

**matter of contention:
sacred objects at
the crossroads of
religious traditions—
introduction**
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Adam H. Becker is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Classics at New York University. His research focuses primarily on the cultural history of the Syriac (Christian Aramaic) tradition in what is now Iraq, Iran, and Turkey in late antiquity and the early Islamic period. His first book, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in late Antique Mesopotamia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), provided a history of Christian schools in late antique Mesopotamia, as well as an analysis of the reception of Greek philosophy and Greek patristic thought in the Syriac milieu. He has also published on Syriac martyr acts in Pre-Islamic Iran and Jewish-Christian relations in antiquity. His most recent book addresses the interaction between American Evangelical missionaries and members of the Church of the East (the "Nestorians") in Iran in the nineteenth century and the secular nationalist culture that emerged from this encounter.

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This special issue of *Material Religion* gathers together a selection of the approximately one dozen papers presented at a colloquium held at the University of Texas at Austin on April 23–24, 2012 under the auspices of the university's Donald D. Harrington Faculty Fellows Program and the Department of Religious Studies. The aim of the colloquium was to investigate, from both historical and theoretical perspectives, competition over relics or other moveable objects that store or effect religious power (e.g., statues, amulets, ritual vessels, books, royal insignia). Such competition often takes place between religious communities or across the boundaries of religious tradition. Our premise was that the dynamics of contestation over the ownership, effectiveness, or meaning of such sacred implements would illuminate their role in materializing value systems and in turn in mediating human relationships. Indeed, we hoped that this emphasis on competing claims and perspectives would bring into sharper focus how distinct—but socially, spatially, or temporally contiguous—groups shaped each other's understandings of sacred matter and even of materiality itself.

This special issue joins an already vibrant conversation concerning the nature and function of sacred relics. The study of these bearers of religious power has blossomed in recent years, in part as a consequence of the so-called material turn. The focus in much of this work has been on Christianity, not only because of the Christian basis of the category "relic" but also because that genealogy has so profoundly informed modern scholarly approaches to the problem of religion and materiality. Long a topic of both scholarly and popular fascination, relics have been subjected to increasingly incisive and sophisticated

interpretation. Yet most work on relics restricts itself to analyzing the role these objects play in this or that religious tradition or for this or that religious community. These studies employ an implicit comparativist phenomenology, which is content to find sameness within the vertical silos of a number of discrete religious traditions. By exploring cases where a sacred object has become a matter of contention—because of social conflict, spatial dislocation, disruptions in the governing semiotic ideology, or simply new circumstances—this special issue lays bare the symbolic and material labor necessary to stabilize things that are, in the end, so labile.

The five papers included in this special issue, along with the three short essays commissioned specially for the journal's "In Conversation" section, push the study of relics and other sacred objects beyond their location and function *within* seemingly discrete religious traditions to consider the material and social factors that conditioned their ongoing relevance *across* multiple—and, in some cases, rival—religious communities. Several of the essays explore how competing institutions or interest groups nominally operating within a given "religious tradition" negotiate claims about or access to the power of sacred matter (Becker, Bitel, Heo, and Cosentino). Others trace the transformations in meaning and function that can occur as objects circulate across communal boundaries through processes of dislocation and relocation (Strootman and Spyer). Still others highlight how the prior assumptions that scholars themselves make about the nature of matter or the profile of a given religious tradition can limit our appreciation of the history of materiality itself in that or other traditions (Wharton and Fleming).

While several of the papers in this volume address the issue of sacred matter in religious traditions other than Christianity (e.g., traditional Graeco-Roman, Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic, and Islamic), one theme that emerges with special persistence from this collection is the diverse configurations of materiality, image-making, and the accessibility of the divine within the Christian tradition. We would suggest that, precisely because of their numerous cognates with the attitudes toward matter in secular modernity, these competing Christian discourses of materiality and mediation may help us—scholars working within modern academic discourses—to recognize and study the intricate workings of matter across religious traditions.

