1 Things Matter! The Stone of the Anointing in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre

For one year I was lucky enough to study at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem while living in a quarter close to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City. Being a German student of Protestant theology at that time, I was fascinated by the dialogue between Jewry and Church and decided to enrich my academic education by taking a programme in Jewish studies. Beside the intensive and inspiring courses in Rabbinic literature and Jewish history, I enjoyed observing daily religious practices as they took place in this city, indeed, the melting pot of Abrahamic religions.

For this article I would like to refer to a situation I experienced while sitting close to the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which one might call one of the most important places in the Christian tradition. Many pilgrims from all over the world enter this place and I was overwhelmed and impressed by the acts that I witnessed at the Stone of the Anointing, a marble slab which is located close to the entrance, embedded into the floor and is a point of interest for many pilgrims. Opposite the stone you find a mosaic depicting the body of Jesus Christ receiving the last rites after death. Many people, mostly women, kneel in front of the stone, touch it, and put different things on top of it, such as small candles that you can buy in souvenir shops around the church, miniature icons of Christian saints, or private photographs depicting loved ones that are not with them or little jewels like bracelets or chains.

An Orthodox guide from Russia gives a piece of advice: “Do not leave your things in the plastic bag. Otherwise, the effect of the stone won’t work!” While personal belongings are placed on top of the stone, the owners start praying, most of them leaning their bodies down to the slab and kissing it tenderly. Some of the women wipe the surface of the stone intensely with white towels. Afterwards all items are tentatively put back into bags and people move on to the next place of holiness in the church.

The Stone of the Anointing is linked to the Christian tradition of the Passion narrative according to the Gospel of Saint John (19:39 – 40) and represents the last place where a human touched Jesus’ dead body before his resurrection. The power and effect of this stone seems to be present even today, at least in the eyes of the pilgrims. Thus, the personal belongings which are put on top of this stone change in value and incorporate a part of the stone’s meaning. The pilgrims’ behaviour is influenced by different objects in this example: They encounter the stone in a submissive attitude by kneeling down and interact by putting personal belongings on top of the stone with the slab.
Things matter – not only – for religious practices; they are essential (inter)actors in the field of religion. The pilgrims I witnessed at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are only one example of many. Religion is far more than a spiritual or verbal system. Religious practices are full of tangible or visible things that play a significant role in religion and are important for human life. Thus, the question arises: What is a ‘religious’ or a ‘sacred’ material object and how does it interact with people exactly? In other words: How does a thing become so meaningful as the Stone of the Anointing and the objects placed on top of it, such that we end up describing it as ‘religious’ or ‘sacred’?

In the following chapter I will present a short introduction of the discussion about artefacts and objects by outlining the relevance of material culture studies for empirical religious studies. Furthermore, I will reflect on some methodological considerations and instructions on how to deal with artefacts and objects in the field of religious studies. To conclude, I will show paradigmatically what kind of theoretical impact and benefit the study of material objects could have for Practical Theology if it integrates the research of artefacts and things into its own research programme.

2 Traditions of Material Analysis

Throughout history material objects have played a prominent role in European philosophy. Rooted in Platonic contemplation, a neo-Platonic tradition postulated a dualistic division between mind and body which was formative for many centuries. In modern times Renes Descartes renewed this dualism in his *Meditationes* through his distinction between the immaterial mind as a *res cogitans* (thinking thing) and the material body as a *res extensa* (existing thing). Even though Descartes described both entities in a way of interaction, in Cartesian rationalism the material body was devalued through a dualism of the body and spirit. Referring to the same neo-Platonic philosophical tradition, Christian scholasticism received the human mind as immortal and spiritual, whereas the body and tangible goods were an expression of transience. Religion was an “interior spiritual experience” and “study of religion, yielding a focus on beliefs.” (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 1) Following this antagonistic concept, a Christian moral against greed was developed, referring also to Biblical sources criticising excessive material possessions as an unchristian immoral way of life. Even though tangible things in religious life were always apparent in history, the Christian doctrine adopted an ambivalent and negative stance towards material objects, which could become human idols and induce mankind to destructive dependencies. The tradition of Lutheran reformation and its highlighting focus on the spiritual biblical word can be understood as a strengthening of these tendencies.

Not only in Christian theology does one find a fundamental scepticism regarding material things, but also in the beginning of non-confessional religious studies this
Scepticism can be seen, where the analysis of fetishism in ‘primitive’ religious practices received a lot of attention. Charles de Brosses (1760) depicted in his book *Du culte des dieux fétiches* that objects are worshipped as gods, a characterisation which is also outlined in Émile Durkheim’s (1912) great work *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. The examination of material artefacts and objects was preluded, but their unprejudiced in-depth analysis was integrated into other fields of research. Cultural material artefacts were a topic of interest in the field of archaeology (archaeological findings), ethnology (everyday items) or anthropology and induced various theoretical concepts about material culture (Miller 1998).

As part of a cultural turn the *material turn* argued strongly for the social relevance of things and artefacts and had a strong impact on social sciences and humanities to focus on material cultural representations (Appadurai 1986). At least since the 1980s material objects as constitutive elements for culture were considered in a participating position of interaction with all humankind and as an indicator of their social status. Thus, not only the function of material things should be analysed but also their symbolic meaning and content as emanations of a cultural location. An additional step was taken by the actor-network theory emphasising an active and creative power of things in a pattern of agency. These reflections of the material turn can be understood as a change of paradigm in which no longer exclusively human beings are in the position to act but also material artefacts and things (Latour 1993). The *theory of practice* is related to that change of paradigm and a fruitful approach for a new perspective on material culture. Material objects are of different though equal entities of arrangements and are connected and constitutive for practises as the basic element of social life (Schatzki 2010).

A philosophical tradition that reconstructs the attribution of meaning to artefacts and things is the Phenomenology which “[... is an attempt to study in a systematic manner our different subjective perspectives, our different ways of experiencing reality.” (Føllesdal 2010, 32) Edmund Husserl, the founder of Phenomenology, took the connection between the human mind and the appearance of material things as the starting point for a transcendental philosophy and returned to the things themselves and described their reception through human mind. The ambiguous meaning of a thing is a product of the intentionality of the human consciousness that receives objects not as what they are but as what they appear to humans. Humans do not perceive things as they are but in a dependency with an intentional focused consciousness (Held 1996, 454–456). The experience and the perception of material things is embedded in a structure of appresentation, i.e., the addition of hidden aspects which are connected to previous experiences and knowledge about an object. Husserl concludes that things are constantly in a transcendental position in human’s mind whereby the task of a phenomenological analysis is to describe the constitution of this position. No material object can be received as isolated but is embedded into patterns of space and time. Therefore, all things are in references to existing senses of an universal horizon in the surrounding world, and act inside this horizon. The Husserlian concept of lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) emphasises the corporal
experienced world and things in it, too. The lifeworld is the pre-reflexive and dynamic horizon of all our lived experiences in the world, thus, it is that scene on which all things appear for human’s consciousness. Material things are in the view of the phenomenological tradition effective elements in all human lifeworlds and give impetus to people to act and interact. Another merit is the phenomenological accordant perception between the human body and material things as related corporal appearances (Waldenfels 2015).

3 Material Religion, ‘Sacralised’ Things, and Artefacts

The research on artefacts in the field of religion(s) is strongly stimulated by the phenomenologically sensitised insights of material culture studies which led to overcoming the traditional antagonism between mind and body (Thomas 2006). The perspective of material culture studies can be described as a new understanding of the interaction between humankind and things in all aspects of culture and as a new sensibility to examine the meaning of material objects (Hahn 2014). Material culture is visible in all parts of human life and therefore a constitutive player in society. Close to the described programme of Phenomenology, material objects are understood in a relation of meaning for people in contact with them. The meaning of material objects becomes apparent by analysing the human perception and dealing with them and the impact of things on humankind’s activities (Hahn 2015, 9). Another instructive awareness emerging from material cultures studies is the postulation to differentiate between things (Dinge) and artefacts/items (Sachen). Dinge are defined as natural materials that are unavailable to the human realm, whereas Sachen are defined as available objects having been produced by humans. This distinction will also be used throughout this chapter, whilst attempting not to reify the nature/culture dichotomy.

Some researchers see an academic programme of material religion closely linked to an aesthetic approach in the context of material culture. In this field, religion is understood heuristically as a materially bounded practice in that belief, rituals and other religious practices are carried out in a perceivable way. All religious actors appear through religious practices or rituals that deal with transcendence or sacredness through different kinds of materiality, such as artefacts or their own corporeality (Morgan 2010). To study material religion means seeking a connection between humans’ corporal and religious practices or experiences and focusing on the sensory and material signifiers within this correlation. These signifiers can be colours, olfactory and visible dimensions, elements of architecture, tangible objects, or corporal movements of religious agents. Thus, everything that is perceivable via bodily senses, in the area of religion is of interest for material religion studies. The international journal Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief publishes much in
this domain. Of course, the research on “religious” or “sacred” material objects is challenged by a pre-existing shared assumption and understanding of the phenomena of religion and sacredness. Through exploration of different examples of material objects, we will begin to see an underlying fluid concept of religion that is not restricted to explicit religion.

A basic understanding in material culture studies is that things and artefacts can pose a symbolic meaning beyond the functional, in their own horizon that is inscribed into them through cultural and social practices (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton 1981). The multitude of symbolic meanings can be described as a polysemy which is characteristic for all material objects: A tree can be perceived as a peaceful place providing shade, as a material expression of God’s creation as well as an emblematic symbol for the ecological movement. All different semantic dimensions and attributed symbolic meanings cause different emotions, responses, and reactions. Thus, the symbolic meaning of a tree is closely linked to different patterns of human interpretations and actions associated with it. Thus, no thing is inherently religious, instead it is always perceived as a thing which is attributed with a specific symbolic religious meaning. Artefacts as well as things are not unambiguous but equivocal. Hence the vagueness of their meaning is the basic condition for a religious attribution. To be more specific: The candles on top of the Stone of the Anointing described above could be lit to illuminate, for example, a room, the wax would last for a few hours and one possible functional sense of the candle would be fulfilled. But in this example another dimension of content and meaning is inscribed on the candle through a social context and an individual belief that the contact with the stone changes the value of the items on top. One can assume that the owner will not light this candle like any other and their activities are guided by the candle, hence the functional sense of this artefact is reduced or even liquidated through a new meaningful attribution. The candles are transfigured into symbols of this meaningful experience in life and can remind of this specific moment. Ultimately therefore, all objects and artefacts are open to be categorised as religious and may be objects of practiced intersubjective transfiguration leading to a separation of these objects from less valued things or artefacts. This process can be understood as a practice of sacralisation (Cress 2021, 33-35). Sacred things in explicit religion can be described as extraordinary, worthy of protection, integral parts of cultic practices at a tabooed place (Kohl 2003, 151–158). Furthermore, material objects (both, artefacts, and things) can occupy an integral function in religious life and play distinct roles within it: some of them embody and represent a deity or saints and serve as a go-between to unreachable figures enabling communication and relation between humankind and transcendent divinities. Others can be described as a memory of religious history giving deep insights into specific historical steps of lived and experienced religion (Cress 2014). Through material objects people remember meaningful narrations and can experience them through immediacy. Sacred artefacts in this sense, authentically transport a religious narrative which is then perceivable in a haptic way and increases its comprehensibility for a religious group. Thus, artefacts and things rep-
resent an important aspect of religious identity and sense of belonging to a social group.

The Stone of the Anointing evokes pilgrims’ intersubjective imagination to be close to the Passion and Resurrection after Jesus’ death. Even though the Stone of the Anointing was placed into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre not earlier than in 1811, in the eyes of the believer this artefact is the place where they are corporeally very close to the final step during the Passion. This individual assumption – to be a part of an authentic immediacy in the presence of a materialised religious narrative – seems to be a key moment for a religious attribution of material objects. In a similar way a sacred host during Communion or a collection of relics can be received as sacred artefacts (Laube 2011). They materialise and actualise a religious narrative and – in the perception of the believer – make it visual and perceptible. Artefacts and things transport religious knowledge and serve as vehicles of culturally remembered religious narratives. All these artefacts cannot be characterised as sacred by their functional sense or by their materiality but by a culturally developed meaning and sense, which formats the horizon for a thing’s religious attribution.

As pointed out above, personal belongings and everyday items (candles, photographs etc.) can obtain a new meaning by being brought into contact with “sacred” objects. This emanation is neither a magical charging nor ‘auratising’ of metaphysical power but simply a change in the human perception of the object. Thus, a sacred meaning can be inscribed into all kinds of personal things leaving it to the individual to convey a religious attribution. In this process they become part of a religious sphere and, indeed, sacred from an individual point of view through contact with intersubjectively recognized sacred objects. These moments of transfiguration of the personal items’ meaning can evoke intimate emotional experiences, embodied in these personal objects. Thus, personal items can be a materialised memory of key moments in life; they represent and embody situations of imagined immediacy.

Having this in mind, one can see phenomena of sacralisation not only in explicitly religious fields but in different cultural situations, for instance in pop-culture or in sports. In my current research project, I analyse the social lifeworlds of people who are fanatic about football and focus on the meaning of material objects in this field as well (Probst 2022). The analogy between objects, as described above, and valorised things in this field is evident in my point of view: A jersey worn by a football player during a match and afterwards thrown to a group of fans in the stands – all the fans trying to get a hold on this valuable item – can be seen as a sacred thing as well. In a fan’s perception, this jersey is much more than a piece of clothing. Indeed, in their eyes it is connected to a single player, his performance and effort on the pitch. A specific value is inscribed to this jersey, so that on the one hand the object is a materialised memory of a specific story. On the other, the jersey evokes a specific treatment (e.g., it is hung on the wall or used only during visits to the stadium perhaps never being washed).

Thus, it is not only things and artefacts that get constructed as valorised religious objects, narratives or persons can also be perceived as transfigured sacralised ob-
jects. Research points to ways in which religious attribution of everyday items is shown in response to the question “to what is your heart committed” (Mädler 2006; o.t.). Here it is shown that everyday items can be transfigured to presenting materialised symbols which represent a moment of individual identity and gain a deeper meaning because they mirror processes of life’s consummation. Valorised everyday belongings as representations of their owners’ identity enable these to cope with human contingency vis a vis the unconditional in life. Through this kind of attribution an everyday item is changed not in its material substance but in its symbolic meaning and is shifted into a new horizon. Tracks of implicit religiosity and sacralisation through meaningful things and artefacts can be recognised in daily life, which requires an open view into social processes of people’s everyday lifeworld.

Hence, things and artefacts in different cultural contexts can gain sacred attribution. It is not only material objects in explicit religions that can be objects of transfiguration, but rather, everyday items can also be understood as religious objects. To focus only on explicitly religious institutions reduces our perception of cultural phenomena in daily life that gain a comparable meaning and attribution. Material objects in an institutional system of religion represent, remember, or embody important experiences in life, but all things and artefacts in daily life are in the position to do so as well. Sacredness (and religion) is therefore neither a stable phenomenon nor fixed to a specific site or moment, but liquid and transferable through human practices (Keenan and Arweck 2006). The dispersion of religion in modernity into other cultural contexts, postulated by many researchers, states that the strict distinction between the profane and sacredness is not maintainable (Luckmann 1967). As a more open and wider perspective for religious phenomena it is postulated that practices which transcend human’s life are essential moments for religion. Material things and artefacts are important actors for all kinds of transcending because there is no (religious) practice without materialisation.

4 Analysis of Sacred Things

For an appropriate analysis of all kinds of transfigured things and artefacts in the field of religion I suggest operating with a plurality of empirical methods as it has been proposed and implemented in numerous research projects on artefacts and things within the field of cultural and social sciences (Eisewicht 2016; Hahn and Soentgen 2011). The described multidimensional process of interactions between things, artefacts and humankind in different areas of life is a substantial reason for a plurality of methods to focus on an artefact’s or thing’s meaning and their materiality in their specific context. For this attempt at reconstructing meaning, it is important to reflect on human perception and handling of material objects. Thus, not only is the bare materiality of things and artefacts the leading topic of this research but rather the materialised meaning in a wider horizon for actors interacting with material objects. To study things and artefacts means not only concentrating on
the material object itself but rather on reconstructing the attribution of meaning through cultural and social practices. An interesting proper starting point for a detailed artefact-analysis could be the recognition and perception of things or artefacts in people’s lifeworld as I indicated above. An examination of artefacts or things is therefore basically linked to an analysing approach into processes and dimensions of meaning within social lifeworlds.

Four different aspects (analysis of material composition, aesthetic dimensions, functional usage, and the question about symbolic meaning of artefacts and things) that are rather circularly integrated into each other and not to be understood as a chronological or distinct research process could be instructive for an in-depth analysis of artefacts. A first step is the physical and chemical material matter of artefacts or objects, so that the shape of artefacts or things is investigated by scientific research. A second aspect of an artefact-analysis would be a description of human aesthetic and sensitive experiences in the presence of the object, e.g., to analyze human consciousness in different modes of perception (auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory). In a third dimension, the researcher observes the different modes of functional use following the question for which purpose an artefact, or a thing is utilised or used in a specific situation. A last perspective thematises the diverse symbolic meanings that can be inscribed onto or attributed to an artefact or thing. These four aspects should be seen in a reciprocal relationship and not as isolated steps.

In the field of sacralised artefacts and objects it is essential to adopt a perspective that helps to reconstruct the interaction between material objects and mankind. To explain how artefacts can gain a religious meaning by representing, symbolizing, or revealing aspects of a deity or a transcending moment in life, the point of view in a specific social lifeworld must be considered. Therefore, different kinds of empirical data that open the perspective for multiple expressions of experiences can be considered. A central method of data gathering is the participating observation that is a key instrument of all kinds of non-standardised ethnographies. Focusing on the meaning of artefacts or things, all data in this research setting such as interview transcripts, observational protocols or other kinds of documents can reflect experiences with material objects and the effect on humankind emanating from them. Thus, the undertaking to reconstruct perspectives of human and non-human actors in the wake of ethnographies can be achieved through personal approaches to the primary context of interaction between things, artefacts, and people. Hence, the detailed description in the beginning attempts to be a stimulating starting point for an in-depth analysis of artefacts and things and their dimensions of interaction. At best, the researcher should acquire specific modes of meaning and interactions between things, artefacts, and people by participating and entering into their social lifeworlds. Taking the thing’s and artefact’s meaning into account as an expression and result of social practices means to challenge the examination as a reconstruction of individual perspectives in a social context. Therefore, data that reflects dimensions of social experiences is suitable and appropriate for a closer specification of things’ and artefacts’ meaning. An integrated self-reflection analysis of one’s own perspectives and han-
dlings with things and artefacts can also supplement a reconstruction and interpretation of things’ and artefacts’ (sacralised) meaning in a social lifeworld’s setting. This research approach is understood as a part of a sensory ethnography that uses human’s corporality and the senses as effective research instruments (Pink 2010).

All methodological considerations are based in a phenomenological sensitised cultural-hermeneutic approach that is not censorious of any religious rituals or practiced cults and avoids prejudging them. An intentional unknowing attitude can rather enable a heuristic exploration of unexpected contents of meaning that are connected and attributed to things and artefacts. Thus, a phenomenological based cultural-hermeneutic research remains open-minded for individual attribution of things’ and artefacts’ meaning.

5 Contribution for Practical Theology

Practical Theology – as an academic theological discipline – thematises, reflects and interprets religious practices in all parts of life’s consummation and has its starting-point in human experiences along with the theological reflection on these everyday experiences. Even though the practical theological tradition has previously not focussed on things and artefacts in religious acts, aspects of a cultural and material turn should be integrated into the field of Practical Theology. One of Practical Theology’s endeavours is to observe material culture and to elucidate explicit and implicit religious dimensions of material objects. It was shown above that artefacts and things play a significant role in all religious processes and, therefore, should be more strongly integrated as substantial objects of research into a phenomenologically grounded examination of lived religion in the field of Practical Theology. Finally, the religious attribution of things and artefacts is an evident argument understanding sacredness as an ongoing practice of sacralization that shifts former postulated distinct borders between profanity and sacredness. In summary, three topics can contribute towards an orientation for a materially informed Practical Theology in different religious denominations (Beckmayer 2021, 44-46).

Firstly, material culture was – historically and still today – an integral part of manifold religious practices and should be recognized as an object of high interest into Practical Theology. Practical Theology should adopt a wider and more forthright position to examine all aspects of religious consummation and should not constrict lived religion as a simple expression of inner faith. Social and cultural sciences offer a thoughtful access to human society and culture and are appropriate dialogic partners for a practical theological approach to material religion. The analysis of material aspects of religious practices and materialization of religious meaning into things and artefacts was proposed as a qualitative research program above. In this way, Practical Theology uses these research tools, developed in the fields of cultural and social sciences in an unbiased way. To reconstruct and analyse things’ and artefacts’ substantial composition and symbolic meaning – not in a moral position but
with a curious and acknowledging attitude – challenges the practical theological researcher to acquire and apply qualitative and empirical methods from social sciences into their own field of interest. Practical Theology is thus positioned in a hinge function between the dynamic variety of religious practices and an academic description and reflection on these human processes. Following this understanding, Practical Theology examines which horizons of meaning and religious attribution are inscribed into material objects and how they influence and interact with human practices.

Secondly, Practical Theology should include not only qualitative and empirical dimensions of social and cultural studies but phenomenologically grounded reflections on human experiences in daily life. Human beings are corporeal creatures and situated in a contingent context of space, time, and social interaction. Religious practices are bound to humans’ social lifeworld that is at all times encompassed with religious contents and transcending dimensions that everybody must interpret. Practical Theology learns about offered interpretations of religious institutions and observes considerations of religious and transcending moments. To name experiences ‘religious’ results from a specific lifeworld-positioned standpoint of interpretation. In the same way, religious symbolic meanings of artefacts and things can be taken as a reasonable example of a socially determined and content-related attribution of human experience. Hence, Practical Theology is an experiencing lifeworld-related academic program that requires cultural hermeneutics of human experiences and their standpoint-based interpretations of symbolic meanings. A phenomenologically sensitive Practical Theology describes and examines contexts in which material objects receive a religious meaning. The continued interest in this analysis focuses on human handlings and interactions that are led by materialised meanings of artefacts and objects.

Finally, Practical Theology integrates the significant insight of material culture studies, namely that the processes and practices of things’ and artefacts’ sacralisation are fluid, and depend on the interactions between objects and human beings. All kinds of material objects, not only in religious institutions, are open to be received as symbolically religious. As shown above, things and artefacts are variable and transformable in their polysemy and their multiple symbolic meanings. For a thing’s or artefact’s attribution with the symbolic meaning “sacred” or “religious”, specific continuous practices and narrations are required: in religious institutions, ritualised consecrations of things or artefacts may be seen, everyday sacred items could be kept in a safe place or used only during special moments. Practical Theology analyses not only the intersubjective sacralisation through social practices and institutional narratives, such as a postulated material symbolic representation of a deity or the participation of material objects in institutional consummation but also focuses on human everyday and individual sacralising attributions of things and artefacts. The insights of sacralisation-processes with material objects can be integrated into a wider understanding regarding the concept of sacredness and profanity. The often-postulated distinction between different spheres that structure phenomena of religious practices and experiences should be left behind. The
dispersion of religion into different cultural and social fields can be perceived on the topic of artefacts’ and things’ sacralisation like under a burning glass. Transfigured and sacralised material objects are apparent not only in religious institutions but in all social lifeworlds.

Bibliography


