
The Sacrality of Things: An Inquiry into Divine Materiality in the Christian Middle Ages

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Abstract

Students of comparative religion, cognitive scientists, art historians, and historians sometimes use paradigms from non-western religions to raise questions about the role of material objects in Christianity. Recently, such discussion has focused on images and controversies about them. This article argues that the most important material manifestation of the holy in the western European Middle Ages was the Eucharist and suggests both that understanding it is enhanced by the use of comparative material and that considering it as a case study of divine materiality leads to a more sophisticated formulation of comparative paradigms.

Keywords

devotion in India, devotional objects, Eucharist, Johannes Bremer, materiality, miracles

For much of the 20th century and increasingly in the past two decades, anthropologists, students of comparative religion, historians, and art historians have been interested in exploring materiality.¹ From such discussion, it seems clear that religions are characterized in a special way by materiality—that is, by the presence of specific things

1 Among many recent collections of essays on the topics of materiality and material culture, I find especially important Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone, 2004); Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2005); and David Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (London: Routledge, 2010). The caveats of Tim Ingold are apposite (see Tim Ingold, 'Materials Against Materiality,' *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 [2007]: 1–16). The much cited article by Bill Brown is, in my judgment, too general to be very helpful (see Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory,' *Critical Inquiry* 28 [2001]: 1–22).

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(not necessarily the same from one religion to another) that are charged with a significance we can call sacred or sacral. Such things are set apart from the ordinary; they provide access to and act for the divine. As anthropologist Webb Keane observes: 'Religions may not always demand beliefs, but they will always involve material forms.'² Indeed, it is usually through its materiality—temples, relics, altars, sacred books, sand patterns, inscriptions—that we first gain access to a religion different from our own.

In recent studies of sacred objects, two examples have been especially popular as providing a paradigm: the eye-opening ritual in Hinduism and the *mīs pī* ceremony of mouth-washing in the Ancient Near East. To take the Indian example first. Many Indian texts describe the coming to life of images of gods and goddesses as a series of rites or processes, from the initial selection of appropriate material for carving (wood from a male tree for a male god, for example) to its awakening by the chiseling and painting in of its eyes.³ The image is then bathed, dressed, and adorned with unguents, and the devotee both recognizes and is recognized, locking eyes with the god (*darshan*).⁴ Although the image is 'made' by those who carve and anoint it, the god is also, as a devotional poem to Vishnu puts it, in the image 'as butter lies hidden in fresh milk.'⁵ In ancient Mesopotamia, a new cult object similarly underwent a series of rituals, culminating in this case in the *mīs pī* (or mouth washing) ceremony, after which the artisans flung away their tools and chanted: 'I did not make it; I swear I did not make it.'⁶ Scholars have struggled with a variety of concepts, such as 'distributive agency' and 'representation,' to express what is happening in these ceremonies, but whichever refinement of terminology one prefers to use, it is clear that the power of an 'other' is emerging in the material object we call an image.⁷

To take as a paradigm for divine materiality these two examples of three-dimensional objects enlivened at the moment when eyes or mouth (two crucial portals of human

2 Webb Keane, 'The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion,' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): 110–27, at 124. See also Elisabeth Arweck and William Keenan, 'Introduction: Material Varieties of Religious Expression,' in *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance and Ritual*, ed. Arweck and Keenan (Oxford: Ashgate, 2006), 1–20.

3 On the eye-opening ceremony, see Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1997), 33–37; Stephen P. Huyler, 'The Experience: Approaching God,' in *The Life of Hinduism*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2006), 33–41; and Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 352.

4 Linda Hess, 'An Open-Air Ramayana: Ramlila, the Audience Experience,' in Hawley and Narayanan, *The Life of Hinduism*, 128–29, and Huyler, 'Experience,' 36.

5 Davis, *Lives*, 39.

6 Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft, eds., *Idol Anxiety* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2011), 'Introduction,' 1–2; and Beate Pongratz-Leisten, 'Divine Agency and Astralization of the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia,' in *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism*, ed. Beate Pongratz-Leisten (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 137–85, esp. 149–50.

7 On 'distributive agency,' see Beate Pongratz-Leisten, 'A New Agenda for the Study of the Rise of Monotheism,' in Pongratz-Leisten, *Reconsidering the Concept*, 21–22. On 'representation,' see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998).

communication) are provided raises a host of issues. How far is a devotional object anthropomorphic or iconic? If anthropomorphic, is it thus in some way 'like' the god it bodies forth? If it is not 'like' the divine, how is it recognized as especially related to the divine?⁸ Does it act for the god and if so, how? Is this agency manifested in events extraordinary to its materiality such as crying or bleeding—actions and events sometimes conceptualized as miracles or wonders?⁹ What authorizes it to act for the divine? Is a ritual process or consecration necessary for the emergence of the divine in the material, and if so, are a role for and control by a priestly class necessary to the process? I shall return below to such questions, but first I must provide some background concerning the recent study of Christian images.

The standard textbook account of the development of western Christian art over two millennia runs as follows.¹⁰ Early Christians inherited the Second Commandment: 'Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them nor serve them' (Exodus 20:4–5). But despite their detestation of statues of the pagan gods, Christians also inherited Roman iconographic traditions such as doves, lambs, fish, and shepherds that seemed appropriate to signify the peace of the afterlife, God's concern for humankind, and so forth. After a flare-up of attacks on images in the eastern church between the sixth and eighth centuries, images were accorded acceptance by the Christian Church because of two basic arguments: first, that Christ, because he is both God and human, can be depicted in his human form, and second (as theorized by John of Damascus and Thomas Aquinas, among others) that images point to the divine but do not instantiate it. They are not God but merely trigger a devotional turn toward or rise to God.

Much about this account is misleading or incorrect, not least because it takes the words of a few theorists to describe the practice of a wide range of European Christians, who often behaved as if statues, mosaics, and wall paintings were in fact divine. It certainly does not account for the distrust of images that erupted in northern Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries.¹¹ After all, the Second Commandment had been around a long time;

8 On the question of the anthropomorphism of religious images and concepts, see nn. 30 and 32 below.

9 See Richard H. Davis, ed., *Images, Miracles, and Authority in Asian Religious Traditions* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), especially Robert L. Brown, 'Expected Miracles: The Unsurprisingly Miraculous Nature of Buddhist Images and Relics' (*ibid.*, 23–36).

10 For one example of this, see Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft, *Idol Anxiety*, 'Introduction,' 8–9. In the eastern church, even after the iconoclastic controversy, images are understood to in some sense 'participate in' and not merely represent the divine. In my discussion here, I leave aside the eastern church.

11 On 16th-century iconoclasm, see Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts*, vol. 1: *Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988). For the point that hostility to images is always an acknowledgement of the power lodged within them, see Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman, 'Introduction,' in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford University, 2002), 1; and Horst Bredekamp, *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte: Bilderkämpfe von der Spätantike bis zur Hussitenrevolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 299–300.

why should it suddenly have been taken seriously? Nor does the traditional account adequately describe the intense presence—the ‘is’-ness—of the images that were attacked in the iconoclasm of the European reformations or reined in by the final decrees of the Council of Trent.¹² Indeed if we consider such an account in the context of a broader theorizing that takes rituals such as the *mīs pī* as the paradigm, Christian images would be anomalous—less mysterious, threatening, and powerful than other religious images. Yet what we know of the behavior of images in the Christian west and the behavior of many devotees toward them sounds more like the behavior of gods and adherents in present-day Bengal or ancient Mesopotamia than like the quiet meditating of a monk or nun who was, in theory at least, to mount upwards away from the carved statue or prayer card to an Other circumscribed by and attainable in no word or figure.¹³

Moreover, if images are only triggers of reactions but in themselves do not incorporate the divine, the question of the source of their power becomes more pressing. As David Freedberg observed in his justly admired *The Power of Images*, western images are not consecrated.¹⁴ Some are blessed and sprinkled with holy water, but full consecration is limited to altar vessels, the top of the altar table, the ground of cemeteries and space of churches, the oil, water, bread, and wine used in the sacraments, and the personnel (the clergy) who perform them.¹⁵ Where then does the sacrality of such objects as wall paintings and statues come from? Having asked the question this way, art historians have had to resort to explanations that attribute the power of images to something injected into them from outside. Frequent explanations include the claim that the earliest free-standing statues in the west (such as the figures of Virgin and child known as the Throne of Wisdom and early monumental crucifixes) contained relics inside, as if pieces of the saints conveyed to the statues their holiness.¹⁶ Another explanation, suggested by Hans

12 *Sacrosancti et Oecumenici Concilii Tridentini Paolo III, Julio III et Pio IV, pontificibus maximis, celebrati canones et decreta: pluribus annexis ad idem concilium spectantibus* (Mechelen: J. Hanicq, 1862), 270–74. The Council also legislated against new miracles and new relics unless investigated by a bishop.

13 On the late medieval turn to inward devotion and the suspicion of sight, which I do not have space to discuss here, see Jeffrey Hamburger, ‘Seeing and Believing: The Suspicion of Sight and the Authentication of Vision in Late Medieval Art,’ in *Imagination und Wirklichkeit: Zum Verhältnis von mentalen und realen Bildern in der Kunst der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Alessandro Nova and Klaus Krüger (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2000), 47–70, and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone, 2011), 269–71 and 298 n. 1. The later Middle Ages also saw an important emphasis on taking in, even eating (*manducatio*), through sight that has parallels to the Hindu concept of *darshan*.

14 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 89–91. Blessed images are ‘sacramentals,’ as are holy water, blessed wheat or flowers, religious medals, and so forth. See n. 22 below.

15 See articles ‘Bénédiction’ and ‘Consécérations,’ in *Dictionnaire de droit canonique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané), vol. 2 (1937), cols. 349–74 and vol. 4 (1949), cols. 248–67, by Auguste Molien and Pierre Bayard, respectively.

16 On the question of how far such early statues do contain relics, see Ilene H. Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1972).

Belting in his influential *Bild und Kult*, relates the authorization of images to stories that certain icons were *acheiropoietia* (not made by human hands) or in other ways miraculous in origin—that is, handed down by angels from heaven, or painted in miraculous circumstances by artists who actually saw Christ or his mother, or imprinted on cloth by Christ's own body or face.¹⁷

Explanations that stress social function or psychological need have also become popular, and such an interpretation need not imply that claims to miraculous images were fraudulent, although we can document that they sometimes were. Images, like visions and other miraculous manifestations, often speak to the disadvantaged or socially marginal (children, women, the sick and disabled, or even criminals).¹⁸ They can thus be analyzed as by-passing the clergy to bring Jesus or his mother Mary directly into contact with the religiously dispossessed. They can also be understood as useful to the powerful. Images were politically and economically important to communities competing for pilgrimage revenues, and they served as inspiration to armies mounting wars for Christ, such as the Reconquista, military missionizing in the northeast of Europe, and crusades to the Holy Land. As historians have pointed out recently, animated images were often older ones, in obscure or neglected sites, whose revival could empower or re-empower the individuals and communities that suddenly began to venerate them.¹⁹

None of this analysis is wrong. And it is pertinent to efforts to go beyond explanations that see images as simply triggers of devotion, inducements to something beyond or other than the images.²⁰ Nonetheless much of the recent study of western images seems to be adducing the wrong parallels. All this focus on image and idol as the place where materiality should be explored for the first 1500 years of western Christianity is the wrong focus. When we use paradigms such as the eye-opening ceremonies of Hinduism to ask questions about Christianity, as I am proposing to do, we see that the parallel to image is not necessarily image. It is wrong to take the elaborate *mās pī* ceremony as a parallel, in any simple sense, to the 16th-century frenzy to venerate the Schöne Madonna of Regensburg, for example, or other late medieval-early modern cults of the Christian

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- 17 Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994).
- 18 An excellent example of an account that stresses social control is Charles Zika, 'Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages: Controlling the Sacred in Fifteenth-Century Germany,' *Past and Present* 118 (1988): 25–64. Sociological or functionalist explanations, like those from cognitive science, are not on the same level of interpretation as those which refer to cultural intention, such as consecration or miraculous origin, and can, of course, co-exist with them.
- 19 Erik Thunø and Gerhard Wolf, eds., *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, *Analecta Romana Supplement* 35 (Rome: 'L'erma' di Bretschneider, 2004).
- 20 An especially effective contribution to the effort to turn our attention away from the visual and toward the tactile (or haptic) is Jacqueline Jung, 'The Tactile and the Visionary: Notes on the Place of Sculpture in the Medieval Religious Imagination,' in *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams, and Insights in Medieval Art and History*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Index of Christian Art, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, in Association with Penn State University, 2010), 202–40.

image.²¹ Nonetheless it *is* useful to try to understand the divine materiality of the European Middle Ages through some of the sophisticated questions scholars have raised about the *mīis pī*, as long as we recognize that image in one culture may not be the best analogy to image in another culture. The most intense devotion to and anxiety about representations of the holy did not, in the western Christian tradition, accrue around images at all but around relics (pieces of holy people that became central to cult) and around sacraments and sacramentals (materials, such as water, oil, rings, staves, and bread, that conveyed a power they did not ‘depict,’ in the sense of having similitude to, but rather ‘represented,’ in the sense of making present).²²

Even in periods when what we call art flourished more or less unquestioned, there was debate about how the holy was present in relics; and from circa 1050 to 1600 there was persistent conflict over the Eucharist. Controversy about whether, and how, bread and wine really become God led to more and more literalist and materialist explanations and to the miraculous behavior of the materials themselves. The iconoclasm of the 15th- and 16th-century European north, which was not practiced by all Protestant groups, was accompanied by far more widespread rejection of medieval practices vis-à-vis relics and the Eucharist. Indeed even in Catholic areas, much of earlier practice about holy matter was discarded or re-defined. ‘Idols’ were not only, perhaps not even primarily, statues and stained glass. For example, when a group of Protestant Visitors came to the nunnery of Zehdenick in the north of Germany to insist that the nuns surrender the ‘idol’ they worshipped, they referred not to an image at all but to a glass container that supposedly contained a miraculous host.²³ The anxiety in what we refer to as early modern ‘iconoclasm’ was not so much over the first phrase of Exodus 20:4: ‘Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing ...’ as over the second: ‘nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth.’²⁴ In other words, the anxiety was over materiality itself: how can the divine be reflected in the cosmos, in matter in all its manifestations? And specific aspects of matter—its changeable-ness and friability—were crucial in the medieval discussion.²⁵ What did it mean for the ‘other’ to be present in bread, in stone, in bones and dust?

All this came to a head most acutely in debates about and devotion to the Eucharist. It is the Eucharist that is, in the western Middle Ages, the most appropriate parallel to images in other parts of the world. It is the Eucharist that is claimed in theology to become God, that is experienced by the faithful as a place of special access to God by seeing as well as ingesting, and that, particularly in the centuries of the later Middle Ages

21 Freedberg, *Power*, 100–4.

22 On relics, see n. 45 below. On sacramentals, the classic work is Adolph Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1909).

23 Caroline Walker Bynum, *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2007), 58.

24 Jan Assmann makes a slightly different point from mine here, arguing that it matters whether one sees the force of the injunction as ‘Thou shalt not make ...’ or ‘Thou shalt not adore ... nor serve ...’ (see Jan Assmann, ‘What’s Wrong with Images?’ in Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft, *Idol Anxiety*, 19–31).

25 The fundamental point of my recent book, *Christian Materiality*, is to underline the importance in the western tradition of anxiety about matter as the locus of change.

but still in some places today, allegedly manifests itself as the body of God by miracles of transformation such as bleeding. Thus it is apropos the Eucharist that the questions I outlined above as raised by the ceremony of *mīs pī*—questions about agency, similitude, consecration, and so forth—are most tellingly raised.

That the Eucharist is understood and apprehended as divine materiality will seem obvious to modern Roman Catholics. But if we consider some of the questions raised by comparative study, we see how bizarre this concept is. In a religion whose theology stresses more than do many other religions incarnation (that is, the coming of God into a human being), it is odd that the focal point of revelation and agency is food stuff, understood to be invisibly—but only invisibly—flesh and blood.

In the mid-15th century, the Franciscan theologian Johannes Bremer underlined the issue. Writing in the midst of a controversy about divine materiality—a controversy in which Franciscans played a key role in defending the presence of various kinds of material traces of Christ's body—Bremer discussed three types of holy objects found in his region of northern Germany. He called all three 'relics.' I cite the discussion both to demonstrate the range of devotional objects Bremer saw as divine presences and to show how sophisticated, philosophically as well as theologically, discussions of the Christian material divine could become. Bremer writes:

There are, in the church militant, great and precious relics [*reliquiae*]: the clothing of Christ, the cross, and other of his arms [*arma*—the instruments of the passion]. And there are, so the pious believe, major and more noble relics, that is, the flesh and blood of Christ reserved under their proper species [that is, the foreskin and blood relics of Christ]. And there are the greatest and most noble relics, in which it is necessary to believe for salvation—that is, the flesh and blood of Christ under the sacrament of the Eucharist [*sub Eucharistiae sacramento*]. The first are great, because they are Christ's *arma* and the instruments of our redemption, although separated. The second are greater, because they are something of the humanity of Christ and were joined to the divinity.²⁶ The third are greatest and most precious because they are united in the *supposito divino* by the act of divinity [that is, they are Christ's humanity assumed by the divine Logos].²⁷

Six aspects of Bremer's claims are telling.²⁸ First, none of the objects is what we would call an image. It is true that the *arma Christi* (the instruments of Christ's passion:

26 Bremer says 'are of the humanity' and 'were joined.' He would seem to be arguing here the traditional Franciscan position that the blood of Christ's body had been assumed by the Logos in the womb, but that shed blood was not united with the Logos during the *triduum* (the three days between Good Friday and Easter Sunday); hence, a bit of it could remain behind.

27 Ludger Meier, 'Der Erfurter Franziskanertheologe Johannes Bremer und der Streit um das Wilsnacker Wunderblut,' in *Aus der Geisteswelt des Mittelalters (Festschrift Grabmann)*, ed. Albert Lang et al., Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters: Texte und Untersuchungen, Supplementband 3 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1935), 1262 (from Braunschweig MS 48, fol. 209d).

28 Bremer shows ambivalence about the second sort of relic both in the phrase 'so the pious believe' (which may suggest that it would be possible not to so believe) and in the phrase 'something of the humanity of Christ' (which, from a theologian so given to precision, seems to be deliberately imprecise). On this point, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 165–67, which discusses Bremer from a different perspective.

nails, whips, thorns, and so forth) were a popular iconographic motif, often found on altarpieces and church walls, in books of hours and other devotional texts. As such, they did serve as aids to prayer and meditation. But in Bremer's discussion, such images are not relevant to the defense of divine presence in matter. The *arma Christi* that he refers to are actual relics of the crucifixion: objects that had been in contact with Christ's body. To Bremer, it is not images but rather other sorts of objects that most closely reflect God.

Second, the word that Bremer uses is 'relics' (*reliquiae*)—what remains of something. The devotional objects that Bremer finds central to worship are what modern theorists (following Peirce) would call indexes, not icons—objects that do not so much refer to as actually exist in contact with the holy.²⁹

Third, the highest instantiation of the divine to Bremer is one that is not visibly animate. The host and chalice—that is, the bread and wine—he points to are not miraculous transformations. Bremer came from an order whose members tended to take a theological position in support of such transformations, and he was involved in university debates about and defenses of both blood relics and miraculously bleeding hosts. But here his emphasis is on invisible presence in material stuff.

Fourth, the highest instantiation of the divine is not anthropomorphic or even representational in the sense of iconic. Bread does not look like flesh. Wine (if red) may bear some similarity to blood, but it does not image or represent blood in any one-to-one sense. Similitude does not matter to Bremer. What matters is presence.

Fifth, the highest 'relic' is not genetically or genealogically linked to past holy bodies or holy objects. Unlike the first sort of relic Bremer mentions (the *arma Christi*: contact relics of Christ) and the second sort of relics (bodily relics of Christ: his foreskin or blood), the Eucharist is not physically derived from Christ's human body or contact with it. The first two sorts of holy objects that Bremer mentions are to him lower, less close to the divine, although they are more closely linked to body and more representational as well. In a sense we might say that, to Bremer, the stuff that is least close to the incarnate god (neither a part of him nor an object that has touched him) is the place where the divine arrives and is found.

Sixth, the bread and wine Bremer speaks of as the highest of relics are not signs or symbols in the sense of something more or less arbitrarily chosen to refer to something else. Neither index nor icon, they are also not sign. They *are* the divine. That which is least 'like' or connected to the incarnate holy is thus its most immediate presence. Indeed, to this theologian (as to many of his contemporaries), the non-visibility may be key. The divine is present 'under the sacrament [*sub... sacramento*]' of the bread and wine. Despite the proliferating Eucharistic miracles in Bremer's own region of Germany, he prefers presence hidden, not manifest, in material stuff.

29 I am using 'icon,' 'index,' 'symbol' as in Peircian sign theory, where the term 'index' refers to something that gives evidence of one-time contact with that which it represents and thus retains some ability to act for it. On this, see Cynthia Hahn, 'Objects of Devotion and Desire: Relics, Reliquaries, Relation, and Response,' in the catalogue for *Objects of Devotion and Desire: Medieval Relic to Contemporary Art*, curated by Cynthia Hahn, New York, Hunter College, 27 January–30 April 2011, 13.

If we bear in mind both Bremer's discussion of the Eucharist and the questions about religious materiality that comparative study of rituals such as the Hindu eye-opening ceremony raises, our understanding of late medieval Eucharistic practice and belief immediately becomes deeper and the theoretical template we use to analyze materiality becomes more complex. In the remainder of this article, I want to suggest four ways in which late medieval Eucharistic theology and devotion raise large questions about the nature of the intersection of the material and the divine.

My first point is simply to underline the dissimilitude between the incarnate God and the material stuff in which that God is understood to be most completely present or instantiated. This dissimilitude requires more attention than we usually give it. So much recent discussion of late medieval piety has been devoted to the new and insistent stress on Christ's physical and emotional humanity that we sometimes neglect to notice that the same period saw an equally insistent emphasis on the literal presence of the incarnate God in the basic foodstuff of the Mediterranean diet—bread and wine—and a radical increase of miracles in which this holy food animated itself by bleeding, levitating, or glowing and was preserved, still visibly as foodstuff (although altered foodstuff), to provide a locus of pilgrimage. Yet bread and wine, even miraculously altered to a red-spotted wafer or a vessel of viscous liquid, are not in any simple sense 'like' the figure of Christ seen on crucifixes, pietàs, or wall paintings of the *arma Christi*.

Much recent theoretical work on divine materiality raises the question of the anthropomorphism or iconicity of religious objects and argues that those that are closest to the human form are most apt to be the locus of the holy and to come alive for the faithful either in ritual or by miraculous self-assertion. This has led to a good deal of use, in the study of religion, of research from the new area of cognitive science. Scholars relate such ceremonies as the Hindu eye-opening ritual and the concomitant importance in Indian piety of *darshan* (the intense gaze between devotee and god) to the fact that babies tend to smile at ovals with only the eyes and mouth drawn in.³⁰ Research on robots has established what is known as the 'uncanny valley effect'—that is, the fact that people can be demonstrated to respond differently to humanoid or humanlike figures, on the one hand, and machines or clearly inanimate objects, on the other.³¹ Some cognitive scientists have

30 Robert L. Fantz, 'Pattern Vision in Newborn Infants,' *Science*, new series, 140 (1963): 296–97; and Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993), 103–12. Guthrie, who sees anthropomorphism as the origin of religion, tends to argue in a circle. Defining religion as that which relates to gods or spirits, he excludes by definition experiences and phenomena that are not anthropomorphic. This is a problem especially for Buddhism. Justin L. Barrett and Rebekah A. Richert suggest that children can conceive of God in anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic ways (Justin L. Barrett and Rebekah A. Richert, 'Anthropomorphism or Preparedness? Exploring Children's God Concepts,' *Review of Religious Research* 44 [2003]: 300–12).

31 Jerome Groopman, 'Medical Dispatch: Robots That Care,' *The New Yorker*, November 2, 2009, 66–77.

even argued that anthropomorphism is a necessary stage in the evolution of religion.³² Art historians and literary scholars have used this sort of research to assume a Pygmalion effect in religious art—that is, a tendency to privilege the human figure, or what approaches to the human figure, as a locus of the divine. There are problems with this approach. I leave aside the well-known fact that neither in India nor in the Ancient Near East is the anthropomorphic always the place where the divine arrives. We have only to think of the Shiva linga—the stone cylinder at the heart of Shaivite Hinduism.³³ I merely point out here that the centrality of the Eucharist in Christianity provides a powerful counter-case to such simple conclusions.

It is worth noting here that even when we study Christian images (statues and wall paintings) that are claimed to come alive in the later Middle Ages, there is no correlation between three-dimensionality and tendency to animate, or between realism of depiction and animation. Nor is there a correlation between naturalism and success at stimulating devotion. The Madonna of the Prison in Prato, for example, that allegedly walked and wept in 1484, is a flat, rather ordinary wall painting like many others of its date and in no way more lively, beautiful, or womanly.³⁴ But the non-anthropomorphism, so to speak, of Eucharistic bread and wine—its non-similitude to the human figure of Christ—is even more telling.

To emphasize the non-anthropomorphism of consecrated bread and wine is not to argue that there are no anthropomorphic elements in devotion to the Eucharistic species. Not only did the faithful increasingly claim that the elements did on occasion manifest their reality as human flesh by miracle, liturgists spent much time elaborating the symbolism of the material stuff in ways that underlined its human physicality. The grains of wheat gathered in the wafer were regularly interpreted as the gathering of Christians into the church, and the grapes gathered (and crushed) to make wine were sometimes also so interpreted. The spilling out of blood in birthing, or wounding, or feeding (since breast-milk was understood as processed blood) was related to the redness of wine/blood in the chalice. Theologians in (to our tastes offensive) supersessionist arguments held that Christians were superior to Jews because they ate real human flesh, whereas Jews sacrificed only animals, but Christians were also superior because their sacrifice was invisible (hence bloodless), whereas Jewish sacrifice was literal and bloody.³⁵ All this symbolic

32 Stewart Guthrie, 'A Cognitive Theory of Religion,' *Current Anthropology* 21(1980): 181–94; Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*; Justin L. Barrett and Frank C. Keil, 'Conceptualizing a Nonnatural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts,' *Cognitive Psychology* 31 (1996): 219–47. On such explanations, see the perceptive critique by James Laidlaw, 'A Well-Disposed Social Anthropologist's Problems with the "Cognitive Science of Religion,"' in *Religion, Anthropology, and Cognitive Science*, ed. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic, 2007), 211–46.

33 In fact, non-anthropomorphic objects are important loci of the divine in Hinduism and, significantly enough, these sacral 'found' or 'self-manifesting' objects do not have to be consecrated. See Davis, *Lives*, 19–21 and 137–40, and Hess, 'Open-Air Ramayana,' 131.

34 Robert Maniura, 'The Images and Miracles of Santa Maria della Carceri,' in Thunø and Wolf, *The Miraculous Image*, 81–96.

35 Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 234–47, esp. 243.

interpretation draws on an understanding of the Eucharistic elements as human flesh and blood, however hidden as such.

Moreover, the well-known fact that the later Middle Ages saw increasing claims to visions in which the host, and sometimes the wine of the chalice, appeared as a human figure—the infant or the adult Christ—might be seen as a sort of ‘return of the [anthropomorphic] repressed.’ Nonetheless, there was ambivalence from both clerical authorities and the faithful about such experiences partly because of the suggestion of cannibalism. Women who saw visions of the infant Christ in the host usually cradled him in their arms as a substitute for receiving communion. When Colette of Corbie saw the Christchild carved like a piece of meat, she brooded over the vision in horror and interpreted it as Christ’s reparation for our sins, beating her own body in response.³⁶ Indeed, Eucharistic visions were sometimes seen as evidence of God’s wrath, and priests who themselves experienced them or met with such claims from the faithful were often enjoined to pray that the elements return to the form of bread and wine. For example, the reforming Premonstatensian Eberhard Waltmann argued in the mid-15th century that the appearance of a bloody finger in the chalice in the tale of the Gregorymass was as horrible [*horribilis*] as the blood-plague in ancient Egypt and an indication that all transformation miracles should be questioned.³⁷ When miraculous matter endured as blood-like or flesh-like or even as reflecting a human face or body (as, for example, in the corporal at Walldürn), it induced at least as much anxiety over how to revere or preserve it as pride in its possession. All this suggests that, even when overlaid with visions of the human Christ or eruptions of flesh and blood, the Christian Eucharist was not in any simple sense anthropomorphic. Thus, the Eucharist, if brought into the center of cross-cultural discussions of divine materiality, becomes a major case study in the questioning of recent generalizations about the importance of anthropomorphism in the genesis of sacral objects.

Second, as I suggested earlier in my discussion of images, the Eucharist should raise for us questions about the role of consecration in the coming of the holy into material stuff. According to Christian theologians, of course, consecration was necessary to the transformation of food stuff into the body of Christ. Moreover, there was complex preparation for this moment of entry not only through the ritual of the mass (including its appeals to all the senses through chant, light, incense, and so forth) but also through previous extra-liturgical preparation of the materials as the bread was baked and the wine pressed.³⁸ In all this, the centrality and control of the clergy are clear. Indeed, as the theological emphasis on the

36 For Low Country examples of such visions, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1987), 115–29. On Colette, see Peter of Vaux, ‘Life of Colette of Corbie,’ in Joannes Bollandus and Godefridus Henschenius, *Acta Sanctorum ... edition novissima*, ed. Joannes Carnandet et al. (Paris: Palmé, 1863ff.), March, vol. 1, chap. 10, par. 84, 558, and chap. 11, 560–62.

37 On Waltmann, see Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 39.

38 Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)*, trans. Francis A. Brunner and Charles K. Riepe, revised and abridged edition in one volume (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1951), 330–35.

Eucharist as sacrifice became more literal in the later Middle Ages, the priest came to be understood as in some sense Christ himself; hence the divine was present in sacrificer as well as sacrifice. So highly charged, so literally divine, were the elements on the altar that only the divine itself could bring about their transformation or handle and distribute them.³⁹ At least in theory. Nonetheless, there was anxiety over exactly the role of the priest and the nature of the instantiation of the divine in food. From the 11th century on, controversy raged in western Europe over how exactly to interpret the Eucharist. Transubstantiation, defined at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, was interpreted quite variously in the course of the later Middle Ages, and radically different theories of the Eucharist were a driving force in the fragmentation of western Christendom in the 16th century. Many scholars have seen the proliferation of Eucharistic miracles from the 12th century on as a response to increasing doubts about the increasingly literalist understanding of real presence.⁴⁰ I shall return to this below. What I want to underline here is the fact that, even in the later Middle Ages, there was no simple relationship between consecration and the arrival of the divine. In many of the Eucharistic visions we know of through *exempla* collections and the important new genre we call nuns' books, Christ by-passes the clergy to bring himself to the person (more often than not a woman) who desires his presence after being denied the Eucharist.⁴¹ In a number of the transformation miracles reported between the 14th and 16th centuries, there was heated controversy over whether the miraculous object (usually a bleeding host) had been consecrated or not.

The question of consecration was, for example, an element in the Wilsnack controversy—the century-long conflict over one of the most popular and contested pilgrimage sites of the later Middle Ages. From the beginning, there was confusion over whether or not the three wafers found intact and red-spotted after the church burned to the ground in 1383 had been consecrated. To the theologians, there was clearly a problem if Christ had manifested himself in non-consecrated bread. But a pilgrimage had already developed. Thus the nearby bishop was sent to re-consecrate the hosts, just in case. According to early chronicle accounts, however, the hosts bled to demonstrate their power before the bishop arrived—a fact that could be interpreted either as proof that they had indeed been consecrated or as an assertion that they did not need to be. As this story makes clear, even in a religion where consecration ritual and the attendant clerical control are central in theory, the arrival of the divine can be understood as slipping out of such control.⁴²

39 Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 240.

40 Peter Browe, *Die eucharistischen Wunder des Mittelalters*, Breslauer Studien zur historischen Theologie N.F. 4 (Breslau: Müller & Seiffert, 1938); Peter Browe, 'Die eucharistischen Verwandlungswunder des Mittelalters,' *Römische Quartalschrift* 37 (1929): 137–69; Peter Browe, 'Die Hostienschändungen der Juden im Mittelalter,' *Römische Quartalschrift* 34 (1926): 67–97; and Gavin Langmuir, 'The Tortures of the Body of Christ,' in *Christendom and Its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution, and Rebellion, 1000–1500*, ed. Scott Waugh and Peter Diehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 287–309.

41 Many examples are given in Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 113–86 and 219–44.

42 Claudia Lichte, *Die Inszenierung einer Wallfahrt: Der Lettner im Havelberger Dom und das Wilsnacker Wunderblut* (Worms: Werner, 1990); Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*, 25–45; and Felix Escher and Hartmut Kühne, eds., *Die Wilsnackerfahrt: Ein Wallfahrts- und Kommunikationszentrum Nord- und Mitteleuropas im Spätmittelalter*, Europäische Wallfahrtsstudien (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006).

My third point is that the coming of the divine into matter in the Christian Eucharist contributes to a general, comparative-religion question about the respective roles of theology and practice in the encounter of God with matter. This is especially true for the later Middle Ages. As I said above, the proliferation of Eucharistic miracles in western Europe, and even their increasing prominence as inducement to and justification of the persecution of Jews, have usually been interpreted as a response to the definition of transubstantiation at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. According to this argument, the literalism of the definition—that is, that substance changes but accidents remain the same—led both to increasing expectation of the revelation of God in the elements and to increasing Christian doubt about the literalism of the doctrine, even to guilt about experiencing such doubt.⁴³ In such interpretation (as in the interpretation of Christian images as mere signs or triggers of devotion), theology is seen as driving practice.

It is true that one of the common scenarios for Eucharistic miracles is skepticism about the presence of Christ in wafer or chalice, followed by transformation of the stuff into blood or less frequently flesh. There are many other scenarios that do not relate to revelation as proof of doctrine, but that is not my point here. My point is that, according to many of the most sophisticated theologians of the period, there should not be such miracles at all. Transubstantiation meant by definition that the substance of the Eucharistic elements (what they are in their nature—that is, bread-ness and wine-ness) changes, but the accidents (the visible characteristics of that sort of stuff) remain the same. According to theological analysis, there could not be change of appearance. Eucharistic transformation could not simply be a revelation of the substance that was, in Bremer's words, 'under' the bread and wine. It was its *invisibility* that guaranteed divine presence. Christ came as substance, not accidents. Hence, complex theorizing was necessary to explain miracles of the change of accidents; such change had to be attributed to a second divine act, either a miracle added to the consecrated material to put a sign of what was 'under' on top, so to speak, or a miracle worked in the minds of those who perceived the transformation to make them see the blood.⁴⁴

The tendency in much cross-cultural analysis of divine materiality has been to search for the theological underpinnings of rituals in which the divine is in some way instantiated. Cultures that have left no written theology have been assumed to be more opaque to analysis. Historians have felt that they need texts in order to understand objects. The gap between late medieval theological analysis of transformation miracles and the fact of such miracles complicates such assumptions. Whether or not exposure to the doctrine of transubstantiation led some people to assume or to doubt that God would appear in the matter of the Eucharist (and much of our evidence even for popular understanding of such miracles comes from writing for a highly specialized audience of clergy or cloistered religious), doctrine and theological explication of it are clearly not the explanation for the events or the piety surrounding them. First, we should note that there is a chronological problem. Accounts of Eucharistic miracles appear before the definition of 1215

43 See n. 40 above.

44 Peter Browe, 'Die scholastische Theorie der eucharistischen Verwandlungswunder,' *Theologische Quartalschrift* 110 (1929): 305–32, at 311 n. 2.

(which is far less precise and Aristotelian than it is often represented as being). Indeed, it may well be that proliferating claims to miracles of Eucharistic transformation were an inducement to theological pronouncement rather than the other way around. Second, for reasons I have just explained, formal theology should have reined in such miracles even if they were owing to expectations raised by doctrine or to doubts about it. Theology cannot have been the driver of practice or the instigator of miracles. Thus the particular form that divine materiality took in the 12th to 16th centuries in western Christendom should lead us to question the assumption that we understand or explain religious practice when we find theological texts that pronounce upon it. This leaves far more open than before the pressing question of why particular holy objects come at certain periods and places to manifest, or spill out in visible ways, the divinity they possess or convey.

With this observation I come to the final argument that I wish to make about the relation of the Christian Eucharist to comparative study. I am never satisfied with mono-causal explanations. Therefore, I am unwilling to say that the political and economic utility of powerful things, theological teaching about the holy, or mind/brain research on human responses to various kinds of form or material explain the special significance of certain objects understood to be the instantiation of the divine in matter. I think specific rituals and specific objects can be understood only in specific settings. That bread and wine became the central manifestation of the divine in late medieval Europe is the consequence of many factors—not least the origins of Christianity in the Mediterranean basin where bread and wine were the basic diet, the model of the Jewish Passover, the theology of sacrifice in Exodus and Leviticus, and the clericalization of the late medieval church. What I want to pursue here is not so much a full explanation of the prominence of a particular kind of holy matter and the concomitant increase in transformation miracles as the observation that divine materiality must be understood as part of a culture's general sense of materiality, nature, and the cosmos. We cannot understand religious attitudes to matter—that is, special material revelations of the divine—unless we look at attitudes toward matter more generally.

To say this is not to argue that all objects should be understood as equally significant nor is it to reduce religion to culture. But it is to remind us that holy matter is always a window not just into the divine but also into the material universe. Interpretations of late medieval Christianity have often forgotten this. Christianity has been criticized for privileging the body and the human in the humanity of Christ and thus putting 'man' at the center of the universe. But late medieval religiosity made the material—relics and a wide range of devotional objects as well as the Eucharist—a special avenue to communication with God.⁴⁵ The power of this piety is attested by the strength of the reaction against it:

45 Relics—and the nature of their materiality—should be brought much more fully into the discussion but I do not have space to do that here. For recent work on relics, see *Past and Present* 206 (2010), Supplement 5: *Relics and Remains*, ed. Alexandra Walsham; *Objects of Devotion and Desire*, curated by Cynthia Hahn, 2011, catalogue; *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson, catalogue (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2011); and the somewhat unsatisfactory, Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2011).

both the new turn to interior devotion that rejected external aids and the vigorous objection to relics, images, and the Eucharist as divine presence that was voiced by dissidents from the 12th to the 16th centuries (Albigensians, Lollards, and Hussites, for example) and by reformers (including some Catholic reformers, such as Erasmus) of the 16th century. Moreover, the special efficacy of the material was part of a late medieval sense of the universe as labile and revelatory—a sense manifested in werewolf stories, a new enthusiasm for alchemy and astrology, and the return of neo-Platonic conceptions of all physical reality as en-souled. Probably at no time in western history has the sense of the material as alive and in constant metamorphosis been as strong as in the folk-story and folk-practice, the learned scientific literature, the magical and mineralogical theory, and the courtly poetry of the late Middle Ages.⁴⁶

In this sense of matter as alive, we find something specific to the culture of western Europe at a particular moment. Yet it is also relevant to wider comparative study. I propose two stories for comparison.

In the late 13th century, the nun Mechtild of Hackeborn saw a vision in which the vestments of a priest who was celebrating mass were covered with every blade and twig, every hair and scale, of the flora and fauna of the universe. She expressed surprise. But when she looked she realized that ‘the smallest details of the creation are reflected in the holy Trinity by means of the humanity of Christ, because it is from the same earth that produced them that Christ drew his humanity.’ In other words, the celebrant is, in a ritual context, clothed with the stuff of the universe, and this is glossed by Mechtild’s sister nun who records the vision as the enclosure of all the flora and fauna of the world in the Christ who is present on the altar.⁴⁷

There is an Indian text that is both parallel and not. In the *Bhāgavatapurāna*, an extant version of which is dated to south India in the ninth or tenth century, Krishna (an avatar of Vishnu) is a child living among goatherds when some of his friends tell his mother Yaśodā that he has been eating dirt. Krishna denies this. ‘If their words are true,’ he says, ‘look in my mouth for yourself.’ When his mother looks in, she sees the entire cosmos: the earth with all its mountains and seas, the sun, moon, and stars, the five material elements, the sense organs and the objects of sensation. Yaśodā is so frightened that Krishna must spread over her his ‘illusion’ (*māyā*) so she once again sees only the everyday.⁴⁸

The two stories are not the same and cannot be analyzed in the same way. They have different subtexts about the nature of revelation and the nature of reality. But each makes it clear that revelation through and within matter is related to a larger sense not only of the divine but also of the significance of the material in the religion in question. Both tales situate a piety in which things are holy in the context of a divine that chooses to manifest itself as containing the entire material universe (whether as redeemed through

46 On this, see Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, chap. 4.

47 Mechtild of Hackeborn, *Sanctae Mechtildis virginis ordinis sancti Benedicti Liber specialis gratiae*, bk. 4, chap. 3, in *Revelationes Gertrudianae ac Mechtildianae*, ed. the monks of Solesmes, vol. 2 (Paris: Oudin, 1877), 260.

48 Davis, *Lives*, 41.

humanity or as reality beyond the illusion of the everyday). Revelation in these stories is not only *in* the material, it is *of* the material. We cannot understand the place of divine materiality in such cultures without a larger sense of their attitudes toward materiality itself.

To summarize. I have tried to destabilize common scholarly assumptions and arguments about the Christian Eucharist by juxtaposing it to some recent questions that scholars have asked about divine materiality in other cultures. In doing so, I have wanted to illuminate both the Eucharist and the broader scholarly conversation about holy things. I have tried to redirect our attention to the fact that the Eucharist is the revelation of God in food. That such a revelation is the central example of divine materiality in late medieval Europe is not, I have argued, owing to what scholars have often assumed to be the explanations not only for Christian devotional objects but also for devotional objects in other cultures: anthropomorphism or some other form of similitude to the divine; consecration by a priestly elite; theological doctrine prescribing a certain sort of revelation. All of these factors are part of the context but they do not explain the particular form of the material divine. Nor indeed does the doctrine of creation or the pervasive sense in late medieval Europe (extending far beyond the religious context) that the material world is in itself labile and revelatory. I have ended with Krishna's revelation to his mother and Christ's revelation to Mechtild in order to end with the questions raised by cross-cultural study left open. The prominence of objects, and especially of non-anthropomorphic objects, in religious practice and understanding is far stranger than we like to admit.

In closing, then, I underline the strangeness of the visions of Yaśodā and Mechtild, the questionable nature of the miracle hosts of Wilsnack and the idol at Zehdenick, and the impressive yet confusing analytical precision of the Franciscan Johannes Bremer. My goal has been twofold: to make western scholars think again about a central Christian rite by undermining conventional assumptions about it and to suggest that anthropologists, art historians, students of comparative religion, and even cognitive psychologists, who are just beginning to explore the aniconic and noniconic material divine, may have conveniently to hand in the Christian Eucharist a case study worth pursuing. Hence, I hope I have opened up new questions about the role of objects in western Christianity and cast doubt on whether scholars of religion have, as yet, understood the full range of the issue of divine materiality.

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