Twenty-five years ago, few scholars could fathom the ways dead bodies and their material extensions (e.g., locks of hair, post-mortem images, portraits, gravestones, etc.) mattered for Protestants. Gary Laderman's seminal work *The Sacred Remains* argued that in nineteenth-century America 'Conflicting discourses and contradictory representations proliferated, each attempting to render meaning from the lifeless body and locate it within an innovative, unusual, or profitable context' (1996:50). According to Laderman, 'From the fantastic in sensational literature on the one hand to the pathetic in postmortem photography on the other, the corpse was transformed from a sacred object exclusively within the interpretive jurisdiction of religion into a symbolic commodity on the marketplace of ideas' (1996:50). This interpretation explained nineteenth-century Americans' 'morbid obsessions' with corpses and their material extensions as evidence of the drift toward secularization (1996:73–85).¹ Despite suggestions to the contrary, this secularization narrative has dominated scholarship on dead bodies and their material extensions in the study of American history and American Protestantism.²

This special issue of *Body and Religion* offers new, interdisciplinary approaches for studying corpses and their material extensions in nineteenth-century Protestantism in the United States and England. It brings together two historians, Erik R. Seeman and Jeffrey E. Smith, a theologian, Kira Moolman, and a religious studies scholar, Jamie L. Brummitt, who reconsider the religious significance and agency of corpses in Anglo-American Protestantism. Moolman and Brummitt originally presented early versions of their papers to the Death, Dying, and Beyond Unit at the

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**Introduction**

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2019 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). Their AAR panel, ‘Death and Domesticity,’ considered the ways Catholics and Protestants engaged corpses in domestic spaces to define religious practice as part of homes and nations. In this special issue, Moolman’s article ‘Dying bodies’ examines how the theological effects of the Protestant Reformation and the ‘Great Transition’ influenced reforms concerning keeping corpses in homes before burial in Victorian England. Brummitt’s essay ‘A sacred relic kept’ argues that nineteenth-century American Protestants developed ‘good death’ traditions that centered bodily and contact relics of their dead as supernatural memory nodes which connected heaven and earth. Seeman’s article ‘Corpses and the Protestant cult of the dead’ offers new insights, developed from his award-winning book *Speaking with the Dead in Early America* (2019), into the ways nineteenth-century American Protestants engaged corpses in homes and at gravesides to maintain relationships with the dead. Smith’s essay ‘The faces of death’ examines how Americans in the Gilded Age combined the sacred and secular in rural cemeteries to remember the dead as successful Christians through their monuments’ carved faces, statues, busts, and epitaphs. Together, these scholars offer new ways of thinking about corpses and their material extensions in nineteenth-century Anglo-American Protestantism that contribute to the growing field of material religion. Five aspects stand out in particular.

First, these studies challenge the notion that the Protestant Reformation initiated a split in Western Christianity, such that Protestantism became a religion of doctrines and creeds in strict opposition to a material culture of the dead. Moolman shows that ‘Despite new Protestant teachings about the dead, the English still sought to somehow do right by their dead [in burial practices], both for fear of provoking the wrath of ghosts and out of love and respect for the dearly departed’ (2020:233). Seeman examines the diaries of Protestant women to illustrate how engaging with corpses in person, in writing, in memory, and at gravesides was central for maintaining relationships with the dead in American Protestantism. According to Seeman, ‘relations with the dead [were] at the heart of lived Protestantism’ (2020:151). Brummitt investigates the ways evangelical Protestants in the United States engaged relics around the ‘good deaths’ of individuals in children’s literature, popular literature, images, and Bibles to support their own material culture of the dead. According to Brummitt, scholars should revise definitions of evangelicalism to take into account the pervasive relic practices evangelicals cultivated as part of their material practices of religion (2020b:196, n. 1). These essays center corpses and their material extensions to demonstrate that nineteenth-century Protestants defined
and participated in a robust material culture of the dead after the Protestant Reformation.

Second, these articles challenge the secularization thesis, which still pervades studies of nineteenth-century history and religion on death, mourning, and corpses. Moolman foregrounds the ways religion and science worked in a ‘symbiotic relationship’ in Victorian England to support reforms that restricted keeping the dead in homes for prolonged periods before burial (2020:232). Religion provided ‘the theological permission to remove the dead from the living, and [medical hygiene provided] the scientific grounds for doing so’ (2020:232). Similarly, Smith considers the ways rural cemeteries in late nineteenth-century America combined the secular and sacred, such that ‘these cemeteries and subsequent examples became part of the secular death industry, despite the general view that they were performing a decidedly sacred function’ (2020:180). These papers suggest that the objects and places associated with corpses, which many historians have considered secular, are intimately related to a Protestant material culture of the dead.

Seeman and Brummitt provide reasons why the secularization thesis persists among historians who study the material culture of death in the United States. According to Seeman, historians have missed the connections between Protestantism and corpses because of the sources they examined. ‘In their focus on cemetery designers and political leaders,’ Seeman explains, ‘historians have overlooked the spiritual journals and published sentimental poems – mostly by women – that document relations between the living and dead’ (2020:153). Brummitt argues that the secularization thesis persists not only because of the types of primary sources historians examine, but because of the interpretive assumptions they bring to their reading of the sources. ‘Many historians of the United States,’ Brummitt writes, ‘have assumed that … Protestants do not engage with relics’ because of their claims about the Protestant Reformation (2020b:217). This has led historians to interpret primary sources that discuss relics as only metaphorical, symbolic, or individualistic, rather than evidence for actual and widespread Protestant relic practices. These studies present new narratives that place Protestant corpses and their material extensions at the center of nineteenth-century American Protestantism.

Third, these essays highlight the importance of memory for Protestants who engaged dead bodies and their material extensions. According to Moolman, ‘Doing right by the dead in Protestant England brought a new urgency to connect with the dead through memorialization,’ in terms of burials and appropriate grieving (2020:233). Even so, memorialization became entangled in debates about hygiene, class, and ethnicity. The
corpses of upper-class Protestants often became objects of memorialization over and above poor Protestant and Irish Catholic corpses, which were removed from the home if kept too long after death. Some theologians and reformers argued that overfamiliarity with dead bodies showed disrespect for the dead, loose morality, and irreligion to the detriment of memorialization. In a similar way, Smith examines the ways American families memorialized the corpses of wealthy Protestants in the Gilded Age through carved faces, statues, busts, and epitaphs on monuments in rural cemeteries. These material extensions of the corpse presented the dead as successful Americans and Christian philanthropists, who deserved to be remembered for their wealth, social status, and practice of religion. These monuments literally embodied wealthy Protestants as larger than life figures, ‘in order to further confirm their place in the secular collective memory while located in the sacred space’ (2020:187). According to Smith, the status of Protestants was ‘increasingly communicated through the material culture of the cemetery with a new type of commemoration that linked worldly accomplishments inextricably with the sacred space of burial. In this way, cemeteries came to build collective memory in new and expanded ways’ (2020:192). Protestants regarded memory as a central aspect of their engagement with corpses and the objects associated with them.

Fourth, Seeman and Brummitt also highlight the importance of memory, but extend the discussion by describing dead bodies and their material extensions as powerful memory objects themselves. According to Seeman, American Protestants understood that ‘corpses deserved adoration’ (2020:153). Protestants kissed dead bodies, wrote about them, cut locks of hair from dead loved ones, and visited graves as the burial sites of corpses. These forms of memorialization ‘ultimately derived their power from the corpse’ (2020:166). American Protestants recognized that corpses exuded a ‘numinous presence,’ which made the dead body ‘too powerful to be forgotten’ (2020:166, 153). Protestants employed corpses and their material extensions to remember and facilitate ‘postmortem relations with the dead’ (2020:160). For Seeman, the corpse as a memory object achieved power, or what some scholars call agency, as it invited Protestant mourners to engage in memorial practices with objects and places that physically linked them back to the corpse in the grave. Brummitt outlines a different view on corpses and their material extensions as agentive memory objects. According to Brummitt, corpses and their material extensions were memory objects (i.e., relics), but they were not just symbolic of the past: ‘They were not dead matter that only referred to past events and people’ (2020b:198). Relics functioned as supernatural memory objects that
generated the presence of the Protestant dead via touch. Touching relics conjured memories of the dead stored in the objects to make that person’s piety present for the living. Touching embodied memories also induced conversion in the living and helped them to ‘experience the presence of the absent dead in heaven’ (2020b:219). According to Brummitt, Protestant relics ‘functioned as material bridges between this life and the next. They linked living evangelical bodies on earth to dead evangelicals living in new heavenly bodies’ (2020b:197). In these ways, Brummitt and Seeman offer new ways for thinking about the relationships between corpses and their material extensions as powerful and agentive memory objects.

Fifth, these studies invite scholars to think more about the relationships between Protestant corpses, their material extensions, mourning, and gender. Seeman’s article examines ‘the spiritual journals and published sentimental poems – mostly by women – that document relations between the living and dead’ (2020:153). Studying journals written by women is important because they are usually overlooked by historians, who are more interested in investigating what cemetery designers and political leaders (usually men) thought about corpses and mourning. From this, Seeman concludes, ‘It is important to note that most participants in the cult of the dead were female’ (2020:153). This article, therefore, departs from other historical narratives in that it centralizes women and women’s writing in American history. Brummitt presents another view on gender, mourning, corpses, and their material extensions. According to Brummitt, American women and men participated equally in Protestant relic culture. The ways evangelical Protestants learned to mourn meant that most Americans, regardless of gender, grew up learning how to engage bodily and contact relics. This is apparent in Brummitt’s discussion of relics in the Civil War (2020b:212–18). In the Civil War, Protestant men – whether soldiers, fathers, or ministers – wrote about, collected, and distributed relics of the war dead. This highlights the fact that men also engaged in nineteenth-century Protestant relic culture. Women were not the only ones engaging corpses and their material extensions in writing, in person, or at gravesides. This is important because it shifts the historiography away from the feminization narrative that still pervades studies of mourning in American history. Protestant women, men, and children participated in a lively material culture of the dead. In these ways, Seeman and Brummitt engage gender studies as they investigate the history of corpses in American Protestantism.

This special issue of *Body and Religion* also includes a roundtable with these authors on Erik R. Seeman’s book *Speaking with the Dead in Early America* (2019). This book won the 2020 Lawrence W. Levine Award from
the Organization of American Historians (OAH) for the best book in American cultural history. In the roundtable, the authors delve further into the contributions presented here, including the influence of the Protestant Reformation, the secularization thesis, memory and memory objects, the agency of corpses, and the relationship between gender, corpses, and mourning. One noticeable omission from this issue is a discussion of race as it relates to corpses and their material extensions in nineteenth-century American Protestantism. This work has been started by scholars, such as Karla F. C. Holloway (2003), Suzanne E. Smith (2010), Lynn Rainville (2014), Kami Fletcher (2020), and others. In fact, two scholars from this special issue are currently researching corpses and their material extensions in Black Protestantism in the United States. Brummitt and Smith presented papers on the panel ‘Black Remembrance and the Remembrance of the Black Experience in America’ at the 2022 annual meeting of OAH, chaired by Fletcher. The work presented in this special issue and beyond will help situate corpses and their material extensions within a framework that considers the material practices of Protestantism in the nineteenth-century United States and England.

Notes

1 For a discussion of this, see Seeman (2019:193). Secularization in this scholarship usually means a shift away from the practice or significance of religion in public and, sometimes, private life in nineteenth-century America. Many religious studies scholars have argued against this view of secularization. For example, see Promey (2003, 2014). Other religious studies scholars have challenged the very definition of secularism as meaning a move away from religion. For example, John Modern (2011) has argued that evangelical print media generated secularism in nineteenth-century America.

2 For other scholarship that has presented increased attention to corpses and/or their material extensions as evidence of secularization, see Barnett (2013); Benes (1977); Blachowicz (2006); Halttunen (1982); Kammen (2010); Linden (1989); Ludwig (1966); Lutz (2011). For a discussion of this, see Seeman (2019:193) and Brummitt (2020b:197–201, nn. 2, 4). For scholars who have pointed to the importance of corpses and their material extensions in Protestantism, see Brummitt (2020); Cray (1990); Lindsey (2017:64–112); McDannell (1995:130–1); Promey (1993:119–21; 2005); Seeman (2019:189–228); Walsham (2010).

References


