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« *The Bodily and Material Cultures
of Religious Subjectivation* »

Conference project,
Venue: Department of Anthropology, UCL
Intended date: 17-18 June 2014
Statement of Purpose and Call for Papers

There is no known religious practice that does not involve bodily motions (bowing, standing, walking, fasting, feasting, etc.) and their associated emotions, nor the use of given material things (shrines, musical instruments, substances of various kinds). Both involve the sensory apparatus of touch, sight, smell, etc.

Without disregarding the religions discourses and creeds, the conference will focus on the bodily and material cultures of religious practice with a strong emphasis on both ethnographic documentation and theoretical elaboration based on a few basic principles:

1/ Bodily *and* material culture. Whereas scholarly approaches have tended to deal independently with the body and with material culture (with journals and publications focusing on either one), we suggest to consider that, in the human species, there is hardly any technique of the body that is not propped against material culture, and, vice versa, no item of material culture that is not embodied and disembodied at a turn.

2/ Religious subjectivation. Bodily and material cultures provide technologies of the self by means of which the religious subject shapes his/her identity and is subjected to an Other. The notion of a subject departs significantly from the notion of an individual insofar as being a subject means being produced by a collective and being subjected to it while acting on oneself in order to govern oneself.

3/ Theoretical inputs. The theme of bodily and material cultures of religion has been explored by the path-breaking publications of the journal *Material Religion* (see Meyer *et Al.*, 2010). In addition to the various theoretical suggestions published in the Journal, we propose to take into account the publications of the “Matière à Penser” (MàP) network (see Warnier 2007, 2009, Naji & Douny 2009, Julien & Rosselin eds. 2009, and, below, “the MàP approach in a nutshell”).

4/ Aims of the conference and call for papers and films. We welcome proposals from students, faculty and independent researchers based on ethnographic fieldwork focused on *both* bodily and material cultures of religious practice as part of the production of a religious subject in different areas and religious settings (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Asiatic, African and other religions, etc.). The papers should address theoretical issues, whatever theoretical references may be put to use, provided they articulate bodily *and* material cultures. We aim at establishing discussions between various academic traditions on both sides of the Atlantic and the Channel. Short documentary films (e.g. 20mn maximum as a rule) showing the intertwinement of bodily

and material cultures in religious practice are welcome. The proposals (of ca. one page) should be addressed to the convenors. They will be assessed by the organizing committee of the conference. Ultimately, we expect to end up with producing an edited volume. **Deadline for the submissions:** 31st December 2013. **Reply** by the convenors by January 31st 2014.

5/ The “MàP” (Matière à Penser) approach in a nutshell. It relies on theoretical contributions from Schilder onwards on the *Körperschema* as a means to conceptualize a) the body as a bodily synthesis acquired by apprenticeship. It has been criticized, refined and much diversified by various scholarly traditions, notably, of late, the neuro-cognitive sciences; and b) the way the body is not coterminous with its coetaneous envelope but extends beyond its limit to incorporate material objects in motion, emotion and perception. That is, the “MàP” approach takes bodily *and* material culture as a systemic whole. It should be stressed that this approach draws a clear distinction between the body as a corporeal entity, and its representations. This notion of bodily and material culture, however, falls short of articulating them into larger social, cultural and political settings. For that purpose, the “MàP” approach relies mostly on the contribution of Michel Foucault to a theory of the subject in a post Kantian, post Freudian context. The subject *is* a body and *has* a body. It is divided up. Yet it bridges the gap between object and subject. It governs itself by implementing techniques of the self that rely extensively on given bodily and material cultures. By these means, s/he subjects itself to an encompassing sovereignty. Foucault, in that respect, belongs with other contemporary philosophers such as Žižek, Certeau and others who have rejected the notion of a thinking, neo-Kantian, transparent and entirely free subject. They provide alternative ways of looking at the religious subject.

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References

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NB: Anouk Cohen and Damien Mottier will organize another conference, along similar lines, at Musée du Quay Branly in Paris, in the Fall of 2014. The two organizing teams are coordinating their efforts.