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Teaching Research Skills Through the Study of Religious Objects at Home

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**teaching research skills
through the study of
religious objects at home**
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ABSTRACT

Religious objects at home are an important source for a material perspective on everyday religiosity in past and present. Teaching *with* these objects is, therefore, of paramount importance, as our students should acquire research skills at the cutting edge of interdisciplinary collaboration. This article will introduce a teaching project centered on domestic religious objects in contemporary Swiss households. It will outline the teaching content, didactic strategies, and reflect on the exhibition that the students curated.

Keywords: teaching, research skills, didactics, domestic religion, museum

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Introduction

Religious objects in the home serve as a gateway to understanding the socio-cultural dynamics of religion within domestic settings. These material objects and decorated surfaces invite a broad exploration that extends beyond religious significance into the reality of everyday meaning-making, production patterns, and situational expectations. For scholars, analyzing domestic religious objects offers valuable teaching opportunities, allowing the use of diverse methodologies in the study of religion, including fieldwork, interview techniques, aesthetic analysis, field studies, historical research, and museum exhibition design.

This article presents a teaching project centered on domestic religious objects in contemporary Swiss households. Following a brief thematic overview, the article will outline the project's objectives and methods, and subsequently reflect on its outcomes from the perspective of the two course instructors.

Material Religion at Home

Although attention for material culture has a long history in archaeology, art history, and anthropology, the “material turn” has become a highly innovative set of approaches, incorporating “thing theory” (Brown 2004), the agency of objects (as explored especially by Alfred Gell and Bruno Latour), and cultural biographies of objects (Miller 1998; Appadurai 2010). Pioneering work in the last 20 years has integrated materiality as a fundamental feature of the study of religion (Houtman and Meyer 2012; Meyer 2012; Morgan 2021), opening the way for further interdisciplinary collaboration (e.g. Uehlinger 2015 on *Religionsästhetik*). These ideas about – and approaches to – religious materiality offer opportunities for alternative stories that break with the hegemonial representation of literary sources and their group-based assumptions (Strijdom 2023).

Research on religious objects in the domestic sphere has matured only recently. Moving beyond earlier short summaries of what domestic religion in a specific period entailed, recent scholarship has pointed to the flow of religious objects and practices through geographical and social spaces (Tweed 2006; Frankfurter 2017), emphasizing the interconnectedness, rather than opposition of categories such as private and public or individual and institutional (e.g. the concept of “open house” in Sarti, Lanzinger, and Eibach 2021 and “privacy” in Birkedal Bruun 2020). Together with the growing focus on “lived” religion as it is practiced in everyday life within and outside institutional settings (Orsi 2003; McGuire 2008; Ammermann 2020), the material turn has shaped the last decade of scholarship. Rather than assuming that material culture and religiosity at home automatically follow institutional trends, we see more clearly how they were negotiated. Home-dwellers initiated ritualization, drawing up various repertoires, adapting them for their own purposes and contexts. Markus Löff (2022), for example, has

shown how production patterns affected the complex entanglement of so-called “Christian” and “pagan” scenes on late Roman tableware, and Tara Hamling (2010) has highlighted how English Protestants carefully incorporated biblical images at home despite cultural fears of idolatry. In both cases, the materialization of religion at home was shaped by expectations about the domestic sphere, opportunities offered by domestic space and its specific rules and affordances, technological affordances, and available religious repertoires.

The journal *Material Religion* has played an important role in the distribution - and development - of a new field in which a variety of research methodologies and foci come together, either under the header of “material religion” or lately as “the aesthetics of religion” (Koch and Wilkens 2019). Almost from the start, the journal contained short reflections on how to teach about these topics and approaches, thereby opening a window on the role of materiality within didactics as well as on materiality as a teaching theme (Corrywright and Cosgrove 2015; Klassen 2019; Witmer 2019; Stewart 2019; see Helbling 2022). The project “Feldforschung: Religiöse Objekte zu Hause und im Museum” (Field Research: Religious Objects at Home and in Museums) at the University of Zürich has taken on these themes by teaching about material religion through a focus on domestic religious objects in a project-based and service-oriented didactic strategy with a small museum exhibition as the course’s end product.

Teaching about the role of religious objects at home—generally phrased to include both historical and contemporary practices and objects—can build on this broad field of overlapping factors and expectations through a strong focus on material objects, thereby limiting the source material and opening teaching settings up to non-textual realities, and a processual focus on domestication, illustrating how individuals and families bring religion into the home. This processual focus is a result of the relational turn, in which less emphasis is placed on the essentialized definition of (domestic) religion and more on the assemblages, like the interrelationships between domestic objects, spaces, and agents. While not all students may appreciate the theoretical nuances of different types of material turns (Hazard 2013; Meyer 2023) and the relational turn (Krech 2020), they easily grasp the complexity behind the selection and appropriation of religious objects at home. Taking this teaching focus, therefore, allows us to ask questions like:

- What is selected?
- Who is doing the selection?
- In what ways does the reassembly of religious repertoires in domestic spaces challenge traditional distinctions between domestic and institutional religious practices?
- What are the motivations behind the selection of specific religious items in domestic spaces, and why are certain items preferred over others?

- How are religious objects appropriated and adapted to fit the expectations of the domestic sphere?
- Which patterns are visible in domestic religious assemblages? How does the combination of elements from different repertoires affect the significance of religious objects in the home?
- How are the objects transformed materially (in size, shape, content, and constellation)?
- How do conceptual alterations of religious objects intersect with material modifications?
- How does the placement of religious objects within the home influence their usage and the meaning attributed to them by family members? Does it reflect social hierarchies?
- When are domestic religious objects encountered? How does this fit within patterns and routines of everyday life? Do they belong to one-time performances, or are they frequently interacted with?
- How are domestic and institutional religious spaces connected through the framework of production and consumption?

Pursuing such questions in specific historical and contemporary settings with students contributes to the development of conceptual skills, as they have to link together various domains of life, as well as practical research skills in the intimate setting of contemporary houses (see Brand [n.d.](#)).

Teaching Project and Method

The project was conducted by students and faculty of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Zürich and funded by the ULF Innovation Program for Didactics at the same university. The participating studies consisted of a fairly homogeneous group of advanced master's students in Religious Studies. Both the postgraduate nature of the participants and the unifying discipline made it less necessary to equalize subject-specific knowledge levels, but any needs were regularly reviewed (Wildt 2006). Based on Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956), we defined the following five learning goals:

- I. **Remember/Understand:** Students know concepts, theories, and methods pertaining to domestic religious objects and are able to discuss them broadly.
- II. **Apply:** Theoretical knowledge can be applied in practice, as demonstrated in their own field-research.
- III. **Analyze:** Students will be able to independently summarize and analyze the results of the surveys using theoretical knowledge.
- IV. **Evaluate:** Based on the learning content and the empirical material, the results and a first poster template are presented for discussion. They can evaluate their results against the framework of the most recent literature.
- V. **Create:** The exhibition will be curated in consultation with fellow students and faculty.

Although the main aim of the course was to experience and practice curating a museum exhibition, the individual learning goals were less like a linear progression and more like a catalog of learning objectives. Across all five learning goals, emphasis was placed on acquiring key competences and transferable

skills. In addition to the technical and methodological skills mentioned earlier, we placed emphasis on developing comprehensive communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills. Students were also expected to demonstrate independence and management skills. As Bloy and Williams (2000, 162) state:

Students should not be expected to achieve all skill at the same level but to be encouraged to be proactive in improving those skills that may enhance their academic and extracurricular profile. By suggesting subject – specific skills development and a broader range of learning support activities, one aim of higher education is to encourage students to develop personal autonomy in order that they can respond to the immediate learning experience and any subsequent new learning environments in a structured manner. In this way key skills become part of a broader culture of learning, rather than a tool for remedying perceived variations in ability.

This broader culture of learning was particularly important, given that the students were tasked with observing people in their homes and interviewing them about sensitive aspects of their religiosity. In Switzerland, religion is widely considered to be a private matter that is less visible in public (Helbling, Riegel, and Jakobs 2009, 229). In order to do justice to the research question "how religion is lived at home in Switzerland", a multi-perspective view was important from the outset. Qualitative field research methods such as participant observation and conducting interviews were triangulated with historical findings on objects, theoretical knowledge of religious appropriation strategies, and critical reflections on exhibition curation. This was supplemented with practical experience in museum work. In concrete terms, this involved aligning empirical research with theoretical and practical foundations. First, the students were introduced to the history of religious objects and their significance in the context of the home (see the dynamics in Konieczny 2009). They were then instructed in the methods of field research and began to move independently in the field. Regular meetings ensured that they discussed their process and findings with the conveyors and the other students. This approach has proven to be quite labor-intensive and ambitious, but in line with the workload specified in the curriculum. We note, however, that innovative teaching always requires students to be willing to engage and experiment. In addition, collaborations were established with the *Museum der Kulturen* in Basel and the *Haus der Religionen* in Bern. The latter, as a meeting place, offered the students broad access to different religious practices, thus possessing the potential of a gatekeeper and ultimately functioning as an exhibition space, the former was a classical museum, struggling with the ethical implications of its collection's past. Here, the students learned more about exhibition curation and management, as well as the storage requirements,

and the practical and ethical discussions surrounding restitution claims. To prepare the students for the specifics of an exhibition concept, a scholar with curatorial experience was invited to discuss important considerations before they begin their research.

Due to the short duration of the teaching project of one semester, the field stay lasted about six weeks. Field research focuses on everyday practice and the active exploration of habitats (Breidenstein et al. 2015). Actions, verbal and non-verbal expressions, and features such as objects or symbols are analyzed. The students had to take this into account, as well as the fact that a field is not artificial but also exists when no observers are present.

To look at the symbolic dimensions of social action—art, religion, ideology, science, law, morality, common sense—is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of deemotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them. The essential vocation of interpretive anthropology is not to answer our deepest questions, but to make available to us answers that others, guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given, and thus to include them in the consultable record of what man has said (Gertz 1973, 30),

Field research combines various research methods and requires "field-specific opportunism" (Breidenstein et al. 2015, 34). Our students also had to react to various conditions and developments. The longer observation period, for example, had to be dispensed with due to the brevity of the project. Another classic element was very quickly included in the survey: guideline-based interviews, which allowed us to analyze the religious objects observed more closely in terms of their practical content. After the site visit, the students were given the task of sifting through the collected material and selecting according to the research questions. Pragmatic solutions for the analysis had to be found beforehand so that, for example, a simplified transcription of the interviews was recommended, in which only the spoken word is transcribed. The material was processed and analyzed using open coding based on grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

In the spirit of the Third Mission, the results were presented to the public in the form of a poster as part of an exhibition at the House of Religions' meeting place. The highly practical nature of the field research was combined with the service-oriented approach of a museum exhibition on contemporary religious practices. In addition to presenting the research results in writing, it was important to engage the museum audience in a multidimensional way (Branković and Heidbrink 2015). We did this through exhibiting selected objects from the interviewees' homes. The presentations also included numerous photos of the field situations and QR codes with videos on specific topics and

additional information on the Swiss religious landscape. In this way, we generated a multifaceted presentation.

In our didactic approach, we aimed to counter the optimized processes and evaluations that are the hallmark of a neoliberal university with a pedagogy of openness, taking into account individual circumstances. The historian Catherine Denial (2024) summarizes this approach as "believing people and believing in people." According to higher education researcher Sue Clegg and Stephen Rowland (2010), an appreciative and friendly didactic approach is consistent with intellectual development. This includes student choice, self-forgiveness, openness to mistakes, reflection, dialogue, a focus on the future, empathy, trust, flexibility, and clarity of expectations. Due to the exceptional end product of our course, we defined our role as instructor to facilitate student learning and collaborate with them in the pursuit of understanding.

Results

In Swiss society, religion is often considered a private matter. At times, a real defensive attitude toward anything religious can be seen in public. For example, when religious communities commented upon political referendums, leading to appeals to the federal court (Federal Supreme Court 2021). Scientific research must explore people's homes if it is to get to the bottom of the narrative of religion as a private matter (Fitz et al. 2018), in order to examine lived religiosity and the spatial dynamics of the "home" (Rüpke 2016; Gould 2019). Not unexpectedly, the results of our student's fieldwork did not support the secularization thesis, but rather the individualization thesis. The individualization thesis argues that while membership in religious communities is declining, religiosity becomes more individualized and less easily recognizable, taking on forms beyond well-known institutions (see Thomas Luckmann 1967 on "invisible religion"). Conventional survey methods struggle to capture this form of religiosity. Quantitative surveys that have relied too heavily on measuring church attendance or membership numbers are unable to address the subject adequately because they exclude alternative practices and activities that participants do not immediately recognize as religious. The qualitative approach adopted by our students was able to respond more adequately to different settings and thus doing more justice to the heterogeneity of material and religious choices made by individuals at home (Holloway and Todres 2003; King and Horrocks 2010; Flick 2022).

The students focused on a variety of religious phenomena. In doing so, they were confronted with forms of knowledge that often have implicit characteristics, which are expressed in a kind of automatism whereby actions and opinions are applied as a matter of course and rarely questioned (Sabisch and Mellenthin 2010, 356). As a result, the exhibition presented various contemporary forms of religion through posters including photographic

representation of religious objects in their domestic environment, and various objects on loan from the interviewees (see Figure 1). Within this representation, traditional institutional religiosity (especially Christian and Islamic) stood next to representations of so-called “non-religion” (Quack, Schuh, and Kind 2019). In between, there was a whole range of individualized religious tendencies in which the competitive market repertoire associated with New Age spirituality was represented (Berger 1963; Bourdieu 1991).

In this context, the importance of critical terminology was once again highlighted. After a first draft of the posters, the question was raised how we dealt with insider terminology. We chose to follow—and comment upon—the interviewees’ individual classification of religious understandings. Interviewees preferred the terms “religious” or “spiritual,” while “being religious” or “religion” often evoked institutional associations. Including these self-understandings and emic definitions of religion in the exhibition posters meant a transfer of knowledge: proven conceptual applications from their studies had to stand up to confrontation with the respondents on site. “Religion” as analytical notion may, at times, be a barrier for further understanding of religious behavior at home. This important process was captured in the posters. One of the interviewees’ positions, for example, was described by our students in the exhibition as:



FIG 1

Impression of a part of the exhibition, showcasing the posters designed by the students, with on the right some of the associated objects (Photo by Mattias Brand).

[Person's name] does not belong to any religious community and rejects the concept of religion for herself. Instead, she places a high value on spirituality in her life, as it allows her to reflect deeply on herself and the events around her. She perceives institutionalized religions and their teachings and values as too rigid and inflexible, which would limit her freedom and capacity for personal reflection. She perceives religion as something that comes to a person from the outside. Spirituality, on the other hand, comes from within.

Only the comprehensibility of individual understandings of religion and religiosity opened up a view of religious objects that were not directly considered as such by the participants in the field.

Reflection on Findings and Exhibition

Our students were able to identify a wide variety of religious objects in Swiss households, some associated with traditional religions, others more with individualized forms of religiosity—although the distinction is far from clear-cut. On the one hand, the results show that religious objects are not always seen as such, less because of their content than because of the unspoken meanings attributed to religion (Berger 1974; Dubuisson 2003). The term “religious” is often equated with typical patterns such as crosses or Buddha statues, which is problematic when the latter is degenerated into a supposedly meaningless decorative commercialized objects, and the former is viewed with skepticism due to a widespread critical attitude toward institutional churches. The individualization thesis, however, points out that religion is much more than institutions. In fact, our students stress that religiosity—even when nominally “Christian” cannot be described solely in terms of attendance at church services. The second result of the research project is that religion in Switzerland is increasingly taking on forms other than Christianity, incorporating aspects from temples or pilgrimages, or combining individual elements to form a personal assemblage of meaningful objects at home. This development corresponds to the trend toward the individualization of the religious field in Europe. The objects encountered by our students are colorful, diverse, and not always unambiguous, as the meaning attributed to them depends on the observer. The students have succeeded in tracking down these forms, making them visible and accessible to a broad public in the spirit of the Third Mission. In this way, the final exhibition—currently already displayed on three locations within Switzerland—also contributes to a more open understanding of religion.

Curating an exhibition from scratch, with associated fieldwork, photos, and objects to be displayed was challenging. As a teaching load, this may have been one of the most time-consuming projects of the year. Our students, however, learned about all aspects of academic fieldwork and the communication with external stakeholders.

In terms of specific domestic objects and the way they were incorporated into the home, our students encountered a large variety of domestication strategies. Most noteworthy, in this context is the collection of stones with cross-shaped figures and shapes (Figure 2), which Jean (name anonymized) has found outdoors, but that reminds him of his faith. Here, the visual pattern rather than the social background or specific materiality defined the affordance of the object for domestic usage. Another common strategy of bringing religious objects into the home is through gifts, which carry meaning due to the relationship with the gift-giver. One of our students brought a small angel statuette into the exhibition, which was seen as a sign of supernatural care. It had been given from a grandmother to a granddaughter, who described it as an object of memory and said that it reminded her of her grandmother's wisdom and warmth. Finally, a migrant couple, Markos and Camilla, described various household items as objects of memory, including a small Buddha statue (Figure 3). Camilla explicitly said: "I am not a Buddhist. I received this [statuette] from a friend who committed suicide. I still have it because I could not throw it away. [...] She was someone with an alcohol problem, and I think that I was the first she talked to [about her problems]." Talking about this object, although seemingly deriving from a well-known "world



FIG 2
Religiously shaped objects in front of the window of Jean (Photo by Jolanda Macdonald).



FIG 3

Small Buddhist statuette that was explicitly labeled as “non-religious” (photo by Mattias Brand).

religion”, opened the door for our students to conversations about everyday meaning-making *with* and *without* religion at home. The exhibition, therefore, presents a nuanced and diverse picture of the Swiss religious landscape, which can open the eyes of a broad public. Although our teaching goals did not

reach into a deeper process of theorizing, one could follow up on these findings by systematically looking at meaning-making practices based on associated social origin and those based on materiality in the entanglement of objects, materiality, people, and their spatial contexts.

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