



TTR
REVIEW

THE FABRICATION OF BELIEF THROUGH IMAGES, SOUNDS, OBJECTS AND BODIES

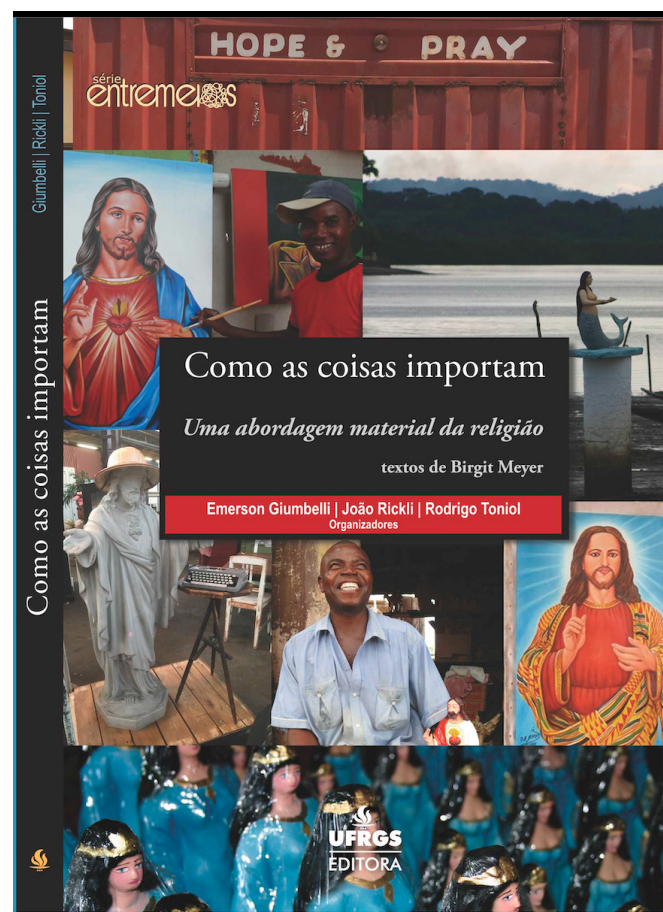
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As a historical product of the West, the universe of “religion” has been placed under scrutiny by social scientists who, for some decades now, have criticized classic binary understandings such as the contrast between the notion of magic and the religious field – the case of anthropologist Stanley Tambiah who, at the start of the 1990s, published the intriguing work *Magic, science, religion and the scope of rationality* (1990) – or the acritical reuse of this field in any and all contexts – one of the themes explored by Talal Asad, among others. Nonetheless, the analytic endeavor of these intellectuals is not an isolated case in the social sciences, and even less of an exclusive viewpoint on the religious question.

In the wake of a theoretical production that strove to interrogate the pillars erected by the project of modernity, some metanarratives collapsed following an incisive and subsumed critique of the prefix “post.” Along these lines, many scholars perceived that their research objects possess agency and the so-called “turns” – including the material turn – functioned as a kind of diagnosis of the failure of modernism or an epistemology constructed according to the logic of opposite pairs. Power, body, image and things are some of the topics that make the material turn such an important landmark in the history of the humanities, especially when we consider the undeniable reach of authors such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Hans Belting, Alfred Gell and Bruno Latour.

Pursuing this line of argument and taking the theme of religion as a backdrop, I consider the translation into Portuguese of a selection of texts written by German anthropologist Birgit Meyer a good example of an intersectionality – to evoke the currently fashionable term – between audacity, method and presence. Before focusing on each suggested term, I immediately emphasize that the material dimension of religion is this work’s central analytic concern and, consequently, the author’s theoretical choices elicit an approximation with one of the premises of the material turn: the critical revision of the meaning of “things.” In Meyer’s vision, however, the critique of the sphere of religion postulated by a tradition of studies – about which I shall speak later – implies privileging precisely meaning in detriment to a method that maximizes “things” themselves. Furthermore, the analysis of the “things” that matter to Meyer or about how they matter in her audacious research project undoubtedly dialogue with the academic trajectory of this thinker.

Birgit Meyer conducted research in the area of anthropology and comparative religions, initially at the University of Bremen and subsequently at the University of Amsterdam where, in the 1990s, she completed a doctorate under the supervision of Johannes Fabian. Joining the ranks of Africanists researchers, Meyer chose southern Ghana as her field of investigation, analyzing the proliferation of Pentecostalism in the

Ghanaian public sphere over a 20-year period. The author observes that following the 1992 Democratic Constitution, the Ghanaian government popularized the means of communication and the subsequent propagation through mass media led to the omnipresence of Christian imagery, especially through the production of video films.

Field experience, and the impact of her ethnographical work, earned her an academic post at the University of Utrecht where, since 2016, she has coordinated the project *Religious matters in an entangled world* along with other researchers from various regions of the world. The relationship between religion and media, or, principally, the comprehension of religion itself as media, forms the main focus of this research project whose objective is to expose religion's presence in buildings, images, objects, food, bodies, texts and the like. Some of the most important articles written by Meyer and published in prestigious scientific journals in Europe and the United States have been collated by anthropologists Emerson Giumbelli, João Rickli and Rodrigo Toniol in what for now is the first work of the author to be published in Brazil. As a reading script for the collection of articles, I appropriate the terms audacity, method and presence as keywords that allow us to learn some of Meyer's proposals.

First, I would say that her work is audacious because it rejects the mentalist perspective from which the field of humanities – based on semantic approaches and indebted to an Enlightenment tradition that emphasizes the content and meaning of things – has both criticized the religious question, from notions like fictitious illusion and false consciousness, reflecting the theoretical input provided by Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud; and the religious “phenomenon” as seen more favorably, such as Durkheim and Rudolf Otto in their respective analyses of social fact and the sphere of the sacred.

Second, by critiquing the viewpoint “from inside,” Meyer proposes a method that converges with various proposals of the material turn. In other words, “how to study religion” sets the baseline for her articles and this methodological commitment, in the author's view, both implies assuming a “post-secularist” stance, which questions the supposed decline of religion in public life – according to the paradigm of secularization – and also demands an attitude of “rematerialization” in the very way researchers study the object, given that the decision to explore religion as a coherent set of meanings ends up neglecting its tangibility in bodies and images.

Third, taking as a reference point contexts of postcolonialism and religious diversity, as in the case of Ghana, the anthropologist states that religion is present in public life and that this presence is the outcome of

material forms that become visible depending on the correlation of political forces. In sum, as Giumbelli, Rickli and Toniol emphasize, Meyer has made major contributions through her perception that action in a public space is connected to a process that involves attributes, bodily skills or, more generally, media that legitimize a public voice. Here we shall examine the book text by text.

In the first article, “*De comunidades imaginadas a formações estéticas*” (“From imagined communities to aesthetic formations”), Meyer introduces the premises of her collaborative research program on media, religion and the formation of communities. At the start of the text, she proposes an interesting dialogue with Benedict Anderson, recognizing that the process of reconfiguration of postcolonial nation-states entails an emergence of communities within which the so-called religious communities are included. In Meyer’s view, however, analyzing these communities from the perspective of the imagination alone obliterates the mechanisms through which the imaginary is constructed. In other words, members of the communities not only imagine and construct identities, they produce effects of authenticity and reality. Consequently, imaginations become tangible beyond the domain of ideas.

Meyer criticizes the entire tradition that inherits the anthropology of meaning or symbols – widely disseminated in the United States – at this point. The author sustains that meanings are tangible insofar as they are shared not only through ideas but mainly through a social environment that materializes them across space, architecture, ritual performances and the inducing of bodily sensations. This materiality is what shows us the role performed by things, media and bodies in the actual processes of producing communities. However, the negotiations and range of these material forms occur amid a process that the author denominates “aesthetic formation.”

By distancing herself from a notion of “aesthetics” limited to the sphere of the arts, such as that proposed by Kant, Meyer returns to the Aristotelean sense of *aisthesis* as the perception of objects in the world through five sensory modes, highlighting the incisive power of images, sounds and texts on bodies. In so doing, the anthropologist expands the possibilities for studying religions, emphasizing style over meaning, appearance over essence and medium over message. Consequently, religion is present in many places because, as a practice of mediation, it spreads itself through and interacts with various forms of media, whether technological – cinema, radio, photography, television, computers – or not – incense, herbs, sacrificial animals, icons, sacred books, stones, rivers, the human body itself, and so on.

By returning to some of the pillars sustaining the project of modernity in the 19th century, the anthropologist, over the course of the second article, "*Religião material: como as coisas importam*" ("Material religion: how things matter"), refers to a classic binarism that even today appears deeply rooted in academic investigations of religion: the belief and meaning with which the immateriality of the spirit is imbued in contrast to questions involving power, practices and materiality. According to the author, this opposition fed the secularist idea that caused religion to be projected into the sphere of interiorization and the private. It so happens that, contrary to the wishes of a science averse to the public presence of religious aspects, some everyday occurrences like sounds, silences, smells, touches, forms, colors and affects are not exclusive to the spaces of "manifestation of the sacred," but to the very social fabric from which the public sphere is constituted. Also, in Meyer's view, the perception of the "extraordinariness of the ordinary" or the "ordinariness of the extraordinary" has been one of the major epistemic and political contributions of the material turn.

Regarding the third article, "*Há um espírito naquela imagem*" ("There is a spirit in that image"), the author explores some curious data from field research. Noting a public presence in the charismatic Pentecostal churches in southern Ghana, Meyer formulates the hypothesis that the power of Pentecostalism in the region, beyond the churches, is the outcome of the liberation of audiovisual mass media and its incorporation by religious actors. At the same time, she observes that the visual and auditory expansion of Pentecostalism on radio, television, posters and stickers occurs in a tense zone of contact with so-called "traditional African religions." Countering the idea of a "loss of aura" due to the technical reproducibility of images – one of Walter Benjamin's theses –, Meyer argues that the Christian images replicated through mass media in the Ghanaian context can be "unsettling presences that bring their beholders under their spell."

In exploring rituals of worship bearing images of Jesus, the author observes an "ambivalence" on the part of the converted: while they demonstrate adoration before the images, they slip into an attitude of fear. In the anthropologist's view, the dubious relation arises from a potential reversibility contained in these images: in other words, the images produce a radical inversion when an image that appears like Jesus has the capacity to become "demonic." As a result, Meyer concludes that social practices of action and observation operate behind these images. At the same time, the apparent dubiousness cannot be understood as an opposition but as a symbiotic dynamic of the relations between the field of Pentecostalism and some autochthonous religious traditions.

To reach these conclusions, however, the author relies on conceptually and historically situated analytic tools. In the fourth article, “*Mediação e a gênese da presença: rumo a uma abordagem material da religião*” (“Mediation and the genesis of presence: towards a material approach of religion”), she reconstructs some points of her methodology, emphasizing the importance of revising approaches, concepts and methods that model traditional research practices on religion. By having in mind this objective, the mediation processes that encompass the materiality of the religious field and the genesis of its presence, one can revise not only the methodology but the concept, role and place of religion. To substantiate the argument on the disturbing presence of Christian images in the Ghanaian context, therefore, Meyer returns to the notion of “fetish.”

Colonial frontier areas like Ghana enable the study of religion decentralized from Europe where, following the critique of religion deriving from the rise of rationalism during the Enlightenment period, the discourse of fetishism transformed the notion of fetish into a category of accusation due to its capacity to sustain, in the eyes of the rationalists, “irrational” structures that maintain the status quo of the *Ancien Régime*. Defined as a phenomenon arising from the commercial encounters between Portuguese and Africans – at the end of the 15th century – the term fetish alludes to objects that, though shaped by human hand, “possess their own life.” In other words, the capacity of agency of these objects was read as a threat to reason and progress, a fact that led rationalists to demand its destruction.

Based on the history of the fetish, Meyer formulates another hypothesis: the disturbance caused by Christian images, like those observed by herself, dialogue with dynamics inscribed in the religious practices of the peoples living in southern Ghana, like the Ewé. In other words, despite the condemnation of the gods of the autochthonous religions – understood as “idols” in Christian discourse –, the Ewé, despite their conversion to Christianity, maintained in the Pentecostal field a pragmatic posture found in the traditional religions. In counterpart, the Pentecostal field itself – which, along with the Ghanaian government and the proliferation of the mass media, enabled the replication of Christian images – offered converts “forms and patterns to act on and access the power of the Holy Spirit” (Meyer, 2019, p. 182).

Meyer concludes, therefore, that the conjunction of materiality and pragmatism can be taken as a sign of the successful presence of Pentecostalism. Following this reasoning, approaching religion materially entails a shift from mentalist orientations centered on language – what do people say? What does this mean? – to a focus on practices – what do people do? What meanings are invoked in the body? What materials are used? –, a proposal already contemplated by the series of turns:

linguistic, bodily, iconic and material. In relation to the material turn, the agency of “things” has focused the attention on the question of the concrete modes of fabricating the social – see Latour – or, we could say with Birgit Meyer, the religious modes of “fabricating belief.”

In the fifth article, “*Imagens do invisível: cultura visual e estudos da religião*” (“Picturing the invisible: visual culture and the study of religion”), Meyer discusses the capacity of images to present the invisible or the absent through performative acts. The author dialogues with art history and anthropology of the image theorists like W. J. T. Mitchell and Hans Belting. According to Meyer, the mass production of devotional images in southern Ghana – such as posters of Jesus or representations of malign spirits like ghosts, mermaids and witches – derives from a visual culture preeminent in this context and derived from both traditional African religions and Christianity. As a consequence, the author warns, a minimally rigorous study in a context such as this cannot overlook the role of “material forms in religious modes of world-making.”

In the sixth and final article, “*Como capturar o ‘Uau!’*” (“How to capture the ‘wow’”), the anthropologist uses an interjection arising from the sensation of admiration and enchantment or the effects experienced by the body in the relation with the “supernatural.” If one takes the argument of the work as a whole, such naturalness and transcendence are fabricated, Meyer, however, assumes an intermediate position between not taking the supernatural as evidence but neither discarding it as an irrational illusion. In this sense, she reinforces the critique of the anthropology of religion, which, pursuing a phenomenological approach, tends to defend the viewpoint “from inside.” Meyer believes on the contrary, a viewpoint “from outside” is indispensable since the attitude of “taking (religion) seriously” finds its limits when the religious universe is approached in an acritical way. A consideration of the clear importance of the body, sensations and emotions in the construction of worlds – as many theorists of the humanities have suggested – proves to be a transformative path for the study of religion.

The collection of articles concludes with an interesting interview conducted with Birgit Meyer by the work’s organizers, on which I shall not comment further except for the fact that readers will probably experience another type of “wow!”

I think some final remarks are pertinent. First, Meyer’s work contains very little ethnographic data. In the collection itself, the author acknowledges such absence and, in response to scholars who accumulate a large body of research and are, perhaps, keen to codify an epistemology, she justifies her preference for investing in a theoretical-methodological

approach. Indeed, as a post-secularist methodology for the study of religion – which is how I view her work –, the collection performs its role of provoking and transforming in the academic field.

Second, and here I allow myself to go slightly beyond Birgit Meyer's work itself, though not her collective project, the methodology proposed by the anthropologist and her collaborators in *Religious matters in an entangled world* had previously obtained a warm reception in Brazil with the publications of Marttijs van de Port, an anthropologist from the University of Amsterdam and interlocutor of Meyer who produced ethnographical work on candomblé based on fieldwork in the city of Salvador, Bahia. In this research project, van de Port challenged traditional methods of studying candomblé. Most ethnographies published on this universe advocate that candomblé should be studied from a triple focus: a particular temple – more commonly called *terreiro* by practitioners, a priest (*sacerdote*) who runs this temple and who acts as the “legitimate” voice to speak, and, finally, an initiation rite.

Based on these readings and observing the most common methodology, when van de Port arrived in the field he did not initially question the premises of the researchers who dedicated themselves to investigate candomblé before: at first sight, it amounted to a closed and secret universe, difficult to access. However, as he began fieldwork, the anthropologist met a hairdresser who talked about candomblé and its rituals in a very intimate manner as he cut the anthropologist's hair. Another surprise was the statue of Iemanjá – one of candomblé's divinities – seen by van de Port in a bar frequented by the LGBT community.

In sum, as a counterpoint to a viewpoint “from inside,” the anthropologist perceived candomblé's presence in Salvador's public sphere, and its tangibility not only in the words of initiates or priests, but also in the bodies of sympathizers, clothing, local mediums of communication, popular festivities, Bahia's cuisine and the agendas coordinated by three social movements: for the black population, for the LGBT population and for the environment.

The impact of van de Port's work yielded an article written by anthropologist Ordep Serra, emeritus professor of Universidade Federal da Bahia who devoted his career to researching candomblé. In the article, Serra recognizes van de Port's innovative approach, but rejects the Dutch anthropologist's criticisms of somewhat outdated and dematerialized study methods.

TRANSLATION
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