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INTRODUCTION

BEYOND SELF-FASHIONING AND FREEDOM: BENDING, BREAKING, AND ADHERING TO RULES IN RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

ABSTRACT

Rules are a crucial part of much religious thought and practice. Their importance or insignificance, their strictness or laxness, and their rigidity or flexibility in the face of change are constant themes of debate, both within and outside religious communities. Yet they have arguably not been given the attention they deserve within recent anthropology. Since the rise of practice theory, rules have more often been considered something to look past in the search for agency. Where the new anthropology of ethics has addressed religious orthopraxy, it has largely been through the lens of the cultivation of virtuous self, or the ways in which moral rules may become especially salient in extraordinary circumstances, such as moments of radical cultural transformation. But religious rules are not just a function of ethical crisis or virtuoso projects of the self. They are also a taken-for-granted part of everyday life for millions of people worldwide. In this introduction and the case studies that follow, we thus aim to move beyond current perspectives, reflecting on both the nature of religious rules themselves and the ways in which they are negotiated in believers' everyday lives.

Keywords: Rules; anthropology; religion; ethics

ANTHROPOLOGY OF RULES

Rules are—among other things—a crucial part of religious thinking and theology, vital for defining the boundaries of religious communities, and central concerns for many religious adherents. Their importance or insignificance, their strictness or laxness, and their rigidity or flexibility in the face of change are constant themes of speculation and debate, as well as prominent cultural tropes concerning religion and its practice today.

Yet religious rules have arguably not been given the theoretical attention they deserve

within recent anthropology. Although rules generally were an important motif of earlier generations of anthropologists, since the rise of practice theory under the influence of Bourdieu, rules have been considered as something to see beyond, rather than deserving attention in their own right (cf. Edgerton 1985; Clarke forthcoming). Within the new anthropology of ethics, which in many ways sees itself as transcending Bourdieu's model (Laidlaw 2014), rules have remained of less interest than the cultivation of virtue, for example. Michael Lambek, in his influential programmatic vision for an anthropology of 'ordinary ethics', indeed argues that we need to see ethics as 'relatively tacit, grounded in agreement *rather than rule*' (Lambek 2010: 2, emphasis added). He also brackets off institutional religion from this domain of ordinary ethics (cf. Lambek 2012), which would make religious rules doubly marginalised as an object of anthropological enquiry. Where recent scholarship has discussed moral rules, it has often focused on the way in which they may become especially explicit or keenly felt in extraordinary circumstances, such as moments of radical cultural transformation or 'moral breakdown' (Robbins 2004; Zigon 2007). This could, indeed, be an important aspect of the social life of rules. But religious rules cannot be seen solely as a function of ethical crisis. In the form of devotional practices, dress codes, or dietary restrictions, they are also a taken-for-granted part of everyday life for millions of people worldwide.

Ranging more widely, one possible source of anthropological discomfort with religious rules might lie within anthropology's broadly liberal ethos. Recall, for instance, Susan Harding's (1991) analysis of North American Evangelicals as the ultimate Other of the secular, feminist, liberal self of the stereotypical anthropologist. Religious adherence to 'strict' rules, particularly rules governing gender and sexuality, has thereby been a tricky topic for many anthropologists to handle. Arguably, this secular liberal ethos has contributed to the tone with which religious rules are conventionally approached when analysed: either as functions of power and signs of repression when abided by,[1] or, when bent or broken, as signs of the individuals' agentive power to resist the forms of subjectivation they impose. Such analytical approaches, written from within the confines of what Furani (2019) calls the Anthropodome, perhaps reflect more the preoccupations of the anthropologists advocating them than those of the anthropologists' ethnographic subjects. Religious rules are thus an excellent example of the wrong kind of cultural Other, as they are both 'rules' (thought of as coercive) *and* 'religious' (and thus at odds with secular-liberal commitments).

It was in opposition to these sorts of liberal prejudices that Saba Mahmood (2005) developed her account of Muslim piety as a project of virtuous self-fashioning, within which the rules of Islamic practice arguably constitute a crucial 'technology of the self' in Foucauldian terms (Clarke 2015). Such work on the self has been a prominent theme of the new anthropology of ethics more generally (e.g. Faubion 2011). This should not be to erase the darker side of such processes of subjectivation, as in the shame-inducing colonial missionary inscription of rules concerning sexual conduct in Africa, for example (Lewis 2011; Kaoma 2016). But such has been the impact of Mahmood's account of 'piety' as a matter of self-discipline and willed subjectivation (see Hefner 2019 for a review) that others have felt the need to push back, arguing—in a manner akin to Lambek—that such 'virtuoso' work on the self stands apart from everyday life, where most people do not follow the precepts of the 'grand schemes' of religion most of the time (Soares

and Osella 2009; Schielke 2009; Schielke and Debevec 2012; and contra, Fadil and Fernando 2015). It hardly needs saying that no one ever imagined that people are always faithful to the rules they professedly adhere to. Here, too, however, criticism of idealised or unrealistic depictions of religious practice should not entail the dismissing of rules from the anthropology of religion and the anthropology of ethics as somehow bizarre or a minority concern. But we undoubtedly need to widen our perspectives on how people put rules into action beyond projects of self-cultivation alone.

One might recall here that some have criticized the recent anthropology of ethics for being overly individualistic (e.g. Kapferer and Gold 2018: 6), not only for its interest in projects of virtuous self-formation, but also for its focus on individual action, choice, and freedom. Joel Robbins (2007) has tried to reintroduce rules and obligations into this debate, and to reconcile such an approach with those centred on ethical choice. Although not uncontested (see e.g. Zigon 2009), his contribution has been fundamental to bringing back into the conversation the idea that individuals' choices are made in relation to the moral models one finds in the social space, and, thus, that rules (or norms, in Robbins' phrasing) matter. But it would also be misleading and reductive to consider rules only in relation to the individual, her self-cultivation, and her moral dilemmas. Rules are involved in complex interactions between individuals, institutions, the groups that the individuals belong to, and—in the case of religious rules—God. For example, according to Alessandro Gusman's (2013) work in Uganda, the rule 'abstain from sex until marriage' in Ugandan Pentecostalism was not a rule for individuals, but for a collectivity, a generation of people who had not yet been (much) affected by the AIDS epidemic. It was obvious that not everyone would follow the rule. Rather, the idea was to create a 'saved generation'.

In this special issue, we aim to add to and move beyond current perspectives on rules, notably on religious rules. We do so, on the one hand, by reflecting on the nature of rules themselves, taking them seriously as part of the functioning of social life, while not collapsing social systems into 'moral codes', as in Durkheim's analysis (Laidlaw 2002). On the other hand, we explore rules through ethnographic insights, revealing how religious rules are negotiated in believers' everyday lives. This is not to say that everyone does with rules whatever she wants, but rather that people reflect on rules, on how best to follow them, and on what it means when rules are not adhered to. In this way, we hope not only to contribute to an emergent wave of such renewed anthropological interest in rules (e.g. Dresch and Skoda 2012; Dresch and Scheele 2015; Heywood 2015; Clarke and Corran 2021), not least in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Clarke 2021a), but also to some core debates in recent anthropology.

We are thinking here not just of our engagement with the recent literature in the anthropology of ethics cited above and Robbins' (2016) concern that religion could be something of a blind spot for 'ordinary ethics' in particular. The way that rules take us back not only to fundamental questions of individual freedom, but also inter-personal justice and social community (Pirie and Scheele 2014), can extend debates on the anthropology of suffering and of goodness more broadly (Robbins 2013; Venkatesan 2015). And by rejecting hackneyed analyses of rules as either causing individuals suffering through their subjectivation, or the breaking of rules as instances of individual agency—that is, by pushing analysis beyond demonisation and idealisation, and instead accommodating multiple, at times contradictory,

aspects within one analytical frame (Ortner 2016; Alava 2022), we seek to practice a moral anthropology that reflects on anthropology's own prejudices (Fassin 2008).

The articles that follow thus propose a set of non-reductionist understandings of rules, which we hope others will go on to take further, in both religious and non-religious contexts. In thinking about rules in ways beyond reductive interpretations, the four case studies provide us with different perspectives on what the aims, stakes, and processes of rule-following are in that particular context. They ask: what do rules *do*, and what do people—both individuals and communities—do *with* and *to* the rules, not just what the rules do to them? These questions direct our attention, as ever, to ethnographic detail and nuance, but also to the importance of using multiple theoretical approaches to understand the complexity of human-rule interactions. Four such studies can only begin to broach the possibilities for comparison, and they all deal with varieties of Abrahamic monotheism, albeit in diverse forms—(Pentecostal) Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, as practiced in different parts of Europe and Africa—while engaging common themes. The theoretical issues are potentially vast. But we pick out here three points of departure that have oriented our writing and that might provoke further debate.

THE AFFORDANCES OF RULES

First, we can think of the particular affordances (Keane 2015) of rules as an ethical form. What are the consequences of adopting rules as a moral form? Why, indeed, rules at all? In a Wittgensteinian sense, rules constitute a form of life—or, thinking of religion in particular, an order of values to which one can belong. Rules provide general categories of experience, above and beyond the particular (Dresch 2012). As Timo Kallinen points out in his article in this issue, the abstraction and generality of rules particularly suits a proselytizing religion like Christianity, which addresses a universal, rather than particular, audience—while then also requiring new labours of interpretation as those abstract rules are insinuated into different contexts. The generality of rules can lead to the experience of one's own particular situation not fitting the general rule—a sense of rigidity, even violence, in response to which a certain 'elasticity' (van Dijk 2017) may be required for life to be practical, or which may on the contrary lend itself to projects of self-discipline (Clarke 2015, and this issue). While acknowledging the potential violence of rules, we can thus also see that subscribing to rules may have an empowering as much as disempowering effect upon individuals and groups. These go beyond processes of pious discipline or adopting a reflexive ethical position (or of identity). Rather, the control rules afford can contribute in quite tangible ways to survival. Nancy Tatom Ammerman (2013: 1) quotes one of her interlocutors as saying, 'it's my faith that can ground me when things seem to be spinning out of control.' Perhaps rules do the same. Subscribing to rules may allow people to maintain control both over their own lives, as in the case of a Congolese refugee who subscribed to Pentecostal moralities so as to avoid joining criminal gangs and thereby ending up in prison (Gusman 2021), as well as over objects or forces outside of them, such as those of the born-again for whom following strict rules of prayer and Bible-reading keep demonic powers at bay.[2]

We must also recognize that what it means to follow a rule may not be as straightforward as is sometimes assumed, as Morgan Clarke explores in his article in this issue (see also Clarke 2021a). As he also argues, the common cliché of religious rules being 'strict' needs

qualification. Rules can provide justifications for action—even excuses—and their legalistic manipulation is often a point of critique (see also Clarke 2021b). Rules thus also open up questions of sincerity (Seligman et al. 2008) and hypocrisy. An analysis of rules needs to consider them not just as something that binds, but as something that 'allows for' transgression, as in the case of the (Italian) 'doppia morale', or 'double morality', described by Paolo Heywood (2015). Rules thus inherently create tensions between intentions and practice. Just following the 'letter' of the rule may be enough to put oneself in the right, but is it enough to constitute truly moral comportment, or does that require following the rule's spirit? Do these sorts of distinctions only become possible once rules become explicit, as opposed to the implicit norms of sociality? That following and not following rules can put you in the right or wrong also raises questions of affect. What sort of emotions and visceral responses do rules provoke? As Henni Alava and Alessandro Gusman describe in their article, studies of African Pentecostalism foreground rules of, for instance, sexuality, an especially visceral domain.

RULES AND RELATIONS

Second, we suggest attending to rules as related to individuals, communities, and orders—and the relations between them. Even if religious rules may be important for individual projects of moral betterment, rules also point us beyond the individual towards the collective and the general. Rules can be an important element of both social coordination and group identity—as Mercédesz Czimbalmos, Ruth Illman, and Dóra Patericza discuss in their article in this issue for the case of Jewish communities in Finland. Rules may even work more for the group than the individual. Rules provide a general standard that transcends individual particularity and can define a common practice and membership, which can also be distinct from that of others. (Indeed, people often aspire to belong to religious communities or projects whose norms would seemingly exclude them.) We suggest that the act of recognising oneself (and being recognised) as part of a group, by means of following rules, cannot be seen merely in terms of a 'performance', 'pretence', or 'submission', and that the reason why rule-abiding so often comes to appear as such is in part due to the analytical perspective and normative positionality of the analyst.

Rules are also made at very different social scales, ranging from the rules inscribed in national legislation or transnational religious frameworks to those affirmed by local religious or family communities. As Alava and Gusman argue (this issue), we can think of how rules work on people and people work on rules across such different scales as a process of 'relational rulework'. In his article in this issue, Timo Kallinen explores such negotiated relations at the political level in Ghana, where different sets of rules and expectations—those of the Christian Ten Commandments and those of Akan chieftancy—are in direct opposition and a source of public tension and debate in the context of postcolonial nationalist modernisation.

RULES IN COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

Third, building on the previous point, we need to ask whether and how these processes play out differently in different contexts. For instance, do rules operate differently when the religious community in question is the majority, as opposed to when it is a minority religion in a given geographical context? How does conversion, as opposed to 'growing into' a tradition, change a religious adherent's relationship to rules (see e.g. Czimbalmos et

al., this issue)? Do rules play different functions in highly secularised societies opposed to ones where religion dominates the public sphere, or in urban centres as opposed to close-knit rural communities? One would also want to ask whether rules work differently in different religious traditions, and to query the different ways in which rules have been treated in different anthropological conversations.

Rules have been a relatively prominent theme in the anthropology of Islam, for example, reflecting the prominence of the sharia. But is that prominence a function of modernity, or even Orientalist and Islamist fantasy, as much as of anything essential to Islam itself (Ahmed 2015)? Islam could in this regard be seen as close to Judaism, the 'ruliness' (Clarke 2015) of which has been the subject of critique within the Christian tradition (Illman et al., this issue). And yet medieval and early modern Christian canon law and casuistry stand as almost archetypally legalistic forms (Clarke and Corran 2021), and some contemporary forms of Protestantism clearly take rules very seriously, as both Kallinen's and Alava and Gusman's articles show for African Pentecostalism here. Nevertheless, the anthropology of Christianity has tended to dismiss religious rules on the lines indicated above. Meanwhile, a great deal of scholarly work in and near anthropology has described how various Christian traditions' rules governing sexuality violate the rights and well-being of those they exclude. Often, such work also shows the creative ways in which rules are circumvented or challenged (Alava 2017; Boyd 2015; Van Klinken and Chitando 2016). But might the relative lack of prominence of rules 'in and of themselves' in the anthropology of Christianity as opposed to that of Islam reflect more the preoccupations of different anthropological theoretical traditions than reality? What bearing might the different geographical and cultural settings in which such work is carried out have on such questions? We hope the juxtaposition of very different examples here will help provoke such debate.

THE ARTICLES IN THIS ISSUE

Morgan Clarke's article opens the issue with an invitation to reconsider the potential ethnographic 'thickness' of the practice of religious rules, and offers a set of suggestions as to how to capture it. The focus is on Islam, which, as suggested above, has a reputation of being especially 'ruly', in Clarke's terms, or even, in the prejudicial terms of much public discourse, of being uncompromisingly 'strict' or 'rigid'—prejudices that Clarke seeks to problematise. The ethnographic examples are here taken from recent fieldwork with a British (Shi'i) Muslim community. Sticking to the rules of Islamic practice can often be challenging in the non-Muslim majority setting of the UK but is clearly important to many of Clarke's interlocutors. And yet, what it means to follow the rules and how—or even why—to do so are not always straightforward issues. Some feel a sense of 'grinding tension'; others are more serene. Sometimes, the practice of rules is a matter of self-discipline, intrinsic to forming a virtuous self. At other times, keeping within the letter of the law is more a matter of staying within a 'safe space', safe from sin, that is. Following the rules—rather than wrestling with the issues for oneself—can be the easy course, rather than the hard one. Even within a small community facing similar issues, the complexity, diversity, and subtlety of everyday practices of rule-following are striking. By going beyond stereotypes of 'mere' 'rigid' rules, blindly followed or boldly evaded, Clarke thus demonstrates both the necessity and the possibility of a thicker description of religious rules.

Mercédesz Czimbalmos, Ruth Illman, and Dóra Pataricza shift the ethnographic focus to Judaism, presenting the findings of an ongoing research project on everyday Jewish life in Finland today. They write in the familiar anthropological terms of a framework of 'vernacular religion', religion 'as it is lived', analysing the many expressions and experiences of rules in day-to-day Jewish life as part of complex interactions between individuals, institutions, and religious motivations. As in the case of Islam, Judaism has been, and continues to be, subject to troubling stereotypes of a minute focus on rules of religious practice. And as in the case of Clarke's study of everyday Muslim practice, Czimbalmos, Illman, and Pataricza reveal that the reality is far more complex, one of negotiation, flexibility, and creativity. Nevertheless, here, too, following the rules of Jewish practice was widely seen as something important, potentially vital, indeed, to Jewish identity, albeit something of a challenge in the Finnish setting, where increasing diversity and deep-reaching secularity contest and reshape traditional boundaries of belonging. Static values and conceptions of 'Jewishness' have to give way to more flexible subjective positions as people struggle to find religiously and culturally significant models from the past that can be subjectively appropriated today. Focusing on ostensibly formal, but, in the end, deeply personal rituals—not least those related to the preparing and sharing of food—the article shows how rules are revisited and refashioned as traditional boundaries between sacred and secular, gendered practices, and ethnic customs, are transgressed and new and individual combinations are developed.

Henni Alava and Alessandro Gusman take us away from Europe, to Uganda, and to a different religious tradition, that of Pentecostal Christianity. Christians have of course at times contrasted their practice with the nominal legalism of Judaism (or Islam for that matter) and, given that Pentecostalism stresses a direct personal experience of God, it could potentially be seen as especially anti-legalistic in spirit (Ellington 2013:157–9, cited by Kallinen, this issue). And yet, as Alava and Gusman describe, rules concerning romantic relationships and sex—what they term 'purity rules'—are central to Pentecostalism in Uganda. In public church arenas, the born-again variant of the rules laid down during Uganda's 'ABC' response to HIV/AIDS—'abstain till marriage and be faithful once you marry'—are presented as clear and non-negotiable. Yet in church members' lives, and in their conversations with each other or in small church groups, space is often created for interpretation and deliberation of the officially strict rules. Rules work on people—but people also work on rules. Alava and Gusman introduce the idea of 'rulework' to describe this process and stress its relational nature. In this setting, rulework necessarily takes place at the nexus of an individual's relationship to the church, to small groups at the church, and to God. As has been so important in the anthropology of law, the dynamics of such rulework become particularly evident on occasions where rules are transgressed or where the nature of the rules—and thus of possible transgression—is questioned. It is thus at the point where the 'ruliness' of religious traditions interacts with the messiness of religious adherents' lives that rulework occurs, and where it can most productively be ethnographically observed.

Timo Kallinen's article also concerns African Pentecostalism, in this case in Ghana, and its suspicion of the institution of traditional chieftancy, which has its own rules, rituals, and practices. Many churches, particularly those that belong to the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement, reject traditional ritual life aimed at

ancestors and other kinds of spirits as immoral. Indeed, Pentecostal discourses often equate chieftaincy with 'idol worship' and thus portray it as in direct conflict with the second of the ten biblical commandments. Here again, then, Pentecostalism and rule-talk, in the form of the Ten Commandments, are far from strangers. Again, the general rules of the 'world religions'—of which the Ten Commandments are perhaps the most famous instance—facilitate exactly the universalism that a world religion requires. And yet, the abstraction and 'entextualization' (Keane 2015) that make the rules not only seemingly profound, but also transportable, inevitably leads to their recontextualization in different particular places. Here, then, we see a very different sort of relational rulework to that described by Alava and Gusman, one related, on the one hand, to global Pentecostal theological discourse and its translation, but, on the other, to local political and ideological struggles over the fate of the modern Ghanaian nation.

Through these distinct but related case studies exploring common themes, it is our hope that this special issue will provoke renewed debate and provide fresh analytical tools for further exploration of rules in the anthropology of religion and beyond.

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NOTES

1 Or, in keeping with a certain cynicism within social scientific analysis, rule-abiding might be thought of as insincere, really just 'pretending', or as 'showing off' (Sadgrove 2007), often with the aim of accruing cultural or social capital (Burchardt 2020).
2 We are drawing here on Henni Alava's fieldwork in Uganda.

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