

## **Response to S. Brent Plate, *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects***

by Jonathan H. Ebel, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Brent Plate's proposed framework for telling a religious history of the world is the perfect topic for the Religion and Culture Web Forum. Plate's project requires readers to engage the Forum's central terms: religion and culture. It expresses in its spirit what I take to be key concerns in the study of religion as practiced at the University of Chicago. And it will fuel discussion not only of the subjects mentioned above, but also of the objects Plate selected, the rationale for choosing them over other objects, and the picture of religion that seems to emerge as he brings them together, but may well have been there from square one, or, rather, square one-half.

It occurred to me in reading Plate's essay and thinking about the five objects he has chosen that he set an exceptionally difficult task for himself. The challenge of choosing five objects that can say meaningful things about the world's religious traditions is itself enormous. The world is a big place and has, until very recently, been experienced by humanity as much bigger. The discourses, practices, communities, and institutions that we now categorize as "religions" (the vast majority of them at least) were born of and propagated in this much bigger world.<sup>1</sup> One can identify some globally available materials—stone, sand, soil, hide, wood, and water, leap to mind—but the extent to which these qualify as "objects" is an open question, perhaps best answered within the boundaries of historically and geographically situated traditions. To add, as Plate does, the additional criterion that each object correlate strongly to one of the five human senses is to elevate the level of difficult to Olympic levels. The clear benefits of such a move are to force our engagement with the fully sensual, fully embodied nature of religious traditions as lived and practiced, and to include in this inquiry realms of life often imagined as devoid of the religious. A potential cost of the penta-sensual framework is the exclusions it forces. Are decisions about objects driven more by their ability to stimulate a particular sense, or by their ability to illuminate the meaningful particularities and shared qualities of religious traditions? Put differently, how would Plate's list change—and what different things might it reveal—without the insistence on a democracy of the senses?

This leads me to a second set of observations and questions related to the choice of objects and the use of an indefinite article. I certainly appreciate Plate's desire to write an open and analytical history rather than a closed and definitive one, to avoid heavy-handed, single model explanations (though I simultaneously appreciate the audacity of a work titled, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*). Signaling this openness in the title, "A History of Religion..." is wise, and the move to keep the conversation open and developing is good. But I wonder about how these five objects (stones, crosses, incense, drums, and bread) emerged from a field of, well, how many? Surely these were not selected at random;

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5-7.

surely some principle guided Plate in his choice of “this” over “that.”<sup>2</sup> Was ubiquity most important? Was it longevity vis-à-vis the historical record? Did something first have to be *not* something, textual or industrial for instance, before it was allowed to be something? Understanding something more of Plate’s process would help us understand more about his list and may well aid others who are inspired by his project to create their own lists.

Plate’s list, though, has its own quiet story to tell, its own rendering of religion. It is a story of the ur-impulses and primordial longings of people (1/2s), and of their attempts to satisfy those longings and to know their worlds using stones, crossed lines, fragrances, and drums. It draws attention to thoughtful and careful contact, to peacefully interior and micro-communal observances, to sentiment and nourishment. Plate’s story is a story of connections: of halves to halves, of religious traditions to religious traditions. It is, at bottom, a story of senses that make sense. “Sensible” senses are, to be sure, an important part of the story of religious traditions in the world and of the women and men who embody those traditions. Yet we cannot ignore darker sensualities evident in the global history of halves; halves who sought religious fulfillment in objectification, in subjugation, and annihilation. These historical, equally religious halves sensed that ordering their world required violence. They honed and sanctified objects to achieve these ends. Such violent religious worlds may strike observers, commentators, and scholars as nonsensical or anti-sensual, but they are undeniably important phenomena in the religious history of the world. Does Plate’s model have space for these actors, their actions, and their objects within it, or do those ways of being religious require another five objects and another accounting of the half?

I have barely begun to explore the potentially fruitful avenues of inquiry that Brent Plate’s essay shows us. Theological questions remain (How important to understanding religious traditions is an account of the soul?). Epistemological questions remain (What is the relationship between that which we sense and that which is?) I look forward to further responses and to reading the complete book.

For the record, my own basically penta-sensual list of objects: the sword, gold, coal fire, the iPhone ... and wine. Discuss.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.