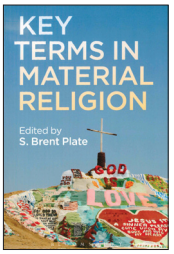


**S. Brent Plate, ed., *Key Terms in Material Religion***

London: Bloomsbury, 2015. xvii + 284 pages. Hardback, $114.00, ISBN: 978-1-47259-546-1. Paperback, $35.95, ISBN: 978-1-47259-545-4. eBook, $26.99, ISBN: 978-1-47259-548-5. PDF eBook, $26.99, ISBN: 978-147259-547-8.

Embodiment and material religion have been emergent topics of research in religious studies for the past two decades. However, when pushed to define what these terms *really* mean, these concepts devolve into "bodies" and "things." The ascendance of the concept of "embodiment" as an intellectual device to describe physical practices and matter in religious life and practice has, according to Plate, continued to hew to the tendency to privilege "mind over matter" (4). A materially centered understanding of embodiment underlies Plate's five-fold working definition of material religion, which is characterized by (1) scholarly investigations of the interchanges between humans and physical objects; (2) the role of the sensorium; (3) an awareness of both time and space; (4) moments of orientation (eating, singing) and disorientation (physical transformation of the body) of religious communities and individuals, and (5) religious laws and rules that train the body (4–7).

*Key Terms in Material Religion* originated as a special issue of *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* in 2011. Plate is the Managing Editor of this pioneering journal focusing on the place of material culture in religious life and practice, and he co-edited this special issue on "key terms" with the journal's editors Birgit Meyer (University of Utrecht), David Morgan (Duke University), and Crispin Paine (University College London). *Key Terms* includes the original nineteen essays from the special issue of *Material Religion* as well as an additional eighteen addressing a broad range of topics that cluster around the sensorium (aesthetics, body, emotion, food, masks, memory, prayer, sensation, smell, sound, taste, touch, vision, and words), space-place (city, maps, space), and material-object (body, brain-mind, collection, digital, display, dress, fetish-factish, icon (image), magic, medium, race, screen, sign, technology, and thing). As with most edited volumes that incorporate such a diversity of topics, the quality of these brief essays is inconsistent, and some are not as deft in drawing clear connections between Plate's five-fold definition of material religion and their field of study. Readers of this volume will find North American religions somewhat overrepresented, although some of the contributors do focus on Buddhist and Hindu traditions in Asia (for example, Inken Prohl on aesthetics, James McHugh on smell, Anita Patil-Deshmukh on maps, Wei-Cheng Lin on sign, and Rich Freeman on taste).

Many of the essays found in this special issue have been expanded and given more detail in the edited volume. The eighteen new contributions that have been added to

the edited volume by emergent, mid-career, and senior scholars focus on traditional (aesthetics, dress, food) and unexpected dimensions (screen, technology, words) of material religion. The essays are arranged alphabetically rather than thematically, allowing considerable flexibility with how the book may be used for either research or teaching.

In the *Aesthetica*, published in 1750, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten defined "aesthetics" as the science of "sensual perception, the human memory, beauty, and the arts" (11). Taking Zen Buddhism as a lens through which to analyze the ways in which religious practitioners sensually experience and perceive material culture, Prohl argues for an understanding of aesthetics that moves beyond a simple equation of the term with beauty to one that returns to Baumgarten's more comprehensive definition. Through the rituals of Zen Buddhism, including temple ceremonies, *zazen*, the burning of incense, and other practices, which bring mind and body into alignment, Prohl defines aesthetics as "theorizing about the sensory experience of the world" (14).

Patil-Deshmukh's essay on maps begins with a dictionary definition of the meaning, "to map something," which is far less interesting than the image conjured by the statistic from the 2001 Census of India revealing 2.4 million places of worship located throughout the country (124–25). In 2012, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) created a two-tier system for the preservation of religious structures (pre- and post-1964 construction). Through the Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research (PUKAR) Barefoot Researchers initiative, these structures were mapped, and it was observed that in the slums (*cāḷ*s), religious buildings (illegal or not) were "being guarded with great gusto under the pretext of worship, but underpinning the safeguarding was the desire for preservation of a sense of place" (127). This process of mapping described by Patil-Deshmukh reveals and gives voice to the economically disenfranchised and marginalized and indicates the strategic power that the "use of religious spaces as tools for asserting rights over land" can have as a negotiating tool.

McHugh's essay on "Smell" focuses on the use of "aromatic materials of worship," particularly camphor and civet oil, which is derived from the anal glands of small cat-like creatures related to mongooses at the Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Venkatkeshvara in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India (209). The specialness of these scents, which are reserved exclusively for the adornment of the god, generates a sense of the mysterious and the uncertain: Are these scents real? How do we know what the scent *really* smells like (212)?

Freeman links aesthetics and Indic theories of taste, *rasa*, which as a means of observing "changing bodily states," emerged as one of the primary tropes in South Asia (240). The eight "flavors" of *rasa* aesthetics combined the savor of food with eroticism, and the "equally early assimilation of drama to a kind of ritual forum, a religious festival offered to please the gods, where dramaturgy was claimed as a 'fifth Veda'" (241). The eight flavors of *rasa* aesthetics, the tension between the erotic and the ascetic, was later systematized in the medieval tradition of intense emotional love and longing for the god in *bhakti* (*bhakti rasa*). The consumption of the "leftovers" of the food offerings made to temple gods and goddesses are known as *prasāda* ("grace"), which are consumed by devotees as a sign of utmost humility and devotion, rather than of potential food pollution (242).

A sign, according to Lin, is "vital and invocatory," and through semiotic theory we can understand how signs mediate between subject and that to which the sign

refers, such as the object or image (202). Signs are invocatory and have a performative tendency that emphasizes their material nature, which points to divine presence. Lin notes that in "medieval Chinese Buddhism, radiant light, a chiming sound, a curing touch, and scented smell experienced unexpectedly served as signs of the divine presence, manifesting miraculously in response to the deserving believer for his/her accrued karma" (203). Signs accrue meaning to communities of interpreters, who change over time in different historical and social contexts.

This volume will be useful for introductory and advanced undergraduate courses in religious studies, anthropology, material culture studies, and art history. The essays are, for the most part, engagingly written and accessible. While there is no bibliography, each essay includes a brief list of suggested readings.

## Reference

Meyer, Birgit, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, eds.
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