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Book Review

Plate, S. Brent (ed.) 2015. *Key Terms in Material Religion.* London: Bloomsbury. vi + 284pp. ISBN: 9781472595461 £85 (hbk); ISBN: 9781472595454 £24.99 (pbk); ISBN: 9781472595485 £24.99 (e-pub).

Reviewed by: Amy Whitehead, University of Wales, Lampeter.
a.whitehead@yahoo.com

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The field of material religion has been gaining momentum in recent decades, but particularly since the launch of the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Art, Objects, and Belief* in 2005. As if previously cordoned off from view, religious materiality (in its myriad forms) is currently taking centre stage in research, theories and debates. This shift in the study of religions is currently redressing what can be considered a scholarly imbalance whereby attention on "belief," texts and/or metaphysics has eclipsed and made problematic that which religionists actually do, for example craft, build, create, engage with, ritualize, eat, wear and sense—things. Consequently, this privileging of mind over matter has influenced the discourses and terminologies through which these "things" are often understood and discussed. *Key Terms in Material Religion* has, therefore, arrived in a timely fashion.

Stimulating and evocative, the Introduction begins with the assertion that "Religions, for whatever else we can say about them, are lived out through the bodies of people. To be students of religious life means we sometimes need to get back to basics, back to the physical substrate upon which all religious traditions, beliefs, and practices originate" (p. 3). These lines very quickly get to the heart of what readers might expect from the critical entries found in the book. With a stellar line-up of entries written by notable scholars such as David Morgan, Robert Orsi, Bruno Latour and Robert Maniura (among many other fine contributors), terms such as "Belief," "Body," "Collection," "Dress," "Food," "Masks," "Medium," "Prayer," "Race," "Sacred," "Spirit," "Magic" and "Touch" (among others) are addressed through the use of short case studies and critical discussions, all of which both problematize and advance the notion that religion can be brought "down to earth" and centralized, first, in the body.

With much difficulty in selecting an entry for discussion (they are all admirable in my opinion), I would like to draw attention to one of the key terms addressed in the book: "Sacred." David Chidester tells us that "the sacred" is typically understood in the study of religions (using Otto's "holy," van der Leeuw's "power" or Eliade's "real" and following Durkheim) as "both supremely transcendental and essentially social, as an otherness transcending the ordinary world" (p. 180). Chidester then brings this classic understanding of the sacred into conversation with "hair." Inspired by the Chris Rock documentary about African American hairstyling, *Good Hair*, Chidester examines "hair" (principally the sacrificial or

"sacred hair" that is given in exchange for discharged vows at the Hindu Sri Venkateswara Temple in Tirupati) in relation to the global hair trade industry, hair distribution, sacred hair surpluses, and the use of Hindu sacrificial hair on Christian and Orthodox Jewish heads.

Focusing on "the additions to hair, the weaves, which dominate hairstyling, as a $9 billion business" Chidester suggests that this type of hair informs us about the nature of the sacred (and profane) in Durkheimian terms because hair additions are "set apart from ordinary contact, forbidden and tabooed." They [weaves, additions] "cannot be touched, not even in the intimacy of sexual relations" (p. 180). Chidester says, "From a comedian, therefore, we learn that hair is sacred because it is a focus for extraordinary attention, the locus of ritual sacrifice, the nexus of ritualized exchanges, and the matrix of religious contestation" (p. 183). Hair, argues Chidester, not only merges religious and economic markets, but also questions and challenges ideas about the secular and the sacred.

Thematically, *Key Terms in Material Religion* covers five interrelated areas that are based on the editor S. Brent Plate's working definition of "material religion." These are (1) "Bodies meet objects" which refers to "an investigation of the interactions between human bodies and physical objects, both natural and human-made"; (2) "The senses" whereby interaction "takes place through sense perception," (3) "Time and space" which focuses on "special and specified spaces and times"; (4) "Orientation and disorientation of communities and individuals" which refers to the functional roles of objects, spaces, places, performances, and the senses, and (5) the "Strictures and structures of tradition" (pp. 4–7). This "five-part definition" offers a useful, yet not exclusive, formula from which to understand the complexity and significance of religious "materiality" (which extends to rituals and performances, and other relational engagements) that makes an excellent contribution to debates.

As more and more scholars are challenging, scrutinizing and offering advances to the often delimiting and problematic terminologies that suggest a privileging of mind over matter, *Key Terms in Material Religion* offers both students and more experienced scholars alike an invaluable reference text whose entries signal, shape and inform the direction in which debates in material religion is taking. As a final note, the clarity of the text, along with the exemplifying colourful images and ease with which entries are accessed, make this book an ideal companion for studies and research in material religion. It is not, however, only potentially useful for religious studies, but for a variety of subjects in the humanities including ritual studies, anthropology, archaeology, material culture studies, folklore, museum studies and sociology.