

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND THE
CLAIMS OF ANTHROPOLOGY
THE EDVARD WESTERMARCK MEMORIAL
LECTURE 2007

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It is an enormous honor to be here to celebrate the memory of Edvard Westermarck. A Swedish-speaking Finn, a Scandinavian emissary to London, a Northerner intimate with Morocco, a founding figure across the emergent disciplinary boundaries between sociology and anthropology, Westermarck was a cosmopolitan in the best sense of the word. From his position betwixt and between, he was well placed to identify the two central challenges of relativity that have long marked the human sciences in general, and anthropology in particular. One is ontological, the other moral. From the start, given their vast ambition to understand humans in the broadest social context, anthropologists have frequently had to grapple with reality claims and ethical norms far from their own. To his enduring credit, Westermarck had the courage to face the problem directly, and early on staked out one of the more radical and still unsettled positions on the relativistic implications of anthropology. In a world of ever faster and more widely circulating people, images, and ideas, the challenges posed by other reality claims and other moral values have only become more pressing.

The two relativisms have a special place at the foundations of anthropology. This is in part because of anthropology's cosmopolitan claims, the effort to view matters in the widest context. It is also because of anthropology's peculiar, countervailing, insistence on the intimate demands of fieldwork. Nor are these demands merely effects of a certain empirical methodology. They also arise from the cosmopolitan impulse toward critique. As Saba Mahmood has said, speaking against the certainties of her activist colleagues, "Critique (...) is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another's worldview" (2005: 36). Although not all anthropologists have welcomed the idea of anthropology as critique, it has a long lineage, and certainly Westermarck, who was notorious for his attacks on Christianity (1939) and defence of homosexuality (1906), can be counted among those who saw anthropology as offering a special critical perspective on his own society (or, perhaps better, his own societies). With this tradition, the possibility that the observer himself or herself might be remade is an always lurking moral challenge, and the problem of relativism is goes beyond matters of method and analysis.

I stated that Westermarck dealt with two relativisms, ontological and moral, and not just one. This is because we should not too quickly assume that particular views of reality necessarily require particular value systems. In practice, however, the two are often hard to separate. This is especially evident in the domains we have come to call "religious". To be sure, morality is not necessarily religious, nor is religion necessarily about morality. In fact, Westermarck's critical remarks about Christianity suggest quite the opposite. But as an empirical matter, morality and religion are commonly allied. Differences among reality claims are perhaps most consequential when they underwrite differences of morality, and

these characteristically come to focus in clashes among religions. Whether we look at Muslim headscarves in Europe or the Christian attack on evolution in America, struggles over sacred lands in Australia or fundamentalist politics in India, we cannot escape the fact that the differences over realities and moralities have given rise to some of our deepest conceptual paradoxes and most painful political struggles. But today I step back a bit from these struggles, pressing though they are, to consider some of basic conceptual problems in the new anthropology of religion. I want to show why we should pay special attention to the materiality of religious practice. I will then briefly point to some implications of this materiality, and in particular, will suggest some links between materiality and morality. I begin by arguing against efforts to define religion in non-material ways, notably, as a special kind of belief.

In the history of social and cultural anthropology, the category of 'religion' has long stood for the general problem of apparently strange beliefs. Since the beginnings of European expansion, the encounter with the strangeness of other people's beliefs—from Montaigne's cannibalism to Malinowski's virgin birth—has been an instigation to cross-cultural study. Indeed, the problem of strange beliefs was one motive for formulating the very idea of 'culture' in its anthropological sense. When anthropologists attempted to explain shamanism, witchcraft, or human sacrifice, they seemed to need an idea like *culture*. For strange beliefs might turn out not to be so strange if viewed in the context of a background constellation of meanings more or less tacitly accepted by those people who were then held to share that culture. In that context, beliefs should not only make sense, they should also be evidence of the very existence of the culture that sustains them. But then the category of religion begins to slip. If we define religion in terms of strange beliefs, then we set about to explain why, when properly understood, those beliefs are not strange, we seem to have explained away that very feature by which we were able to identify the category in the first place. So what remains of the category religion? Is it coherent across cases? This question is one version of anthropology's tension between particularist and comparative projects.

There are two things anthropologists have usually claimed they can do well. One is to expand our empirical range *across contexts* in order to counteract a natural propensity for provincialism. The second is to situate empirical findings *within contexts*, an ambition at least once talked about in terms of understanding "the native point of view". The effort to do both at once seems to invite paradox, and most anthropologists have tended towards one or the other side. A glance at two recent discussions about 'religion', one within evolutionary cognitive anthropology, another within postcolonial critique, will illustrate the problem.

One recent attempt to develop a universal theory of religion is given by cognitive anthropologists. Pascal Boyer (2001), for example, claims that out of all possible ideas about the supernatural, only a relatively limited number actually appear on the ethnographic record, and many of these ideas seem to have been reinvented in unrelated societies. He explains this by asserting that although people may come up with any number of ideas about the supernatural, only some of them will be interesting and memorable enough to circulate from person to person, and to be perpetuated over time. These will be ideas that are based on certain cognitive templates (such as the category of the 'person') that are violated, but only in limited ways (a god is not visible and not mortal, but is like a person in every other way). This allows people to draw inferences that are not explicit in anything they have been taught about their supernatural ideas.

I find two aspects of this theory useful. First, Boyer wisely avoids the pitfall of most universal theories of religion and does not claim religion has any one purpose overall. Second, by giving an important place to inferences, the explanation frees up cultural phenomena from an excessive dependence on something like rote transmission from generation to generation.

In this one respect, at least, Boyer is in accord with other tendencies in cultural anthropology. For if there is anything anthropologists have come to stress in recent years, it is that cultures are creative projects as much as they are conservative traditions. Indeed, one of the more useful ways to think of culture is not in terms of sharing or persistence, but rather in terms of a capacity for innovation. Let us take the example of possible inferences in a society in which people tend to think of themselves as highly conservative. People on the eastern Indonesian island of Sumba perform rituals directed towards ancestral spirits (Keane 1997a). Most Sumbanese, including Christians, accept that those rituals were transmitted without any subsequent additions from the time of the earliest ancestors. But most Sumbanese have only the dimmest ideas about those spirits. Where they are located, what they are up to when you are not making offerings to them, how they actually carry out acts like making it rain, are simply not of interest. But because ancestor spirits are quasi-persons, it is possible to speculate beyond what tradition tells you, and every once in awhile, someone like the man whom I will call Umbu Haingu, will do so. He was very happy to stay up all night with me, huddled around the hearth, pursuing the most arcane philosophical questions. Speculations like Umbu Haingu's just might eventually add something new to the cultural materials available to Sumbanese more widely. Nothing about ritual per se rules out this possibility.

There are, however, severe limitations to the usefulness of this sort of cognitive approach. Any analysis of cultural phenomena, including religions, should attempt to deal with their publicness, and their historical character. Cognitive approaches stress universal mental experiences. Now, suppose one day I am strolling along and encounter the Virgin Mary, or at night I dream I have been granted powers by a jaguar spirit, or suddenly start to speak fluently in a voice and a language that are not my own. Certainly people have such experiences, and we may even grant that each involves identifiable cognitive phenomena. But what makes these respectively a vision, a prophetic experience, and a case of spirit possession rather than, say, fantasies, dreams, psychotic episodes, the effects of drugs, or a sudden head injury? They are instances of categories that are recognizable *to other people*. This is not an automatic business: even in places where shamanism or spirit possession are well accepted, *in any given instance* local communities have to decide whether they now have a case of possession or, say, madness, fraud, or error. Ethnographers who have seen this decision-making in progress tell us it is not at all a foregone conclusion how the decisions will go. The socially relevant outcome results from the irreducible conjunction of a potentially open-ended set of things beyond cognitive basics, such as micro-politics, recent precedents, kinship ties, and concepts currently circulating in public. And these outcomes become the context within which subsequent actions and decisions are made. The very *materiality* of this context, which makes actions and ideas public, has a direct bearing on morality, as I will argue below.

Even unique cases such as, say, the star over Bethlehem or Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, must become recognizable as instances of something that is potentially

repeatable (if only in the discursive form of a report) if they are to count as religious, or, more generally, if they are to have a potential for social existence. *In order to be recognizable as instances of something knowable, they must take semiotic form.* They must, that is, have some material manifestation that makes them available to, interpretable by, and, in most cases, replicable by, other people: bodily actions, speech, the treatment of objects, and so forth. This is not simply an issue for remarkable events or the experiences of virtuosi. A similar point holds for spontaneous and commonplace cognitive phenomena, such as the child's invisible friends or magical thinking. For it is apparent that *what circulate are not ideas or experiences but rather semiotic forms.* I do not have access to your ideas except insofar as they are mediated by signs such as words or movements. Signs have forms and material properties. They are also repeatable but there is nothing to guarantee that they will produce identical interpretations or experiences across time or between persons.

Semiotic forms are public entities. That is, they are available as objects *for the senses* and not confined to inner or subjective experience. As such, they have distinctive *temporal dimensions*. Because they are repeatable, they have the potential to persist over time and across social contexts. One result is they can enter into individual and social projects. Semiotic forms accumulate new features over time, contributed by different people, with different projects, in different contexts. The speculations of Umbu Haingu start from what in his youth he saw and heard the old men do when they were communicating with spirits. One of the things they do is make offerings of metal. A century ago, these were small pieces of metal. As money entered into the economy it became common to use a coin for this purpose. But if you do not have a coin, you can substitute paper money. Notice the quiet innovation, shifting the categorical identity of the offering from its metallic properties to its association with value. That is, the relative salience of co-existing properties of the offering (a phenomenon I call 'bundling') has been altered, but not the public identity of the offering itself. More generally, the work people put into cultural phenomena draws not just on ideas but on the properties of the semiotic forms. These properties characteristically form clusters with those of other phenomena: rituals develop multiple parts, scriptures acquire liturgies, gods acquire apotheoses, sacrifices acquire temples. Thus they are historical in character. However much any *particular* component of the phenomenon may rest on some universal feature of human minds, the *assemblage* is the outcome of contingent factors of historical context.

This point threatens to lead us back to the hyper-particularism of "local knowledge". But consider an alternative, markedly historicist, approach to an anthropology of religion. Talal Asad (1993; see also 2003) has criticised efforts to define religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon in the first place. His argument has two distinct aspects, which I think can be treated separately. The first is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion because any such definition is itself a historical and parochial product. More specifically, the effort to define religion as a universal arises is peculiarly *Christian*. Faced with competing creeds and the rise of natural science, the goal of such universal definitions was to find an underlying common essence that could be abstracted from concrete but divergent practices. According to Asad, with the first efforts to produce a universal definition of religion in the seventeenth century, the "emphasis on beliefs meant that henceforth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent" (1993: 41).

According to Asad, universalizing definitions of religion have tended to privilege *belief* as a cognitive and ultimately private or subjective phenomenon. Many familiar objections and alternatives have been posed against this privileging of belief. Asad raises two challenges in particular. The first is that the emphasis on belief had tended to fold into a further claim that those beliefs concern ultimate meanings—what is the purpose of life, what happens after death, how did it all begin, what are the foundations of morality. But by those terms, many of the things people do—including Umbu Haingu’s ancestral rituals—what we might want to count as religious are simply ruled out of court. The apparently neutral description turns out, on examination, to be normative. For evangelists and some nation-states, like contemporary Indonesia, people who lack ‘religion’ under such definitions *require* . The *material ritual* seems to militate against the true morality of an *immaterial conscience*.

Any definition of religion that privileges particular subjective experiences or beliefs risks being circular. To avoid this, the category of religion must be capable of including *not just the ardently faithful* but the bored schoolboy who has memorized a credo which he recites by rote. To say the latter is not really ‘religious’ is to make the definition of religion, as a matter of genuine, wholehearted faith, self-confirming. I would argue that we need that schoolboy. Belief ontogenically follows on practice. The child learns a prayer, or listens to scripture in a foreign language like Latin or Arabic, or sees her grandmother go into trance, or helps the priest by holding a sacrificial chicken. She may develop beliefs as a result, but *they depend on the prior existence of the practices*. This does not mean that beliefs are *determined* by practices. Quite the contrary, as the bored schoolboy should tell us. But even the most spiritualized of scriptural religions teach doctrines through concrete activities, such as catechisms, sermons, scripture reading, and exegesis. Even Saul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus had to become communicable in some form that made it recognizable to others.

Asad’s second objection to universal definitions of religion in terms of propositions and meanings is this: it separates religion from the domain of power. Yet even within Christianity, the power of disciplines to construct dispositions to believe has been a central concern. It is only with the rise of modern science and states, and the privatization of religion, Asad argues, that it makes sense to see religion as a state of *mind* rather than as practical knowledge of institutions and rules that orients effective *activity*.

Many religious traditions have little interest in either individual belief or public statements of doctrine. Sumbanese, for example, may accept differences of interpretation as long as practices themselves remain consistent. What *is* of recurring significance is the question “What can or must we do?”—a *moral* question about *material* practice. Moreover, even religions that *do* stress belief may still object to the subordination of material practices to inner states. For instance, Blaise Pascal insisted, “The external must be joined to the internal to obtain anything from God, that is to say, we must kneel to pray with the lips, etc., in order that proud man, who would not submit himself to God, may be now subject to the creature. (...) [To] refuse to join [externals] to the internal is pride” (1958 [1669]: 250). The very existence of a practice may be the basis for moral judgment, and its semiotic form a component of its morality. As Saba Mahmood (2005) has argued, the Muslim veil is not merely an *expression* of piety, in some circumstances it is *consubstantial* with it. If moral agents are constituted in an intersubjective field, it is as objective beings—beings with bodies, words, actions that have form and substance—that *they enter into the public world of judgments*.

Any spiritualizing or transcendentalizing effort to separate the soul or conscience from the semiotic form by which they are judged can only be, at best, an extrapolation to the unreachable end of a trajectory that always touches ground in words, bodies, and other things. This is one reason why materiality can be such a morally fraught domain for religious reformers. However much a ritual gesture, a prayer, or a shrine may seem to point *beyond* itself, its *objective form* has all the anxiety-producing persistence of an irresolvable paradox.

Can we define religion in a way that takes seriously *the perspective of its practitioners* and can still guide research *across contexts*? Can we do so in a way that respects the historicity of the phenomena, without returning to full-fledged particularism? Here I will focus on linguistic activity (see also Keane 1997b). Although this is a selective focus, it is not arbitrary. For one thing, religions very often focus on language as a source of difficulty or of power—Quaker silence, Pentecostal speaking in tongues, Hindu and Buddhist mantras, Sumbanese couplets, and the use of opaque liturgical languages such as Arabic in Indonesia and Latin in colonial Africa can all be seen as responses to the properties of language. Linguistic practices are especially interesting in the context of questions of belief, of course, because they so often seem to point us in the direction of *thoughts*. But this is a conclusion about which we should be very cautious. Instead, an examination of religious language may be more useful as a guide to how we might understand religious practices more generally, attending to their forms, pragmatics, and the semiotic ideologies they presuppose.

The linguistic features of ritual speech—ranging from parallelistic verse form to archaic vocabulary—typically impose some markedness relative to other ways of speaking, a sense of being unusual. Moreover, they tend to seem, to the practitioners, to involve either some sort of difficulty or effort. Religious language may demand extra control or aim to release language from control, to become more spontaneous; it may aim to make language more elaborate, or to simplify it. It involves linguistic practices that are taken *by practitioners themselves* to be marked or unusual in some respect.

They are not marked, however, against universal norms, but against *local ideologies of language*: assumptions about the relation between language and reality. Is the prototypical speech act referring to objects and the making predications about them, or is it a promise between two individuals, or a command between two hierarchical statuses? Is language a set of arbitrary signs established by social convention or is it a divine emanation expressing the true, if hidden, essence of the world? How you use words will depend in part on such assumptions.

This definition can only be a starting point. But it aims to satisfy the two opposed demands on the anthropologist, *to take practitioners' own perceptions as a guide, without foreclosing the possibility of comparison*. This approach presupposes that people have some intuitions, or language ideologies, about distinctions of markedness among different linguistic forms and practices. The intuitions or experiences to which I refer, however, are not the source of these practices so much as possible consequences. Beliefs can be understood as parasitic on activities, rather than activities as expressing—or as evidence for—prior beliefs.

By emphasizing the formal properties of religious language, and their markedness, we can start to go beyond imputing the experiential effects of ritual to convention or belief. Rather, we can ask how those experiential effects derive from ritual forms as they unfold in real-time. For example, Sumbanese rituals commonly display increasing depersonalization

and decontextualization over the course of the event. Indexes of the present time, place, or participants such as personal pronouns may be progressively eliminated, poetic formulae, prosodic regularity, and other regimentations of discourse becoming more stringent, such that the participants come increasingly to speak not as individuated, complex, politically interested and temporally finite parties, but as more abstract, disinterested, and timeless elders or spirits. The outcome is due not wholly to convention or conscious intention but to subliminal effects of linguistic and pragmatic forms, regardless of any particular beliefs held by participants.

Forms that decontextualize discourse help create a perception that certain chunks of speech are self-contained, belong together, and could be reproduced in different contexts without substantive consequences for the discourse itself. This results in what has been called a “decentering of discourse” through what the linguistic anthropologists have dubbed entextualization, the process of foregrounding the text-like and therefore context-independent properties of discourse. The words will seem to come from some source beyond the present situation in which they are being spoken and heard. Often the speakers seem to others or even themselves to have relatively little volition in producing their speech. They may be supposed, for instance, to be speaking exactly as the ancestors did, as the spirits who possess them dictate, or as has been written. Compelling examples of the dialectic of recontextualization are found in the use of scriptures among contemporary Christians. Certain parts of scripture, such as Christ’s Sermon on the Mount or the Lord’s Prayer, are taken by many believers to reproduce words that were originally spoken in a particular context. Circulating in textual form, the words are now available for broad dissemination. Indeed, some believers take a capacity for wide circulation found, for example, in videotaped sermons, as evidence of the divinity of words even when they are not themselves sacred scripture.

Effects of linguistic form are likely to seem especially persuasive and realistic because they are not derived from explicit doctrines, which one might doubt or deny, but seem to come directly from experience. The decentering of discourse is one moment in a larger set of dialectical processes that also include the centering or contextualizing of discourse, which stress the relatively objective and subjective experiences of language, such as the experience of inner speech and speaker’s intentionality. Since the experience of linguistic form is relatively independent of any particular intentions of or interpretations by language users, people’s responses to that experience will be historically variable. Suspicions of language in some religious traditions, such as Quakerism (who reject liturgy [Bauman 1983]) or the Masowe apostolics (who reject scripture [see Engelke 2007]), focus on the very same linguistic and pragmatic properties that other traditions may seek to exploit. To the extent that religious practices respond to or contribute to the perception of an ontological gap contrary to the assumptions of ordinary interaction, they may be prone to draw on the decentering and recentering possibilities of entextualization processes (Silverstein and Urban 1996). For religions “of the book”, the very existence of a written scripture is often taken as evidence for claims to an authority that transcends any particular context, and provides semiotic grounds for their intuitive verification. But the same decontextualizing objectivity may become the target of reformers and critics who seek more direct access to divinity. The very materiality of the text, and the displacements of agency it invokes, focus the moral anxieties that demand reform.

Differences in linguistic form can serve, under socially specified conditions, as evidence for differences in responsibility for what claims the words make, or actions they carry out. One of the stakes in the precise distinction between author and animator is the degree of agency, authority and responsibility a performer is willing or permitted to assume. In the US, evangelical Protestants often describe their conversion as a call to witness, testify, or preach to others. Often this does not involve any particular change in *belief*, if we mean the doctrines to which they subscribe. Rather, in such cases, full conversion consists in becoming enabled to speak scriptural language with authority.

This is an instance of the broader point, that one widespread effect of religious language is the creation or extension of agents and forms of agency beyond what is commonly available in unmarked interaction. Many of the effects of religious language can be better understood as expanding the presumptive speaker *above* the level of the individual. But the reverse may also occur, distinguishing among different voices *below* that level, emanating from a single body. Spirit possession, glossolalia, some preaching styles, involve both a deity and human being using the same body but speaking in different voices, marked by contrasting prosodic and paralinguistic features, and sometimes distinct linguistic codes. The formal properties of highly ritualized performances often play down the agency of the living human participants in favour of powers ascribed to other entities. Conversely, reformist movements may place a great emphasis on cultivating sincere speaker intentionality, as in the demand that prayer be spontaneous.

The emphasis on sincere intentions usually manifests language ideology that privileges individual interiority, and places great *moral* weight on distinguishing interior state from exterior words. The encounter between this ideology and actual linguistic activities can have powerful consequences. For example, the language ideology of some evangelicals assumes that utterances are always the expression of conscious individual intentions. Therefore, when under stress they utter words they did not intend, they see the hand of divine agency. Language ideology is crucial to the interpretation and evaluation of discursive forms. It mediates the practices that produce experiences of agency that are expanded, displaced, distributed or otherwise different from—but clearly related to—what are otherwise available.

Creeds are part of a larger set of genres, including sermons, scripture reading, and some kinds of prayer, that re-contextualize certain texts into liturgical and everyday practice. The creed, an explicit statement of religious tenets and norms for its verbal performance, is unique to the evangelizing, scripture-based religions.

A creed normally looks like a series of propositions about the world. But they are peculiar in certain respects (see Keane 2007). First, usually they are formulaic, condensing complex arguments about doctrine into a readily learned and reproduced form. Moreover, the propositions are attached to a performative of assent. The credo states an objective claim (it is the case that “Jesus is the Son of God”). As such it appears to be merely a proposition. But it has performative force; the Nicene creed begins “We believe”. It asserts the speaker’s alignment with the claims (“Jesus is the Son of God” is true about the world, and I hold that it is true). Moreover, it publically reports this alignment (“Jesus is the Son of God” is true about the world, and I hold that it is true, and I hereby state so—that is, I take responsibility for the match between my words and the world itself).

The creed takes the publically circulating form of an assertion. It represents the speaker as taking responsibility for her own thoughts. To be sure, the schoolboy may memorize a credo as mere rote. But the persistent recurrence of religious reform movements suggests that the semiotic form of the credo entails a normative tilt toward taking responsibility for those words, making them one's own. Since they are supposed to be transparent to one's inner thoughts, this stance towards one's own words is a model for both sincerity and responsibility. The practice of speaking a creed helps convey a norm of being able to objectify thoughts as words, and by avowing them in this way, taking responsibility for them. It thus encourages a distinction between the abstraction of thought and the materiality of its expressions, mediated by the moral norm of sincerity. The centrality of creeds to the conventional understanding of 'religion' in western society reinforces the assumption that religions are, above all, about ideas, and their materializations are thus a source of moral anxiety.

In the creed, we see one way in which religion bears on morality. Not all moral actions can be properly called religious. This is true, in many cases, for gifts, hospitality, and certain demands of kinship. But if by religion we mean a certain way of marking actions and evoking special kinds of agents, this markedness may bring the moral character of agency into focus. Religious practices often organize relations among actions, their agents, and their consequences. Through objectifications, such practices work on the doxic, the taken-for-granted, and bring aspects of it out of the penumbra of habit into the bright center of attention.

There has been a strong divide between those who take history seriously and find that it makes comparison impossible, and those whose comparative projects lead them to treat the historicity of their object as inessential, mere noise. Certain styles of critical post-modernist thought stand on one side, resurgent positivism such as some versions of cognitive anthropology on the other. I have suggested that both positions at the extreme are untenable. By focusing on semiotic forms, we may start to develop an alternative to the particularist and universalizing extremes.

Innovators like Umbu Haingu tend to respond to the forms—the prayers, the procedures, the offerings—that experience has made available to them. That is, practices are *objects* within experience to which people may respond. They can thus become sources of new intuitions, habits, and concepts. Moral judgments start with these objects of experience, even if they point toward something that lies beyond experience, such as virtue, a soul, or The Good. Much of the history of scriptural religions consists of struggles between correct dogma and practical deviations, purification and accretion. A recurrent theme in these struggles is the tension between abstract or immaterial entities and semiotic form, the undescribable god of the mystic or negative theologian and the physicality of the amulet, universal ethical norms and particular bodily habits, high doctrine and ritual sounds and smells. The Protestant Reformation is defined, in part, by the moment when the very same Roman Catholic liturgy that could have been experienced in terms of divine immanence becomes instead, in Martin Luther's words, so much "babbling and bellowing" (quoted in Pelikan 2003: 165).

To the extent that semiotic form is an unavoidable component of any cultural phenomenon, including those held to lie beyond representation, and involves an irreducibly public dimension, reformist purifications cannot fully and permanently establish themselves.

If religions continually produce material forms, those forms can never be reduced only to the status of evidence for something else, such as beliefs. As material forms, they remain objects of experience. As objects, they persist across contexts and beyond any particular intentions and projects. To these objects, people may respond in new ways. To the extent those responses become materialized in altered or new semiotic forms, those responses build on and are additive to, responses of other people in other contexts. These materializations bear the marks of their temporality.

Let me close by observing a few things that follow from the relative autonomy of the semiotic forms from particular intentions and interpretations. In the first place, forms do not only permit new inferences, but as objects that endure across time, they can, in principle, acquire features unrelated to the intentions of previous users or the inferences to which they have given rise in the past. This is in part because as material forms they are prone to enter into new contexts. But this is also the result of accumulation: the history of any set of cultural practices is in part a matter of accretion and of stripping away. To revelation is added commentary. Liturgies produce architectures, both require officers. Oral testimony comes to be inscribed; the written texts that result can be kissed, enshrouded, worn about the neck, rendered into ashes to be swallowed, read for literary beauty. Offerings expect altars, altars support images, images enter art markets, art objects develop aura. Rituals provoke anti-ritualist purifiers. Purified religions develop heterodox rites.

By virtue of their relative autonomy of particular uses and inferences, and their materially enduring character, practices are inherently prone to impurity and heterogeneity. Their very materiality gives them an irreducibly *historical* character. Two important consequences follow from this historical character. First, in their materiality, religious practices, institutions, and objects properly serve as evidence for something immaterial, such as beliefs, only under particular circumstances, and under the guidance of particular semiotic ideologies. Second, the move from intention to object is not a one way street. Materialized religion is not simply a Tylorian survival, the fossilized trace of some agents and purposes now lost. In any given instance, it is also part of a world that is giving rise to new agents and purposes. Material forms are raw material available for new exploitations. And as raw materials, they are not simply mute matter. To the extent they seem to those who encounter them to bear moral implications, they are also potential provocations.

This observation brings us back to the questions of morality and moral relativity with which I opened. As Westermarck stressed, when he attacked Christianity for displacing ethics onto divinity, priests, and liturgy, morality is fundamentally social. It involves judgments about the rightness of one's actions toward others, and vice versa.

Being social, morality depends upon public experience and its forms. Even if moral judgments are ultimately supposed to be about the soul or intentions or other immaterial things, these immaterial things are inferred from something material. Here is where materiality can be a moral problem. *First*, some moral systems seem to stress the empirical character of right actions, by insisting on procedural correctness, for example. Religious purifiers who object to such systems typically focus their objections not just on their *content*, but on *the very fact* of their materiality. *Semiotic form* can be the very sign of the fact of materiality itself. For example, reformers commonly argue that the problem with ritual is the materiality of the practice displaces attention from the proper locus of moral judgment, the conscience or the intention of the actor. *Second*: material forms can never be fully

stabilized in immaterial states. Therefore they can give rise to uncertainty and suspicion—one can never know for sure what inferences to draw from a material form. This *inherent gap* between material form and what it can appear to be materializing, may in certain historical contexts, make *the very fact of materiality itself* a prime locus of moral anxieties. Materiality and the experiential attention it draws *away from* the immaterial, *in themselves* seem to be moral problems. Or at least materiality is the domain in which moral struggles are carried out. And *third*, since material forms are by their very nature highly particular and variable (in contrast to abstract formulations of moral universals), they can seem to manifest the problem of moral relativism: different practices, different moralities.

The anti-ritualism of reformers worries about the relative autonomy of material practices from the particular intentions, inner states, moral intuitions whose primacy it assumes. In its more secular forms, anti-ritualism draws further impetus from what I have called the moral narrative of modernity. This sees the elimination of ritual and its deities as part of a historical trajectory by which humans come to be emancipated through the realization of their own true agency. What such attacks on materiality tend to overlook is that acting subjects, such as people and deities, are situated in a public world only by virtue of their materialization in practices. It is in the first instance in their objective form that subjects become available for judgments by others. Indeed, one might argue that *it is only by virtue of taking material form as objects for others that subjects can know themselves*, at least in ways that are socially recognizable.

In short, to the extent that moral judgments and disagreements focus on what people actually do, they depend on people's experiences of one another. For both these reasons, *objectification* is a necessary condition for moral agency. At the same time, the materiality of practices makes them relatively independent of particular agents, whose purposes they always exceed. By virtue of the very materiality of any given practice, there is always something more that might be made of it. The result we know now as a truism, that social facts are irrevocably vulnerable to history. This truism has a direct bearing on the problem of relativism that Westermarck expressed so pointedly. There are many ways we might grapple with the problem of moral relativism. One is through the reassertion of universal rational norms, another through the return of the dream of a positivistic social science. Westermarck rejected such facile solutions, whose appeal, however, never seems to diminish. Both these approaches depend on the denial of time and, perhaps, of our coexistence with social others. But this historicity, this sociality, and the materiality that produces them, must not be evaded if we are to understand how humans really live with one another.

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