

The Goddess and the Virgin: Materiality in Western Europe

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Abstract

Materiality causes disruptions in Western discourses and, accordingly, has been largely relegated to being representational instead of sensual, embodied or tangible. The present article, relationally situated around two forms of the Divine Feminine, forms part of a greater work in progress and discusses two ethnographic accounts that highlight the role materiality plays in vernacular, non-mainstream religious contexts in contemporary Western Europe. The practices and performances that take place in relation to Our Lady of Avalon (the Glastonbury Goddess) and the Virgin of Alcala de los Gazules in Andalusia exemplify the *lived* reality of religion in context where objects and offerings are subjective, relational participants in ceremony, rites, and ritual. Here, objects play central roles in how beliefs are created and relationships with the divine are maintained and negotiated. This article explores the idea that although 'modern' by name and culture, Westerners' vernacular engagement with objects tells another story that not only challenges the current dominant discourses responsible for reproducing current theories about materiality, but produces the idea that there is a common rubric, or protocol, for the way in which Westerners deal with and relate to religious materiality.

Introduction

'Material religion' relates directly to the senses: it can be smelled, touched, seen, felt, heard, and tasted. Religious materiality is seen in countless colorful forms from ritual performances to venerated objects such as statues, icons, and images; it is the bones of a saint that are kissed and touched in acts of devotion, the smell of incense in a temple, an acorn left on a Pagan altar, or flowers used to dress a shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Material religion can refer to a burial mound, a sacred spring, a talisman, amulet, or objects used in ceremony. It is the act of making pilgrimage, of eating, and meditating. In essence, the term 'material religion' refers to any *thing* used, created, done, and/or related to within a multitude of religious expressive forms, and the list is practically endless. Hence it goes to follow that the *lived* reality of religions is inescapably entangled with material culture. But this asser-

tion does not come without its own Pandora's Box of problems. Because religion is often defined in relation to spirituality, metaphysics and/or transcendence, religious objects are largely relegated to being symbolic and representational instead of tangible, sensual, or embodied forms of religious expression. For that matter, the problematic nature of materiality is such that the theorists responsible for reproducing the dominant discourses relating to materiality have remained aloof from the actual 'goings on' of religion, especially with regards to minority practitioners, vernacular and non-mainstream religiosities.

This work sets out to bridge that gap through two means. One is through case studies of two forms of the divine feminine (the Goddess of Glastonbury, England, and the Virgin of Alcala de los Gazules in Andalusia, Spain) that show the material practices, the objects offered and made offerings to, and performances that take place at their altars and in their Temple/shrine settings. These ethnographic accounts allow for the subjectivity roles of objects and exemplify the relationships that take place in two religiously distinct Western European vernacular contexts as they are experienced by minority and non-mainstream participants. The second is to create a space in the current theorizations for the acknowledgement of religious materiality in vernacular and non-mainstream contexts, one that goes beyond the social and economic life of things. This last highlights the problems that become evident when one compares the 'official' or elite version of the story of materiality with the narrated experiences told by those religious practitioners who live outside the box of theoretical discourses. Using the ethnographic data at hand, I will give evidence to support the existence of a cognitively dissonant rubric, or protocol, for the way in which Westerners deal with, process, create, and relate to vernacular, non-mainstream religious materiality.

Discussion

The dominant discourses of materiality would have us theoretically welcome material objects into the fold of human cultural studies, and rightly so. Some of the major works addressing materiality include Daniel Miller's edited volume *Materiality*.¹ Through different accounts this work discusses the fundamental role objects play through a multitude of manifestations that culminate on one point: that which humans create ends up shaping us, our cultural reflections of ourselves, and our humanity. The foundational ideas expressed in Pierre Bourdieu's

1. Daniel Miller, *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

*Outline of a Theory of Practice*² explore how the constitution of things conditions human socialization. Marilyn Strathern³ examines the relations that become evident when people become objects capable of transmitting agencies in Melanesian contexts. In the introduction to his edited volume, *The Social Life of Things*,⁴ Arjun Appadurai discusses politics and value in the social life of commodities. He asserts that commodities continually breach existing frameworks of prices, negotiating, etc through their insistence on not representing the same values among those involved in their exchange.⁵ Alan D. Schrift locates the theme of the 'gift' at the 'center of current discussions of deconstruction, gender, ethics, philosophy, anthropology, and economics.'⁶ Alfred Gell examines the roles of objects as what we anthropomorphize and intentionally infer qualities and agencies upon them. Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell's edited work *Thinking Through Things* is a methodological project that renders objects capable of producing a multiplicity of creative theories, novel ideas and concepts where "the 'things' themselves dictate a *plurality* of ontologies"⁷ that challenge approaches largely symptomatic of modernist thought. These theorists and more recognize the importance of 'taking things seriously' as they are produced, reproduced and related to in Western and other cultures. Indeed, they have done wonderfully ground breaking jobs of picking 'things' up, dusting them off, and creating new, even revolutionary, theoretical discourses that provide useful ways through which objects can be engaged.

However, outside of theoretical views, 'things' have always been with us. People speak to their cars, they scold the laundry basket that gets under their feet, or 'love' their wooly pajamas. As mentioned before, being human means interacting with and relating to material culture. We have no choice. Yet when it comes to 'things' as they are engaged, created, displayed and related to by those in Western vernacular and non-mainstream religiosities, 'things' or 'objects' have been strangely

2. Pierre Bordieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

3. Marilyn Strathern, "Partners and Consumers," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan. Schrift, (London Routledge, 1997).

4. Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things, Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

5. Ibid., 57.

6. Alan Schrift, ed. *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, London: Routledge, 1997), 3.

7 Alfred Gell, *The Anthropology of Time* (Oxford: Berg, 1992; Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell, eds. *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 7.

overlooked. Enter the Goddess (Our Lady of Avalon) and the Virgin of Alcala.

If the work of theorists has been mainly to discuss materiality in terms of commodities inserted into social and economic framework, then objects in vernacular, non-mainstream religious contexts are in fact relationally capable of containing their own operative agencies. In these contexts objects are active and subjective participants in performances, rituals, and shrine and temple settings. This last is a more useful way of thinking because it involves taking seriously not only the accounts given by those actors in relational encounters with objects, but the objects of devotion themselves. In these instances, normative economic value systems are turned on their heads and *things* slip beyond the prescribed roles of commodities and into the realms of the 'X' factor that is the unknown, where value can be relational, even, depending on the context, magical. But before I launch into ethnographic accounts of bones, feathers, baby dummies, and gold, I will expound on some necessary terms of engagement.

Vernacular Religion

Leonard Primiano coined the term 'vernacular religion' to redress 'a heritage of scholarly misrepresentation, in what I [Primiano] see as the necessary methodological reflexivity on the ethnographic process..⁸ He describes it as 'personal' and 'private' and says, 'Vernacular religion is, by definition, religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it'.⁹ This coinage circumscribed the scholarly tendencies of anthropologists, historians, sociologists, folklorists and those in the study of religions who have 'consistently named religious people's beliefs in residualistic, derogatory ways as 'folk', 'unofficial', or 'popular' religion, and have then juxtaposed these terms on a two-tiered model with 'official religion'.¹⁰ This could be due in part to how the male-dominated discourses of Protestantism and modernity have generally dismissed object use and veneration as the stuff of superstition, old women, and ignorance — things that are remnant of a Pagan past or 'primitive' alterity. Primiano adds that this juxtaposition implies 'that religion somewhere exists as a pure element which is some way transformed, even contaminated, by its exposure to human communi-

8. Primiano, Leonard N. "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklore." *Western Folklore* 54 (1995):42.

9. *Ibid.*, 44.

10. *Ibid.*, 38.

ties'.¹¹ It can also be suggested that 'high' religion regards vernacular or 'low' religion as invalid and in some way inauthentic. This last refers to the elitism found in many doctrinal religions and academic disciplines that consequently marginalizes its practitioners. According to Primiano, although several scholars in recent years have addressed the problematic nature of the two-tiered, dualistic model, no alternatives were being found, even though 'what scholars have referred to as "official" religion does not, in fact, exist'.¹² Every religiosity, whether doctrinal or non-doctrinal, has no choice but to be vernacular in that they take on the qualities and physical expressions of the places where they take seed and grow. For example, the Vatican in Rome is still culturally Italian. Its inhabitants speak Italian, eat Italian food, and drink Italian wine. Roman Catholicism is just that: Roman, local to Rome. So for academics, involvement with vernacular, popular or folk religious practices entails theoretically 'getting a bit messy'. Vernacular religion is not a refined dining experience with the House of Windsor; it is a hearty outdoor feast with old friends.

Objects or Things

One of the more perplexing parts about being a student of materiality is knowing where and when to use the terms 'objects' and 'things'. James Leach makes an attempt to define the difference between them. He says, 'Objects are fitted into cultural contexts, while 'things' often are discussed only as the necessary material backdrop to the workings of society'.¹³ While not completely adequate as a definition, it has become apparent that 'things' is the term more commonly chosen by social theorists. As Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell write in the introduction to *Thinking Through Things: Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*, 'The advantage of 'things' as a term is that, unlike 'objects', 'artifacts' and 'materiality', they carry minimal theoretical baggage'.¹⁴ There is value in this statement. 'Things' is not a particularly charged word. Yet 'objects' is the term more commonly used in relation to religion. Because of its mild contestability, it can be used as a defining point between that which refers to the theories being turned out by social anthropologists and that which refers to religious objects in context, i.e. things that are

11. Ibid., 39.

12. Ibid., 45.

13. James Leach, "Differentiation and Encompassment: A Critique of Alfred Gell's Theory of the Abduction of Creativity," in *Thinking Through Things*, ed. Amiria Henare and others, (London: Routledge 2007), 16

14. Ibid., 5.

capable of going beyond that which is representational, social, or commoditized. Although I reserve the right to use 'things' as and when necessary, religious objects will here be religious 'objects'.

The Goddess and Mary

The Glastonbury Goddess and the Virgin of Alcala are distinct in their own rights, yet the material practices and performances that take place in relation to them are proving to have fascinating points of interplay, parallels, and differences. However, I should first note that I am aware of the common idea that the Virgin Mary is a continuation and superimposition of ancient local goddesses such as Isis or Cybele (to name two of many). Indeed, one of my informants, a Spanish devotee of the Virgin of Alcala, made the observation that the statue and the style of the shrine share an uncanny likeness to those of some of the female deities celebrated throughout the ancient worlds of Greece and Egypt. However, I suggest that those ideas be temporarily suspended both for the sake of this article and in respect to those devotees who might find that idea disagreeable.

Ethnography

The ethnographic data discussed in this paper is taken from time spent in the temple and shrine with Our Lady of Avalon and the Virgin of Alcala and from encounters with devotees, caretakers, and clergy. My research methods have been mainly qualitative and have taken the form of one-to-one formal, semi-formal, and informal interviews, participant observation, and group interviews. My methods can also be described as 'sensual ethnography' because they have included a kind of 'hands on' approach that has involved picking asparagus, participating in ritual, watering flower beds, moving rocks, cooking, eating, and drinking with informants.

In the last year and a half I have had made contact with many Goddess devotees, but have mainly been informed about the workings of the temple by one particular founding priestess. Formal interviews that soon began to take on the feel of friendly chats have mainly taken place in a café near the temple, but also included my being shown around the temple and introduced to the deities that reside therein. I have attended public ceremonies and processions of the Goddess, observed the seasonal changing of the altars and the flux of materiality used in devotional practice, and I have participated in temple opening ceremonies. On a more day-to-day basis, I have visited the temple regularly (I live near Glastonbury, which makes regular visits easy). Sometimes research

meant just going into the temple and sitting quietly for long periods of time, sometimes observing devotees and the interactions that take place at the altar, and other times reading the literature available there.

I was introduced to the Virgin of Alcala de los Gazules by my partner's mother, who is both from the village of Alcala and a devotee of the Virgin. After three casual family visits to the shrine, I could not stop thinking about all the wonderful materiality in use there, so I decided to test the possibility of using this complex in my fieldwork studies. By this point I had already met the *santero* (literally translated as someone who works with or deals with saints) so that when I went back on the 'business' of making a study of the Virgin, I was remembered and welcomed. I have spent three occasions of two weeks each around Alcala, not always staying in the village, but close by. Alcala is a tightly woven community, so meetings were easily arranged and often took place the same day or the next day by means of 'Ah, I know who you need to speak to!' then a phone call would be made and a meeting arranged. Through these means, I have (formally and informally) interviewed devotees, the village priest, the *santero*, his wife, the *santera*, and those members of the cult of the Virgin who are intimately involved with the seasonal and liturgical rites centered upon the changing of the Virgin's mantles.

The Goddess

I have been wondering in and out of Glastonbury for years, sometimes living, there sometimes not. Glastonbury is a remarkably complex and multi-layered locale. It is a small Somerset market town in the Southwest of England and also one of the most spiritually colorful places that I have experienced. Among the many names given to Glastonbury are 'Avalon', the 'Isle of Apples', the 'Isle of Glass', and the 'Isle of the Dead'. With 8,600 inhabitants, Glastonbury is home to a patchwork of faiths, beliefs, spiritualities, and ideals. One resident said that is the 'spiritual heart' of Europe. Others have claimed that it is home to ancient mystery schools, the resting place of King Arthur and his Lady, and the burial place of the Holy Grail. Indeed, Glastonbury is famous both locally and worldwide for many things too numerous to mention here; however, what is relevant is Glastonbury's remarkable landscape. Marion Bowman says that 'Some regard it [Glastonbury] as a significant prehistoric centre of Goddess worship, confirmed for present day devotees by figures of the Goddess they discern in the landscape and by the existence in the Christian era of strong devotion to Our Lady St Mary of Glastonbury and to St Bridget, both widely regarded as Christianised

forms of the Goddess.¹⁵ John Michell offers a description of Glastonbury's landscape and its best iconic landscape feature, the Glastonbury Tor. He writes,

The sanctity of Glastonbury is not a matter of human convention, nor did it arise from any historical event. It was decreed directly by nature. That conclusion is made obvious to anyone who visits Glastonbury, especially at dawn or evening when the mystical quality of the light over its landscape is particularly intense. As one enters the Glastonbury landscape, over the hills which surround its lowlands, one's perception of natural light and colour subtly changes. Around the towering cone of Glastonbury Tor is a countryside which gives the impression of being somehow different from any other. It can seem wistful, nostalgic, other-worldly, even intimidating, but it is never quite ordinary.¹⁶

The Tor dominates the Somerset landscape and can be seen from as far as South Wales on a clear day. A priestess of Avalon told me that the Glastonbury Goddess (known as Novala, Our Lady of Avalon, keeper of the mysteries; and Lady of the Mists of Avalon) presides over the lands from around which the Tor is visible to the naked eye. The Goddess, according to this informant, is visibly present in and around Glastonbury's landscape.

The Glastonbury Goddess Temple is situated just off the Glastonbury High Street and is both an active point in the community as well as a point of Pagan pilgrimage for Goddess worshippers. First opened in 2002, it is the first indigenous temple dedicated to the Goddess in 1,500 years, according to its founders, and it is the first of a network of temples that have been founded in different parts of Europe, the USA and Australia. The temple is open six days a week¹⁷, and provides a space to the community where the public are invited to participate in ceremonies and Kundalini yoga classes, to meditate, enter into personal prayer, read, make offerings, stop and rest, and/or seek healing and/or oracular advice. The website of Kathy Jones (a priestess of Avalon, researcher and founding member of the Goddess Temple) describes the Goddess Temple as,

A place set aside for the Lady of Avalon.
A place of beauty, love and welcoming joy.

15. Marion Bowman, "Procession and possession in Glastonbury: continuity, change and the manipulation of tradition", *Folklore*. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2386/is_3_115/ai_n8589966

16 John Michell, *New Light on the Ancient Mystery of Glastonbury*, (Glastonbury, Somerset: Gothic Image Publications, 1997), ii.

17. Geraldine Charles, "The Glastonbury Goddess Temple," <http://goddess temple.co.uk/>

A place for those who love Her to meet each other.
 A place for celebrations, rituals, rites of passage, for all seasons of the year
 and for all aspects of Goddess.
 Where we may laugh and cry, sing and weep in her loving embrace.¹⁸

The Goddess Temple is a place where the goddesses who are celebrated are indigenous and local to Glastonbury and the Isle of Avalon (Glastonbury's mystical counterpart). In the temple, the goddesses take the forms of willow wickerwork statues who are venerated, spoken with, and said by informants to embody the Goddesses. The Nine Morgens, permanent residents in the temple, are goddesses connected to different parts of the landscape around the town, such as springs, mounds, and groves. More goddesses are connected to different aspects of the seasonal cycles and directions, and they come and go accordingly. Yet there is one goddess that presides over the whole of the landscape of Glastonbury (and Avalon). The Goddess is paradoxically one and many simultaneously. Cynthia Eller writes, "One very real difficulty in writing about feminist spirituality is deciding whether to use the singular or the plural in referring to the divine".¹⁹ In an interview given to the BBC, Kathy Jones says, "I think there is one goddess, and she has ten thousand faces".²⁰ So when one refers to 'the Goddess' in Glastonbury, either one is referring to all of them as one, a particular 'face' of the Goddess that 'resonates' with an individual devotee, or with the goddess that is being celebrated at that particular point in the Wheel of the year.

The material practices of the temple are centered around the altar and the willow wickerwork goddess figures that reside there. The temple is a source of continual change, renovation, innovation, and devotion, whereby countless forms of volatile, votive expression can be found. Priestesses and devotees devote much of their time to Goddess-centered creativity. 'Feminist spirituality is a religion of doing more than believing'.²¹ From what I have encountered at the Goddess Temple in Glastonbury, England, I can say with certainty that this is true. Dressing the temple involves drawing on the collective pool of creative ideas and energies that come from devotees. From this the temple is decorated and changed cyclically in accordance with the deities who correlate with the

18. "A Goddess Temple in Glastonbury," *In the Heart of the Goddess: The Website of Kathy Jones*, <http://www.kathyjones.co.uk/temple/goddess temple.html>.

19. Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 133.

20. BBC, "Goddess spirituality in Glastonbury," BBC Religion & Ethics-Paganism, <http://www/bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/paganism/subdivisions/goddess.shtml>

21. Eller, 83.

eight directions and the eight sabbats found on the ceremonial Goddess Wheel of the year (based on the Wiccan Wheel), known as the sacred Wheel of Britannia, or Ana, in which the eight directions are North, North-East, East, South-East, South, South-West, West, and North-West. Local Glastonbury artists create both the willow figures and the painting that holds the center of the Temple. One informant told me that once the painting is placed at the center of the altar, the rest of the creativity is correlated and emanates from there. The Goddess Temple website provides an overview of the Wheel of Ana and their particular deities and correspondences.²² Here they in brief:

Direction	Element	Sabbat	Color	Animal	Objects	Goddesses
North	Air	<i>Winter Solstice</i>	Violet/Silver	Wren, Eagle, Owl, Buzzard	Scepter, Sword, Feather, Fan	Mother of Air: Danu, Anu, Arianrhod, Bone Woman, Stone Woman, Cailleach, Tyronoe
North-east		<i>Imbolc</i>	White	Swan, Snake, Wolf, Cow	Grael, Spindle, Wheel	Maiden Goddess: Brigit, Bridie, Kernababy, Thitis
East	Fire	<i>Spring Equinox</i>	Green, Gold	Bear, Hare, Hen, Cat	Wand/Rod	Mother of Fire: Artha, Grainne, Sulis, Eostra, Cliton
South-east		<i>Beltane</i>	Red	Mare, Horse, Dove, Swan	Comb, Mirror, Shell	Lover/Virgin Goddess: (Ker) Rhiannon, Olwen, Elen, Blodeuwedd, Thetis
South	Water	<i>Summer Solstice</i>	Blue, Turquoise	Dolphin, Whale, Salmon, Seal	Chalice, Shell	Mother of Water: Domnu, Queen of the Deep, Lady of the Springs and Wells, Lady of the Lake, Gliten
South-west		<i>Lammas</i>	Yellow	Horned Deer, Cattle, Sheep, Goats	Loom, Shuttle	Mother Goddess: Ker, Grain Goddess, Madron, Glitonea
West	Earth	<i>Autumn Equinox</i>	Brown, Orange	Boar, Badger, Fox;	Stone, Orb, Crystal	Mother of Earth: Banbha, Brigantia, Gaia, Moronoe

22. "The Wheel of the Year," *The Glastonbury Goddess Temple*, <http://www.goddess temple.co.uk/>.

North-west		<i>Samhain</i>	Black	Sow, Toad,	Caul-dron, Sickle,	Crone Goddess: Dark Mother, Keridwen, Sheela na Gig; Mazoe
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Objects of natural materials are generally offered at the temple: wood, bone, minerals, stones, feathers, acorns, hazelnuts, shells, plants, and flowers are quite commonly used. Ribbons, clouts, candles, hand-made ornaments, and/or jewelry (earrings, necklaces) are sometimes tied to or hung on the wicker goddess on display at that time. Offerings also consist of items such as money, paintings, goddess figurines, jewelry of sentimental or other value, or photographs of loved ones who are either ill or passed away. However, the point of time on the wheel of the year dictates the types of offerings made to the goddess on display in the temple and the materials of which those offerings consist. For example, snowdrops will be offered to Bridie, or Brigit, during and around the time of Imbolc (1 February). Around the spring equinox, blown eggs and pink quartz are often left in honor of the Goddess Eostra or Cliton. At Lammas (around the first of August), bread is left as an offering on the altar in the temple, as are Bridie, or corn dollies. Ivy will be offered to Keridwen during Her time in the temple around Samhain (1 November). In the autumn months, apples, fruits and nuts are left along with photographs of the deceased as memorials where they are either left on the altar or pinned/tied to the wicker statue when the ancestors are remembered. A priestess told me that a cow skull was recently offered to the temple from a female devotee's herd. The cow died naturally, so the skull was intact. The devotee brought it to the temple to be adorned and dedicated to the bone goddess Danu, the goddess of death, during her time in the temple around the winter solstice. Other forms of offerings are also made to the Goddess Temple, such as the volunteered time of devotees in service to the temple and monetary donations.

Offerings given to the Goddess, or left at the altar of the temple, vary as much in materials as they do in creativity, and it can be suggested that an overall rubric is followed that is reflected by the aesthetics and arrangement of objects on the Goddesses and the altar found in the temple. Within the creativity of offerings to the Goddess, there are limits dictated by the appreciation and value for those things that are either found in nature (acorns, hazelnuts, pine cones, wild flowers, berries, etc.), created from natural materials, generally of non-economic value (generally wood), or are indigenous to the land around Glastonbury. Offerings are also inspired by what can be considered normative forms of Goddess Pagan materiality (goddess statues, crystals, etc), or

are personal (jewelry worn by a devotee, photos of loved ones ill or deceased).

From time spent at the temple, I have observed that objects offered to the Goddess are often given in acts of meditation, prayer, or invocation. The act of making material offerings at the altar sometimes involves touching one of the willow figures, but this is usually when something is going to be pinned or tied on. Willow goddesses receive the most contact on days of procession. Relationships with the Goddess are solidified and made physical through the act of making offerings, thus rooting the devotee further into a more personal relationship with the divine. The figures of the Goddess become relational objects that are treated as *subjects* (instead of objects). Informants tell me that the Goddess is often petitioned for help with problems such as economic hardship, infertility, or asked to aid in healing spiritual, physical or psychological damage or difficulties encountered by either a devotee or a loved one. She is also petitioned in order to give thanks, or in celebration of her. Pledges and promises are sometimes made using the exemplifying phrase 'If you do this for me, I will buy you the grounds on which to build a new temple'. It can be suggested from this last that, although I am told that trying to barter with the Goddess is risky business, entering into negotiations with her is permissible, especially when, but not limited to, things of a practical value to the temple are being offered.

Virgin of Alcala

The village of Alcala de los Gazules rests on a hill top in the Southern Spanish region of Andalusia, and in the province of Cadiz. Alcala has a small population of around 5,600 inhabitants. The sanctuary and shrine of the Virgin of Alcala are approximately five kilometres from the village, and a path between village and shrine forms a pilgrimage route used by the villagers to access the shrine (sometimes on their knees). Interviews with the *santero*, or shrine steward, who resides at the shrine of the Virgin, usually involve long hours of walking, talking and light physical labor. Time spent with the *santero* almost always involves cooking, eating, drinking, and being given my own room for the siesta. This form of conducting fieldwork comes highly recommended. During these visits I have also had the opportunity to interview participants in some of the more intimate rituals involving the statue as well as those devotees who regularly visit the shrine.

The Virgin of Alcala is said to be 'extremely miraculous' and flourishes within a vibrant Catholic cultic movement (the cult of the Virgin) where displays of passion and physical contact are alive, stable and continuous. The Baroque-style shrine is over 400 years old. When I

have been there it has been cool, dimly lit and has smelled strongly of a mixture of frankincense, must and flowers. The statue is three feet tall and sits in a *templete* (or small temple) of silver within an elevated dome-like structure at the head of the shrine, where a spiral staircase off to the right gives access to the Virgin's 'chamber'. The altar of the Virgin sits about eight feet below the statue and is the point where flowers and other offerings are left.

The performances that take place in relation to the Virgin are best described as acts resulting from a combination of doctrine and popular piety due to the vernacular customs practiced in relation to her uniqueness of place and ties with village community of Alcala. The parish priest of Alcala told me during an interview that women outnumber men as devotees, but not by very much. Male devotion to the Virgin in this particular context is alive. However, the priest added that women are prone to outnumber men when it comes to church attendance.

The Virgin's robes are one of the major foci of performance in the shrine. In the chamber, her mantle, which is said to have miraculous properties, can be touched while one asks for a miracle or prays to the Virgin. The devotee puts the train of the Virgin's mantle over his or her head. This is the moment when objects such as jewelry, photos, or prayer requests are left on the 'body' of the Virgin, particularly under her feet. The importance of the Virgin's mantles is seen in the rites that surround the changing of her robes. An elite group of women within the local cult of the Virgin called the *camaristas* (literally translated as 'chamber maids') get together during specific points in the year and remove, wash, and change the mantles worn by the statue. The *camaristas* tell me that the mantles are colour coordinated to coincide with the Catholic liturgical year. For example, in the autumn and winter months the Virgin is dressed in dark blue, in the spring and at Easter she is dressed in white, and so on. The Virgin has many mantles that have been donated to her by convents, anonymous donors, and devotees. Many of them are sewn with gold thread, and many are three and four hundred years old.

Objects offered to the Virgin vary in materials and are either extremely personal and of sentimental value, or they are valuable through the lens of normative Western economic value systems. In my visits to the shrine, I have seen offerings such as locks of hair, photos of loved ones, and economically valuable objects such as jewelry made from gold, silver, and precious stones. Offerings can also be an abundance of seasonal flowers, plants, money, jewelry bought especially for the statue (usually gold rings and necklaces mounted with precious stones). The rings offered to the Virgin are placed on her fingers and changed weekly so that every piece has some time on her hands. The Santero said that there is a 'back

log' of jewelry that must be placed on the 'body' of the Virgin, i.e. on her fingers, around her neck, on her wrists, and not enough time. Offerings also include rosary beads, candles, cloth cut from the clothes of loved ones, and written petitions placed under the feet of the statue. I have also seen baby dummies, baby jewelry, and baby shoes left in the shrine as offerings given for prayers answered with regards to fertility. Military medals and *ex votos* are also common shrine inhabitants. Colleen McDannell says that *ex votos* are "physical expressions of thanks for a cure or divine help". From both what I have witnessed in the shrine and according to McDannell, *ex votos* can take the form of 'elaborate paintings depicting the saving act or cure. They could also be simple representations in wax, silver, or wood of the part of the body that was healed'. McDannell writes, "Found in the ancient world, *ex votos* became popular throughout Christian Europe. As early as the sixth century, synods and councils placed restrictions on offerings made in thanks for, or in hopes of, a cure because of lingering pagan associations".²³ The shrine of the Virgin of Alcala is filled with different forms of artistry that graphically depict the actual accidents or tragedies that occurred which called for the Virgin's intervention. In this Virgin's shrine, *ex votos* line the walls.

Although I have made it very clear to the *santero* that I am not Catholic, at one point during my fieldwork he urged me to 'participate' by placing my head under the back of the Virgin's mantle and asking for a 'miracle'. Under the mantle, the world is dark and smells of sweet must, yet it was still possible to make out the little pieces of paper and photos that have been placed under the feet of the statue. Being somewhat emotionally affected by this experience, and coupled with accounts from devotees, I can better understand how material engagements with the statue make her 'real' for those that love her. In the moments of touch and physical engagement, this 'thing' (the Virgin of Alcala) is subjective, personal and approachable. The Virgin is petitioned for help with varying problems such as economic hardship, infertility, sicknesses, family troubles, or offered simple devotion or given thanks for a miracle or answered prayer. As in the case of the Goddess, a similar form of petition by prayer is practiced with the same reciprocal phrase, 'If you do this for me, I will buy you a new roof for the shrine'. The Virgin is interacted and negotiated with daily, and there is no problem in doing so. It can be suggested that offerings to the Virgin can be considered subjective conduits whereby links to the divine are created, the petitions are made possible, and relationships with the Virgin are reinforced.

23. Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995), 152.

Relationships

Despite the differences in Pagan and Catholic religiosities, the general reasons why offerings are made and relationships are sustained follow similar lines. Interviews have found that there are three general reasons why both the Virgin of Alcala and the Goddess of Glastonbury are petitioned, employed, praised and made promises/pledges to:

1. Something good has happened in the devotee's life where the person feels that it has been "Her" (the Goddess or the Virgin) who has provided it for them and they want to show their gratitude in the form of an offering, so offerings are made in thanks.
2. A gift or offering is given with or before a promise or pledge, i.e. 'If you do this for me, I will build a temple in your name, bring you a lock of my hair, a gold ring, or build you new patio, give you a cow, or its skull when it is dead, etc.'
3. An offering is made as votive act of love or veneration without asking for anything in return, i.e. no direct motivation, but the reinforcement of commitment, relationship and devotion.

The accounts discussed here make evident the assertion that objects in these vernacular religious contexts take on the role of subjects. The willow goddess figures and the statue of the Virgin of Alcala are active, relational participants in ensuing performances with their devotees. However, according to current theorizations of materiality, the definition of what it means to be a human subject is defined in relation to what it means to be a material, non human object. Daniel Miller, in his introduction to *Materiality*,²⁴ explores important questions of relational placement, i.e. where the subject stops and the object begins. Resolving this dualism forms the focus for the essays discussed in *Materiality*. Miller says, 'it will become evident that we can indeed resolve the dualism of subjects and objects through philosophy. But these "resolutions" are so dependent upon the abstract nature of philosophy that in and of themselves they may be of only limited benefit to anthropology'.²⁴ I suggest that at least part of the solution to this theoretical dilemma be found in exploring the lived, experiential reality of Western vernacular and non-mainstream religiosities. In these contexts, there are no abstractions. 'Objects/subjects' show support, love, and care for their devotees which are in turn reciprocated. A Goddess Pagan informant said that the willow figures of the goddesses at the temple 'embody the Goddess; she is within and without' (both subject and object simultaneously). The Nine Morgens that live inside the Temple of Our Lady of Avalon have also been said to 'smile' or 'be grumpy'. The Virgin of Alcala is spoken

24. Miller, 3.

to, employed and treated like a sacred, living woman; when she is being washed and dressed by the *camaristas*, they speak to her saying, 'Aren't you beautiful today'. Two of them also told me that during this intimate, feminine process they sing devotional songs to her. The same two women also said they have seen tears on the statue's face. Yet when I asked them whether or not she is 'alive', the *camaristas* answered, 'Well, yes and no. The statue is a statue, but she is also the Virgin.' With these accounts in mind, what type of benefit do academics actually gain from engaging modernist dualities where no 'real' divisions exist?

There is a kind of cultural schizophrenia involved in the ways that Westerners engage religious materiality. Making a comparison with Amerindian cosmologies, Viveiros de Castro says "Virtually all attacks on Cartesian and other dualisms consider that two is already too much—we need just one (one principle, one substance, one reality). As far as Amerindian cosmologies are concerned, it would appear that two is not enough".²⁵ This last is compared to the multiplicity of discourses and 'perspectivisms' afforded every creature, plant, object and stone by American Indians. This dualism discussed by Viveiros de Castro is the reason why religious materiality is/has been problematic in the West. He continues, saying that the

Cartesian break with medieval scholasticism produced a radical simplification of European ontology by positing only two principles or substances: unextended thought and extended matter. Modern thought began with that simplification; and its massive conversion of ontological into epistemological questions (questions of representation) is still with us.²⁶

Value as Personal and Relational

Without fully engaging a discourse about fetishism, the understanding of religious offerings (especially *sentimental* objects) as extensions of the self is worth mentioning insofar as it aids in understanding their flexibility and value as agents of devotion. Marilyn Strathern says (to something that is also a valid statement for Westerners in general), 'As I understand it, what Euro-Americans call gifts in the late twentieth-century consumer culture, whether body substance or merchandise, are regarded as extensions of the self insofar as they carry the expression of sentiments'.²⁷ While gifts, or offerings to the divine, might 'carry

25. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives: The Transformation of Objects into Subjects in Amerindian Ontologies," *Common Knowledge*, 10 (2004):482.

26. *Ibid.*, 482.

27. Marilyn Strathern, "Partners and Consumers," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an*

the expression of sentiments', they are also capable of containing more than conferred value. For example, if an object is considered an extension of a devotee (something that is worn or carried for many years, for example, a piece of rose quartz or Grandmother's ring), that object will contain the utmost value to him or her for many possible reasons. Those reasons might include the context in which the object came to the bearer, or perhaps there is an attachment that has grown with time spent with the object. That particular object may or may not be of *sentimental* value, but might also be capable of carrying, for example, the *essence* of the bearer. Hence, it follows, that if the same object (the rose quartz crystal or Grandmother's ring) is given in devotion, it contains a multitude of possibilities, i.e. it can be a devotional agent whereby sentimental value is transferred to the divine, it can be understood to contain the essence of the bearer, or it can have its own independent purpose for being. However, this affording objects the possibility of an unknowable value and existence beyond what is understood to be the limits of capitalism and the material proves problematic for modern theorists. Peter Stallybrass says:

As Bill Pietz has argued, the concept of the fetish is a concept developed on the boundaries of capitalism. With the development of capitalism, it comes increasingly to point to demonized forms of materialization. A fetish is an external organ of the body, but the emergent regime of the individual will deny that the body can have external organs. To be dependent upon 'mere things' is to invalidate the individual's supposed autonomy. The theory of the fetish, then, produces by back-formation the subject of modernity: an individual who, freed from fetishism, is freed from materialization.²⁸

Not freed from fetishism or materialization (and from what I have experienced with these groups, quite happy to engage a myriad of creative and colorful religiously expressive forms), Goddess and Virgin devotees engage materiality regularly. The modern values illustrated by Stallybrass' critique do not fully grip and describe the uses of materiality and religious performances that take place in contemporary, *modern*, Western Europe. Devotees of Our Lady of Avalon, for example, will find materials occurring in nature, such as wood, bone, stone, or acorns, to be suitable gifts worth using to create objects, or simply given unrefined, to the Goddess. Of course, Goddess devotees are not limited to offering objects of natural materials, and sometimes offer worked silver and gold as well.

Ethic of Generosity, ed. A. Schrift (London: Routledge, 1997), 302.

28. Peter Stallybrass, "'The Value of Culture and the Disavowal of Things,'" *Early Modern Culture*, <http://eserver.org/emc/1-1/stallybrass.html>, 2.

The Virgin of Alcala also sees various types of offerings, some of which are creatively personal, but objects offered generally contain economic value. Gold plays a big part in offerings to the Virgin. It has been established that gift giving to the divine promotes and ensures relationships; however, the value of the gift can also reflect the nature of the relationship, i.e. devotees want the Virgin to have what is considered by the normative economic value system by which they live to be the best. Alan D. Schrift tells us in the introduction of *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* that, 'Where commodity exchange is focused on a transfer in which objects of equivalent exchange value are reciprocally transacted, the actual objects transferred are incidental to the value of the relationship established'.²⁹ According to this last, the act of making an offering of economic value to the Virgin, for example, would reflect the nature and worth of the relationship had with her, thereby increasing the possibility of earning deeper relationships and acts of reciprocated value or more. Likewise, offering the best of what one has in terms of personal or sentimental value, i.e. that which is most important to a devotee is also a gift of great worth; one that is freed from commodification.

Although the concept of the reciprocity of the altar is not a new one, as demonstrated by Kay Turner's *Beautiful Necessity*,³⁰ the goings on in the Goddess Temple and the shrine of the Virgin highlights another dimension of materiality: here the 'economy' of the altar is based on relational value and encounters with the divine that go beyond the frameworks of economics and capitalism. Value, then, must take on a whole new set of rules: a baby dummy is just a baby dummy to me or you, but a baby dummy offered in response to the 'miracle' of fertility is something more. It can be suggested that the baby dummy is transformed into a 'thank you', a physical part of the devotee extended in thanks and praise to the Virgin who cured a woman's infertility. The presence of the baby dummy in the shrine testifies to a miracle performed and gives hope and faith to other women or couples who make pilgrimages to the shrine to ask for the blessing of fertility. In a sense, the presence of the baby dummy is also an extension of the Virgin and her reciprocated relationship with the devotee; it links both Virgin and devotee to the answered prayer, miracle or blessing. To a Goddess devotee, an acorn is not 'just an acorn', but a thought of remembrance to the Goddess that may have wanted to be picked up by the devotee and taken to the altar.

29. Alan Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift*, 3.

30. Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

The acorn is also a subject capable of transmitting praise or celebration to the Goddess who is responsible for not only creating it and the devotee, but for the creation of everything. Therefore ontologically different worlds are revealed in the 'things' that are considered valuable inside the function of the altar. These 'things' go beyond the meanings of representation, symbolic, social, and economic, both in theory and in practice.

Conclusions

The data offered from the ethnographic accounts have uncovered three lines of enquiry. The first is that contemporary theorizations regarding materiality do not adequately address or include the use of religious objects in non-mainstream, vernacular religiosities in Western European contexts. As seen in the contexts of Our Lady of Avalon and the Virgin or Alcala, 'things' are not interacted with as if they are the material against which we define ourselves as human beings. Although religious objects and images are generally accepted to be representational of the divine in the West, their treatment and ensuing performances indicate otherwise. Who we think we are in terms of the modern ideal type called 'Western culture' has kept many who form part of the academic and religious elite aloof and separated from the reality of religion as it is lived. Tim Ignold noted 'culture is conceived to hover over the material world but not permeate it'³¹. So in terms of religious material culture, there is some scope to play with the idea of modern culture and say that it can be likened to an ill fitting bed sheet that does not adequately cover the mattress that it is designed to fit.

The second is that through the relationships had with tangible divine 'objects/subjects', a type of altar economy is facilitated based on relational value. Re-thinking object engagement as exemplified in the Goddess Temple and the shrine of the Virgin of Alcala (acorns and locks of hair as offerings for example) provides another dimension to the way in which 'things' are to be theorized in the materiality debate. This last offers a revised concept of value which circumscribes Western normative concepts of value. Here, the value of objects can be devotional, personal, magical and/or spiritual, and these things are value-less in the culture of capital.

The third suggests the possibility of a common protocol by which Westerners deal with materiality in vernacular, non-mainstream religi-

31. Tim Ignold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 240.

osities. Western religiosities are 'modern' in name and ideal, but not in practice. In comparison to many indigenous cosmologies in which objects are accepted not only as having social rank and status, but as being relations, i.e. living members of communities, Westerners also have ways of dealing with objects that are *Western*, especially in terms of vernacular, non-mainstream religious contexts. As exemplified by the two case studies discussed here, objects are not 'objects' in the inanimate sense. They play central, stimulating roles in religious communities. Here, objects are active, relational participants in ritual, ceremony and devotions. Through them, relationships with the divine are established, experienced, and negotiated. As demonstrated, objects are a fundamental part of the *lived* reality of religions.

Thinking outside the box of modernity and re-thinking the roles of religious objects in vernacular contexts contains the future possibility of reaching wider understandings of contemporary Western religious practices that go beyond transcendent, abstract ideal types and into ontology, or more accurately, *ontologies*. Is it possible to consider, then, whether our Western cultivation will allow us *not* to be so modern?³² This last reflects the importance of taking not only the objects and offerings given in religious settings seriously, but the theories, ideas and agents that make relationships, exchanges and presentations possible.

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32. With a nod to Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 1993

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