

God in the 'bits and pieces of everyday' – sacred objects and human encounter with the divine.

A few years ago I was having a baby in a Limerick maternity hospital and I was in a bed next to a young woman also going through labour. She went into the delivery suite first and delivered a healthy baby. Like an athlete passing on a baton in a relay race she returned to me and gave me a sacred object, a 'holy stone' that had come from a holy well. She assured me that this sacred stone would bring God's blessings and protection both to me and my baby. I was grateful for it and for her thoughtfulness and after my baby's safe arrival I returned it to her. As a member of the Traveller community in Ireland she had a wealth of tradition about sacred objects and their power to express and foster religious faith. She knew from experience that the sacred is not divorced from the secular (Latin *Saecularis* meaning present world). Indeed in some Traveller families sacred objects such as the baptismal shawl hold a particular significance and when children are ill it is not uncommon to wrap them up in their baptismal shawl to give them strength. For the concrete, physical, aspect of prayer through contact with holy wells, sacred places (e.g. Croagh Patrick, Lough Derg) and sacred objects (relics, medals, statues) is a visible manifestation of a multi-sensory Traveller spirituality. The natural and physical world is embraced as a vital aspect of the person's relationship with God. This young Traveller woman's sense of the universal and intimate presence of God in the concrete world was pivotal to her spirituality. Indeed many of the world's religions also express religious belief through the use of sacred objects in ritual and worship.

Sometimes people imagine religious believers as a species of other-worldly, ethereal, abstract beings who are fundamentally disconnected from the world of objects, time and place. This couldn't be further from the truth. In many religious traditions religious believers use the world of objects, of sensory materials, as a medium of and aid to religious belief and worship. The interpenetration of the material and spiritual is pithily presented in Patrick Kavanagh's observation that 'God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday'. The intertwining of the spiritual and physical bits and pieces, the world of religious belief and the physical world, means that sacred objects are an integral aid to and aspect of religious belief. Of course the classification of objects as sacred varies according to religious tradition, context, history and interpretation. In general we can classify as sacred any object that is designed specifically for, or used in, an act of religious worship or veneration, or relating to religious belief and practice and designated holy or sacred by religious believers. This broad definition incorporates material things, including animate (sacred cow in Hinduism) and inanimate (Christian crucifix) objects, that are perceptible by the human

senses and that relate to religious belief and worship. Here the category of sacred object incorporates a diverse and complex range of objects, large and small, from a variety of religious traditions, from ancient architectural sites like Newgrange (or the Pyramids), to buildings consecrated or designated for sacred rituals (e.g. Jewish Synagogue), to physical representations of divinity (e.g. statues of the Hindu god Shiva), to sacred jewellery and clothes (e.g. Sikh Kara) as well as objects designed for use in specific acts of worship (e.g. Christian chalice & paten). This article will explore the origin, nature and function of selected sacred objects in a variety of world faiths.

I remember sitting in a Church in the Gambia, West Africa, and noticing that most of the congregation, especially children, wore little strings of leather or cloth around their neck or wrists with pieces of shell, stone or bone attached to them. I asked the person beside me if they were fashion accessories and they told me that they were juju. Juju are charms or amulets thought to mediate supernatural powers, usually worn around the neck and in many indigenous religions are associated with protection from injury or evil. Seeing these amulets being worn in a Christian Church reinforced two very definite ideas that may prove useful in the study of world religions. First it showed how complex religious belief is and that religious syncretism or an intermingling of ingredients (objects, belief, elements of practice, ritual) from different religious traditions, in this instance Christianity and West African indigenous religious tradition, is perhaps more prevalent than is often acknowledged. Text book accounts of religions tend to underestimate the complexity and diversity of lived religious practice and belief which is always more fluid and unpredictable than neat categorisations and clinical observations suggest. This community in West Africa had very distinctive indigenous religious traditions which had synthesised with the Catholic faith so that its practitioners did not view any inconsistency between the wearing of juju and miraculous medals. The second observation arising from juju being worn in this context is that faith in God and the supernatural is often expressed through sacred objects. The forms of juju I had seen were sacred objects with a very definite sacred. In both instances the sacred object provided the bearer with protection from harm as it mediated the relationship between the natural and the supernatural. The sacred object was central to the well-being of the individual and the community. Indeed in some traditions the sacred object is understood not only as facilitating a means of communication with the divine (e.g. Catholic rosary beads) but as being the very locus for the sacred spirit. Shamanism is a complex religious tradition found in many parts of the world and 'shamans' are generally understood as mediators between this world and other realms of being and consciousness. Sacred objects such as drums and rattles are used by shamans to induce a state of altered consciousness where they are open to the spirit world with which they communicate. Sometimes the shamans guide the spirits into physical objects in the visible world. In such

forms of shamanism the sacred spirit inhabits the object and the sacred object is the focus for animate spiritual life that resides within.

In general there are two broad categories of religious objects. The first category comes from everyday elemental objects. These objects are part of ordinary life for the vast majority of people but their significance and usage is transformed in a sacred context. In this category we can place physical objects (e.g. statues) and indeed natural ingredients which have ensured the survival of the human species for thousands of years such as water, food (usually grains, fruits), fire and oil. One may question whether these ingredients can be legitimately classified as sacred objects since they are used by billions of people through out the world in everyday life. However in the homes and places of worship of many religious believers their status is transformed as they become an integral part of religious worship and belief. For example if one enters a Hindu temple one may see diva lamps, (usually clay candles holding clarified butter {ghee} and wicks) lit on front of an altar with an image or statue of a deity (devas), vegetarian offerings of bananas, coconuts or apples (indeed many types of fruit and vegetables), water used to wash the deity and aromatic incense or flower petals and garlands. The human senses of taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight are appealed to in the act of worship as the whole human being as physical and spiritual entity is involved in the act of religious belief. Central to this act of belief and worship is a statue or image of a deity, sometimes called an idol. This idol is not generally worshipped as an object in itself but as the locus for the manifestation of the spirit of Brahman (God) who suffuses all life and all objects. The murti (image of the deity) functions at a variety of levels and may enable the believer to recall sacred stories from the sacred scriptures or evoke key characteristics associated with the deity or remind the believer of festivals associated with the deity. For instance an image of the god Rama may evoke recollection of the Ramayana, an ancient Sanskrit Hindu sacred text (c. 400 BCE), provide a profile of Rama as the prototype of the perfect man living a life according to dharma (perfect righteousness), as well as focus the believer's mind on the celebration of the festival of light, Diwali.



A sacred object on the streets of New Delhi, India. This statue of the Hindu goddess Kali is garlanded with flowers and nestled beside it is a light reminding the passer-by that fire (arti) is sacred within Hinduism. This image of Kali on a busy street pavement reminds people of the importance of prayer (puja) and the omnipresence of Brahman.

The senses are involved in Hindu religious belief and worship in a most striking manner as the smell of the ghee divas (candles), perfumed water and incense, the sound of the ringing of bells and chanting, the touching of statues of deities, the sight of other worshippers as well as the architecture of the temple or shrine, assist the worshipping community in the act of meditation, yoga (stillness of the mind) and religious belief.

In a Buddhist monastery or temple one may notice these same elemental ingredients of worship such as the sound of gongs or bells, candles, oil, water, food offerings, statues (mainly of the Buddha), mandalas (geometric designs used as an aid to meditation), chanting, and the recitation of scripture. Sacred objects often function as aids to religious worship. For instance the Tibetan ‘singing bowl’ pictured beneath is sometimes used during the act of meditation in Buddhism. It works when the user runs the wooden stick around the outer circumference of the bowl which is held on the palm of the hand. A high pitched sweet sound emerges almost as if the bowl is singing, releasing a mantra into the universe, hence the name of the bowl. This sound is sometimes used as an aural initiation into prayer and mindfulness.



A Tibetan metal singing bowl with wooden puja stick

While each religious tradition is unique and while the temptation to reduce different religions to one common denominator must be resisted, one can say that in many of the World religions sacred objects have great significance. Obviously the status of sacred objects varies according to whether their use is peripheral or central to religious ceremonies, whether they are used by those officiating at religious ceremonies or by ordinary believers, as well as the religious community's understanding of their origin and significance. The Bodhi Tree (and Mahabodhi Temple), at Bodhgaya, where the Buddha gained enlightenment, is a centre of pilgrimage for Buddhists and as an animate sacred object one could argue that it is of much greater significance to Buddhists world-wide than a prayer wheel used by a Buddhist family for daily prayer. Nonetheless it must be remembered that each sacred object has a capacity to connect the believer with the sacred in a unique manner and this may involve an object that is of little significance to non-believers. For instance many sacred objects are on sale, as décor accessories for the chic home in contemporary Irish shops. Many garden centres, homeware stores and high-street shops contain sacred images and statues of the Buddha which are marketed as stylish interior or garden accessories. Yet for the believer a statue of the Buddha is a sacred object and it does not function at the level of a style accessory. Indeed the calm serenity modelled by a statue of the Buddha sitting in the lotus position, his hand *mudra* (the positioning of his hands) recalling the earth-touching moment after his

enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, acts as a teaching device for the devotee and an encouragement to awaken the Buddha within each human being.



For the believer it does not matter whether the sacred object is small or big, ancient or modern, priceless or of little economic value. The value of the sacred object lies in its inherent capacity to mediate and express the sacred.



Buddhist monks greet each other at the entrance of a Buddhist temple. The seated monk is holding a sacred object, a prayer wheel, in his left hand. Prayer need not be verbal and when the prayer wheel is rotated the sacred scriptures contained in tiny scrolls within are being prayed.

The second broad category of sacred object consists of objects that are divine in origin or that are designed for a specific religious use. Sometimes the divine origin of the sacred object holds the key to its unique status within the religious tradition. In the Jewish tradition the ancient Hebrew scriptures record that God provided the physical measurement and dimensions for the construction of the holiest of holy of sacred objects, the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:10-22). The Book of Exodus indicates that Yahweh (JHWH) oversaw the construction of the Ark which was built to house sacred objects. These sacred objects, including the two stone tablets (the ten commandments), were given to the chosen people by God. The Jewish faith also contains prohibitions which warn believers about a reliance on objects which distract believers from the sacred. It is evident that not all objects used in acts of worship are sacred, only those legitimised by YHWH. The prophet Isaiah speaks out against the worship of human-made idols.

Their land is also full of idols;
They worship the work of their own hands,
That which their own fingers have made (Isaiah 2:8).

This point is of great importance in the monotheistic prophetic traditions of Judaism and Islam where images or objects depicting God (referred to as Allah in Arabic) are generally prohibited. Indeed in many religious traditions objects are seen as having the power to diminish human openness to the sacred (desecrate = de-sacred) and distract the believer. This does not mean that in the Jewish and Muslim religious traditions that objects are not used in some forms of religious worship. For instance in Islam objects such as prayer mats, prayer beads, and Qur'an stands are used to facilitate prayer (*salat*). However while religious objects may be used in *salat*, it must be stressed that the believer is constantly focused on the act of submission to Allah.

The Christian tradition, like all religious traditions, exhibits diversity of type (Orthodox, Catholic, Reformed) and religious believers in many (but not all!) denominations use sacred objects such as candles (Paschal candle) to signify God as the light of the world, as well as water, food (e.g. bread and wine), incense, oil, bells and statues as vital expressions of divine-human encounter and religious worship. For Catholics the elements of bread and wine are transformed into the most sacred elements of the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. In the mass these sacred elements of the body and blood of Christ are not equivalent to other sacred objects as they embody and manifest the 'real' presence of God in the world. The Eucharist was instituted by Christ and is perceived as divine in origin and nature. Therefore only those who are initiated into the Catholic faith can share in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Many sacred objects are designed with a specific religious purpose in mind. For the Sikh believer the wearing of sacred jewellery, a stainless steel bracelet called a Kara, worn around the right wrist, is a constant visual reminder that they must always act with justice and integrity.



Above two Sikh boys, each wearing the Kara on their right hands.

The bracelet is one of the 5 K's of Sikhism and often makes a jangling sound. The Kara acts as an aural as well as a visual reminder for the wearer of the need to be faithful to the tenets of their Sikh faith, especially if they are using their hand to do wrong or to hurt anyone. In this instance the religious object acts as a sensory reminder of the need to live an ethical life.



At a Sikh Gurdwara in Patna, Northern India, the birthplace of Guru Gobind Singh and a place of pilgrimage for Sikhs, members of the community ceremonially process holding a golden case containing sacred objects, Guru Gobind Singh's slippers. Many sacred objects are associated with the lives of saints or religious leaders. The man standing in the background is holding a chauri, a sacred object which is waved over the sacred scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib.

Indeed religious objects generally facilitate acts of worship, symbolise sacred stories or commitment (wearing of Tefillin containing Torah scrolls in the Jewish tradition, Deut. 6: 5-8), provide collective support in the expression of faith, and identify religious believers in a social context. Sacred objects move religious belief out of the realm of the private and personal into the public and social, while facilitating the expression of private religious devotion. They facilitate the link between religious practice and belief hundreds and indeed thousands of years ago and contemporary religious practice. In all their variety and complexity one thing remains constant – human experience of the sacred and divine has found concrete, sensory expression through sacred objects for thousands of years.