



A HISTORY OF RELIGION IN 5 1/2 OBJECTS

BRINGING THE SPIRITUAL
TO ITS SENSES

S. BRENT PLATE





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*To my father, who taught me to think.
To my mother, who taught me to write.
To my companion, who taught me to feel.
To my children, who taught me to play.
And to my grandfather
Carlyle Metz Baehne (1916–2013),
who taught me a lot of things.*

*This is what life is all about: salamanders, fiddle
tunes, you and me and things, the split and burr of
it all, the fizz into particulars.*

—Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone
to Talk*

Contents

½

STONES

INCENSE

DRUMS

CROSSES

BREAD

→

SOUL

Acknowledgments

Notes

Index

half. I. Being one of the two equal parts into which a thing is or may be divided.

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

Less solace in these songs half-ourselves & half-not.

—Colin Cheney, “Half-Ourselves & Half-Not”¹

After making eight mostly successful movies, Federico Fellini set to work on *8½*. Since its release a half century ago, the surrealistic, self-reflexive motion picture has hit the tops of “all-time best” lists the world over. Fellini’s film within a film portrays a middle-aged filmmaker, Guido Anselmi, played by Marcello Mastroianni. Between love and lust, desire and creativity, Guido quests for something, but seems unsure exactly what that might be. His life is incomplete and he knows it. He gestures toward love, often lasciviously, but as the beautiful Claudia suggests, he doesn’t know how to love. Guido rhetorically queries her: “Could you choose one single thing, and be faithful to it? Could you make it the one thing that gives your life meaning . . . just because you believe in it? Could you do that?”² The apparent answer is no, at least in his case. But the quest remains, and Guido’s limited life persists.

Two and a half decades later, Julian Barnes inserted what he called a “Parenthesis” between chapters 8 and 9 of his novel *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*. Equally as eccentric as Fellini’s film, Barnes’s fictional writings speculate on love, history, and artistic creation, meanwhile self-referentially questioning the author’s role in it all. The parenthetical half chapter asks what it means for two people to love each other and the effects that may or may not have on a “history of the world.” Among other felicitous phrasings, Barnes likens love to a “windscreen wiper across the eyeball.” Even so, he wonders whether love is a “useful mutation that helps the race survive.” Or maybe it is a luxury, some value-added option to our lives: unnecessary but persistent. Regardless, “we must believe in it, or we’re lost.”³

Two different works of art that examine love, desire, creativity, and the meaning of life, and both use “1/2” in their titles. What can this possibly mean? Is the half some extra value, like a baker’s dozen? Or does it reflect something taken away, as if it was

supposed to be the ninth but part of it was lost, or never finished? The beginnings of an answer were laid out a long time ago.

Almost two and a half millennia before Fellini and Barnes, the philosopher Plato wrote a work known as the *Symposium*, another meditation on the nature of love. In the midst of the convivial conversations of the story, Aristophanes stands up and presents what is perhaps the first artistic, amorous exploration of the half. The ancient playwright waxes mythological as he tells a comic tale of human origins: The first creatures were different from us, doubled in form from our present appearances; they had spherical bodies, with four hands, four feet, one head with two faces, and two sets of genitals. Because of their multiple hands and feet, they could move quite fast, and as such made a cartwheeled attack on the gods, which sent shock waves through the heavenly realms. Instead of killing the human creatures in retribution, the great Zeus decided to split them all in half so that they would be “diminished in strength and increased in numbers.”⁴ The result is the human body we each have today, living our lives as incomplete creatures, always looking for our other half. Love, the story suggests, completes us by coupling us, making us whole again with the perfect fit of another creature.

Aristophanes’s halving is, I suspect, what Fellini and Barnes were after in their approaches to the topic of love. The “1/2” in their titles, and mine, stands as a symbol of our incomplete natures, the need for a human body to be made whole through relations with something outside itself. “No man is an island, entire of itself,” as John Donne’s seventeenth-century text declares. “Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” Except that we get disconnected from our surroundings, from each other, from our gods, from the natural world, becoming floating islands. Our lives are half-lives, and we desire fulfillment, completion, wholeness. Aristophanes’s mythologizing intimates that a perfect fit exists, somewhere out there, for our half bodies.

But this is not a book about finding a soul mate, one other human body that completes us. Many such books are readily available. This is about another kind of fullness, another kind of bonding for our coupling bodies, another kind of love. This is about a religious love, though not necessarily the love of a god.

This book tells the story of the human half body, such as we are, and some of the objects we connect with in our quest for religiously meaningful, fulfilling lives. Because, let’s face it, Aristophanes tells a nice tale, but another body *doesn’t* actually complete us. We humans may experience a few, fleeting moments of all-consuming, all-connecting ecstasy that grow rarer as life goes on, but we don’t, can’t, live in that state. We still need to eat and explore, to touch and talk, to breathe plant-produced oxygen and drink from one stage of nature’s water cycle. Moreover, our ability to love can be amazingly vast, well beyond directing our affections toward one other single creature. We love (and *love* is indeed the word) a very good meal, our children and their imaginary plays, the color orange just so at sunset, the feel of our cat’s fur as we pet it, a film that makes us laugh, a book that makes us cry. All these things too we love. They link us with a world beyond our own skin. Taken collectively, these experiences make us feel as if we are not one-half but one.

Beginning with our incomplete half body, the following chapters discuss five types of objects that humans have engaged and put to use in highly symbolic, sacred ways:

stones, incense, drums, crosses, bread. These objects are ordinarily common, basic, profane. *Profane* stems from the Latin roots *pro* and *fanus*, meaning “outside the temple”; in other words, the deep meaning of the profane is not inherently negative, just everyday life: houses, trinkets, bakers, and post offices are all outside the temple. Such is the paradox of religious experience: the most ordinary things can become extraordinary. We often forget this, overlooking the commonplace because we’re trained to respond to mass media spectacles, expecting an overwhelming lightning-bolt transmission from on high. Or we do the opposite and believe that spiritual truths are to be found in some remote setting, far from the quotidian, in a pretense of utter silence and absence, usually a mountaintop, desert, or other spectacular natural setting. Situated in between these two extremes, the spiritual objects discussed here are things that many readers will come across in the course of the next twenty-four hours. Chances are, you will find them where you didn’t expect to find them, right under your noses, at your fingertips, on the tips of your tongues.

Connectors: USB ports, HDMI cables, DVI outlets, VGA adapters, 110-volt three-prong plugs, 220-volt two-prong plugs. If you don’t have the right connectors, you can’t watch your high-definition television, project your PowerPoint presentation, or use your hair dryer when traveling abroad. In the world of electronics much is incompatible, which makes it so nice when the right fit is found, when that crystal-clear connection is established and the show can go on.

We humans also *plug in*. Our bodies are a matrix of connecting points that, when used appropriately, allow us to relate to and draw breath, meaning, and inspiration from the environment around. James Cameron’s blockbuster film *Avatar* portrayed something like this, as the blue-being Na’vi had neural ponytails that directly jacked into the flora and fauna of their world, linking nervous systems across species. And we watched this bright new time-space in 3-D, thinking: “How cool is that?” Meanwhile, we forgot that we already have such connectors inherent in this very mortal coil.

The primary contact points between the self and the world are the sense organs: the mouth, nose, eyes, ears, and skin.* So vital are these to our being in the world that the ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras once claimed, “Man is nothing but a bundle of sensations.” These sense connectors are the meeting places for us to experience the world, the comings and goings that flow through the organs and open our bodies to life itself. We plug in with them. The human body feels the world, engages the sights and sounds, tastes and smells of one’s setting, incorporating (literally, “bringing into the body”) the environment around. As the painter Paul Cézanne once claimed of his process, “The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness.”⁵ Similarly, Diane Ackerman’s wonderful work *A Natural History of the Senses* explores many of these connections:

There is no way in which to understand the world without first detecting it through the radar-net of our senses. . . . Our senses define the edge of consciousness, and because we are born explorers and questors after the unknown, we spend a lot of our lives pacing that windswept perimeter: We take drugs; we go to circuses; we tramp through jungles; we listen to loud music; we purchase exotic fragrances; we pay hugely for culinary novelties, and are even willing to risk our lives to sample a new

taste.⁶

To become more than a half being, more than a drifting island, we use our senses, the primary place of communion with the physical world, including the communion with other human bodies. And each of the senses has their appropriate objects of connection. Apart from some striking synesthetic experiences, basil's fragrance is not heard, a computer keyboard is not tasted, words on a page are not smelled. Proper connectors matter so that we can make sense of the objects in the world.

Because human experience and understanding is primarily a sensual bodily exercise, making a whole out of a half through the sense organs, religion itself is also deeply sensual. Ackerman doesn't name it as such here, but the explorations and questings she describes are the stuff from which religion is made. Religion is more about such quests and questions than any answers and arrivals. Too often religion is explained as a "set of beliefs," which primarily exist in the thought processes of the brain. The answers, having been found, are guarded behind the fortress of the forehead. The quest is over, we're all cleaned up, and life goes on. Religion, on this popular but ultimately misguided account, is about intellectual decisions regarding theism or atheism or polytheism, about correct thinking—orthodoxy (*ortho*, meaning "right" and *dox*, meaning "thinking") with regard to prophets and scriptures, about theological treatises and the content of preachers' sermons. Symbols, rituals, and bodies are believed to be merely secondary expressions of some primary intellectual order. But this is to put the proverbial cart before the horse.

There is no thinking without first sensing, no minds without their entanglement in bodies, no intellectual religion without felt religion as it is lived in streets and homes, temples and theaters. Long before intellectual, systematic thoughts arise in the cognitive workings of humans, long before abstract ideas emerge about deities who create and destroy, the senses actively receive and process information about the world and make meaning of it. Religion, being a prime human activity throughout history, is rooted in the body and in its sensual relations with the world. It always has been and always will be. We make sense out of the senses. This is the first true thing we can say about religion, because it is also the first true thing we can say about being human. We are sentient beings, and religion is sensuous.

The prolific Romanian-born historian of religions Mircea Eliade thought long and hard about what makes certain activities, gatherings, objects, people, and beliefs "religious" and not just some other part of mundane existence. Reading across multiple languages, modern and ancient, Eliade articulated some of the most important ideas for the scholarly study of religion, and his influence still continues to be felt a quarter century after his death. While many aspects of religious experience (myths, rituals, and symbols most prominently) are found in most cultures and times, Eliade is also clear about the role of the senses in making and shaping religion: "Broadly speaking, there can be no religious experience without the intervention of the senses. . . . Throughout religious history, sensory activity has been used as a means of participating in the sacred and attaining to the divine."⁷ Eliade goes on to examine anthropological and mythological accounts of shamans, magicians, and healers and how they undergo a profound reshaping of their sense perceptions in order to achieve

their appointed vocation. The shaman does not see, smell, or hear like ordinary people but “through the strangely sharpened sense of the shaman, the sacred manifests itself.”⁸ Which is not unlike the role often ascribed to the artist and poet in secular societies, who offer new ways of seeing, new ways of being. The parallels between artists and shamans, poets and priests will be one of the underlying aspects of the following chapters.

While shamans are his prime examples, Eliade notes that *all* religious people experience the sacred primarily in and through the senses. This should be obvious to anyone who reflects for long on religion and how it happens: incense fills the nostrils of a Krishna devotee in a temple in Vrindavan, India, letting him know he is in a sacred place; Muslim worshipers heed the muezzin’s amplified call to prayer from the minaret of a Moroccan mosque; a girl tastes bitter herbs at a Passover Seder in Brooklyn, reminding her of the harshness of her ancestors’ slavery in Egypt; a Greek Orthodox woman gazes reverently upon an icon of Jesus Christ and sees the gaze returned, knowing she is blessed; a Zen Buddhist acolyte strolls meditatively through gardens in Kyoto, experiencing form and emptiness. These sensual experiences are part and parcel of the *stuff* of religion. Myths, rituals, symbols, acts of devotion, prayer, and faith itself do not occur without sensual encounters.

To learn about religion we have to come to our senses. Literally. We have to begin to discover, as the anthropologist Paul Stoller did some years ago, that we cannot know the worlds of any other culture, let alone our own, unless we get inside the sensational operations of human bodies. Stoller began doing anthropological fieldwork with the Songhay people in Niger in the 1970s, initially returning from his visits troubled by the fact that the world he experienced there could not be communicated to his professional circles back home. Most important, the sense experiences he encountered operated in ways distinct from those he learned in the United States. After continued visits, he eventually realized that for the Songhay, thought, feeling, and action are inextricably linked, and that these bonds are made in and through the senses. His revelation finally led to a new way of understanding: “Now I let the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of Niger flow into me. This fundamental rule in epistemological humility taught me that taste, smell, and hearing are often more important for the Songhay than sight, the privileged sense of the West. In Songhay one can taste kinship, smell witches, and hear the ancestors.”⁹

Stoller’s interest in the sensuality of social life led him to reflect on his own process of conducting scholarly research, and especially the linguistic and cognitive biases on which our idea of “knowledge” relies. In short, knowledge is believed to be about rational thoughts, communicated in verbal language, at the expense of the body and its perceptions. Even so, the body makes itself known:

Stiffened from long sleep in the background of scholarly life, the scholar’s body yearns to exercise its muscles. Sleepy from long inactivity, it aches to restore sensibilities. Adrift in a sea of half-lives, it wants to breathe in the pungent odors of social life, to run its palms over the jagged surface of social reality, to hear the wondrous symphonies of social experience, to see the sensuous shapes and colors that fill windows of consciousness.¹⁰

The bodily senses—of the scholar, shaman, and layperson alike—awaken, begin to desire, to seek out the missing half.

My daughter once had an African dwarf frog, all of a full-grown inch. It's a perfect pet for a five-year-old since it doesn't require much cleanup. But she still wanted a dog, because, as she emphatically told me, dogs can be petted. When she first got the frog, she wanted to take a bath with it. That was her way of making an amphibious connection, and since she can't really get into its little cube of a home, she thought they could meet in a mutually agreeable aquatic atmosphere. There is at least one reason elephants and kangaroos are not pets, just as there is a reason dwarf frogs are not hugely popular; they can't be petted. Petting a dwarf frog would nearly kill it; elephants are relatively immune to the smallness of the human hand. My daughter inadvertently taught me that what is meant by a *pet* is directly tied to *petting*, which has to do with having a meaningful encounter with a creature beyond our body. We feel the need to touch, and we need the feel of touch. And while the pet who is petted benefits—the dog pumps his leg rhythmically, the cat purrs—the petter also gains. We crave interaction: sensing half bodies need objects to sense.

When I set out to write this book, I thought I was writing a book about the role of the senses in religious experiences. In a sense, that's what this is. But more honestly, the objects took over. My daughter and her frog showed me that while touch is important, the thing touched is equally so. Things got turned inside out. And that's because it's impossible to talk about the senses in abstraction, to smell without an odor, to hear without a sound, to touch without some thing to bump up against. The half body meets its missing parts. Experience is a two-way process, a mutual give and take.

The strangest part of all this is the assertion that, for example, a rock can have character, agency, power, and not just when it trips us on the sidewalk. Walt Whitman's poem "There Was a Child Went Forth" tells of the child who engages objects and these become a part of him as he grows: "And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became." Whitman tells of the objects we engage with in life, of lilacs and morning glories, "the noisy brood of the barn-yard" and "His own parents." For our interests in this book, drums and bread and incense have the ability to *correspond*, becoming correspondents, and we take them with us, as Whitman declared, "for the day, or a certain part of the day, or for many years, or stretching cycles of years." It takes two to tango, and meanings are created from the dance—the interactions, relationships, and exchanging of information. Which means that while it may seem I am doing the sensing and meaning making, the objects themselves are giving me input, speaking to me. Purring, perhaps.

Many people in many times and places have believed in the power of fetish objects, material things endowed with magical powers that must be treated with proper respect. The Songhay people Stoller lived with for many years, for instance, often use carved wood fetishes in their rituals because they hold power. The sculptures help in fertility, in connection to the ancestors, and with other life necessities. These objects are thought to cure and bless and kill; they have agency, the ability to act upon the world and change it in some significant way. Such things, and the people who hold them

dear, will be discussed in these pages. But modern, secular people also have their own meaningful objects, and they are affected by their power, even if they don't *believe* in the fetishistic nature of the object. I give two examples here that have resonated in my own deeply felt senses about the power of objects and the effect they have on our lives, ancient and contemporary.

Thirty years ago MIT physicist and philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller wrote a biography of the geneticist Barbara McClintock. McClintock was a modern scientist who devoted her life, almost monastically so, to the understanding of genetics by engaging with generation after generation of corn crops. Her unorthodox methodologies brought insights and sometimes scorn from fellow biologists. As Keller begins to conclude McClintock's life story, she asks, "What enabled McClintock to see further and deeper into the mysteries of genetics than her colleagues?" Keller tells us that McClintock's "answer is simple. Over and over again, she tells us one must have the time to look, the patience to 'hear what the material has to say to you,' the openness to 'let it come to you.' Above all one must have 'a feeling for the organism.'"¹¹ This last phrase became the title of Keller's book. McClintock was accused of being too mystical when she talked like this, but she knew this was the path to good science, and she did not think being a mystic was an altogether bad thing. Good science takes time. It takes receptivity. It takes insight. We must have open eyes and ears. Listen to the corn and it will tell many things.

Another example comes from the work of Sherry Turkle, the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For a long time now, Turkle's research has responded to questions about how new technologies are changing human identity, how we continue to evolve sometimes in contrast to and sometimes coextensive with the machines we make. She has edited a collection of autobiographical essays written by scientists, artists, designers, and scholars, each musing upon one object that has been significant to them in some way or another in their life: a suitcase, a camera, a car, a cello, a train. (Evelyn Fox Keller considers slime mold.) The result is a delightful insight into the material realities that lie beneath even the most abstract thinking. "For every object they have spun a world," says Turkle.¹²

Turkle introduces the book, entitled *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, by reflecting on her childhood memories, and in particular a certain closet in her grandparents' house. Inside the closet were keepsakes, photographs, notes, address books, and other things that allowed her a deeper insight into the lives of her ancestors. This is where, in retrospect, she began to feel her calling:

If being attentive to the details of people's lives might be considered a vocation, mine was born in the smell and feel of the memory closet and its objects. That is where I found the musty books, photographs, corsages, and gloves that made me feel connected. That is where I determined that I would solve mysteries and that I would use objects as my clues.¹³

Turkle's memory, and thus identity, and ultimately vocation are shaped by the closet stuff she sensually engaged decades ago. Such objects are *evocative*: they call us,

shape us, and identify us.

It is really just a coincidence that both examples here come from scholars currently working at MIT, but the fact that they are at one of the world's elite institutions of scientific learning shows us how narrow can be the gaps between premodern and postmodern worldviews, between the fetishists and the scientists. In human settings across time and space, objects have power. They remind, shape, overtake, startle, stir, and speak. Turkle suggests, "We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with," just as McClintock thought *with* corn, not simply *about* it. This is part of what it means to love things, and for objects to help complete us.

Objects, things, stuff, belongings, mementos, goods, and artifacts all have the ability to speak, to call out, to meet the human body in particular times and places and alter the course of our lives. One person's trash may be another's treasure; meanwhile, there are many instances in which objects have helped steer entire cultures and civilizations and, if you believe the subtitles of recent books, "changed the world." Philosophers and historians have begun to recast their eyes on overlooked objects, writing stories of such mundane things as salt, maps, cod, mathematical equations, tea, sugar, the Fender bass guitar, shoes, coal, potatoes, tulips, guns, germs, and steel and how these have altered the history of civilization.

In 2010 the British Broadcasting Corporation and the British Museum joined forces to produce a marvelous series of broadcasts entitled *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. Written and narrated by Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, each of the programs focuses on one object from the museum's collection. Rather than being a staid overview and description of these artifacts, MacGregor does something grander and tells of the ways these objects are imbedded within historical processes and came to actually set the stage for major world events to emerge and cultures to evolve. A two-million-year-old piece of stone found in Tanzania marks the emergence of modern, tool-using humans. A three-millennia-old Egyptian papyrus demonstrates the use of mathematics in ancient societies. A pair of five-hundred-year-old Japanese porcelain elephant sculptures is entangled with the emergence of our contemporary global economy. Human history is not just a story of big ideas and bloody battles that erupted across the earth for eons. It is also a history of the objects that humans have forged out of natural materials, how we have used them and how they have simultaneously used us.

The BBC programs, like this book, use the modest indefinite article *a*. Not *the* history of the world or *the* history of religion but *a* history. As if to say, "Here's a way to look at it. Not the only way, but one we've found to be of interest, and we hope you will too." A century ago, a perusal of a local library would reveal multiple titles beginning with "The History of . . .," though not many books make such an assertion anymore. We've grown skeptical of such approaches, and rightly so, since they claim something that is not possible: a single, conclusive, all-encompassing history. This book is decidedly not that.

At the same time there is an argument going on here about how to examine *any* history of religious traditions and practices. This is to say that religious history is incomplete if it ignores the sensing body and the seemingly trivial things it confronts.

Years ago I attended a Protestant seminary and took courses in church history, which meant we read the writings of intellectual theologians who wrote about abstract ideas that a tiny minority of literate people have understood. Nowhere did we learn about how the masses of people (“the church”) actually experienced life, practiced rituals, or sensed the world. Which is to miss much. My research since that time has convinced me that religion must be understood as deriving from rudimentary human experiences, from lived, embodied practices. This is not to disregard the intellectual writings—far from it—but to resituate them in actual space and time and to write many histories beginning with the indefinite article.

One rainy day a few years ago, I stood at the confluence of the Kamo and Takano Rivers in Kyoto, Japan, with a group of researchers who had come to learn about the history of Japanese gardens. Our guide was about to show us the nearby ancient Shinto shrine called Shimogamo, but felt it important for us to begin a bit farther downstream, at the meeting of the rivers, in order to understand the power of place that the shrine held. The rivers, flowing in from the mountains north of the city, have brought life to the urban valley of Kyoto for well over a thousand years, and the shrine’s location between the two water sources draws a kind of sacred hydroelectric energy from them.

I stood on the riverbanks in a rain jacket long past its utility, and some lines from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* came to mind: “I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river is a strong brown god.” Eliot—who grew up in the Mississippi River city of St. Louis—goes on to tell of how the river is at first seen as a frontier to those who confront it and need to get to the other side. Then, once bridges and barges are built, the river is forgotten by city dwellers, those “worshippers of the machine,” who go about their business crossing from one side to the next or pushing commerce upstream.¹⁴

As the rain came down that day and the water rose on both sides of us, it slowly struck me that these rivers had surely also brought death and destruction on more than one occasion. The unpropitiated river “keeps his seasons and rages,” as Eliot put it, offering a reminder “of what men choose to forget.”¹⁵ This was without a doubt also part of the power tapped into by the ancient diviners who saw the site as a point of contact for the *kami*, the nature-dwelling spirits of the Shinto tradition. Sacred sites hold energy in reserve, forces that can rise up and kill. Meanwhile, humans wage technological war against the raging gods of nature, making tools such as flood containment devices that aim to tame the threats of the wild. The need to control the natural world, to make order out of chaos, produces great inventions and proves the ingenuity of human survival mechanisms. At the same time, technological taming facilitates forgetting. When we forget how our existence depends on our technologies—whether a bridge over a river, a stone arrowhead for hunting, or an Internet connection over continents—we begin to lose connection, remaining in our half-lives.

This is also to say that religion, at a certain base level, operates in accord with basic, natural experiences of eating and breathing, seeing and speaking. The natural world—from flora and fauna to the sun, moon, and stars—has its cycles, its seasons, and its smells and colors. Religious life grew up in correspondence with these cycles, keeping humans in tune with nature’s rage and blessings. To make sense of it all, we

humans began to tell and listen to stories about the rivers and crops, night skies and blue seas; we acted out audiovisual performances to ensure fertility of family and fields; we burned substances and breathed their scented smoke; we cooked foods and savored their flavors; and we began to become more extravagant with the twists and turns of abstract meaning we assigned to the sensually evocative objects we encountered. Religious life, like other aspects of culture and society, engages basic, cosmic forces, producing sense-laden myths, rituals, and symbols that allow us to embrace the rhythms of the natural world, share with other humans, and commune with God. Culture is at heart the cultivation of nature, and religion has been a key human force of cultivation. Cults, culture, and cultivation are not merely etymological relations, as each of the following chapters will illustrate.

We modern people, so the story of history goes, don't need the cycles of the moon to tell us when to start fasting for Ramadan, since we have calendars; we don't need to know when sunset begins and the candles are to be lit for the Sabbath meal, because we have clocks; we don't even need buildings for Sunday morning church services, because we have live streaming on the Internet. We have thus lost touch with cosmic cycles, and in so doing have lost touch with the basic ebbs and flows of religion. But let's be clear here too: religious institutions are as much to blame for any of this.

The objects explored in these pages each navigate the distinctions between nature and culture and their impact on religious histories. Each object is initially embedded in the natural world, but becomes part of culture through a series of ritualistic, mythic, and symbolic interactions with human bodies. Rock exists throughout the earth's crust and mantle, but when pieces of it crumble, tumble, or erupt, they become human sized and we interact with them as *stones*. Fire burns matter with or without human involvement, yet when some burning smoke is produced and used for particular rituals, the scented substance is called *incense*. Animal skin, stretched taut across wood supports from felled trees, are the foundational material for *drums*. One of the primary marks scribbled by toddlers is that of two crossed lines, and the near-universal primacy of this figure makes the symbol of the *cross* appear natural, emerging across continents and cultures. Naturally occurring materials like wheat, water, eggs, and yeast are harvested, processed, and baked into *bread*. Cultivating nature is what makes nature meaningful, useful to us as humans, just as we humans evolve in relation with these objects—they act on us as much as we act on them. In and through these varied objects, we are able to explore the religious cultivation of nature, thus telling particular histories of religion.

The nature-culture nexus is also the birthplace of art. So, by simultaneously placing religion at this connecting point, I also aim to give a privileged place for the arts, as religion comes to its senses. This is then an aesthetic religion as much as a religious aesthetics. Poets like T. S. Eliot, Gary Snyder, and Walt Whitman and visual artists like Paul Cézanne, Agnes Martin, and Andy Goldsworthy have as much to teach us about a history of religion as the philosophers and theologians. Actually, more so.

One of the odd and ironic things about this book is that it takes words to point toward sensual objects and bodies. Just as physical bridges are built over rivers, verbal viaducts span the physical experiences of our lives. When we do so we invoke another

vital connection: that between words and things, the key connection of *metaphorical* language. The term *metaphor* stems from Greek linguistic roots that have to do with “carrying across.” À la Eliot, we might say metaphors carry us across a godly, raging river.

The contemporary philosopher Mark Johnson argues that metaphors are most often manifestations of basic bodily, sensual encounters with the physical world. He has discussed the idea of “primary metaphors” that grow from our bodily perceptions and interaction with our environment as we grow up and try to make sense of things. Our bodily experience and engagement with physical reality is so permanent, so all-pervasive that our language can only come back to these most elemental interactions. Thus, ideas are *grasped* or they go right *over our heads*; good friends are *close*, but sometimes even our partner feels *far away* and we *drift apart*; some days we wake up feeling *up* and other days we are *down*, even though our height hasn’t changed. The physical basis of our existence aids communication, letting others know how we feel through the use of metaphor. This allows connection between people and collectively enables us to reach for *higher*, more abstract ways of thinking.¹⁶ To come back to the aquatic metaphor: the river is made up of the primary physical experiences of our sensual body, and the bridge is the language we use to build upon these experiences and make them intelligible to others and to ourselves. Without the bridge, we are just swimming in the current. With only the bridge, we are forgetful, disconnected creatures.

Metaphors are not just flowery words or decorative flourishes for our speech and writing. Instead, James Geary’s 2011 book on metaphor suggests that “metaphorical thinking—our instinct not just for describing but for comprehending one thing in terms of another—shapes our view of the world, and is essential to how we communicate, learn, discover and invent.”¹⁷ Metaphor is our bridge of understanding, carrying our communications to a farther shore we could not otherwise reach. Metaphor is imaginative, allowing us to travel, feel, and comprehend the places, experiences, and knowledge to which we do not have immediate access. This is true not only technologically and theologically but also ethically. Novelist Cynthia Ozick explains how metaphors are “one of the chief agents of our moral nature, and that the more serious we are in life, the less we can do without it. . . . Those who have no pain can imagine those who suffer. The strong can imagine the weak. . . . We strangers can imagine the familiar hearts of strangers.”¹⁸ We rely on the known to understand what is unknown. One thing suggests another: the familiar, already experienced, carries us to the strange, as yet unexperienced other shore.

To think up and put up bridges across rivers, to engineer our protection from nature’s rages and diseases, abstract thinking is necessary. Our most lofty, abstract language about angels and afterlives, gods and demons, heavens and hells uses metaphorical crossings to carry us to the unknown. It is, for example, humanly impossible to comprehend a Creator God who can establish the entire universe; so devout monotheists have referred to this god metaphorically, calling him Father, King, Judge, Protector, Provider. The gendered *him* is also a metaphor. But even the down-to-earth dimensions of religious discourse are based on our physical-sensual environment: Evangelical Christians gather to discuss their “walk with God”; the most

basic prayer in Judaism begins with the sensual injunction, “Hear, O Israel . . .”; Quakers seek an “inner light”; the name Qur’an means “recitation” and invokes the first words the angel Jibrail spoke to Muhammad on Mount Hira: “*Iqra!*” meaning, “Recite!”; and Buddhist sutras and sayings constantly evoke the imagery of the mind as a clear mirror.

To experience metaphor in its full sense is to bask in the comfort of walking dryly across the bridge, while simultaneously appreciating the potentially hazardous crossing that is taking place. Part of the purpose of this book, therefore, is to remind us of these two aspects, to bring the spiritual to its senses. Too often we forget the forging it once took to make that crossing. Scholarly histories of religion, as well as many self-help spirituality books, are filled with such forgetful language, turning the realities of religious life into disembodied, detached verbal constructions. Meanwhile, the best of poetry and prose can simultaneously bring us to the dizzying heights of metaphor, just as they remind us of the engineered scaffolding that has brought us there. Without the comprehension of why the bridge is there in the first place, the power of it is lost. Thus also, to understand religions from places around the world and times through history, we have to approach them metaphorically, which is to say sensually *and* verbally.

Bringing the river and the bridge together, bringing the spiritual to its senses, means thinking about religion itself in a new light. We have to divest ourselves of the idea that we can get to know something about a tradition by reading their sacred texts or by following the decrees of religious leaders. Instead, I suggest we imagine religious histories as histories of *technology*. The term derives from the ancient Greek root *techne*, which refers to an “art, skill, or craft.” Technology deals with human connections to and uses of natural and human-made materials, as well as the artistic, religious, social, and pragmatic means of repurposing these materials for human use. Turning geological rocks into sacred stones for a temple, wheat berries into bread for Christian Communion, and smoldering cinders into incense for protection from malicious spirits are all technological activities. Here, the artist is just as crucial as the engineer, and a history of religion relies on know-how as much as knowledge. Libraries and the Internet may store information and records of previous knowledge, but the human body stores know-how. People who practice religion do not necessarily *know* about the history or doctrinal elements of that religion, but they *know how* to do that religion. Religious people are not *believers* so much as *technologists*.*

Ultimately, it is physical objects like stones, incense, drums, crosses, and bread, and our technological encounters with them, that give rise to our religious language and make sacred utterances meaningful. We see, hear, smell, taste, and touch well before we speak. Sensual experiences with these objects constitute the rushing river; language about them creates the bridge over which we cross. If these chapters do nothing more than make you put the book down and pick up that stone or feather or drawing or knickknack on your desk or by your bed or in your purse and think about the sensed significance of that object, then they will have achieved one part of their aim.

In the concluding chapter I will return to some of these broad takes on religion and technology and suggest that the sensually religious activities described herein are bound up with *soul*. *Soul, I will suggest, is a technology. But before we get to that, we*

have to wind through the histories of the objects themselves, to metaphorically imagine them as they are sensually approached and apprehended within specific times and places. Interactions with objects as well as words are and always will be sensual engagements, whether that technology is the burning sap of a myrrh tree or a computer network, whether we are face to face or interfaced. Religion in a high-tech, media-saturated, global-economic age is as reliant on objects as it is in smaller scale societies. Humans are fetishists through and through.

* *The primary contact points between the self and the world.* . . There are other ways of numbering the senses—there may be only one sense or as many as hundreds, depending on the perspective—but we will begin with the contemporary, commonplace conception that there are *five* senses. The five senses noted here are technically called the *exteroceptive* senses, relating the internal and external worlds, while there are also *interoceptive* senses that tell us about our internal state of being, such as our sense of pain, thirst, and hunger. There is also a sense of balance, a sense of decorum, a sense of humor, and that critical kinesthetic sense that lets us know where we are in relation to the rest of the world.

* *Religious people are not.* . . And thus many polls that seek to chart religious demographics are doomed to inadequacy since they merely ask about what people believe. What people *say* and what they *do* are often two different things.



STONES

I had to forget my idea of nature and learn again that stone is hard and in so doing found that it is also soft. . . . I am no longer content to simply make objects; instead of placing works upon a stone, I am drawn to the stone itself. I want to explore the space within and around the stone through a touch that is a brief moment in its life. A long resting stone is not an object in the landscape but a deeply ingrained witness to time and a focus of energy for its surroundings.

—Andy Goldsworthy, *Stone*¹

Stones are set, cut, clutched, chiseled, and hurled. They ride in our pockets for luck on journeys or climb into our boots, turning travels into travails. Five small ones and a sling can take down a giant, while one alone might kill two birds. They are fingered for protection, worn as rings and necklaces, studied for scientific discovery, used as a tool in capital punishment, and seen as sites of supernatural power. If all that sounds too grand, we might just put them in a box, call them our pet and sell them by the millions.*

Stones solicit attention, usually subtly, almost inaudibly. Among the vast number of stones, rocks, pebbles, and gravel on the planet earth and beyond, a handful are occasionally selected, unearthed, transported, and repurposed for sacred means, becoming talismans, amulets, altars, or memorials. Stones can be manifestations of a divine force, provoking people to pilgrimage over hundreds, even thousands, of miles to bask in their presence. Others are ritual objects, helping to keep ceremonies centered and flowing smoothly. Some offer curative powers when touched, healing various maladies. Still others survive as markers of special events from ages past, inviting people to engage memories in a present, physical form. They can mark space

in the form of boundary markers, delineating mundane distances as well as precincts of sacred sites, while specially set stones symbolize microcosmic events like fertility and macrocosmic occurrences like the rhythm of the stars and planets in the sky. Reaching back through time, they are mediums for ancestors long gone. In each case, stones are objects sensed, felt with fingertips, seen with the eyes, and felt deeply within. Stones show us the way.

This chapter tells the story of stones large and small, ancient and recent, white and black, striated and marbled, smooth and rough that have found their way into personal and communal sacred settings, engaging the sensual human body. Somehow, in spite of their assumed nature as hard, cold, heavy, deaf, dumb, blind, and unmoving, humans have taken a shine to stones. Stones confront us with object lessons in permanence and change, protection and vulnerability, the stability of home and the instability of the journey, and ultimately, the transitions between life and death. Such ambiguities allow insights into the power of religious traditions, institutions, beliefs, and practices.

Three stones. Three faiths. Situated at the zero point of the Abrahamic, monotheistic religions known as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are stones. Making up more than one-half of the world's population today, and stretching back for millennia, these three religious traditions have spread around the world through missionaries, militaries, and media. The Peoples of the Book have collectively produced libraries upon libraries of learned writings, given birth to modern science, waged wars, mourned and praised their long-gone mythological heroes, and performed simple and elaborate rituals filled with songs and objects, and they continue to challenge the sociopolitical structures of the modern and postmodern world. If we head to the heart of their globally sprawling bodies, to the nave of their sacred spaces, we find stones. A wise man builds his house upon rock, while a foolish man builds it on sand. After the storms come and go, the house on the rock stands firm.²

These three Western traditions clearly built their houses on rock, and that metaphor can be taken literally. Singular stones help orient the global spaces of the religious traditions, serving mythic and ritual functions as they mark the *axis mundi*, the “cosmic axis,” the absolute center of the world around which all else revolves. In turn, stones have become central as pilgrimage sites of the faiths, standing patiently as throngs of people come to gaze, touch, and be in the presence of this hard substance's witness, there at the nexus of existence.

At the geographical center of Judaism is the city of Jerusalem. Within that holy city today are the remains of the temple, first built by King Solomon about three thousand years ago, destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon around 586 BCE, later rebuilt, and destroyed again by the Roman Empire in 70 CE. The stone bricks of its western wall (the Wailing Wall) still remain, as does the foundation stone, thought by many to be the location for the ancient Holy of Holies, the most sacred space for Judaism and the site where people believe Abraham came close to sacrificing his son Isaac. Jutting up from the earth, the outcropping is nothing spectacular, but it stands its ground. Through a series of concentric circles of increasing sacredness— Israel, Jerusalem, Temple, Holy of Holies—the foundation stone holds forth as the central