

Some Important Things About Brent Plate's "A History of Religion in 5½ Objects"

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The way I see it, every life is a pile of good things and bad things. The good things don't always soften the bad things, but vice versa, the bad things don't always spoil the good things and make them unimportant.

— The Doctor

In "A History of Religion in 5½ Objects," Brent Plate seeks to return us to an appreciation of religious Things. Things complete us spiritually and physically, he writes. We love things, he reminds us. Things invoke divinity and evoke ecstasy. Humans are incomplete without their things. Likewise, "religious history is incomplete if it ignores the sensing body and the seemingly trivial things it confronts," Plate notes. "The crux of religion itself is the sensual engagement with the physical objects of the world." If we want to make meaningful religion, Plate believes, we must ignore anyone who tells us that religion "is interior, invisible, silent, and/or otherworldly."

Who has been talking anti-Thing nonsense to Brent Plate? I blame the Reformation, the Enlightenment, various Revolution/s (Scientific, technological, French), colonialism, modernity, Vatican II, and academic theologians, in that order. Who still believes that religion is *sola fides*? Luther seemed right at the time, but he forgot that mortals couldn't actually survive on faith alone—we need loaves and fishes, matzo with gefilte, or some other variety of bread and relishes discussed by Plate in his book about religious objects.

I am a medievalist trained to understand life and religion in pre-modern Europe. Medievalists have known all along that religion resides in objects. We

understand people who think and make their religions by means of solid things like buildings, books, and bodies. Medieval Europe was littered with the things of Christianity—or rather, as Peter Brown famously put it, of multiple micro-christianities, each characterized by its local context. Christianity looked different in 8th-century Rome than it did in 8th-century Lisbon, Edinburgh, or Prague because the things of each place were also different. In fact, if all medieval Christians shared anything, it was their belief in a god who became a man in an all-too-human body. They cared less about Jesus' preaching than about his healing and feeding miracle, his ability to walk on water, and his physical suffering. The principle liturgy of medieval Christians was the reenactment of a meal that celebrated the enfleshment of Christ. In the Eucharist, believers tasted the body and drank the blood of their savior.

Christians hauled their own ailing bodies across many miles just to visit the places where Jesus once roamed, where his human mother lived, or where the most holy dead lay entombed. They liked their ecclesiastics to dress up, and they wanted their shrines to be beautifully made and decorated in honor of the saints whom they believed to be immanent within bodily relics. They prayed to bones housed in golden boxes made even brighter with jewels. They spent hours visualizing the terrible instruments of Jesus' torture until they could feel the sting of the thorny crown on their own foreheads and the stab of nails through their hands and feet. Medieval Christians knew that their souls flew out of their bodies

at death but, as Caroline Walker Bynum has pointed out, they hoped to recover those same familiar limbs and faces at the end of time.¹

The Reformation deprived Christians of their cherished objects. At least, that is what Protestant seminaries are teaching in Church History classes, according to Plate (“we are *taught not* to listen, *taught not* to believe these objects have any worth”). Yet the ritual use and adoration of objects troubled a minority of Christians right from the start. Saint Augustine of Hippo, for instance, was one of many devout Christians who renounced tangible rewards and bodily pleasures in order to concentrate on improving his soul. Augustine argued that desire—not just for sex, but also for food, sleep, wealth, power, comfort, and things—caused good Christians to sin. He and other ascetics chastised their bodies in order to cleanse their souls. The first monks, who hid themselves in the Egyptian desert, denied material reality by living in caves and subsisting on a few beans.

Still, even the Desert Fathers and Mothers realized that the desire for an ascetic reputation was still desire. Palladius, a fifth-century admirer of the Egyptian hermits, told the following story in his *Lausiac History*:

I knew a virgin in Jerusalem who wore sackcloth for six years and shut herself up in a cell, taking none of the things that bestow pleasure. In the end she fell, abandoned (by God) because of her excessive arrogance. She opened the window and admitted the man who waited on her and sinned with him, because she had practiced asceticism not with a religious motive and for the love of God, but with human ostentation, which springs from vain-glory and

¹ *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia, 1995).

corrupt intention. For, her thoughts being engrossed in condemning others, the guardian of her chastity was absent. (Chap. 28)²

When monastics began to write down guidelines for their religious practice, they warned against such over-enthusiastic self-deniers whose hyper-abstinence led straight to hell. Theologians decreed that the demonization of material things—all derived from God's creation—was a gnostic heresy. Even saints had to pay attention to their bodies and things or risk dying, like Saint Catherine of Siena, of hunger. A religion based on divine incarnation can never give up its bodily sensations or its physical objects.

No one can adequately share an interior religious experience—not honestly, not even with co-religionists who speak the same spiritual tongue. We cannot share individual epiphanies. But as Plate points out, we can easily break bread together. We can plan to meet at a stone monument or rendezvous at the sign of an X carved on a tree. Water carries religious profound symbolism across plenty of historical faith traditions, but it also carries our boats to new places, where we can listen to the sacred music and smell the ritual preparation of food. And what better way to cross religious boundaries than to start a band? King David was a harpist. Clapton is God. Let's rock.

Meanwhile, look around you. See what's on your walls, in your drawers, and decorating your body. What's in your refrigerator? The objects that surround and sustain and inspire you are everywhere—a pebble, picked up at a medieval cathedral while on a memorable vacation; a reproduction of a famous

² <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/palladius-lausiaca.asp#PREFACE%20TO%20THE%20LIFE%20OF%20THE%20HOLY%20FATHERS>

statue; a blue bead or a hamsa; a bell, a book, a candle, a pressed flower; a hat or scarf; a bottle of something smelly; a matzoh ball; a picture of some person or object that you just love. Tell me about your things, and I will tell you about religion.