

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, MILTON KEYNES

**Abstract:**

Department of Religious Studies

Doctor of Philosophy

**Religious Objects and Performance: Testing the Role of Materiality**

by Amy Renee Whitehead

This thesis addresses the problematic nature of religious materiality in Western discourses, illustrated by its typical relegation to being representational instead of sensual, embodied or tangible. Two ethnographic accounts highlight the prominent role that materiality plays in vernacular religious contexts in contemporary England and Spain. With a focus on offerings and gift giving, the practices and performances that take place in relation to statue forms of Our Lady of Avalon (the Glastonbury Goddess) in her temple, and the Virgin of Alcala de los Gazules, Andalusia, in her shrine, exemplify an aspect of the lived, everyday reality of religion. In these contexts, in tension with religious doctrine, the relationships that take place between statues and devotees show that instead of being mere objects, statues of the Goddess and Virgin are subjective, relational participants in ceremony, rites and ritual, and they play central roles in how human relationships with the divine are maintained and negotiated. Using the discourses of animism and fetishism to test the role of materiality, this thesis further considers how making offerings to statues exemplifies a form of Western animism (different from Tylolean animism where alien spirits inhabit dead matter) where objects and subjects bring each other into co-inspired, co-relational being through encounters. Here, 'subjecthood' is achieved through relationships and relational encounters, and a multiplicity of ontological possibilities emerge which challenge commonly accepted modern dualisms, i.e. subject/object, mind/matter.