

UNDERSTANDING SACRED OBJECTS

TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY OF RELIGIOUS MEANING

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Abstract

The anthropological theory of religious meaning proposed in this paper is based on a multimodal approach to human communication. According to this approach, meaning originates not in a set of propositions about the world but in modes of experience of and engagement with it. These modes of experience include different forms of communication in which their performative component trumps their propositional content, modes of communication that are normally defined as ‘symbolic languages’ when religious scholars try to translate them into explicit verbal statements, that is, into a set of propositions. Of all these modes of communication or symbolic languages, in this article the focus is on sacred objects, that is, objects that evoke their absent signifieds by being simultaneously objects of thought and instruments of thought.

Key words: cognition, fetishes, meaning, religion, religious anthropology, sacred objects, symbolism.

Introduction

What does ‘explaining religion’ actually mean? What kind of explanations can anthropology provide for religious phenomena that are different from those produced by other disciplines? One way of addressing this question is to compare religion with other human traits for which we do have an explanation. If explaining religion consists in identifying its natural foundations, as researchers working within the framework of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) strongly emphasize (e.g. Boyer 2001), whether these are adaptive predispositions or by-products of human cognitive equipment, religions appear to be remarkably similar to natural human languages. Without a doubt religion originates in cultural learning. But the actual specific weight of that cultural learning turns out to be much less significant than has traditionally been assumed in the social sciences, in what Tooby and Cosmides (1992) disparagingly dubbed the ‘Standard Social Science Model’. The exposure to religious ideas acts as the spark that activates sets of hard-wired inferential systems out of which religious belief and

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behaviour are ultimately constituted. Hence it is these pre-cultural inferential systems that ‘cause’, in the last instance, religious belief, rather than religious cultural representations per se. My purpose in this paper is to question this view, which is widely accepted among the proponents of a naturalistic analysis of religion.

The analogy between religions and human languages has two stark limitations. There is first the universality of language: all human beings brought up under unexceptional conditions, apart from those suffering from some neuropathology, develop linguistic capabilities. This situation clearly does not apply to religion. Even though the percentage of unbelievers the world over, especially taking into account the whole history of the human species, is certainly very small, it seems wholly inappropriate to classify atheists, agnostics or sceptics as sufferers from some form of cerebral disorder. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere (Salazar 2018), human languages do not seem to be ‘believable’ in the same way that religions are. The problem of believability as applied to language brings to the fore what to my mind constitutes the main difference between language and religion, namely the issue of meaning. Whereas languages are a vehicle of meaning but are essentially *meaningless*, religions are *meaningful*.

But what is the meaning of religion, and how should we approach it? In this article, I would like to provide some building blocks for an anthropological theory of religious meaning. By an anthropological theory of religious meaning, I understand a theory with a broad comparative scope, capable of encompassing all recorded manifestations of religious behaviour, but specifically concerned with what we normally understand as popular or non-erudite religiosity. Secondly, it has to be an ethnographically grounded theory, for it is only through ethnography that religious meanings can be perceived and analysed (cf. Sterelny 2017).

The experience of the sacred

Let me start not by defining religion (I shall return to this issue) but by describing the experience of the religious, specifically the experience of the sacred. The sacred does not refer here to some set of ultimate or transcendental values (cf. Rappaport 1999) but is a surrogate for the beyond, the supernatural, which does not necessarily allude to some supreme moral principles or values but rather to ‘another form of reality’ (Pitarch 2010). A very common way of experiencing the supernatural is by means of sacred objects or fetishes. A sacred object is an ordinary object, sometimes with some unusual

characteristics, that is believed to be endowed with extraordinary power, which in general can be defined as the capacity for self-effacement, that is, the capacity to go beyond itself. Perhaps one of the best-known accounts of the power of sacred objects is that provided by Durkheim on the *churinga*, the sacred things of the Arunta in Australia. The *churinga* are pieces of wood or bits of polished stone of a great variety of forms, but generally oval or oblong in shape. As Durkheim points out (1915: 119-21), they are objects of high religious value, and women and young men not yet initiated into the religious life may not touch or even see them. They have the power to heal wounds and to make the beard grow, they confer important powers over the totemic species, they give men courage and perseverance, and they weaken and depress their enemies.

Maurice Godelier came across a very similar case of hallowed objects among the Baruya in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. These were the *kwaimatnié*, objects that are secretly kept by the masters of initiation rituals and that can only be shown in special circumstances. *Kwaimatnié*, meaning ‘make grow’, are objects that cause men to grow and that turn initiates into warriors and give them the power of hunting and of war, that is, the power of death. Godelier (1995: 97) was given the privilege of seeing some of them:

Un Kwaimatnié se présente comme un long objet entouré d’une bande d’écorce de couleur rouge, un Yipmoulié, bandeau dont les hommes baruya se seignent le front et qui est rouge de la couleur du Soleil, leur père. Il me fut donné d’avoir le privilège de voir ce qu’il y avait à l’intérieur d’un Kwaimatnié. L’homme qui vint me le montrer, accompagné de son fils qui devait en hériter, écarta avec précaution l’écorce et je vis couchés côte à côte une pierre noire, des os, une noix. L’homme ne me dit rien et se mit à pleurer silencieusement, puis il referma le tout avec précaution et partit. Emotion devant un objet qui n’était pas beaux mais qui probablement pour lui était sublime.²

In this particular context, ordinary objects such as a black stone, a few bones and a nut seem to be endowed with this self-effacing power to go beyond themselves, giving men the power of war and death. Their mere presence can cause this strong emotion in the

² ‘A Kwaimatnié appears as a long object surrounded by a strip of red bark, a Yipmoulié, a headband which Baruya men use to bless their forehead and which is red in the color of the Sun, their father. I was given the privilege of seeing what was inside a Kwaimatnié. The man who came to show it to me, accompanied by his son who was to inherit it, carefully removed the bark, and I saw lying side by side a black stone, bones, a nut. The man said nothing to me and started crying silently, then he closed it carefully and left. Emotion in front of an object that did not look beautiful but probably for him was sublime’ (my translation).

man who is showing them, making him cry. In fact, they are not exactly 'ordinary' objects, for they possess some special characteristics. Godelier goes on to tell us that the black stone has the shape of an adze blade and is meant to represent Venus, the morning and evening star, which for the Baruya was a sacrificial victim offered to the python snake, master of thunder and rain. One of the bones was an eagle bone. Eagles are taken to be metamorphoses of a mythical animal called 'original dog', which accompanied the first woman before men appeared on the earth. The other bone was a human bone probably belonging to one of the clan's ancestors. It was tapered like a punch and was used to pierce the nose of the initiates. Finally, the nut was a brown disk bearing a drawing that resembles an eye, which the Baruya call 'baby's eye'. It was used, among other things, for different forms of life-enhancing magic (Godelier 1995: 97).

We shall now move on to consider a very different type of sacred object: the fetishes used by Yaka healers from south-west Congo to counteract the activities of sorcerers and witches. According to René Devisch (2002: 178), these objects have the power to channel phantasmagorical forces that annul or deter the malignant energies released by an evildoer. These are the *nkisi*, a term that can be translated as fetish, charm, medicine, potion or power object. In the words of one of these healers, the *nkisi* might include:

glass shards collected from a tomb, earth surreptitiously taken from below the bed of an old widow suffering from rectal piles and who cannot control her urination, a piece of cloth or leaves which have been used by a girl at the time of her first menstruation that I secretly steal from her, a madman's saliva, a rooster's heart, the 'sperm of lightning' [that is, vitrified sand, or latex exuded from a tree mutilated by lightning], the blood of murder victims, and other residual substances whose usage is revealed to me in dreams. (Devisch 2002:176)

What does the healer do with all this stuff? He asks a not yet nubile girl to put them into a cartouche, which he seals with a resin. The healer then whispers a spell in partly inaudible tones while his wife holds the cartouche in her left hand. The cartouche is then deposited on the tomb of an irascible ancestor, and on the evening of the third day the healer treats it with a mixture of toxic plants and waste materials while turning his back to it. Finally, he carries it home, tying it to his rectum with a loincloth knotted between his legs. Again, we see a mixture of ordinary things with somewhat extraordinary or weird characteristics. Devisch draws our attention to the residual character of most of them, which might be related to the way in which the Yaka understand the nature of the malignant energies produced by the sorcerer. Note as well the multimodal character of

the experience of the supernatural that these objects generate. It is often not the object on its own that produces the desired effects, as it has to be made and obtained in a certain way, as well as being treated in a certain way by the healer and his assistants.

The last example of hallowed objects I would like to introduce here might seem more prosaic, but it is nonetheless more symptomatic, I argue, of their nature than the more or less standard ethnological exotica I have just described. I am in a Catholic parish in the west of the Republic of Ireland in the house of a middle-aged woman, married and the mother of three. She is showing me different kinds of things that, in one way or another, are valuable to her. She begins with an album of photographs. There are all kinds of pictures in it, from her marriage, from the marriage of one of her sisters, from her children's graduations, the trips they made to Barcelona and other places, etc. The interesting thing about them is the little things she attaches to them from time to time. One is the cross that her daughter received for her Holy Communion, another is a medal given to her youngest son when he was christened, yet another a piece of the tie the daughter used to wear when she was at school. She also tells me about the dress her husband bought for the girl's graduation at Athenry vocational school. She recognizes that it is not a big deal, but still they paid €400 for it, and she tells me about the care with which the girl looks after it, how much she liked it, etc. She made two blankets when both her eldest son and the girl were about to be born, one pink, the other blue, because she did not know whether it was going to be a boy or a girl. Anyway, she still keeps the blankets. 'They think I am mad, with all the things I keep [she is referring to her sisters]. Not Mamó (her mother), though – she also *believes in keeping things*' (my emphasis).

A few days later, I paid a second visit to the same house. There were candles everywhere, because of the kids' exams. In the dining room there were two pictures of them, with a candle beside each. Today the youngest son had an exam at 8:30 in the morning, so the mother woke up at that time and observed a 'morning vigil', praying for him. Later the girl phoned and asked her mother to pray for her, as did the eldest son, who was sitting the exam in Dublin. When I ask her about the prayers she was offering, she pulls a big envelope out of a drawer full of prayer cards plus bits and pieces from different places: receipts, bills, phone numbers, memorial cards, little prayer books. She also has a relic of Padre Pio, a little card with, she says, a small piece of Padre Pio's body (it looks like a piece of bone). It has healing properties, she adds, in a matter-of-fact manner. She also shows me the rosary. Each person should have one, she says, and

it goes with you to your grave. Her husband has one too, probably acquiring it when he was little, and he has kept it ever since. The rosary is a big thing here in Ireland, she says. Then she shows me a plastic bag with a couple of woollen socks, a handkerchief and a wooden cross. These were the socks that Daideo (her father, who passed away some years ago) was wearing when he was in hospital just before his death, together with his handkerchief and a wooden cross.

In this case, sacred objects such as relics, rosaries, crosses and prayer cards mix freely with all sorts of mementos, souvenirs, phone numbers, bills, etc. I did not ask the woman why she was keeping all these things, though it was clear to me that they all had some sort of story, a life of their own. She did not handle any of them with special care, not even Padre Pio's relic, nor the rosary, but they all seemed to be wrapped up with some kind of significance, more or less sacred, more or less profane. One of them at least was explicitly endowed with supernatural power, like the bones of the Baruya's ancestors. Another might be associated with the substances used by the Yaka healer in his incantations, though no phantasmagorical energy could be produced from it. A complex network of metonymical and metaphorical relationships brought all those objects together and linked them to their (absent) signifieds. Webs of meaning and interwoven modes of experience blend the sacred with the symbolic. For, as Durkheim pointed out long ago, the sacred *is* the symbolic, though for reasons different from those he envisaged.³

The meaning of religious belief

Sacred objects are therefore meaningful objects, but they are meaningful in a special way. The philosopher Tim Crane has recently demarcated the meaning of religious belief in terms of what he calls the 'religious impulse', which, following William James, he defines as the 'claim that there is an unseen order and that our greatest good is to live in harmony with this order' (Crane 2017: 54). Behind the world as we see it, therefore, is a deeper, truer, perhaps better reality. But what kind of order is this 'unseen order'? And why is it 'unseen'? Crane refutes the idea of the supernatural as a characterization of this unseen order because, in his view, that would bring religion too close to magic. If that were to happen, it would deprive religion of its social character, and that is an essential component of all religions, Crane maintains, following

³ See my critique of Durkheim's sociological theory of religious symbolism (Salazar 2015).

Durkheim's well-known analysis.⁴ Of course, definitions are always arbitrary. However, there is a sense in which too radical a separation between magic and religion turns out to be somewhat misleading.

A very important distinction should be emphasized at this juncture, one that is especially relevant when we are discussing the meaning of religious belief, namely the distinction between erudite and popular religion (see Boyer 2009: 308-9; Salazar 2018). Whereas erudite religion is typically the product of a minority of religious specialists in literate cultures (theologians, priests, etc.), popular religion refers to the set of religious beliefs and practices that are characteristic of ordinary folk. The beliefs of religious scholars originate in long years of hard training, not dissimilar in that sense from the beliefs of other erudite minorities such as scientists or philosophers (McCauley 2011: 153-4). Anthropologically speaking, there is no 'mystery' in the assimilation of such beliefs, no matter how bizarre, extraordinary or counterintuitive they happen to be. Assimilation is possible thanks to the intellectual effort entailed in the in-depth study of theology. Certainly, erudite and popular religion are not completely independent of each other. However, it would be very disingenuous to consider popular religion as merely an unsophisticated version of its scholarly counterpart.

It is in this sense that popular religious practices and beliefs, which are likely to be condemned by religious scholars as 'superstitions', come closer to what we normally understand by 'magic'.⁵ And it is in this sense too that the concept of the supernatural could be useful as a definition of the world view – what we might call the 'folk ontology' – that is characteristic of popular religion. Having said that, I rush to add that there is a very important difference between popular religion and superstition, interestingly a difference that is normally neglected by CSR practitioners. I shall expand on this below: at this point it is the concept of religious meaning that I want to focus my

⁴ He cites approvingly Durkheim's critical views on the idea of the supernatural as a definition of religion (Crane 2017: 10), according to which this idea would be alien to the majority of societies in so far as they lack the concept of the 'natural' and hence cannot conceive what the 'supernatural' could possibly mean. However, this is a fallacious argument. All individuals in all human societies have an intuitive representation of the ordinary world, let us call it the 'natural' world, which does not correspond to the view put forward by the natural sciences and is challenged or contradicted in many different ways by religious ideas. This is precisely the point that Crane fails to grasp in his critique of the concept of the counterintuitive (2017: 47-8), which he wrongly sees as that which 'contradicts contemporary, scientific, secular culture'.

⁵ Magic might not be 'social' in the same ways as religion is: there is no sense of belonging or collective effervescence in magical rituals, etc. But magical beliefs and practices have to be shared in one way or another in order to be effective, i.e. to be meaningful (see Lévi-Stauss 1963: 168, 180-5).

attention on. Let us take as our point of departure Crane's definition of the religious impulse as an attempt 'to make sense of the world by seeing a kind of meaning or significance in things' (2017: 39), a meaning to be found in the 'unseen order' whose existence constitutes the core of any religious belief. Let us further assume that this unseen order corresponds to the idea of the supernatural or, as Crane prefers to call it, the 'transcendent' (ibid.: 54-5), which in any case refers to something otherworldly, strange, uncanny, numinous, 'radically other'.

Ethnographers of the religious have come across different manifestations of this radical otherness in particular cultural elaborations. The Greek villagers studied by the Charles Stewart (1991: xv) used the term *exoticá*, literally 'things outside or beyond'. Among the Tzeltal Indians of Mexico, it is the *chu'l* (sacred, 'other') which, according to their ethnographer, 'is not so much another place but rather another sort of reality or form of existence – perhaps we could call it “virtual” – that develops in a time and space distinct from ordinary understandings of these dimensions' (Pitarch 2010: 202). Polynesians from Tikopia talk about *manu*, which Raymond Firth (2011: 192) tentatively defined as 'supernatural power'. And, perhaps in a slightly different sense, we could also include the Fang's notion of *akyunge*, by which they refer to anything surprising, extraordinary or miraculous (Fernandez 1982: 436). Note that there is an at best ambivalent moral significance to these notions of the supernatural that is totally absent from the Greek *exoticá* and the Fang's *akyunge*, and less than clear with respect to the *chu'l* of the Tzeltal and the *manu* of the Tikopia. As already noted, the common denominator of them all is the idea of otherworldliness: they all point to an 'unseen order' of sorts, even though it is unclear to what extent our greatest good is to live in harmony with this order.

Knowing about the supernatural

How does anyone come to know about, and believe in, the existence of a supernatural order? Modes of cultural transmission in general and of religious communication in particular can vary widely from society to society. However, specifically in respect of religious communication, there are certain common denominators that no anthropologist who has done research on popular religion can fail to notice. Prominent among them is the use of symbolic languages. A symbol is merely something that stands for something else. However, the phrase 'symbolic language' or 'symbolic communication' is explicitly used here to refer to a form of communication that is different from ordinary

verbal or linguistic communication. In symbolic languages the relationship between signifier and signified is tenuous, ambivalent, indeterminate, inchoate (Fernandez 1974). Unlike ordinary linguistic signs, symbols cannot simply be read, they have to be interpreted.

Religious communication is overwhelmingly symbolic communication. This takes place not only by means of the religious language par excellence, the language of ritual, but also in the metaphors and metonymies of mythological narratives, in sacred chants, anthems and dances, in works of art and all sorts of sacred objects, amulets and fetishes. We might wonder why popular religions the world over, and as far back as archaeological evidence allows us to go,⁶ should make use of this apparently indeterminate form of communication. One way of answering this question would be to refer to a very special characteristic of symbolic signifiers, namely that they are signifiers with an 'absent' signified. Might not that absent signified be the 'unseen order' that all religions seem to refer to? Apparently, nothing could be more absent or self-effacing than what cannot be seen. Invisibility is not necessarily absence, even though the presence of the invisible is certainly a weird, counterintuitive presence. In any case, it is arguable what this absent signified might refer to. Perhaps 'absent signified' means simply the absence of the signified, that is to say, meaninglessness.⁷ Superstitions are the clearest instance of absent signifieds. Superstitions are not instinctive, as we have to learn them, but the ways in which they manifest themselves in behaviour resembles a nervous tic, that is, a mindless action, rather than intentional behaviour. There might be theories about particular superstitions that provide them with a kind of meaning, but nobody behaves in a superstitious way because of their knowledge of that theory. A superstition is what most clearly exemplifies a 'virus of the mind'. Superstitions are almost unintentional, sometimes even against the subject's will. In Boyer's terms (1990: 72-8), the relationship between the event that generates superstitious behaviour – for example, someone mentioning a calamity – and superstitious behaviour, such as touching wood, is indexical and not representational.

What applies to superstitions, however, cannot be extended to religious behaviour in general. It is true that religious behaviour in popular religion does not originate in a

⁶ We should remember that the oldest sculpture on record is famous the 40,000-year-old lion-man or *Löwenmensch*, discovered in the Hohlenstein Stadel cave in Germany, and that in all probability it had some magico-religious significance.

⁷ This point has been forcefully maintained by some analysts of religious rituals, such as Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) and Staal (1979); cf. Salazar 2014.

‘theory’ about the world, consequently being devoid of propositional content or meaning. But propositional meaning (i.e. the meaning contained in a set of explicit propositions about the world) is not the only way of producing meaning: symbolic communication can also be seen as a means of accomplishing that end. Note that symbolic communication is not a defective or less efficient form of communication (cf. Bloch 1974). The need for interpretation, the fact that symbolic meanings do not seem to be immediately understandable, does not originate in some sort of incompleteness of the language itself that must somehow be compensated by the interpreter’s work. Symbols have to be interpreted in so far as we want to translate them into ordinary language. It is the translation into ordinary language, the exegesis of symbols, that creates the indeterminacy or ambivalence. In a way, it could be argued that all forms of communication that depart from ordinary linguistic communication become ‘symbolic’, that is, ambivalent, indeterminate, etc., as we attempt to translate their messages into ordinary language. Furthermore, at least certain forms of symbolic communication, such as ritual language, and maybe music and singing as well (Mithen 2007), are evolutionarily older than linguistic communication. It could be the case, therefore, that the human mind had a stronger predisposition for symbolic, that is, non-linguistic forms of communication than for linguistic communication *sensu stricto*.

Thus, a simple ‘why wouldn’t they?’ could be another way of answering the question as to why popular religions make use of symbolic languages. There is nothing inherently ambiguous, indeterminate or mysterious in such languages: it is our attempt to translate them into ordinary, analytic language that makes them look ambivalent and indeterminate. As James Fernandez (1982: 341-2) perceptively observed with regard to the Bwiti religious cult among the Fang of Gabon:

We can only impose theological consistency in the origin myths of Bwiti. Fang theology was embedded in diverse lore and was not clear to begin with. There was little interest in the topic. (...) Moreover, the theology does not emerge from recitations of the origin myths alone. Much is contained elsewhere in the liturgy and in what is being sung or danced about. We have to consult many interwoven modes of experience.

Two key ideas clearly emerge from this passage. First, the Bwiti’s followers had little interest in theology or theological consistency, which had to be ‘imposed’ upon them. Secondly, much of that theology is contained in ‘interwoven modes of experience’. Here Fernandez is using the concept of ‘theology’ in a loose sense, not as a systematic

set of propositions about the supernatural or the divine, as is normally the case in literate religions, but rather as a Geertzian web of significance in which meaning – the meaning of the supernatural or sacred – does not appear in propositional form.

What can be shown cannot be said

Let us now return to the experience of the sacred made possible by sacred objects. Sacred objects, I argue, are meaningful objects in a special way. In all of them subjects can very often produce explicit statements concerning their meaning. There is a clear explicit reason for why some of these objects have the properties they have. The black stone of the Baruya represents Venus, the sacrificial victim offered to the python snake; the wooden cross in a plastic bag is the cross a man was holding on his deathbed, etc. For the Yaka healer, however, it seems that it is their highly implausible, uncanny, tortuous nature that constitutes the very discourse of their significance ('earth surreptitiously taken from below the bed of an old widow,' etc.). Be that as it may, in no case does there seem to be a 'theory' that explains how these symbolic meanings can be produced or their mysterious power generated. We might think that the woman who keeps the socks, the handkerchief and the cross belonging to her father does not need any theory to account for her behaviour: anyone can see the metonymical association between those objects and the man who once possessed them. Conversely, we might need a theory to explain why Padre Pio's relics have healing properties. Yet no theory was ever given to me: 'That's the religion' is all I could get whenever I asked. Besides, on the few occasions when I managed to obtain further elaboration, I had the impression that they were trying to make me happy with an improvised explanation rather than providing me with a real account of their behaviour.

What caught my attention at that time was not only that all those symbolically charged articles with different degrees of sacredness or 'otherworldliness' were kept in the same place, the same drawer, but also that their handling, the way the woman was actually pulling them out of the drawer and showing them to me, did not seem to make any distinctions among them, as if they were all part of the same meaningful totality.

Let me dwell a little longer on this concept of meaningful totality. Sure, the three ethnographic cases described above were not only culturally heterogeneous but also phenomenologically incommensurable, at least to some extent. But there is a sense in which, by considering all of them as part of the same meaningful totality, controversial though that might be, we may gain some deeper insight into the roots of their

significance and, by implication, into the process of the production of religious meanings.

The key issue to be addressed here is the un-thematized or pre-reflective nature of their enigmatic powers. What if we see those objects as parts of an extended mind of sorts? In other words, suppose they are not external entities in the world whose existence and properties have to be accounted for, but the very means by which that external world is perceived and understood? In their article about the extended mind, Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) give the example of an imaginary patient suffering from Alzheimer's disease whom they call 'Otto'. To make up for his loss of memory, Otto carries around with him a notebook in which he writes down any new information he learns. Otto's notebook plays the role usually played by biological memory in healthy people. Clark and Chalmers's point is that Otto's beliefs about the world, in so far as they are based upon the information contained in his notebook, are in actual fact constituted by that notebook instead of by his biological memory. In other words, Otto's notebook is not an object in the world but has become part of his (extended) mind. From here they conclude that '*beliefs* can be constituted partly by features of the environment, when those features play the right sort of role in driving cognitive processes. If so, the mind extends into the world' (ibid.: 12). Is not Otto's notebook therefore also a kind of 'sacred object', similar to the Baruya's black stones, the Yaka's glass shards or Padre Pio's relic?

There is a difference, however, between Otto's notebook and the sacred objects we have been dealing with. The difference is important because it is what draws the boundary (certainly, not a clear-cut boundary) between the meaningfulness of the world and the meaninglessness of the tools one may use to perceive and understand that world. The process of enculturation, in the sense of which of these objects are believed to acquire their specific characteristics (remember, a multimodal process in which different forms of learning might coexist), is inherent in the value they have for the subjects who make use of them. Yes, Otto can also give us an explanation for why he is using that notebook, an explanation analogous to that provided by a neuroscientist regarding the workings of biological memory. But just as we do not need to know how our biological memory actually works in order to remember, so too Otto could very well forget why he is using that notebook (perhaps as a result of the disease he is suffering from); yet his notebook would still be as useful to him as our brain is useful to us, even

though we know nothing about how it works.⁸ By contrast, none of the subjects who deal with sacred objects can actually ‘forget’ what makes those objects sacred and still make use of them according to that property. The confusing thing here is the fact that none of them seems to have a theory of their sacredness. So what is it, then, that they cannot ‘forget’? It is not a theology, understood as a set of propositions about the nature of the sacred and the divine, but the set of interwoven modes of experience that provide them with their sacred nature. These modes of experience are not dissimilar in kind from those that made my informant keep her dead father’s socks in a plastic bag.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to provide the outline of an anthropological theory of religious meaning that takes as its point of departure the study of sacred objects. Certainly this is not a fully-fledged theory, but merely an expanded theoretical argument that aims to identify some key issues in the anthropological study of religion. An anthropological theory must be a species theory, that is to say, it ought to be able to explain human behaviour, religious beliefs and practice in this case from the perspective of the whole human species. Furthermore, an anthropological theory must be ethnographically grounded. If it is a theory of religious meaning we want to advance, this does not mean that the meaning of (religious) meaning should not be understood a priori, for meaning is an analytical concept that does not stare ‘any observer in the face’ (Whorf 1956: 213). As intentional entities, meanings are not *in* the world but *about* the world. However, an ethnographically grounded theory of religious meaning entails that the transmission of meaning cannot be taken for granted. CSR scholars have done a good job of providing a species perspective that so far has been somewhat neglected, when not altogether derided, by mainstream anthropological theory. However, overall CSR researchers have glossed over the issue of religious meaning,⁹ apparently because they (wrongly) see religion as on a par with human natural languages, an analogy that

⁸ Interestingly, Clark and Chalmers mention language as an instance of what they call ‘socially extended cognition’ (1995: 17-18). Language can certainly be an instrument of cognition instead of an object of cognition in so far as it is meaningless, as I have argued above, this being a condition that sacred objects can never have.

⁹ In a foundational text of CSR, Lawson and McCauley (1990) defended the need to integrate ‘explanation’ and ‘interpretation’ in the study of religious phenomena. That should be the aim of what they called the ‘interactive’ model between explanatory theories that search for causal laws and the interpretative endeavours concerned with meaning and experience. Unfortunately, that much desired interpenetration and integration between these two forms of the analysis of religion (and a fortiori of all culture) remains to be seen.

can only have some purchase if religious beliefs and behaviour are equated with superstitions. Or it may be because a lack of ethnographic research makes them blind to the constitutive power of cultural meanings in human behaviour.

The need for the ethnographic method in the analysis of religious meaning emerges from the specific nature of that meaning. In popular religion, meaning does not originate in a set of propositions, a 'theology', but in a form of engagement with the world. This engagement might include different forms of communication whose performative component trumps their propositional contents. These forms of communication are normally defined as 'symbolic languages' when religious scholars try to translate them into explicit verbal statements, that is, into a set of propositions. Of all these modes of communication or symbolic languages, in this article I have focused my attention on sacred objects. These are objects with absent signifieds that evoke notions about the sacred, the divine or the supernatural.

One way of approaching the analysis of sacred objects is by means of the extended mind hypothesis. What if such objects were instruments of thought rather than objects of thought? That would explain their pre-reflective or un-thematized nature. However, that would leave the culturally specific value that these objects have for their users unaccounted for, since sacred objects are simultaneously instruments of thought and objects of thought. That is what makes them 'symbolic': as we think about them, they take us to another form of reality. And yet there is nothing mysterious in these symbolic languages, just as there is nothing mysterious or 'unnatural' in the supernatural itself, as long as we do not translate them into propositional language. Sacred objects are uncanny, baffling and enigmatic because we cannot find a theory that accounts for their sacred nature. But we cannot find that theory because there is no such theory other than the object itself and the set of interwoven modes of experience that place it into a meaningful totality. In conclusion, therefore, perhaps the anthropological theory of religious meaning that this article has been aiming at cannot, and should not, go beyond the expanded theoretical discussion offered here.

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