

# Material religion

Religion



Connection with the material world is inevitable for a person with all senses intact. Upon rising at 5:30am, one can watch the sun rise over the land, eat breakfast, listen the news, shower, and dress, put on jewelry, and maybe even find a few minutes to establish a connection with the Divine. One great dialogue among contemporary social scientists today, is determining the place religion occupies in the material world: i. e., how does it influence the culture of a people? Within the body of this paper, we will explore the influence of Buddhism on Chinese Culture, Christianity on American culture, and the role of the physical senses in one's experience of the divine.

For many years, spirituality and the material world were seen as two different spheres...one is governed by the tides of commerce while the other is inhabited by mysterious supernatural beings. In the twentieth century, the rise of the natural sciences and Communism pushed religion into the background, however with the terrorist attacks of 9/11, conservative governments in many Western countries, and movies like *The Passion of the Christ*, the question of religion's place in society had once again come to the foreground.

Since the enlightenment period, sensory data was used to dispute claims of the existence of a super-natural world beyond this one. Because one cannot hear, see, smell, or feel God, the angels, ghosts, or draw tears of blood from a statue through any normal means, many, especially in the academic community, dismissed these possibilities. Is religion not extrasensory by its very nature, requiring the faculties of human intuition and faith? Some might say that these human sensory deprivation entities have more spiritual advantages because they are not tempted by the

physical world. However, Clark argues that religion cannot exist without the input of the same senses used to disprove it.

Calling upon the readers to imagine living without the imagery, musical, and gustatory rituals surrounding many religious ceremonies, she says that such a spirituality would never come into being, “ Close your eyes and imagine a life without mediation. You are blind, deaf, dumb, and unable to touch or smell anything in your environment. The majority of us would find it difficult to cope with the loss of even just one of these senses. Now pause and consider a religious life without mediation. Even the least overtly sacramental faiths depend on visual, oral, and material culture in everyday life”(Clark, 123-4).

Apparently, it is her argument that the religious and the material work together in a symbiotic relationship to form a coherent vision of reality for adherents. Paintings of saints, prophets, angels, the crafting of temples and cathedrals, and symbols such as the Cross, Star of David, and swastika (in Buddhism) help to forge a material link to the spiritual realm.

When Buddhism was first introduced to China, many of its symbols were adopted into the mainstream of Chinese culture. For example, elaborate circular paintings called mandalas, had become objects of meditation, as did swastikas. Many important figures such as Kuan Yin were venerated as bodhisattvas, enlightened beings that returned to the world repeatedly to help liberate all other beings from the wheel of death and birth before claiming this liberation for themselves. These Bodhisattvas were extremely popular in China before the rise of Communism.

The robes monks and nuns used to adorn themselves were immediately indicative of the Buddhist order, and the laity would support them, and visit the monastery for instruction in meditation, “ Images and relics allowed the ordinary person to experience Buddhism in a manner that was at once powerful and intimate, without the immediate intervention of learned intermediaries explaining what should be felt, what should be understood. Sacred objects, perhaps more than any of the other types of Buddhist objects, rendered the religion tangible and proximate for any who wished it, from the most erudite of monks to the illiterate devotee”(Kieschnick, 24).

Today, Asian philosophical systems such as yoga and Zen are marketed to American consumers through fitness classes, clothes (containing Sanskrit script such as the OM symbol), and books promising to help the reader with relationship dilemmas and career moves. Today, more Westerners are embracing Eastern philosophy because of its dissemination through the popular culture of the Internet and the bookstore scene.

Even in Christianity, a religion that traditionally eschews the trappings of materialism to embrace a life of simple service, iconographic images aids the faithful not only in making their religion more practical, but helping to connect strangers that share the same beliefs, “ Religious objects function within complicated networks of beliefs, values, myths, and social structures.

Clerical elites articulate the proper use of objects based on their understanding of scripture and religious traditions. People relate to objects as if they were sacred characters, in spite of warnings against idolatry. Religious artifacts may also function like tools they help Christians to

acknowledge common commitments, delineate differences, express affection, or socialize children”(McDannell, 57).

In the modern age, many people buy jewelry, t-shirts, and bumper stickers to share their beliefs with the world. For example, since the 1980s, Christian Rock had gathered quite a following, and there are many radio stations in the area dedicated to playing Christian music. To many children and young adults, attending religious institutions is a boring way to spend a Sunday (Friday, or Saturday) afternoon. With the introduction of religion into pop-culture, people are viewing spirituality as a more socially desirable phenomenon.

## **Works Cited**

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