

# Reviews

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*The Thing About Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions.* By David Morgan. University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 268 pages. \$95.00 hardcover; \$24.95 softcover; ebook available.

David Morgan, a material culturist, takes a fresh look at the role of objects in relationship to religion. He threads the conceit of the web throughout his study: the web of an object's interactions within the context of its religion, a kind of "ecology" that imbues agency and power into the object. After a philosophically-argued introduction introducing six forms of agency—"external, ritual, mimetic, inherent, instrumental, and aesthetic" (19)—Morgan divides the book into two major sections with three chapters each. In Part One he takes an analytical approach, starting with a chapter on philosophical theories, followed by a somewhat argumentative literature review, and notably, in chapter 3, seven examples of the ways in which religions are material. In Part Two he provides three case studies through which he investigates themes: the power of things with respect to magic wands; religion and time through a history of Notre Dame Cathedral; and words and things by tracing the path of a Polynesian divinity statue from its origin to museums.

In the theoretical portions of the book, Morgan shines when he argues passionately for points that he believes in, particularly his thesis that religions should not be dematerialized. When refuting other scholars' claims, his tone is equally passionate, but his arguments sometimes make logical leaps that reach his own conclusions too quickly or follow tangential strands. Morgan counters foundational scholars (Plato, David Hume, John Calvin) who promote dematerializing religion. He puts other scholars (Clifford Geertz, William James, Maurice Merleau-Ponty) in conversation with each other, providing context for the academic history that contributes to the current material ecosystems to which he attends. He turns a clever phrase, evoking admiration for his poetic language and effective prose. Brief examples of his eloquence include "ideological myopia" (45), "aesthetic engine" (19), his pun on "fabricate shared identity" (72), and "cocktail of feelings" (175). Morgan's writing style, while still academic, is refreshing.

The most engaging sections, chiefly in Part Two, center on specific objects and their agency, history, and interrelationships with the religions associated with them. By investigating an object in depth, Morgan situates that object in both its concrete materiality and its abstract, esoteric context. The blending of concrete and abstract, coupled with the

historical narratives of the objects, makes for a nuanced discussion. In the chapter about magic wands, Morgan delves into a fascinating cultural study of comparative mythology. At the same time, the chapter sometimes leans too much towards the expository and not enough towards the analytical. The sociopolitical history of Notre Dame Cathedral in chapter 5 is comprehensive and compelling, providing the clearest support for his ideas about the importance of materiality in religion while simultaneously reiterating the themes of an object's agency and web of interrelationships. Chapter 6, "Words and Things," associates the changing labels placed on a Polynesian deity object with an evolving perspective on colonialism. While the connection between language and thing seems tenuous at first, by the end of the chapter, the point is quite convincing.

Morgan's conclusion correlates these three case studies, respectively, with the concepts of networks, focal objects, and agency, returning to the initial themes. The book includes fifteen color plates, fifty-four half-tones, resources for classroom use (supplemental readings, key terms, online suggestions, and a writing guide), endnotes, bibliography, and index. Course resources have excellent potential to spark curiosity and questions among students, scholars, and general readers, especially the extensive references and insightful writing prompts.

This study follows current academic trends in its emphases on agency and webs of interrelationships—think of the rhizome metaphor. In line with the relatively new field of material religion, in which he is a major player, Morgan breaks with traditional approaches to objects as inert artifacts that play little more than a symbolic role in a static religion. Instead, he recognizes objects as dynamic, integral, and even transformative to the history and very nature of their religions.

Laura Strudwick, Independent Scholar

*Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices.* By Nancy Tatom Ammerman. NYU Press, 2021. 272 pages. \$89.00 hardcover; \$30.00 soft-cover; ebook available.

*Studying Lived Religion* is a much-needed addition to both religious studies research and the classroom. Clearly written and tightly organized, it is accessible and eminently referenceable, offering a variety of methodologies, historical contexts, and examples. Ammerman's inclusive and synthetic thought touches and builds on many of the major players in the field while also foregrounding minority points of view and innovative current literature. At the same time, her sustained focus and organizational schema of the six dimensions of lived religion—"how religion happens in everyday life"—indeed offers a "foundation [that]