

A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects

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Less solace in these songs half-ourselves

& half-not.

-Colin Cheney, "Half-Ourselves & Half-Not"

After creating eight, mostly successful films, Federico Fellini set to work on *8½*. Since its release a half century ago, the surrealistic movie has surfaced toward the tops of "All Time Best" lists the world over. Fellini's film-within-a-film portrays a middle-aged filmmaker, played by Marcello Mastroianni. Between love and lust, desire and creativity, he 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 Claudia: "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?" The apparent answer is no, at least in his case. But the quest remains and Guido's incomplete life abides.

Two and a half decades later, Julian Barnes inserted 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' fictional writings speculate on love, history, and artistic creation. 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," allowing the lover to see clearly. Even so, he wonders whether love is a "useful mutation that helps the race survive." Regardless, "we must believe in it, or we're lost."ⁱ

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 value added

extra, 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 somewhat 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. 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.

Zeus's halving is, I suspect, what Fellini and Barnes were after in their approaches to the topic of love. The $\frac{1}{2}$ in their titles, and my own title here, 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 poem 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 the natural world, becoming floating islands. Our lives are half-lives, and we desire fulfillment, completion, wholeness. Aristophanes' mythologizing intimates that there is a perfect fit, somewhere out there, for our half-bodies.

But my story here is not a story about finding a soulmate, one other human body that completes us. There are plenty such works 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. Rather, as poet Richard Wilbur surmises, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World."

In the following I tell a brief story of the human half-body, and some of the objects that 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 seem to 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 being. 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 under our caress, 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, in the following I discuss five types of objects that humans have engaged and put to use in highly symbolic, sacred ways: stones, crosses, incense, drums, and bread. Each connects to one of the "five" sense perceptions as conceived in the modern world: touch, vision, smell, hearing, and taste. (The "five" is not, however, the only way to count the senses.) These objects are common, basic, profane. And such is the paradox of religious experience: the most ordinary things can become extraordinary.

Things and us, Things are us

*There was a child went forth every day;
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became; [. . .]
The strata of color'd clouds, the long bar of maroon-tint, away solitary by itself—the spread of
purity it lies motionless in,
The horizon's edge, the flying sea-crow, the fragrance of salt marsh and shore mud;
These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now goes, and will always go
forth every day*

-Walt Whitman, "There was a Child went Forth"

My daughter once had an African dwarf frog, all of a full-grown inch. It was perfect for her age (she was six) since it doesn't require much clean up. 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's a 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, while 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 and uncontrollably, the cat purrs—the petter also gains. We crave interaction: sensing half-bodies need objects to sense.

When I first set out on this project, I thought I was writing about the role of the senses in religious experiences. In a sense, that's what this is. But more honestly, the objects took over.ⁱⁱ 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. Drums and bread and incense have the ability to co-respond. 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 persons 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. And modern, secular people also have their own meaningful objects and they are impacted 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 affect they have on our lives, ancient and contemporary.

Thirty years ago, the 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 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 concludes 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.'"ⁱⁱⁱ 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, Director of the Center for Technology and the Self at MIT. Turkle's research engages 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 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 lay beneath even the most abstract thinking. "For every object they have spun a world," says Turkle.

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. She says:

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.^{iv}

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

It is somewhat coincidental that both examples here come from scholars currently working at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, but the fact that they are at one of the world's elite institutions of scientific learning shows us how narrow can be some of the gaps between pre-modern and post-modern worldviews, between the fetishists and 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 BBC 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 British 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, and came to actually set the stage for major world events to emerge and cultures to evolve. 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 essay, 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 hope you will too." A century ago, a perusal of a local library would reveal multiple titles beginning with "The History of . . ." though there are not many books anymore making such an assertion. 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 article (and my 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.

So now I have spent the first half of this paper talking about the half of my title. For the second half, I have to fit in the five. In other words, I will move quickly over the surface of these five objects. (My book offers much deeper engagements.)

Stones

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.

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 icons of a divine being,

or evidence of divine power, provoking people to pilgrimage over hundreds, even thousands, of miles to bask in their presence, such as the "black stone" at the corner of the kaba in Mecca, or the "stone of anointing" in the church of the holy sepulcher in Jerusalem. Some offer curative powers when touched and still others survive as markers of special events from ages past, inviting people to engage memories in a present, physical form. They also mark space in the form of boundary markers, delineating mundane distances as well as precincts of sacred sites. Some 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 of ancestors long gone that now continue to stand for us in the present. In each of these, stones are objects sensed, felt with fingertips, seen with the eyes, and felt deeply within. Stones show us the way.

Long ago, the ancient Israelites first crossed the Jordan river, and God told them to "Take twelve stones . . . and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight. . . . So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever" (Joshua 4.3-7). Stones trigger stories. From cairns to tombs, garden markers to monuments, stones have functioned through history as guardians of previous lives, ones that can be experienced again through the physical dimensions of time and touch.

Stones can be repeatedly touched without relative harm, and thus serve in memorial structures; yet they eventually get worn away through constant contact with the elements, while still retaining qualities of impermanence. This long term, paradoxical situation makes stones a meditative point for religious and artistic practitioners alike. Japanese Zen gardeners are called "stone-setting priests," while modern Western artists like Andy Goldsworthy and Isamu Noguchi take the paradox of decay and longevity inherent in stones, and apply it to their contemporary artwork.

Crosses

Arguably the oldest, most basic, and widespread religious symbol in the history of the world is that of two crossed lines. Crossed lines are one of the first recognizable visual forms that children make just past scribbling, and thus the prominence of the symbolism of the cross might be understood through its connection with primal visions of human childhood. Crosses are seen in the form of ankhs, swastikas, trees of life, the Chinese character "10" (*shi*), Neolithic

sunwheels, and a multitude of Christian varieties. The visual meaning created from two crossed lines depends on the religious-cultural location of the viewer and her environment. A Native American Omaha might see a cross and be reminded of the four directions and concomitant powers, a Christian of Jesus' crucifixion, and a mathematician will begin to do addition. Meanwhile, crossed lines have become a point of reference for modern artists like Kazimir Malevich, Joseph Beuys and Robert Rauschenberg, and operate as grids, intersecting crossed lines in the minimalist works of Agnes Martin. These modern artistic techniques attempt to strip the cross of any institutionally religious connotations, yet contemporary artists continue to see something visually primal, and thus paradoxically, potentially mystical in the rectilinear figure.

In the midst of these primary figurations, a basic visual symbol can shift from mere physical ornament to become a fundamental marker of identity. In the contemporary United States, Christian women wear gold crosses as necklaces, visually indicating their Christianity. In late-medieval Andalusia, Jews were forced to convert to Christianity and large crosses were affixed to their houses to signal their conversion (and for others to keep a watch on them and make sure they weren't backsliding). And many flags from nations around the world, especially in northern Europe, utilize the cross as a part of national identity.

Ultimately, the Nazi use of the ancient symbol of the swastika shows the power of visual symbols to remake identity and history, and in the aftermath of the Holocaust the visual image of these particular crossed lines becomes almost unbearable to see. Primary visual symbols hold deep-seated power. This includes the power to identify persons, whether for active self-promoting means, or by outsiders who wish to impose an order on the "otherness" that visual symbols might provide.

In spite of its utter simplicity, people argue endlessly over the meaning of two crossed lines. High school students in Albany, New York were told to take off their crucifix necklaces, not for religious reasons, but because they might symbolize gang identity. Two crossed lines in the middle of the Mojave desert result in a court case that causes the image to be covered up.

Meanwhile, the cross has variously symbolised health, fertility, life, immortality, the union of heaven and earth, spirit and matter, the sun, the stars. It is seen as a world center and a cosmic axis. The cross represents the human form, and with its four cardinal points it can be mapped to fourfold systems: the four directions, the 4 seasons, the four elements, the four winds.

Incense

In her ethnographic work among West African Tuareg societies, anthropologist Susan Rasmussen pays close attention to the role of incense in local Islamic ceremonies, suggesting, "Aromas carry messages, open up boundaries, and suggest alternative ways of interpreting experience." There is then an "olfactory code" that helps structure the society, and perfumes and incense are media to connect with spirits, to ward off danger, and to purify. The olfactory may be the sense furthest removed from language (it is notoriously difficult to describe scent), yet it is simultaneously the sense closest to human emotion and memory. Religious traditions have long relied on olfactory experiences of incense to buttress particular experiences with the sacred. Aromatic materials are burned in ritualized environments, producing both smoke and smell. In its basic form incense is natural matter that is burned to produce smoke and an aroma, just as the matter burned might end up smelling sweet, musky, earthy, or even slightly putrid. In this burning, the scent takes on ideological dimensions, prompting adherents to bow and pray, to usher in hushed tones, and/or to walk softly.

Chances are good that, like so much else, the burning of incense for religious purposes began somewhere in India. In India today, one can barely walk down street without the wafts of incense filling the nostrils. Storeowners burn it in the mornings as they open shop, taxidriviers burn it in front of their taxies, and the devout in temples all over wave burning agarbatti (an aloe wood as they perform *puja* to the deities).

Incense is also used for purification and medicinal purposes (e.g., the ritual activity of "smudging" across many Native American groups), and is believed to ward off spirits and help in fertility, among other magical uses. The smell of incense becomes the smell of "holiness," and an important component of rituals indicated in texts from the Hebrew Bible to the Vedas. The smell of incense varies from culture to culture, depending on what is being burned, yet these differences remain linked through their evocation of sacred environments.

The smells become triggers for emotional responses in the body of the devotee. These, in turn, directly and indirectly affect his behavior. Over time, a consistent smell in a meditation room will activate the trained response of preparation for a meditative session: the senses still, the mind calms, and the body relaxes. Or the smell might let her know she is now in a sacred place, and the burning spices become a purification device that the practitioner wafts over her body before entering the temple. Also, the smell of burning incense has a deep-seated

aromatherapeutic dimension, as it has been believed, and sometimes scientifically proven, that particular scents can penetrate the body and offer healing.

Drums

The heart is a drum. Its beating is the rhythm of life. Its pulsing provides memories stretching back to our embryonic state; sounds that shaped and soothed us well before we could see anything. And in many religious cosmogonies, drummed rhythm produces and sustains the universe. Shiva holds a drum in his role as *Nataraja*, "Lord of the Dance," as the universe is alternately created and destroyed. The deity "Universe" beats his drum to create rain in the mythology of the Siberian Koryak people. Such mythologies begin to speak to the reasons drums are some of the most essential and widespread musical instruments in the history of human cultures. The sound of the drum reaches our eardrums, sonic percussions that draw people together in space, just as it pulses in time. The drum measures time, providing a sonic backbone for the jazz trumpeter and sutra-reciting monk alike.

One of the central rituals in the Afro-Cuban tradition of Santería is a drumming ceremony that invokes the deities (*orishas*) to manifest themselves in the bodies of willing adherents. Yet the possession is not limited to human bodies: it also occurs within the drums themselves, the *Bata*, which become divine. Of course, one has to know how to beat it. Drums are used in East Asian Buddhist traditions to establish tempo in the midst of meditation sessions, with the understanding that there is a rhythm at the heart of life. And in Pakistani-Sufi *qawwali* music the *tabla* helps maintain consistency in the midst of the singer's improvisations. Because of the ubiquity of drums, former Grateful Dead percussionist Mickey Hart has come to regard earth as "planet drum," and his ongoing work with percussionists around the world shows deep relations across cultures and religious traditions.

But drums, like all music, can be divisive. The drummer Teri Bryant has played with musicians around the world, and retains a strident Christian faith. He founded the network "Psalm Drummers," in which Christians gather together to play drums collectively. In his book *A Heart to Drum* he tells the story of how a woman once went up to him and threw water on him, commanding "the evil spirit of drumming" to come out of him.

And I myself can remember as a child, at a particular theologically conservative Christian church, a man came to our church to speak out against rock music. (This was at the advent of the

Christian contemporary music scene.) Unlike the many moralists who railed against rock & roll's raunchy lyrics, its associations with sex, drugs, and rebellion in general, this particular preacher went for the jugular. The real reason rock & roll is wrong is because of its beat. The beat of rock and roll, he claimed, is antithetical to the beating of the human heart, and thus against God's own rhythmic creation.

Bread

When my daughter was a year old, she put everything in her mouth. After a big meal filled with the sweet flavors of milk and applesauce, it's hard to believe there was any flavor in plastic and wood toys, so she wasn't putting objects in her mouth because she was hungry. Instead, as child psychologists consider, this is a primary way babies interact with their environment and *learn* about the world around them: they touch objects, and even taste them. "Tasting" and "testing" are related terms in English. How do we come to know something? One answer developmentally and linguistically is that we taste it. The proof *is* in the pudding. Relatedly, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss once described food as "a type of language that helps human beings express their basic perceptions of reality."

"What is bread?" I ask my students in an Introduction to Religion course, as I pass around a big bowl filled with pumpernickel, chapatti, Wonder, tortilla, rye, and matzah. Students agree that all these things are bread, but they are somehow different. Bread can be sweet or salty, hard or soft, dry or moist, black or white. It is both widely shared and particular in its incarnation. I follow up these quandaries with the question: "What does bread have to do with religion?" The answers bring us to the centrality of this vital-yet-ubiquitous, tasted and tested substance, especially as it is ritualistically elevated to sacred status in the central ritual of Christianity (communion), and takes on symbolic importance in Judaism (matzah for the Passover Seder, Challah for the Sabbath).

At the same time, bread is *not* universal and, for instance, Christian churches in East Asia use rice for communion, just as Sephardic Jewish communities sometimes use cous cous for Sabbath meals. The particular non-universality of these substances can be just as important as their widespread appeal. Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, and various animists may eat bread, but rarely does it find its way into so prominent a place as it does in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity.

Throughout southern and eastern Asia, where bread grains are not regularly grown, there are various festivals that celebrate the planting and harvesting of rice, and it is this grass and not bread grain that is the staple. In India, rice is associated with the goddess Lakshmi who is celebrated every Autumn during Diwali, with rice playing a key role as part of her devotional offerings (*Lakshmi puja*). In China, rice was one of the "Five Sacred Grains" in the ancient mythologies. And in Japan, the popular rice deity (*kami*), Inari Okami, is associated with fertility and offerings are made in the form of rice and the fermented rice drink, sake. The deities need to eat, as do the communicants and companions, and where bread is not a mainstay, rice generally is.

Religion, like bread, is a useful term, just as "art," "literature," "history," and "culture" are useful terms. We use these terms as concepts and conventions, even if what they point to is an invention. They help us live, and offer us shorthand accounts for our experiences. Yet we must remain aware of the limits of our comparisons, be careful of the crunch when we are all set to chew.

A Sense of an Ending: Re-binding Religion

*In truth, I have less faith in the gods than I do in the chair
I passed one night set out with the trash on John Street,
even though it seemed to me then to be already beyond saving [...]*

-Kathleen Graber, "Tolle! Lege!"

The word *religion* is often believed to stem from Latin roots and means something like "re-binding" or "re-connecting." I explain this to students in my courses, and they dutifully write the fact down in their notes. When I push them a bit, two questions come to the fore. First, *what* exactly, is "bound"? Maybe it's God and humans bound together. Maybe it's the binding force of the law. Maybe it's just humans bound together to form a community, strength in numbers and all that. And so go the better of the responses. Sometimes a second, more intriguing question emerges from these definitions: "What happened to the first binding?" "Re-binding" implies that something has come loose, the ties untied.

My playfully serious suggestion here is that religion, in its deepest forms, rebinds the half-body to the world, connecting the interior realms of existence to the exterior realms, and

thus crafting *soul*. And maybe, just maybe, the soul is *produced* when humans consciously engage the things and bodies of the world. Soulcraft. The soul, on this account, is not some interior, invisible substance. Rather, it is thoroughly material, stemming from physical connections (though not, à la Descartes, found in a specific part of the anatomy). It is not some immortal, immutable essence, but a human production that comes and goes, ebbs and flows.

In 1930, the blues singer Blind Willie Johnson sought an answer to the question, "What is the soul of a man?" He tells of his travels and talks with people, and his reading of the Bible in search of an answer. Through it all, as far as he can tell, it's "nothing but a burning light." Soul is like the spark alighting from two rocks rubbed together: fleeting, temporary, but potent nonetheless. An occasional flame erupts, yet even that burning light exists codependent on oxygen and material to burn. An "eternal flame" is only everlasting in a relative way. The flame is new and different in each twinkling of an eye.

What I mean is that to understand soul, and thus the re-binding of religion, we would do well to listen to soul music, eat soul food. Soul emerges when the music is played, heard, felt, when the food is smelled, tasted, shared. There is no separation between body and soul, and so without some bodily sensing activity, the soul doesn't exist, or at least it goes dormant. Soul comes forth, is birthed, awakens, when head and heart meet the world. Sherry Turkle expresses soul with the objects in her childhood closet, Barbara McClintock with her ears of corn.^v Poet Gary Snyder discusses something like this in his Buddhist-rooted "practice of the wild": "a deliberate sustained and conscious effort to be more finely attuned to ourselves and to the way the actual existing world is. 'The world,' with the exception of a tiny bit of human intervention, is ultimately a wild place. It is that side of our being which guides our breath and digestion, and when observed and appreciated is a source of deep intelligence."^{vi} Soul materializes when the half-body makes conscious contact with the world, even its wild sides.

You don't have to believe this account of soul to get something from my story of objects. I won't push to convince you of it. But I will push for a re-thinking and re-experiencing of religion as a deeply, thoroughly, unfailingly physical activity. The body cannot be disregarded, as some have considered, as a "bag of bones" to be left behind as the soul migrates onwards and upwards. Instead, the crux of religion itself is the sensual engagement with the physical objects of the world. I believe that starting a history of religion from this point also offers the potential for a renewed take on dialogues between religions, an increasingly necessary task. Instead of

asking whether all gods are the same thing (they aren't), we might have renewed respect for each other if we begin in wonder of why so many of us use incense, beat drums, and eat bread as part of our religious devotion and secular life alike.

And while we use objects on daily, even hourly bases, we often forget their power and stop listening for their evocations. More than likely, we are *taught not* to listen, *taught not* to believe these objects have any worth, no matter how much we use them. The spiritual life, we are often told, is not found "out there" in the land of things, but is interior, invisible, silent, and/or otherworldly. By investing in such stingy interpretations of the wisdom found across religious traditions, we forsake the rich depths of *this* world, *this* body, *these* things. As long as the spiritual realm is set in opposition to the material realm, we can only remain deeply and intractably *unaware*.

My deepest interest is in bringing us to our religious senses, to become aware of the objects we have come to love across ages and continents, and realize how central they are to our spiritual lives.

ⁱ Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

ⁱⁱ I deal with the senses further in my "The Skin of Religion: Aesthetic Mediations of the Sacred," *CrossCurrents*, June, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock* (New York: W.F. Freeman, 1983), p. 197-198.

^{iv} Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 4, 10.

^v I am intrigued by and indebted to the writings of the French philosopher of science, Michel Serres and his work *The Five Senses* (New York: Continuum, 2008; original French, 1998) a meandering, metaphorically rich excursion into the cultural, historical, philosophical, and scientific understanding of the senses. Serres begins by telling of an experience he had in which his soul was "saved." The experience was a shipwreck, an autobiographical tale that made him realize the deep relations of the senses not only with the struggle between life and death, but of life itself. He did not find his soul through some inner calm, some prayer, but rather as his senses struggled, worked together and against each other in the dark, watery chaos.

^{vi} Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), pp. viii-ix. Snyder is not using the term "soul" in the way I am suggesting, but I mean to insert into soul-making something like the "practice of the wild" that Snyder discusses.