifestations of “religion”—or the sacred—in material form.⁵⁶

55. What could “the spiritual” refer to here other than persons who identify as such? The idea that “the spiritual” must be brought to its senses suggests a critique of religious practice or spirituality that is overly noetic and interiorized, or insufficiently embodied and sensual.

I admit here to some informed speculation, but it seems to me that the publisher Beacon Press of Boston, which is operated by the Unitarian Universalist Association, may have regarded this book as a welcome addition to its suite of practical theological resources for its ministers and churches, supporting those who seek enhancement of their “spiritual” practices through more “materiality” in “religion.”

As the book’s description on the UUA Bookstore website puts it: “*A History of Religion in 5 1/2 Objects* is a celebration of the materiality of religious life. Plate moves our understanding of religion away from the current obsessions with God, fundamentalism, and science—and toward the rich depths of this world, this body, these things. Religion, it turns out, has as much to do with our bodies as our beliefs. Maybe even more.” (See <http://www.uuabookstore.org/A-History-of-Religion-in-5-12-Objects-P17911.aspx>)

56. That Plate’s approach and structure of argument resembles the methodology of Eliade in such works as *Patterns in Comparative Religion* hardly needs to be emphasized. Eliade’s book treats “hierophanies” (manifestations of the sacred) cross-culturally, by looking at “the sky,” “the sun,” “the moon,” “the waters,” “the earth and woman,” “vegetation,” “agriculture,” locative centers, etc. See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (tr. Rosemary Sheed; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996; originally 1958).

Other scholars associated with “material religion” offer similarly quasi-phenomenological theoretical moves. In a short note, Gretchen Buggeln argues that “[h]umans do things with images and objects, but objects also do things to us; because of this we need to respect their autonomy and integrity — their materiality.”⁵⁷ Her example, a description of a contemporary white ceramic coffee mug (her fig 1), is meant to show how “[t]he proper place for theory is after some open-minded data collection; interpretation is built on a foundation of both connoisseurship and theory.”⁵⁸ She proposes scholars of religion who deal with material culture should include “connoisseurship” in their approach to artifacts, a mode of appreciation which draws on curatorial expertise and “respect” for the qualities that an object manifests in the world, supposedly autonomously.⁵⁹

More recently, in an affecting and compelling de-colonialist account of devotional practices in Mexico, Jennifer Scheper Hughes makes an appeal to religious studies scholars, that they ought to treat the “diverse objects of material religion” not as “inert,” “silent sources of data,” but rather as “practitioners” do, that is, as “sacred persons,” as “‘beings’ not ‘things,’” and as “vital, dynamic, and even agentive members of the communities we study.”⁶⁰ Her advice to Religious Studies scholars is to adopt a “horizontal” rather than “vertical” theory of “distributive agency” in which humans and objects are co-agentive beings.⁶¹ Scholars should

57. “A Word on Behalf of the Object,” *Material Religion* 5:3 [2009] 357–358; 357.

58. I call it “quasi-phenomenological” because the notion of “connoisseurship” obviously calls for an *epoché* of *epoché*; the connoisseur by definition treats an object as a member of a class the characteristics of which are already known and the value of which is already appreciated.

59. There is a self-contradiction embedded in the claim that (a) theory must come only after “open-minded” (phenomenological) collection of data, and (b) the claim that “connoisseurship” should guide that same collection. This is just another failure of *epoché* and the reason why I call this approach *quasi-phenomenological*. In any case I remain convinced that *phainomena* (apparent things) do not simply “appear;” *theoria* (point of view) is essential to their “appearing.”

60. “Mysterium Materiae: Vital Matter and the Object as Evidence in the Study of Religion,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 41:4 [2012] 16–24.

61. Hughes, “*Mysterium Materiae*,” 20. I have two criticisms of Hughes that I would like to emphasize, without intending to cast general aspersions on the informative value of her work, or on the importance of its historical-political critique of the legacy of colonial oppression and marginalization which burdens the lives of her research subjects. First, that in her account of a journey undertaken by devotees of “El Niño Jesus Doctor,” she slips too easily into the passive voice, which facilitates some concealment of the human actors who obviously carry the object. We do not learn their identities or the origins of the object, nor is there any evidence available in her short account about the actual human agents at work here. There is discussion of the “image’s will” but no mention of the will (or

learn from their informants and sources that so-called material objects are themselves informants and sources, co-agents affecting change within communities of practice.⁶² In setting up her analysis, Hughes appeals to Robert Orsi's notion of "abundant events," suggesting that "religious objects" be viewed as "abundant objects" which present "material manifestations of the sacred" which "cannot be properly comprehended, described or interpreted within a Western ontological frame." She regards it as proper to think of the "agency of things," and "the mystery of living matter" (the *mysterium materiae* of her article's title). The term *mysterium materiae* is a deliberate nod to Rudolf Otto's category of "the numinous," transferring to materiality itself Otto's appeal to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* that is the ineffable "numinous" he also calls "the holy" or "sacred."⁶³

But Wait... There's "Something More"

Hughes is by no means alone among our colleagues in Religious Studies in openly advocating this new view of "objects," properly described, as possessing "agency" or manifesting the "'something more' of the *fascinans*" as Otto put it.⁶⁴ Examples in recent research abound: a feminist critic committed to the new "object-oriented ontology" whose

even any names) of the participants. The humans are treated *en masse* only as a background to the activities of the statuette. In this way the asserted co-agency of the Infant Doctor Jesus actually effaces notice of the human co-agency of the devotees, leaving only the image in the role of subject (all page 20). Second, that in her account of the story of Christo Aparecido in Totolapan (pages 18-19), what emerges is not really compelling evidence for the agency of the Christo, but instead an interesting display of competing discourses among the subjects, concerning Christo's agency (this appears especially in the form of a they-said/he-said between the devotees and Padre Salvador). Hughes' sympathy for the accounts of the devotees, as opposed to those of Christo's "clerical denigrators," is quite evident; it leads her to "take seriously" only the views of the former. This approach conceals other possible interpretations of these events, which might be described as a power struggle between competing groups of humans, a contest in which material objects become focal points of contested identity and loyalties, while not being themselves "agents."

62. Anyone interested in the theoretical underpinnings of object-agency would do well to follow up on the sources she draws on, in particular Jane Bennett, *Vital Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

63. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (tr. John W. Harvey; New York: Oxford University Press, 1967 [originally *Das Heilige*, 1917, English translation 1923]); pages 5–40.

64. Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 35.

participant-observer study of Tarot reading attributes agency (and perhaps even sentience) to the deck of cards;⁶⁵ a scholar of museum-exhibited South Asian art warns against scholarship which “condescendingly” dismisses the idea of object agency, and proposes to ask in all seriousness, “what do Indian images really want?”⁶⁶ The list could be easily extended. Less poetically minded scholars should be forgiven for regarding these interesting and counterintuitive treatments of material objects—in which scholars are sometimes deliberately honoring and echoing the insider language and testimony of informants who value them, and sometimes phenomenologically describing their own encounters with objects represented as agentive—as itself the surprising data that invites investigation and explanation or reduction.⁶⁷

In this new mystification of “materiality,” data which are materially present (i.e. objects) are represented as a gateway to the “origins” of “religion.”⁶⁸ As we have seen, in a return of the Elliadean/Ottonian category of the “hierophany,” “religious objects” are sometimes described by scholars as a manifestation of “the sacred.” In other cases attention to materiality in itself is proposed as a mode providing special access to “the real” that is not

65. Karen Gregory, “In the Cards: From Hearing ‘Things’ to Human Capital,” pages 225–245 in *Object-Oriented Feminism* (ed. Katherine Behar; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

66. Richard H. Davis, “What do Indian Images Really Want? A Biographical Approach,” Chapter 1 in *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (ed. Bruce M. Sullivan; London: Bloomsbury, 2015); see page 10.

67. Regarding the widespread attribution of agency to objects (including by Religious Studies scholars, apparently), several explanatory models might contend for our attention. From the “cognitive science of religion” the concept of “hyperactive agency detection” is frequently invoked, along with related discussions of “theory of mind.” See, *inter alia*, Michiel van Elk, et al. “Priming of Supernatural Agent Concepts and Agency Detection,” *Religion, Brain, and Behavior* 6:1 (2016) 4-33. Furthermore, old-school psychoanalytic “object relations” theory has some promise here, especially Donald Winnicott’s concept of the “transitional object,” so familiar from observing play in childhood. These concepts have often been invoked in “Religious Studies” and Theology, though Winnicott’s theories appear to be out of fashion at the moment. For one of the most recent examples, see Ryan LaMothe, “Sacred Objects as Vital Objects: Transitional Objects Reconsidered,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 26:2 (1998) 159–167. It is important to note that LaMothe does not use the term “objects” primarily in the sense of “material objects” (his study is not a part of the “material turn”) but in a psychological sense: “object” is the word for a conceptual focal point, used in reference, e.g. to “God representations” and “sacred symbols” invoked by believers.

68. Plate asserts that there is a “significance of *materiality*” (emphasis original) and that “to be students of religious life means we sometimes need to get back to the basics, back to the physical substrate upon which all religious traditions, beliefs, and practices originate;” from “Material Religion: An Introduction,” in *Key Terms for Material Religion*, 3.

available to merely discursive approaches. Van Beek represents an early example of this tendency. He rightly asks whether “material culture” has “a special epistemological and phenomenological status in our understanding of culture.”⁶⁹ Much more recently Susan Niditch proposes that the value of attending to the “material and visceral” aspects of objects and embodied practices is that they can show where practitioners get “a touch of the real.”⁷⁰ Interestingly, Niditch’s method of looking for that “touch of the real” remains yoked to data that would be better described as discursive and literary rather than material.⁷¹

An emphasis on the study of embodied practices in “material religion” has allowed the movement to find a natural ally in the scholarly trend called “lived religion.” As noted above, some scholars of “material religion” have deliberately invoked Robert Orsi’s notion of the

69. Van Beek, “On Materiality,” 9. Van Beek writes, “I want to have it both ways... I want to keep the *humility of objects* with regard to culture as a process and at the same time award their materiality a special status (better: attribute) in the construction and perception of culture” (10).

70. Susan Niditch, “Material Religion, Created and Experienced: Burial Sites, Symbolic Visions, and Sign Acts,” Chapter 5 (pages 90–105) in *The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). See pp. 90 and 103. This formula is attributed to Patricia Cox Miller.

71. Curiously, two of Niditch’s three “case studies” in her chapter on “Material Religion” are not studies of physical or material objects at all, but rather investigations of *literary representations* of physical objects which appear in the Hebrew Scriptures: the vision reports of the prophet Zechariah in Zech. 3:2-9 and 5:5-11 (100), and the narrative describing Jeremiah’s “sign acts” (also styled “performance art”) in Jer. 13:1-11 and 19:1–13 (101-104). We have no historical or contextual reason to suppose that these narratives offer the researcher anything more than *verisimilitude*, i.e. a semblance (or simulacrum) of material culture as it was in ancient Judah/Yehud.

Even Niditch’s case study on the figural drawings found in the burial site at Khirbet Beit Lei (92-99) treats them (necessarily) as representational communicative acts; hence these examples of “material religion” could, if one were in pursuit of different theoretical aims, just as easily be classified as evidence of the discursive nature of the data. The same is obviously true of the words (of uncertain provenance) found scratched on the tomb’s walls. But this discursive approach to describing and interpreting the drawings is accompanied by a quasi-phenomenological method used for describing the tomb itself—the truly “material” thing here—which she has apparently visited in person. In a speculative passage, she tries to enter empathetically into what an ancient visitor might “felt” entering into the tomb (94). She asks a series of questions which, if we are to be fully honest about the limits of our data, could never be answered by a contemporary researcher. “Did one feel as if one were entering an adumbration of the underworld?” Maybe yes, maybe no. An argumentative answer to the question (which she does not supply) would be forced to look to textual sources from antiquity for an ancient informant’s discursive disclosure of a comparable experience.

The flexibility of “material religion” to incorporate into its approach what are, strictly speaking, merely discursive representations of artifacts means that even Biblical Scholars can do this thing called “material religion” or “lived religion” while continuing to do what they have always tended to do: read texts and attribute to them “historical” (or material) referentiality.

“abundant” or “the more.”⁷² Orsi, the social anthropologist of contemporary Catholicism and other traditions in New York City, has used his undeniable skills as a descriptive writer and ethnographic reporter to promote scholarship committed to accepting (or taking seriously) informants’ claimed experiences of the “reality” or “presence” of what he glosses as “the gods.”⁷³ Repeating, in his own way, the critical deconstruction of “religion” as a category in social and scholarly discourses, Orsi’s work draws attention to the ways that intellectualist accounts of “religion” are connected to the Protestant and post-Protestant critiques of the practices of Catholics and other lower status groups. Especially, he focuses on the elitism of Protestant modernity’s critique of the concept of the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharistic host, showing how it fed into intellectualist accounts of “religion,” relegating the “lived religion” experienced by subaltern groups to the status of “not religion.”

Orsi’s entire oeuvre, taken together, can be seen as a vocal, though somewhat ironically self-contradictory objection to this trend. On the one hand, Orsi’s emphasis on “lived religion” rejects essentializing accounts of particular traditions, correctly emphasizing that all of our data comes from situated, local, material, and practical concerns of actual people.⁷⁴ On the other, paradoxically, his work seeks to rehabilitate the “real presence” of “the gods,” appealing to Otto’s perennialist account of religion as a universal response to “the holy,” “met as the really real.”⁷⁵ Religious studies scholars must acknowledge the presence of “the holy, the really real, the 2+2=5,” or what he calls “abundant events” in the materiality of things and in lived experience.⁷⁶

72. Robert Orsi, “When 2+2=5,” *The American Scholar* (March 1, 2007); available online at <https://theamericanscholar.org/when-2-2-5/>

73. For Orsi, “the gods” is “a synecdoche for all the special superehuman beings with whom humans have been in relationship in different times and places.” See Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016) 4. Orsi’s idea of “the gods” bears more than a passing resemblance to Otto’s category of “the numen.”

74. See Robert A. Orsi, “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In? Special Presidential Address, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42:2 (2003) 169–174.

75. So, Robert A. Orsi, “The Problem of the Holy,” Chapter 4 (pages 84–105) in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (ed. Robert Orsi; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

76. According to Orsi, “Abundant events are characterized by aspects of the human imagination that cannot be completely accounted for by social and cultural codes, that go beyond authorized limits; by

In the wake of Orsi's return to Otto, there has emerged in Religious Studies a trend that I would like to call "the school of 'the more.'" The characteristic discourse of this "school" employs variations of the word "more," along with other terms signaling abundance, excess, overflow, unknowability, ineffability, irreducibility, incommensurability, etc.⁷⁷ Such descriptors most often serve to authorize and legitimate scholarly objections to naturalistic approaches to the study of "religion."⁷⁸ In place of the reductions offered by flat naturalism (let alone dreadful materialism or wicked positivism), this school promotes something which resembles the tradition of Emersonian Transcendentalism: an idealism of Nature as sign of the Spirit. In this new transcendentalism the very materiality of "religious" objects and embodied practices are always also an adumbration of the eternal divine and/or universal human (or both simultaneously). They are never merely particular, peculiar, local, social, economic, interested, ordinary, or otherwise *mundane* signs of intersubjective human behavior.

Methodology in 'Material Religion'

It appears to me that neither the "material religion" approach, nor the "school of the more," offer any genuinely new methodological alternatives to the Study of Religion. What they do offer are a new metaphysics of presence, an interpretive framework which mystifies

the 'more' in William James's word (which got him into so much trouble with positivist psychologists); by the 'unthought known,' a cultural experience of déjà vu or uncanny awareness of something outside us and independent of us, yet still familiar to us. Abundant events are saturated by memory, desire, need, fear, terror, hope or denial, or some inchoate combination of these." Abundant events are characterized, he says, by five traits. They "present themselves as sui generis," (or "out of the ordinary"); they "are real to those who experience them"; they "arise at the intersection of the conscious and unconscious"; and "at the intersection of the past/present/future"; and "they are intersubjective (though this intersubjectivity may include the dead, for instance, or saints)."

In regards to this last point, it should be emphasized that, given present methods of observation and data collection, no scholar can legitimately confirm the claims of research subjects to have had "intersubjective" experiences with "the gods." Honesty about the nature of data suggests we should at most say that subject discourses report subjective experiences.

77. See for example Mary Dunn, "What Really Happened: Radical Empiricism and the Historian of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84:4 (2016) 881–902.

78. In certain peripheries of the school, such objections are accompanied by laments about the "passionate disbelief" of social-scientists who work on "religion." See the plaintive essay of Michael A. Cantrell, "Must a Scholar of Religion be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84:2 (2016) 373–400; see esp. 390.

simultaneously both materiality and subjective experience. This appears to be an effort to neutralize the epistemological problems that were posed for objectivity and subjectivity by the postmodern “linguistic turn.” Some scholars in the movements offer a sort of methodological hand-waving, in which “material” and “lived religion” are problematically described as new methods of research yielding insights into the mysterious dynamics of human “religiosity.” But when the chips are down, if we examine the all too ordinary genres of scholarly discourse produced in these movements we see that the methods in play are just ordinary (and even old fashioned) modes of data collection that are the common property of the human sciences; especially evident are well worn and time honored approaches to ethnographic and historical research.

But if there is a characteristic method at play, it may be evident in a dual refusal of the theory and methods that are favored in other corners of the tent. First, we see the refusal of the critique of the category “religion.” At its best (in Orsi, for example) this first refusal is accompanied by an alternative critique of the genealogy of the category. However Orsi’s sociological analysis of the power dynamic at play in the “religion/not religion” distinction does not finally lead to a categorical *Aufheben* but rather to an ironic *apotheosis*: in the name of protecting the particularity of marginalized peoples, the critique leads back to Otto’s universal account of “religion.” Second, there is an evident refusal of second-order scholarly redescription and explanatory theorization. This is often accompanied by an explicit revival of the same denunciations of reductionism that have characterized Religious Studies scholarship at least since the days of Eliade.⁷⁹ At its best, this second refusal promotes a first-order thick description of actual human behaviors and social formations, allowing for careful attention to emic discourses. But this refusal of second-order discourse also appears wedded to a barely submerged humanistic project which seeks, as Eliade proposed, to overcome the dual problem of traditional religious authority on the one hand, and pernicious secular rejection of “religion” on the other. Taken together, these two refusals of critique and theory allow for analyses which purport to privilege emic categories and self-representations, but which actually provide cover

79. I am thinking in particular of the explicit denunciations of reductionism found in Mircea Eliade, “History of Religions and a New Humanism,” *History of Religions* 1:1 (1961) 1–8.

to quasi-phenomenological (or neo-Transcendental) projections of universal “real” presences and experiences (especially, of “the sacred”) back onto the objects and subjects of research.

And so the manufacturing of “religion” by “Religious Studies” continues apace, with no end in sight. To be sure, as such it will continue to be accompanied by our “intemperate” objections.

III. Six Theses on Objects

If the reader will continue to indulge me, I wish by way of conclusion to offer six final theoretical and methodological theses regarding the study of “objects.”

1. First, that “objects” as such are always only matters before us. This claim is consistent with the results of inquiry into the origins of the English word “object.” Object enters the language in the late 14th century through a transliteration of (that is, in a refusal or inability to translate) the substantive form of the Latin verbal adjective *objectus*. The word *objectus* comes from *obicio*, which combines *iacio*, “I throw” with *ob*, meaning “towards,” “before,” or “against.” This word “object” cannot be defined except by tautological resort to putatively equivalent terms (especially “thing”). This reflects the word’s origin in a verbal *adjective*. It can therefore be thought of as a substitute pronoun, or a demonstrative; it only ever stands for something else. It describes. Whatever is described as “object” (whether using the obsolete English adjective or the noun) will therefore inevitably bear a trace of reference to the activity of description, which is nothing other than someone positing a something as an object. An object is one matter that a someone describes as standing opposed to or over against another. This is reflected in the translation of the substantive use of *objectus* in German as *Gegenstand* (the attributive use can be translated with the much rarer German *gegenständig*).

2. Second, that the word “object” (like *objectus*) is only ever used by one human being speaking to or writing for another in order to describe some matter which stands in relation to them both. For this reason I contend that “objects,” properly so termed, are *matters intersubjectively available*. In philosophy, the fraught epistemological discussion of the relationship between “object” and “subject” all too often conceals this triadic relationship,

misrepresenting it in both regnant models (*intentio recta* and *intentio obliqua*) as merely diadic.⁸⁰ Objects properly so termed are object to at least two subjects. This triadic relation is embedded in the communicative structure of language itself, making objects a subject for semeiology.

3. Third, that whatever is called an “object” in scholarly discourse (or any discourse, really) is always subject to objection. So-called objects may through the process of argument either lose the status of object altogether, or be analyzed (broken up) into multiple different objects, or reduced to or combined with some other object. Objections, then, play no accidental role in establishing objects as objects (that is, as objective). It is intersubjective communicative action which establishes them. In fact objection (rather than objectification) may be the ideal term for describing the intersubjective process by which objects come to be accepted as given things (data). The danger of realist “ontological” approaches to objects may be analyzed as its tendency to efface the always already present social process which is construing things as *things for us*.

4. Fourth, that not all of our objects are sensual or “material objects,” but rather everything which we make subject to objections can still be thought of as some kind of an object. Some objects are social formations with so-called social ontologies and others are purely conceptual. Perhaps to think is to think up (posit or postulate) an object; this is how Locke defined “idea”: the “object of understanding.” And so there are also “imaginary objects” like unicorns. In that respect, in the end, all that we scholars have available for study and research are objects (even if they are also termed “subjects”).

5. Fifth, that in scholarship, objects must be established as objects (that is, *intersubjectively available matters*, or data) through methods that are best termed either *scientific*, *genealogical*, *sociological*, or *historical*. The study of an object must be grounded in a rigorous effort

80. Adorno attempts to overcome the internal contradiction of the *intentio obliqua* (and to move past the naive realism of the *intentio recta*) through his notion of “the primacy of objects.” But note that “the primacy of objects” does not point the way to the flat ontology of Object-Oriented speculative realism, but rather to a sublation of subject and object resulting in critical theory: “critique of society is critique of knowledge and vice versa.” Thus Adorno also speaks of “primacy of the species, of society.” See Theodor W. Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” pages 245–258 in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (Henry W. Pickford, trans; New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); for the quotes see §4 (250) and §12 (258).

to communicate the process by which the posited object has been proposed as an object suitable for research. This means, practically speaking, that scholarship can never treat objects as fully autonomous, but must attend to the social, historical, and material conditions by which the object becomes object to the research community. This involves, necessarily, the self-reflective and careful study of provenance, ownership, properties, contexts, economies (networks and systems—that is, social relations—involving production, reproduction, mediation, etc.), uses, influences, and finally: critical examination of the priors that result in selection and presentation by the critic in argument.

6. Sixth, that research in “Religious Studies,” as in all branches of the human sciences, is never interested solely in theorizing the “materiality” or “presence” of objects. (In the same way we never stop once we have established the “objectivity” of an object.) This is not to say that notions of “materiality” (or “presence” or “objectivity”) cannot themselves become objects for us. But especially when it comes to dealing with so-called material objects, these become objects of interest for us insofar as they have been *used*—as *tools*, *instruments*, and *artifacts*—and as such they have significance for us as primarily as evidence for human activity and behavior. And please note that all “non-material” objects that interest us are also tools, instruments and artifacts! Connoisseurs, curators, and collectors all have roles to play, but in “Religious Studies,” as in anthropology, we are ultimately interested in our fellow human beings, and the things that we make out as objects have value to our work mainly insofar as they are signs of the human. As scholars we are not here to promote mere appreciation, let alone devotion or mystification, but rather critical understanding of *what is going on*.