

Introduction to the Study of Religion



Seminar 6: Spectral Materiality

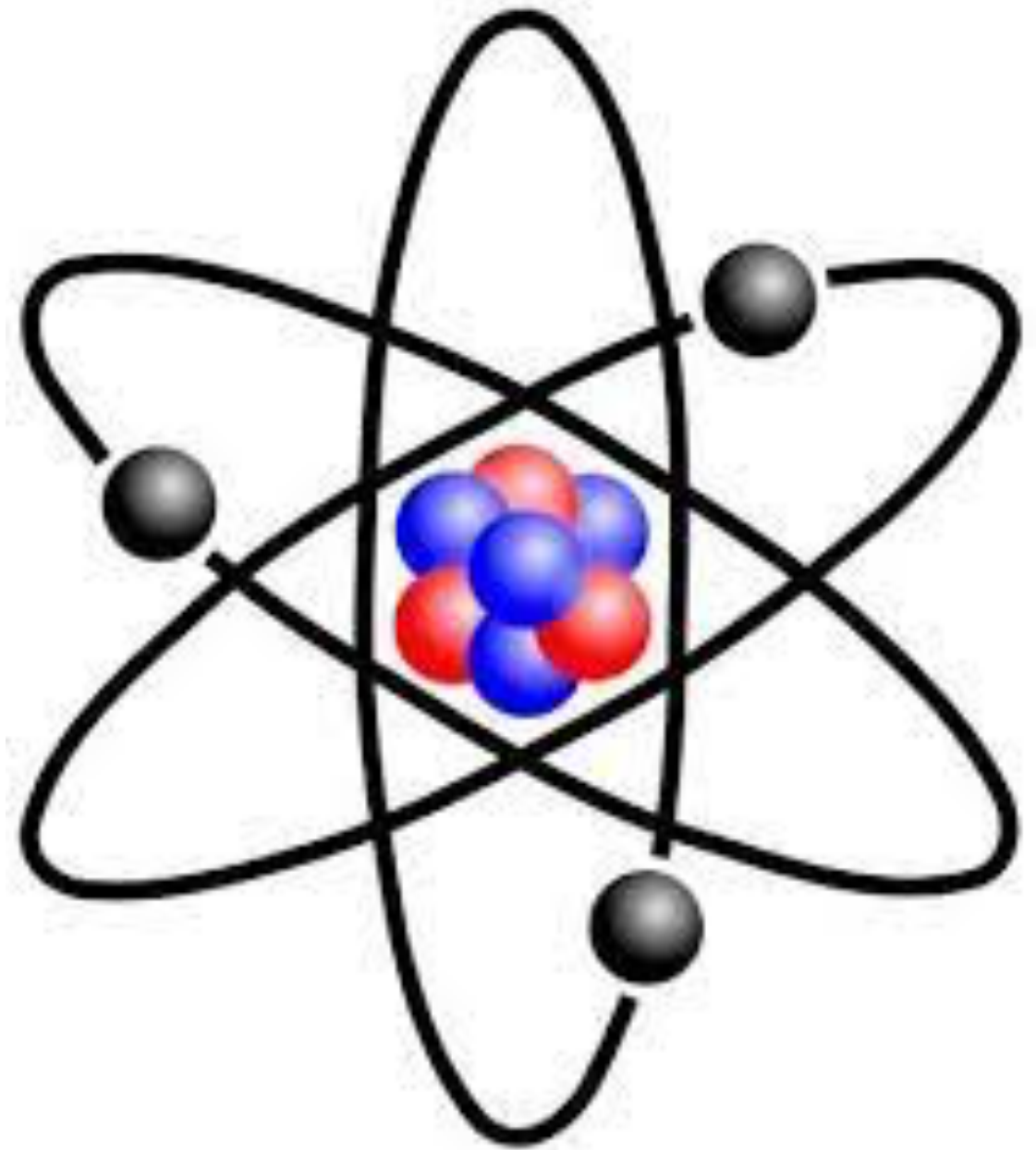


Overview

- Materialism (and problems)
- New Materialism
- Panpsychism
- Implications for the Study of Religion
- Mattering the Invisible
- Examples

Materialism

- Les Lancaster (2004) writes, in the context of the philosophy of mind:
- “A view widely held today asserts that only the entities studied by physics are the basic elements of the real, a viewpoint known as *materialism*.”
- “Closely related to this view is that of *physicalism*, which asserts that the mind is determined solely by causes which are physical in nature.”
- Reductionism.
- Is the ontological background for most social-scientific research in the study of religion.



Problems with materialism

- The hard problem of consciousness.
- The philosopher of mind David Chalmers (1995):
- “The hard problem...is the question of how physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience. This puzzle involves the inner aspect of thought and perception: the way things feel for the subject. When we see, for example, we experience visual sensations, such as that of vivid blue. Or think of the ineffable sound of a distant oboe, the agony of an intense pain, the sparkle of happiness or the meditative quality of a moment lost in thought. All are part of what I am calling consciousness. It is these phenomena that pose the real mystery of the mind” (Chalmers, 1995, p. 80).
- Matter is clearly more than just inert material. Our understanding is incomplete.
- It seems to possess a subjective dimension.



New-Materialism

- A growing number of scholars in the humanities are beginning to re-think matter itself.
- The scholar of communications Christopher Gamble and colleagues (2019) explain that the so-called 'new materialism' movement is a reaction to the:
- 'perceived neglect or diminishment of matter in the dominant Euro-Western tradition as a passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning.'
- The feminist theorist Karen Barad asks:
- 'Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured as passive and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture?'



Panpsychism

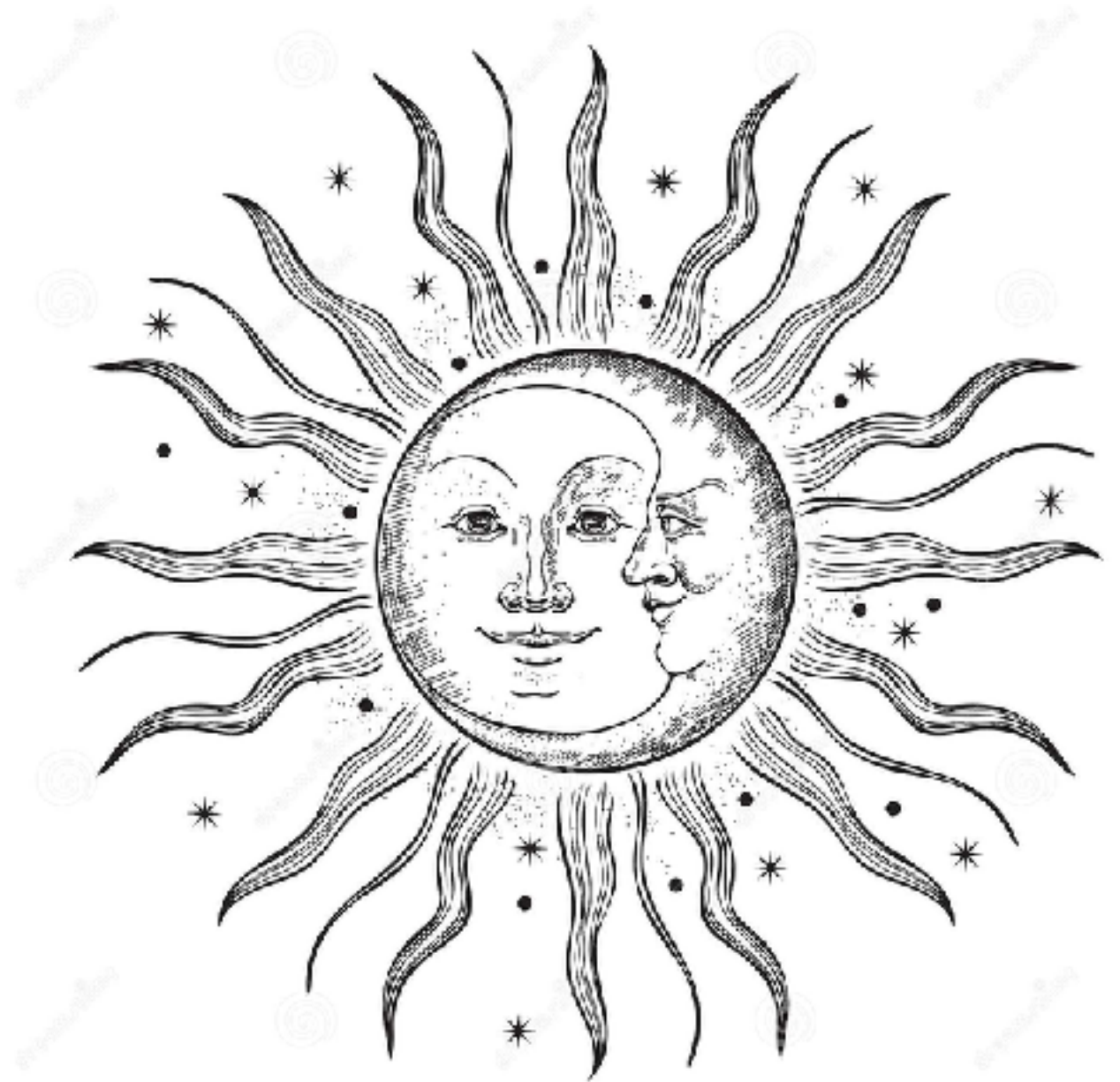
- The philosopher of mind Peter Sjöstedt-Hughes (2022) explains that panpsychism refers to:
- “[...] the doctrine that minds exist fundamentally throughout all of actuality - from humans, hawks, honeybees and trees, down to bacteria, mycelia, molecules, and the subatomic below these. All of matter includes minds.”
- Transpersonal psychologist Les Lancaster (2004) writes:
- “Panpsychists [...] hold that mind is a property of the whole physical world, and is not limited only to brains [...] If mind is a property of the natural world, then [...] consciousness, is to be explained in terms of properties of the natural world as a whole, and not simply as a product of the brain.”
- Max Velmans (2007):
- “On this panpsychist view, all forms of matter have an associated form of consciousness, although in complex life forms such as ourselves, much of this consciousness is inhibited. In the cosmic explosion that gave birth to the universe, consciousness co- emerged with matter and co- evolves with it. As matter became more differentiated and developed in complexity, consciousness became correspondingly differentiated and complex.”



Implications for the Study of Religion

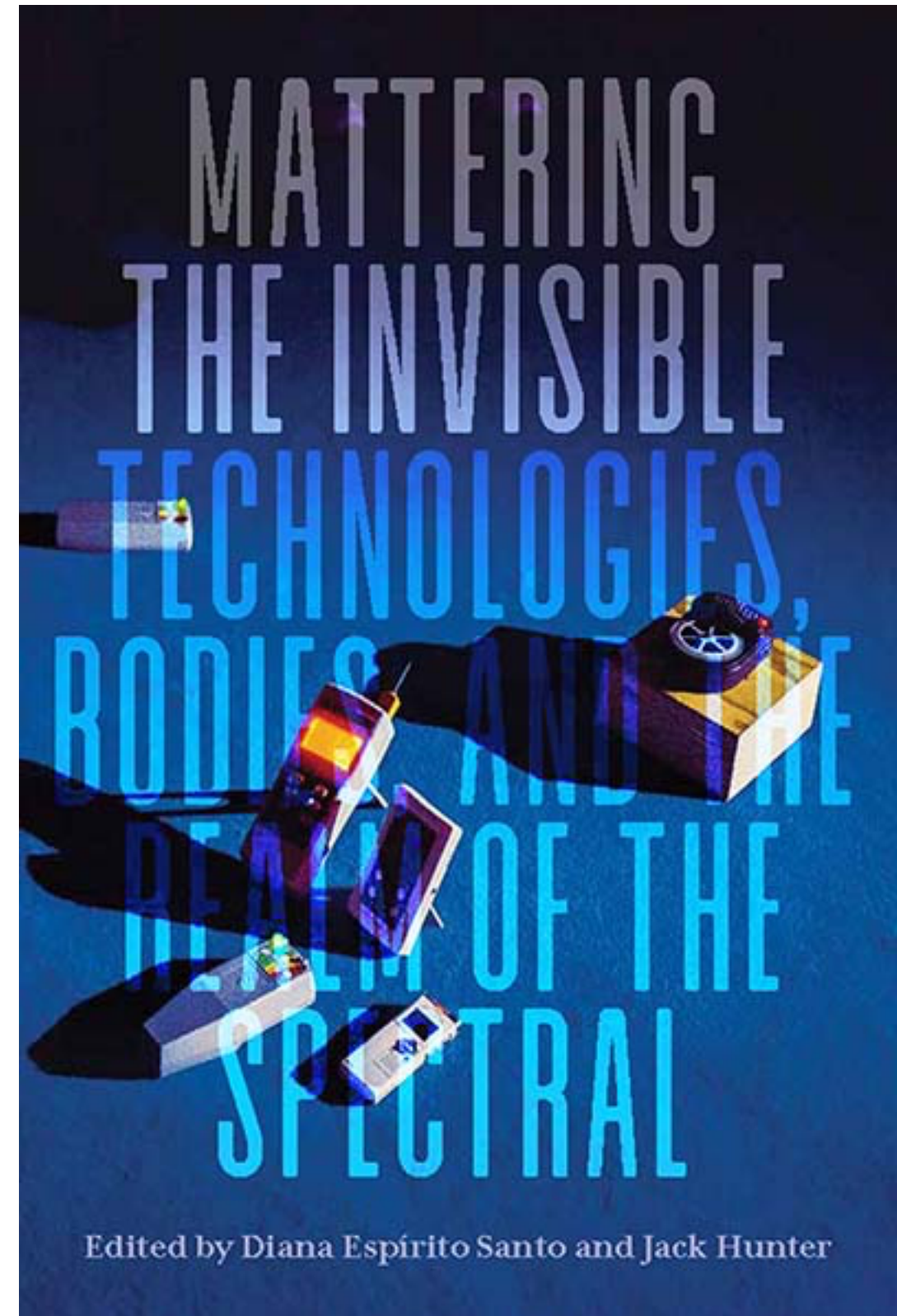
- The historian of astrology Garry Phillipson (2022) has suggested that panpsychism might provide a basis for understanding astrological influences, providing a grounding for astrology in the natural world.
- He explains that if:

“...panpsychism is a valid account, then consequences follow for our relationship to the cosmos which might extend so far as to support an account of astrology as divination.”
- What about other material aspects of religion?



Mattering the Invisible

- “Exploring how technological apparatuses “capture” invisible worlds, this book looks at how spirits, UFOs, discarnate entities, spectral energies, atmospheric forces and particles are mattered into existence by human minds. Technological and scientific discourse has always been central to the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualist quest for legitimacy, but as this book shows, machines, people, and invisible beings are much more ontologically entangled in their definitions and constitution than we would expect. The book shows this entanglement through a series of contemporary case studies where the realm of the invisible arises through technological engagement, and where the paranormal intertwines with modern technology.”
- The ways in which technologies, objects and physical bodies are used by humans to express the invisible.



Anglo-Saxon Magical Swords

- Archaeologist Michael Shapland (2021) on Anglo-Saxon magical swords:
- “There are an increasing number of studies of objects from the archaeological record which are seen as having accrued names, voices, personalities, visual identities and life-histories, rendering them person-like or even animated. An example of this concerns swords from societies across early medieval North-Western Europe.”
- “Famous swords had names, from Excalibur in the Arthurian myths to Hrunting in the Anglo-Saxon epic poem Beowulf; the ancient sword Curtana, remade in the 17th century, has been used in the coronation of British monarchs for at least the last seven hundred years.”
- “Swords did not merely bear names, they may have earned them: some clearly accrued complex biographies as they passed from owner to owner, achieving famous deeds and becoming imbued with person-like agency.”



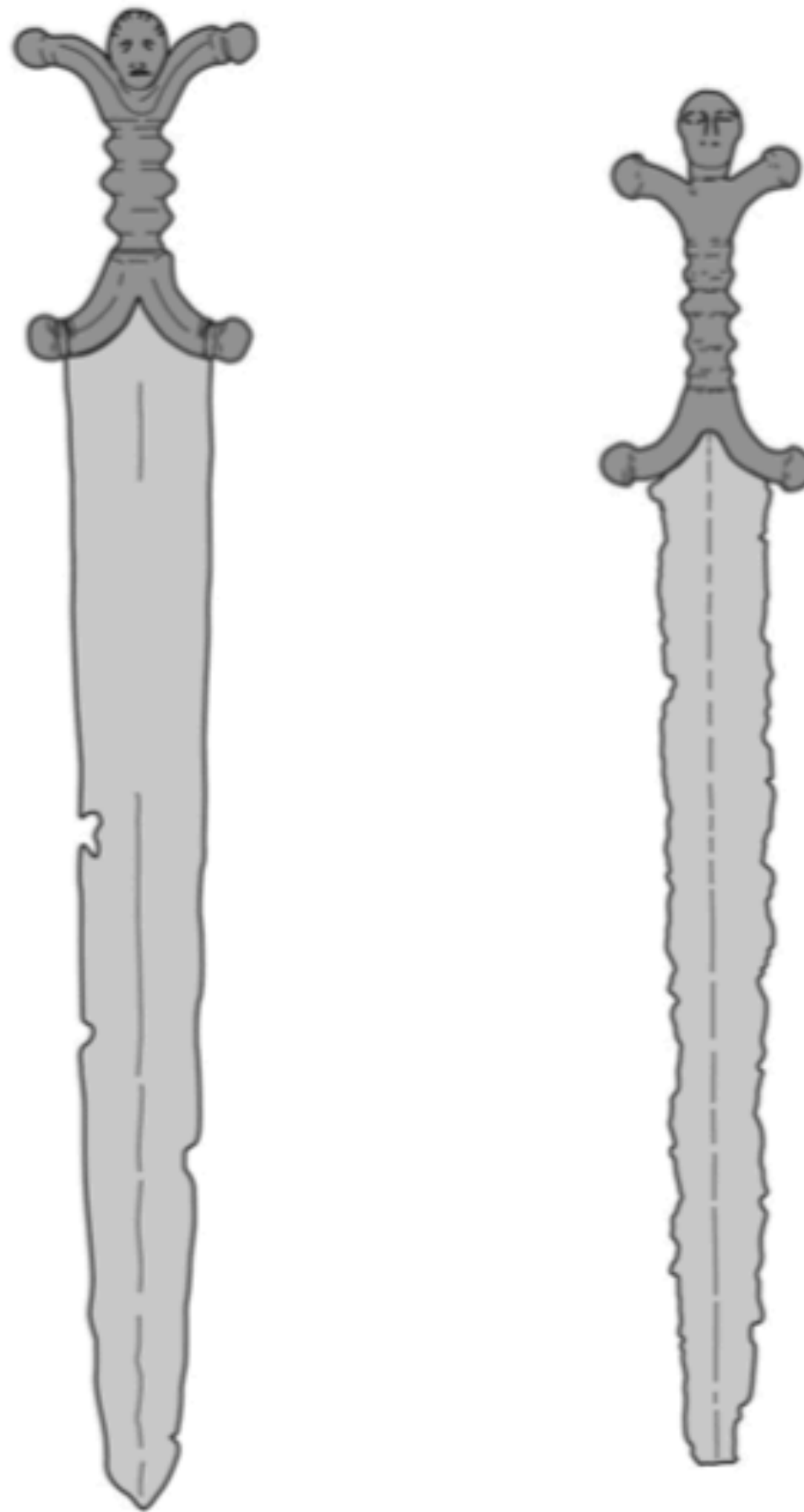


Figure 3. Two anthropomorphic swords from Iron Age England (Bradley 2017, 149).

Shaligram Stones

- The anthropologist Holly Walters (2020) has documented ‘the veneration of sacred fossil ammonites, called Shaligrams’ in Nepal.
- Their veneration ‘has been an integral part of ritual practice throughout South Asia.’
- ‘Viewed primarily as natural manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu, Shaligrams are called *svarupa* (“natural forms”) and are therefore inherently sacred. The meaning of “natural”, then, is often locally articulated as something whose formation lies distinctly outside of human agency (meaning, for example, through the will of the gods or with the landscape). Shaligrams are natural in that they are not human-made and ultimately demonstrate their own agency. For this reason, they do not require any rites of consecration or invocation...’



Chief Berens

- Hallowell worked with Chief William (1865-1947) Berens, of the Berens River Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), for 10 years between 1930-1940.
- They established a strong rapport, and Berens became a key informant for Hallowell.
- Chief Berens was custodian of a place on the Berens River that was sacred because of the distinctive round stones that are found there.



Are all stones alive?

- “Since stones are grammatically animate, I once asked an old man: Are *all* the stones we see about us here alive? He reflected for a long while and then replied, ‘No! But *some* are.’...”
- “The Ojibwa do not perceive stones in general as animate any more than we do. The crucial test is experience...”
- The Ojibwa language holds open the door for the possibility of interaction with animate rocks.



Chief Berens

- Photograph by Hallowell of Berens at Grandfather's Rock - "beside a shrine, with offerings, between Grand Rapids and Pikangikum, Ontario, Canada."
- "Grandfathers" (*mishoomis*) refers to both genealogical ancestors (e.g. Chief Berens' great-grandfather placed this particular rock here), but also to the rocks themselves who may be animate grandfathers.
- "My friend Chief Berens had one of these, but it no longer possessed these attributes. It had contours that suggested eyes and mouth. When Yellow Legs, Chief Berens' great-grandfather, was a leader of the Midewiwin he used to tap the stone with a new knife. It would then open its mouth, Yellow Legs would insert his fingers and take out a small leather sack with medicine in it..." (Hallowell, 1960, in Harvey, 2002, p. 25).
- Certain rocks present themselves in such a way as to invite our participation.



Rock Worship

- Rocks are a central feature of classical Chinese garden design.
- “As an ancient mentality, rock worship remains in Chinese legends, myths and is practiced in folk culture such as feng-shui, a traditional Chinese practice used to harmonize people with their environment...”
- “In Chinese gardens rock worship mainly appears in two aspects: the adoration of rocks and use of rocks as the tool to drive evil factors away...” (Xu, 2014)



The Secret Life of Statues

- Angela Voss (2006) on 'The Secret Life of Statues':
- “In this paper I want to explore the question of representation, resemblance and identity in figurative sculpture. By this I mean considering the varying degrees by which a statue may be seen to be merely ‘standing for’ or imitating the being it portrays, sharing its qualities in some more dynamic way, or completely embodying it as a living presence.”
- “I was led to this enquiry by the ancient magical texts of the Hermetic and neoplatonic traditions in which telestike or statue-animation played a major part in theurgic rituals, rituals which were in aid of the alignment of the human soul with the gods and the eventual realisation of its own—embodied—immortality. Both humans and statues could become divine through a process of cultivating an intense form of symbolic perception which brought divine and human worlds into single focus.”



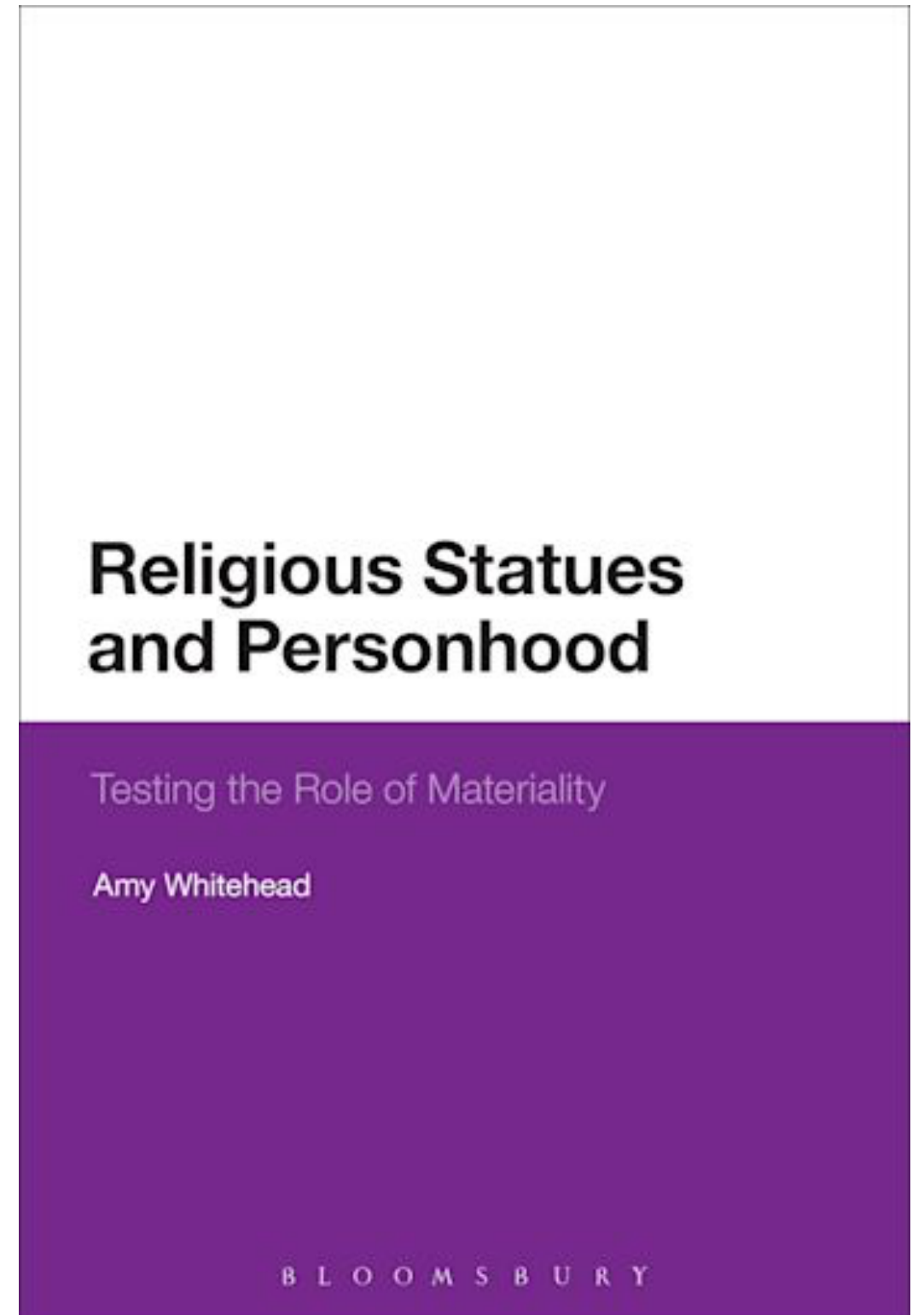
Relics and Icons

- Darrell Pinckney (2022) - ‘Relics and Icons: Their Role in Healing, Conversions, and Miracles’:
- “In this paper, I will seek to demonstrate how prayer, relics and icons have had life changing effects on people who came into contact with them or had sought out help through prayer.”



Religious Statues

- Amy Whitehead (2020):
- “...‘personhood’ as an approach is an appropriate conceptual and methodological tool with which to frame theoretically, address, and approach practically the religious objects that researchers encounter in the field. Such approaches are considered here as ‘relational’, as lived religion is best understood through the intimate relationships and negotiations that take place not only between religious group or community members, but also between human persons and other than human persons such as religious statues.”















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