

Material Objects in Cosmological Worlds: An Introduction

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We begin with an object lesson. It is about religion and about materiality, the two themes of this volume, but it is also about a sheep.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Candle

In the Republic of Georgia, official Georgian Orthodox rituals blend into a series of lay practices that are sometimes ignored, sometimes tolerated, and sometimes incorporated into church rituals, often at the whim of the individual local priest. One such practice is animal sacrifice. Animal sacrifice is never allowed within the church proper, but within a church's courtyard it is sometimes accepted. To the extent that the priest participates in such lay rituals, it is usually a simple ritual involving blessing the sacrificial animal with a candle; the priest will not actually perform the sacrifice. But a priest who does choose to participate in this way may well be motivated by desire for material gain: in return for this religious service of rather dubious orthodoxy, the priest may expect or demand some of the meat, and perhaps some wine, too.

Once, apparently, some Georgians brought a sheep to a church for sacrifice, along a rough road in the trunk of their car, where, importantly, they also had a couple of loosely sealed cans of gasoline. In the church's courtyard, the priest offered to bless the sheep prior to sacrifice in the usual way. The priest began to make the sign of the cross with a lit candle over the sheep which had been soaked with gasoline while traversing the bumpy road. The sheep explodes.

The story is popular with Georgians for several reasons, especially because the seemingly opposed categories of high-minded religious ritual and grotesque materiality are brought into conjuncture in a bit of folk anti-clericism.

As a ritual (and culinary) misfire, it reminds us that lit candles are not only signs of higher illumination, but may also combine with gasoline-drenched sheep to produce incendiary devices, that a sheep as a religious sacrifice is ideally going to end up as shashlik (shish kebab), and that the village priest performing such humble spiritual tasks for his flock is also, perhaps, eager to use some religious excuse to appropriate the meat of sacrifice (and here his potential greed is highlighted by the tellers). Religious ritual and messy materiality come to a head, leaving not only a priest with a burnt beard, but also charred, inedible, and distinctly unconsecrated bits of sheep adorning a church courtyard. Obviously, contingency, risk, and bleating bombs are only some of the things that come into view when we move the spotlight from the transcendent meaning to the risky and contingent materiality of the carrier of that meaning. Material objects, precisely because they are here and now, sensuous, and not impalpable cosmological entities, are in fact able to participate in many distinct fields simultaneously. Candles, for example, in Orthodox practice are potential carriers of light which allows them to function in various rituals because they resemble that higher illumination, the same illumination represented in a holy icon by gold leaf in the halo around the head of a saint. Candles, then, have sensuous properties of various kinds, sensuous qualities that are potentially meaningful (qualisigns): when lit, they are sources of light that can bless, but they are also potential igniters of explosive compounds. The Georgian story about the priest and the exploding sheep may be apocryphal, but it forcibly reminds us of the way that objects and their qualities participate in different registers and different fields of action simultaneously.

The story of the inadvertent sheep bomb also draws our attention to the fact that there are different ways in which the material properties of objects operate in their surroundings as signs. The light of the candle, after all, really only *resembles* that higher illumination, like the gold leaf on an icon, or the arrangement of windows in a Byzantine church that allow religiously significant interior illuminations. It is a sign that works by resemblance, a Peircian icon. In each case, the 'qualisign' (the relevant sensuous property that gives the object the potential to operate as a sign) of the object 'light', is manifested in different ways depending on the object in which it is embodied (lit candle, icon, church). Only in the case of the candle does the light come from combustion, and only this kind of light can operate to cause a gas-soaked sheep to explode in the middle of a ritual. Such causal relations between signs and their contexts are very different from relations of resemblance between a lit

candle and, for example, spiritual illumination. In general, just as signs that work by resemblance are icons, so signs that operate by existential relations of proximity or causality are called indexes. But more importantly, a ritual of blessing a sheep in which the material world unexpectedly intrudes with an explosion, shows us that when considering the materiality of objects, any given object will not only embody those qualisigns that are relevant for its operation as a sign (light, illumination), but also a number of other qualisigns that differ according to the object (icons, churches and lit candles in Orthodoxy all instantiate the theologically relevant qualisign of 'light, illumination').¹ These resemble each other in this respect, but otherwise they have few, if any, other qualities in common. Unfortunately for the Georgian sheep and those who wished to make shish kebab of it, in one of these objects the qualisign of illumination is also 'bundled' with the qualisign of chemical combustion, which can function as an ignition device, fire. As Webb Keane reminds us, qualities are always found embodied in this or that object, and depending on what that object is, they are necessarily bound up with a whole series of other qualities that are also potential signs, qualisigns. The relationship of co-presence between qualities mediated by co-presence in the same object is what he calls 'bundling':

This points to one of the obvious, but important, effects of materiality: redness cannot be manifest without some embodiment that inescapably binds it to some other qualities as well, which can become contingent but real factors in its social life... as qualisigns bundled together in any object will shift in their relative value, utility, and relevance across contexts (Keane 2003:414).

This bundling, which gives rise to so much of the contingency and variability of the value of objects, is a theme illustrated throughout these papers. Quite simply, the papers here do not seek to immediately get past the messy materiality of things to discern the transcendent meanings. For as we concentrate on the materiality of the objects that are the bearers of these meanings we find that these meanings themselves are often various. The sensuous qualities of the objects imbricated in fields of specifically religious meanings often allow the same objects to participate in other non-religious fields of meanings simultaneously. The object becomes, via the qualisigns that allow it to participate in different fields of meaning, a kind of 'condominium' that is a potential zone of conflict as these different cosmological fields seek to establish unique sovereignty over that object. Therefore, the sensuous qualities of objects are not merely empty forms of 'difference' that arbitrarily are

used to oppose cosmological categories of 'meaning' statically in a Saussurean manner. Rather these material qualities can be mobilized dynamically to reposition singular objects rhetorically as contested grounds between different sovereign fields of meaning (akin to Latour's 'purification'). Or by situating a singular object as a 'hybrid' condominium, are able to mediate across different fields and contexts.

One of the things the papers have in common is their attention to the materiality of objects, significant or otherwise, not merely seeing in these objects the carriers of transcendent meanings, for to see them this way would be to privilege certain forms of representation over others. Another broad tendency the papers show is, in fact, a refusal to see the religious as being universally opposed to whatever it is we are going to call the residue of this category, including materiality. We would like to think that there is nothing surprising about either move, but we do see the two things as being related on a fairly abstract level. Somehow the opposition between immaterial meaning and material signifier is homologous with the opposition between the world of pure spirit and the world of matter (Irvine 1989; Keane 2003).

Questions of value of qualisigns of objects also raise questions of indigenous ontologies and cosmologies in which the interpretations of these objects are embedded, ideas about what sorts of things they are, what capacities they have, and so on. Objects do not speak for themselves, qualisigns remain only *potential* signs, 'icons and indexes in themselves, "assert nothing"' (Keane 2003:418–9, citing Peirce) until they are construed or regimented as signs by some further sign, a 'meta-level' of semiosis, which we can call, again following Keane, semiotic ideologies (Keane 2003:419). The papers here each draw attention in different ways to the constitutive role that such semiotic meta-discourses can have in foregrounding some qualisigns of an object as being semiotically important (for example, the Georgian discourse of the sublime that privileges ruined churches over new churches). Indeed, as we will see, such semiotic ideologies can act discursively not only to foreground and background the relative importance of different sensuous qualities of objects as signs (for example, sweetness of dates as signs of God's beneficence), but can in effect constitute a whole new set of qualisigns in objects that can only be apprehended discursively, and not sensuously. Yet again, the sad fate of the sheep reminds us that these semiotic ideologies do not have the power to cancel out semiotically irrelevant, but materially potent, attendant bundled qualisigns, which can, at times, remind us most forcibly of their bundled status.

The Figure of the Fetish

As we attempt to take stock of the situation, we are left to wonder why the matter-spirit relation has come to seem so problematic, so permeated with the smell of death. When did matter as such become so dead, and its animation so ghoulish? Has it always been this way? (Masuzawa 2000:261).

Part of what makes the story of the sheep so provocative is the way that it brings together very different values of the same material object (the capacity to be both illuminary and incendiary), commingling the category of religion with base materiality. One of our many anthropological inheritances from the anti-idolatrous iconoclasm of the early Protestants is our general tendency to divide a category of 'religion' away from the general material muck of human existence. To speak of the materiality of religion seems oddly contradictory, even debased (Masuzawa 2000). This is so much the case that the 'untranscended materiality' imputed to African fetish objects by European travelers and traders became a basic diagnostic of an essentially defective, or primitive form of religious expression, that for Europeans typified 'savagery':

For Enlightenment thinkers and their nineteenth-century successors, the fetish was the marker of the barbarous par excellence. To evince a belief in the power of the object was to engage in a fundamental category mistake that separated superstitious and credulous others (non-whites, non-Christians, Catholics, the lower classes, and women) from the rational European man (Kierney 2002:436).

We cannot deal with all of the much-vexed complexities of discourses of the fetish here (but see Masuzawa 2000). For our purposes, it is the radical alterity of the fetish which seems to highlight the basic problem we face when discussing the idealization of the non-intersection of the 'material' and 'religion'. For the fetish as a semiotic form imputed to others involves mixtures of all manner of things that Catholic, and later Protestant, Europeans felt should be kept separate. The very inability to separate these things instantiated in the fetish was diagnostic of the base spiritual condition of savages. Placed within a 19th century view of human social evolution, particularly with respect to religion, such a materialistic, idolatrous religion that imputed subjective properties to objects, confused the spiritual world of religion with more base, personal material interests, would be replaced, by slow degrees of iconoclasm, by a form of religious expression assumed to be more advanced, more adequate, in which material expressions vanished away, from incarnations of the divine to wispy metaphors or tropes. The central irony of the reception of the fetish

in 19th century accounts of 'primitive religion' is that the 'fetish theory' of religion seemed to inherit all the 'low', debased and pathological materialistic properties of the religion it described. Fetishism came to be viewed by leading proponents of the 19th century comparative science of religion such as Tylor or Muller not merely as a low, debased form of religion, but an equally low, debased *theory* of religion as well.

The trouble was – and there seems to have been near consensus on this point – that the use of the term 'fetishism' tended to be too liberally expansive and uncritically inclusive, such that just about anything could count as an instance of fetishism for the advocate of fetishism-theory, just as any piece of rubbish, trifle, or trinket was said to be a potential fetish for the practitioner of fetish-religion (Masuzawa 2000:243).

And yet, at the same time, it was perhaps the very unruly, debased and 'primitive' materialism of the fetish belief and the fetish theory that made it so essential as a semiotic figure of alterity, an 'anti-model' of religion, allowing religion to be ordered in a progressive teleological series from inadequate 'primitive' to adequate 'modern' expressions. More importantly, as Masuzawa suggests, the absolute alterity of the fetish allowed the justification of certain material expressions of religion by reference to the alterity of the fetish:

Fetishism's lowly character is evidence above all by a tenacious attachment to the base materiality of the object and, by the same token, to its physical immediacy, its incidental natural, and its radical finitude. The fetish is materiality at its crudest and lowest; it points to no transcendent meaning beyond itself, no abstract, general, or universal essence with respect to which it might be construed as a symbol. It is this special tie to materiality, and the alleged absence of any symbolic (or supra-material) dimension, that distinguishes fetishism from idolatry... As a matter of fact, it may be speculated that the positing of fetishism as a third category in addition to polytheism and monotheism – in addition to 'idol' and 'icon/symbol' – helped clarify and justify the often difficult-to-sustain distinction between the illegitimate and legitimate uses of material objects in religious practice... By positing the fetish as the opposite extreme in contrast with iconic/symbolic representation, one can render idolatry as something of a transitional stage in the development of religion, a midway point between materiality and true spirituality... (Masuzawa 2000:248).

When anthropologists begin to think of religion, then, we tend to implicitly follow, as noted above, movements in Christian theology and 19th century anthropological forebears in the comparative science of religion, that cause us to prioritize symbols as representations which can be 'read' or 'interpreted'

by knowledgeable others, thereby seeking a transcendent, unitary 'meaning'. Among the most famous of these universalizing accounts of religion where-by meaning was foregrounded at the expense of materiality within our discipline, was proposed by Clifford Geertz. He was, of course, also a prime figure in approaches to 'meaning' in general in anthropology, most generally known under the title 'symbolic anthropology'. Even though our paper here shares with one of Geertz' most influential programmatic statements of his position, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture' (1973), an anecdote about sheep, we argue that just as accounts of religion show a general tendency to abstract away from materiality to find meanings, so too does symbolic anthropology abstract away from the materiality of the sign in a rush to find transcendent meanings.²

This approach to meaning in symbolic anthropology, of course, follows an idealizing tendency in the linguistic and structuralist treatment of meaning that finds its exemplary expression in Saussure, and subsequent structuralist approaches to signs (Irvine 1989:248; Keane 2003:410; Manning 2006). Borrowing heavily from phonological models in which differences between sounds have no role other than to serve as diacritics to separate meaningful lexemes ('minimal pairs'), these approaches have also tended to abstract away from the sensuous materiality of the objects in order to find just those qualities that would serve as potential differences that were invested with meaning (Stasch 2006:167). The specific sensuous content of these qualities did not matter, only that they could serve as sensory differences that could anchor differences of meaning. In such a way, perhaps, did 'meaning' become the secular equivalent of the transcendent order associated with the 'religious', and the purification of the materiality of the sign does show some homologies with the purification of the materiality of religion (see Irvine 1996:258; Keane 2003). We should note that exchange theorists perhaps paid more attention to the qualities of the objects exchanged; for instance, kula shells have qualitatively different capacities for exchange than do banana leaves or yams (cf. Weiner 1992; Munn 1986). Alfred Gell is particularly concerned with the transformative potential of certain objects; for instance, odiferous objects like incense, which have the capacity to change form from a solid to a non-solid, are, in his formulation, objects which are particularly effective for imagining the transcendent (1977).

We are influenced by Asad's reading of Voloshinov's critique of Saussurean linguistics: 'he [Voloshinov] tried to link language to what he called the materiality of the sign, to the fact that signs *are* things and not merely

reflections of things. And if signs are *things*, they must have a physical presence apprehended by the senses – through hearing, feeling, and seeing. The stress on materiality seemed to me important, and I later saw that it was necessary to think about signs in relation to the body and its emotions’ (cited in Scott 2006:270). Also influential here is Raymond Williams’ insistence that the realm of ideas and meanings cannot be held to be separate from material social processes, but rather, ideas and meanings are understood to be part of hegemonic relationships (1977). Williams clearly offers a way to think about meanings as material, yet Carolyn Steedman offers a yet more detailed reflection on how material goods like clothes provide or restrict access to desired social worlds (1986). Peter Stallybrass, in his lovely article ‘Marx’s Coat’, reflects on how central material possessions were for establishing respectability for those who made commodities they did not own: ‘For Marx, as for the workers of whom he wrote, there were no ‘mere’ things. Things were the materials – the clothes, the bedding, the furniture – from which one constructed a life; they were the supplements the undoing of which was the annihilation of the self’ (1998:203). Young’s paper (this volume) picks up on this key insight: we must look too at the absence of objects, or their frailty, as potentially meaning-producing. The meaning of an object is not separate from its material condition. Keane (2001:70) notes how the condition of an object, in his example, a cloth torn during a ritual, becomes not a prestigious gift but an insult to the recipient.

All of these considerations bring us back to the category of the ‘fetish’. Certainly in the last decade or so the fetish has become very ‘good to think’, perhaps because both Freud and Marx found it to be so (in both cases to label pathological conditions of modernity), thus giving the category a certain chic panache and, perhaps, offering a tantalizing opportunity to bring these two authors and their works into dialog. In order to actually make analytic use of the category of the fetish, however, the complex semiotic polysemy of the historical term is usually winnowed down to one or another semiotic relation that it contains. For our purposes, however, the fetish does not stand as a term to be recuperated as a category of analysis (and hence is not found in many of the papers in this volume), but the opposite, as a figure standing for an amorphous collection of ‘hybrid’ semiotic phenomena united only in their inability to be assimilated to the Saussurean ‘purification’ of the sign, and especially the religious sign, from messy materiality. Following the influential discussion by Pietz, the category of fetish seems to instantiate a series of apparent category errors of mixture, of which we will only discuss

a relevant few. First, there is the ‘untranscended materiality’ of the Fetish, which differs from the almost equally objectionable idol (Pietz 1985:7).³ But the fetish is not even an idol, it is: ‘neither a false god, nor a *representation* of a false god. The fetish has a certain semiotic opacity, a certain nonrepresentativeness that is “utterly alien to the Christian theory of idolatry” (Kearney 2002:441, citing Pietz). That is, the idol is a material representation of that which does not exist while in the fetish the opposition between material sign and transcendent signifier is absent: ‘the fetish is precisely *not* a material signifier referring beyond itself’ (Pietz 1985:15). Pietz calls this materiality of the fetish ‘territorialization’.

The semiotically debased properties of the fetish do not end there. Also unlike an idol, which is capable of replication (multiple instances, or tokens, of the same idol do not imply multiple divinities); the fetish is a singular sign (a Peircean sinsign). Moreover, it is one in which random non-sequiturs of coincidental happenstance occasioned by a singular event are fixed by the whimsy of the maker in the form of the fetish and thereby allow that particular conjunction of events to be repeated in the future, a feature of the fetish discourse which is most prominent in Freudian approaches to the fetish. As Pietz notes, it is: ‘the radical historicity of the fetish’s origin: rising in a singular event fixing together otherwise heterogenous elements, the identity and power of the fetish consists of fixation, along with the resultant effect’ (1987:231). Therefore, while idols involve types replicated through tokens, fetishes involve token level mediation (indexical relationships between token level signs (token-mediation (Parmentier 2002:304)), as each fetish is as unique as the historical uniqueness of the events and the capricious whim of the maker that led to its creation. Pietz calls this property ‘historicization’. Inasmuch as individual instances of signs, unlike the transcendent (cosmological) types they instantiate, are by definition individual material objects themselves, here again the materiality of the fetish raises its head. The fetish is not only an individual sign (a Peircean sinsign), but it lacks any replicability or iterability (that is, there is no general rule (Peircean legisign or ‘type’) for its replication as individual sinsign replicas or ‘tokens’). Once again, this is a kind of ‘untranscended materiality’: from this property of token mediation instantiated in the fetish Europeans often made a broader deduction that African societies were societies ordered by chance (sinsigns, token mediation) rather than moral principles or laws (legisigns which organize these sinsigns into replicas (tokens) of a general law or rule for sign creation) (Pietz 1988:121). There is a type-token relationship, but it is a fundamentally flawed

one: the fetish allowed a random chance confluence of events to be fixed in a fetish which would subsequently allow the replication of that same chance confluence of events.

Such confusions of material sign and transcendent meaning, subjective and objective properties, type and token level mediation, lead to what was felt to be a more general set of confusions relating to the fetish, namely, inability to separate out discrete spheres of valuation, such as religion and other, more base material spheres: 'Confusion of religious values with material objects compounded by... confusion of the sacred with other dimensions of value: aesthetic, erotic, economic, medical, sociopolitical, and technological, which were also found attributed to these capriciously chosen and childishly personified material objects.' (Pietz 1988:109). This inability to delineate different spheres of evaluation (representing a situation where social and individual schemes of valuation were conflated, an individual fetish representing a non-universal and (capricious) construction of social value [Pietz 1985:9]) for the same material object manifested by the fetish is related to more general confusions regarding the value of things imputed by Europeans to 'savages', who appeared to assign too much value to 'trifles' and 'trinkets' (Pietz 1985:9; Kearney 2002:439). Particularly worrisome to Europeans perhaps was the confounding of the sphere of religion with the sphere of base, 'material', individual interests associated with the developing imaginary of the sphere of the market as a separate sphere (Agnew 1986). Just at the same time Europeans were establishing a separate sphere of 'religion', they were beginning to take the concept of 'the market' as not being merely a specific set of places where the tendency to truck and barter found a home, and relations defined by interests were the norm. Rather, the kinds of processes defining particular marketplaces, such as commodity exchange, were now conceptualized as defining an order unto themselves, 'another nature', no longer delimited to times (market days) and places (market places). The market process, once it escaped these delimited spaces, becomes a sphere of existence imagined to have its own internal principles, its own characteristic forms of affect ('interests'), opposed to residual natural and civic orders, and most especially to the sphere of religion. For the 18th Century Dutch merchant Willem Bosman, originator of the discourse of the fetish, the mixture of such categories seemed to embody not only the debased quality of primitive religion, but also the more immediate contradictions for this new, universalizing, theory of exchange:

Throughout Bosman's book, fetish worship appears as the key to African society considered as a theoretical problem. Bosman's explicit thesis was that fetish religion was the perversion of the true principle of social order: interest. Institutionalized superstition – the religion of fetishes – was interpreted by Bosman as the specific social force that blocked otherwise spontaneous and natural market activities that would bring about a healthy economic and truly moral social order. Fetish religion was thus a priestly conspiracy; priests and merchants acted from the same motives (economically rational self-interest), but whereas merchants were honest and moral, priests were hypocritical and immoral (Pietz 1988:121).

The last theme related to the fetish that Pietz stresses, again separating the semiotic alterity of the fetish from that of the idol, is the close indexical connection ('Personalization') between the individual fetish object and the individual human body that it adorns and protects. Whereas an idol is by definition a free-standing form that spatially separates the object of worship from the worshiper, in the fetish, subjective and objective forms of embodiment, persons and things, as well as religious and aesthetic forms of value, appear to be conflated by the use of the fetish as a personal adornment or medicinal object (Pietz 1985:10). This material conflation of subjective and objective embodiment (via indexical relations of proximity or contiguity) also involves a situation where the subjective features of the person are exteriorized and materialized in the fetish, which in turn acts as a causal (indexical) influence on the person as if part of that same person: 'the subjection of the human body... to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at certain moments' (Pietz 1985:10). This transference of properties of subjects to objects and vice versa, a salient moment in both Marxian and Freudian mobilizations of the fetish, is predicated again on a (token-mediated) material indexical connection between the two forms of embodiment.

The fetish, then, is all at once a representation of radical semiotic alterity, involving pathological category errors of various kinds (from the perspective of Protestant thinking about ideal relations between signs and signifiers, religion and non-religion), most of which seem to involve the basic idea of 'untranscended materiality'. Such a radical figure of alterity of semiosis can be used productively for other ends. Notably, it stands as an inverted figure of the way that we, ourselves, tend to think we should approach the relationship between materiality and religion (Masuzawa 2000), one which willy-nilly slips into our analyses as we seek, for example, to find 'beliefs' and 'meanings' behind practices and objects. Robertson-Smith (1972[1889:437]

cited in Beidelman 1974), insisted that meaningful concepts must be clothed in the 'husk of a material embodiment'. One finds in later thinkers a tendency to treat the material grounds of these meanings, rather, as being empty husks to be discarded along the way. As Asad notes, anthropological conceptions of religion and ritual tend to unselfconsciously mime the movement in Christian theology away from incarnations of the divine and embodied practices to viewing material objects as symbolic representations of the divine whose meaning can be read and interpreted by the anthropologist, if not by the 'natives' themselves (1993:27-79).

We would seem to be looking, however, at a more general set of problems that do not belong to any one field: they are a general inheritance.⁴ The question, of course, is to what extent these particularly vexing questions of meaning versus materiality, homologous with oppositions between 'religion' and other (secular? material? mundane?) spheres of valuation, are artefactual in themselves. Is the discourse of the fetish, the fascination we still find in this semiotic fantasy, oddly positioned on the edge between self and other, then, in itself some sort of semiotic 'return of the repressed'?

Marx, of course, famously and ironically elided the most primitive category of debased, material, religious expression, the fetish, into the most basic atom of the triumphalist social physics of nineteenth-century liberal political economy, the commodity. He therefore turned theories of social evolution on their head, eliding the object of secular political economy (diagnostic of putatively advanced capitalist societies) into the subject of primitive religion (diagnostic of putatively savage societies), eliding the material into the spiritual, the civilized into the savage, finding strange parallels between the attribution of subjective properties to objects that seemed in their respective ways to be diagnostic in turn of the most debased, material form of primitive religion and the most advanced form of material production and exchange. With this peculiar move linking the fragments of the primary category diagnostic of primitive religion, the fetish, and the primary category diagnostic of the putative 'social physics' of advanced liberal capitalism, the commodity, Marx found material for the analysis of the uncanniness of commodity that went well beyond the simple sophomoric heresy of studying modern liberal capitalism (the modern secular self; civilization) using the categories conceived for primitive religion (the savage religious other; barbarism).

The Papers

We take from Marx' analysis not the mystery of the commodity fetish, but the even greater mystery of why the religious fetish was a mystery in the first place, and try to think through the ways in which the rhetorical conflation of the two produced such a powerful rhetorical effect. In Meneley's paper we find an examination of the way that a single substance, olive oil, necessarily and not contingently bundles together a set of discrete qualisigns including luminosity, liquidity, spreadability, durability, capacity to cleanse, capacity to seal or preserve, to insulate, and notably, its *lack* of miscibility. These various qualisigns allow olive oil to slide unctuously across discrete contexts in the Mediterranean, always having some relationship to notions of ritual sacrality and practice, but the interpretations, and the specific qualisigns made salient by those semiotic metadiscourses, are always changing. However, the material substrate, the olive oil itself, which always retains all these qualities, remains a constant. In the case of olive oil we find that a new distinction has been produced in western cultures of distinction by which the qualities constitutive of olive oil are now not those primarily registered by ordinary senses, but rather discursively by expert opinion of various kinds that has a kind of 'authenticating' effect. We could call those qualisigns that are intuited on the basis of direct sensory experience 'pheno-qualisigns', while those that are discursively constituted 'crypto-qualisigns' (on these chains of discursive authentication of such substances as gold and wine see also Irvine 1989:257–8; Silverstein 2006).

A different case is presented in the paper by Manning. Here it is the contingent, accidental qualisigns that attend buildings such as churches, specifically the way they are subjected to or resist the corrosive effects of time and nature, that is at issue. For example, new churches built by the Orthodox Church seem to lack the properties of 'real' churches, which are characterized by telltale signs of age. Here what may seem at first glance to be a contingent, accidental property of a church (that it is old and partially ruined) becomes an almost necessary, defining feature (inasmuch as all existing churches before the present-church building campaign are old and partially ruined).⁵ But these features also allow churches to be appropriated as monuments, testaments to work of the ancestors and thus signs of the nation, objects of archaeological science, to be restored to their pristine state, or as ruins, sublime, melancholy testaments to the triumph of nature and aeons over the works of man, and so on. In the same way, some of the new churches seek to align themselves with the old ones in terms of 'pheno-qualisigns', namely, the

preservation of traditional building techniques, but also, in terms of esoteric orders of 'crypto-qualisigns' (the fact that they incorporate within them, unseen to the naked eye, sacred objects, relics and objects from the Holy Land). The way that a single object, a church, is interpreted as belonging to discrete orders and imaginaries depending on whether it is new or old, a ruin or a monument, a church or a theatre, is discussed in relation to the disputed nature of monuments in general in Georgia and discrete imaginaries (the sacred, the national, the sublime.) to which they belong.

Similarly, the paper by Limbert attends to the materiality of a single object (dates) in the Omani town of Bahla and the ways in which dates for Bahlawis traverse and transcend a number of domains. To understand the place of 'dates' in Bahla, it would, in other words, make little sense to imagine that miracles, piety, domination, war, social life, or healing could, singularly, serve as the key to their 'true' value. Rather than distinguishing materiality from meaning, the author argues that isolating the economic or political relevance of dates from quotidian sociability or from memories of a pre-oil past and pious practices associated with them, would prevent one from recognizing how dates are imbricated in the contexts and expectations of social relations, histories, piety, and nutrition. The date then is 'sacred' not as part of a unitary domain of value opposed at all points to the 'profane' world of everyday life, but because of the multiple ways that it figures, indexes and condenses materially all the different expressions of religious piety embedded in everyday life that define what a 'good' person does and is. Many of these sacred qualities are captured under the qualisign of 'sweetness', by which dates materially embody a qualisign of divinity, generosity. However, inasmuch as the materiality of exchange of the date also increasingly indexes, for example, inequalities embedded in exchange, the date seems to lose some of its sacredness. At the same time, ideas of what forms of behavior constitute proper expressions of religious piety are shifting from such practices as visiting to proper dress or proper faith. These same ideas of proper religion also privilege textual representations of divinity (the Quran) over material expressions of divine attributes (the date), which can seem dangerously close to idolatry. Thus, the 'sacred' date can seem to lose its sacred status because the practices it indexes are not, or are no longer, sacred. At the same time, the date can stand as a figure a nostalgic discourse for forms of piety embedded in everyday sociability that are no longer as hegemonic as they once were.

Young's paper about the Catholic sisters who, in their convent school,

educated the very poor children of rural New Brunswick, one of the most disadvantaged regions of Canada, reflects on objects whose state of disrepair is a qualisign that has a shifting register in different generations. For instance, the sisters hiding holes in the children's socks with felt slippers, or making them crepe paper costumes for a musical festival, were seen as honourable acts of 'making do' by the sisters, but one suspects that the children perceived this qualisign as the shame of having to 'make do'. We hear about the *absence* of objects, like socks themselves, never mind socks with holes in them, pencils, or even boots which would allow children to get to school in the winter. The marginalized people Young discusses have things that are made from other things; rather than things with prestigious 'biographies', in Kopytoff's (1986) sense, they are things which bear the haunting of an original use value, like dresses 'fashioned' from flour sacks, floor wax from candle stubs, or lunch boxes made from lard tins. Kindnesses and cruelties are inculcated by means of material objects: the generosity of the Catholic sisters in taking the food from their own table to inculcate self-respecting, educated selves out of neglected children is contrasted with the cruelty of their fathers who spend their meager wages on 'the demon drink' instead of on food or school fees for these children.

We have spent a certain amount of time in this introduction concerning ourselves with the figure of the fetish as a figure of radical semiotic alterity. We believe that the fetish in certain important ways can stand as a unifying figure for the diverse approaches to religion and materiality we find in the papers in this volume. Part of the continuing fascination of this 'anti-model' of the idealized Protestant (and subsequently Saussurean, structuralist and symbolic anthropologist) model of ideal, dematerialized, forms of semiotic and religious mediation (emphasizing priority of idealized types and transcendent meanings over material instantiation and token level mediation) lies in the way that the figure of the fetish seems to be a repository of all the neglected or repressed forms of semiotic and religious mediation where material and indexical forms of mediation predominate. Whether or not the full complexity of the figure of the fetish was ever a historical category for any society, or whether it could ever truly be deployed in all its polysemous richness as a typological universalist category of cross-cultural description, we cannot decide here (on this antinomy with respect to the fetish see Pietz 1985). Much more modestly, we would only like to suggest that the figure of the fetish contains within it a fair number of discrete forms of semiotic mediation that anthropology has only relatively lately begun to attend to,

foregrounding as it does the materiality of signs and religion, in the way that we seek to do in this volume.

Notes

1. Of course, in Orthodoxy theology, for example, mediation between this world and the otherworld is much more solidly based on mimesis (iconism, hence the theological importance of actual icons) as well as metaphors involving light and illumination, all heavily indebted to a generally Platonic theological system (Kenna 1985). Orthodoxy thus might be said to foreground the Peircean relation of iconism, when compared to Catholicism (which seems to prefer indexical motifs of incarnation instantiated prototypically in the dominant figure of the Eucharist ('Incarnationalism', see O'Connell 1995, 2000; Parmentier 1997; Bedos-Rezak 2000) or Protestantism (where the prototypical form of mediation is the symbolic [textual] sign (O'Connell 1995)).
2. The two most influential of the critiques of Geertz are those offered by Asad 1993, discussed here, and Roseberry 1982 who draws attention to the fact that Geertz neglects how meanings may not be equally shared by all in society, that some people may have meanings imposed upon them, or may contest public meanings. Roseberry's critique also suggests that Geertz neglects the material contexts in which meanings are generated.
3. For some reason the discourse of the idol does not have the same fashionable currency as the discourse of the fetish in various circles, presumably partly because neither Freud nor Marx found it 'good to think', yet as a fantastic anti-model of semiosis, the idol is more complicated than is usually assumed (see for example Mitter 1977; Camille 1989; Pinney 2001; Salih 2003).
4. For example, studies of classical images have shown an internal division between a secularizing aestheticism characteristic of art historical approaches (the dominant approach), while appreciation of those same images in relation to their ritual contexts of manipulation or theology of images is relegated to experts on religion or ignored entirely (Elsner 1996). For similar points with respect to European responses to Indian images see for example Mitter 1977; Pinney 2001; Jain 2007.
5. See Komaromi's (2004) discussion of the Soviet genre of Samizdat (self-publication), for an interestingly similar case where accidental qualisigns (wear and tear from circulation, bad quality of materials and assembly, etc.) become necessary to valuation of an object as authentic, in some ways as important as those qualisigns that establish a given document as a legible 'text'.

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