

Research Article

In a Mirror Dimly: Anthropology and Restoring a Sense of Presence to an Empty World

Timothy Helton

Independent Scholar, USA

Abstract | In this essay, I argue that, in the anthropology of religion, everything depends on the lens through which the ethnographers gaze at the objects of their study. Scholars that approach religion as an object fit only for analysis discover in it a model of an objectified universe; and those that assume a universe subject only to natural law find in the religions that they study worlds devoid of others—sterile worlds populated only by selves incapable of meaningful relationships. The essay urges that those who see in religions only objects for analysis participate in the construction of worlds inhabited by zombie-like beings devoid of selfhood. On the other hand, those who believe religions depict webs of relationships participate in the construction of worlds supportive of whole human beings capable of more than just physical life; and they offer a hopeful corrective to modernity’s tendency to reduce its world to objects of analysis and manipulation. I support my thesis with the criticisms of anthropological conceptions and methods made by contemporary thinkers. Next, taking the work of E. B. Tylor as an example, I demonstrate the validity of such criticisms. Then, I offer two examples of alternatives to objectifying ethnography before tracing developments in anthropological method in the last decades that have greatly improved the lens used for the anthropological gaze. Finally, I conclude by suggesting the collaboration between anthropology and theology in the restoration of a world capable of supporting life in more than a mere physical sense.

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***Correspondence** | Timothy Helton, Independent Scholar, USA; **Email:** tim@timhelton.com

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When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child;

When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

(1 Corinthians 13:11-12)

Unhappiness was not Psyche’s problem. The palace in which she lived was beautiful and comfortable. In-

deed, it was so much so that her sisters did a poor job of hiding their envy. No matter that she could only be with her lover in the dark of the night, he was a gentle lover and he brought her considerable joy in the brief hours they shared together. For some time, the hours from dusk to dawn were enough for her, but in their growing envy, her sisters taught her to want more than she had and to doubt that which she did have. Where once her love had painted a strong and comely lover on the canvas of her mind, she began to wonder if he might not instead be the hideous beast they claimed. After all, marriage to a monster was the curse that

Venus had laid on her out of her jealousy of Psyche's beauty. The rest of the story, that Psyche lost her lover in consequence of her doubt and betrayal, and that a petition born of his own longing restored him to her, is of less interest to us than the effect that her state of mind had on her experience. Believing Cupid to be a handsome and gentle lover, he was that. Yet when she thought him a monster, the comely and considerate lover vanished.

In this essay, I will argue that in anthropology of religion everything depends on the lens through which the ethnographer gazes at the object of her study. Scholars that approach religion as an object fit only for analysis discover in it a model of an objectified universe; and those that assume a universe subject only to natural law find in the religions that they study, worlds devoid of others—sterile worlds populated only by selves incapable of meaningful relationships. Some ethnographers have seen early religions as primitive philosophies or pseudo-sciences (Tylor, 1965). For others, religion provided channels in which people safely expressed strong emotions (Malinowski, 1925). For some, religions supplied the rituals with which humanity created the symbols necessary for wholesome individual and social life (E. Turner, 1992; V. Turner, 1970). More recently, however, some scholars have begun to take seriously the claims made by their interlocutors on religion's behalf. One of the most interesting features of such scholarship is the relational nature of the lens it deploys. For these scholars, religions model a radically related universe populated with subjects both human and not (Brown, 1991; Guédon, 1998; Knab, 2004; Rethmann, 2007; Searles, 2007; E. Turner, 1992; and Vitebsky, 2005). A vast difference exists between a lens that reveals only objects and one that displays subjective selves whom one can know as one knows the person in the mirror. This essay will argue that those anthropologists who approach the religions that they study solely as objects for analysis risk colluding in the propagation of a worldview devoid of other selves. On the other hand, those anthropologists who take seriously the religious beliefs of their interlocutors, including the supernatural beings posited by those beliefs, contribute to a vision of a world inhabited by other selves; and in doing so, offer a hopeful corrective to modernity's tendency to reduce its world to objects of analysis and manipulation.

I support my thesis with the criticisms of anthropo-

logical conceptions and methods developed by contemporary thinkers. Next, criticizing the work of E. B. Tylor, I demonstrate the validity of their criticisms. Then, I illustrate these same criticisms first with an example drawn from personal experience and then with a modern parable based on Piers Vitebsky's work with the Eveny of Siberia (2005). Having, I hope, thoroughly demonstrated the flaws in the lens employed, not only by early anthropologists, but also by other disciplines that reduce science to the mere analysis of objects, I consider the contributions of several anthropologists who have greatly improved the lens used for the anthropological gaze. Finally, I conclude by considering an opposing viewpoint before offering some thoughts on the proper role of anthropology in the restoration of a world capable of supporting life in more than a mere physical sense. We begin with a critique of early anthropological concepts and methods.

Flaws in the Anthropological Lens

Older discussions reflected a lot about the societies which formulated the questions. For the Victorians the issue of the distinction between religion and magic was important. This reflected the varying strands in late Victorian values: the triumphant virtue of science; the spiritual superiority of Protestantism... the degeneracy of savages, etc. (Ninian Smart, quoted in Cunningham, 1999, p. 40)

Few criticize the traditional lens deployed by anthropologists in the study of religion as eloquently as does Talal Asad. He argues, for example, that Protestants, in their eagerness to condemn Catholic practices, deployed the English word "ritual" that had once meant religious practice to indicate general religious behavior, which they in turn derogated as inferior to religious belief (1993). This Protestant bias led anthropologists, Asad believes, to privilege an analytical interpretation of ritual over that stated by religious actors. Indeed, he finds problematic the very notion that ritual acts carry propositional meaning.

More radically, he also questions the category of religion itself, arguing persuasively that, until the advent of modernity, religion was, and still is in many places, a thread indistinguishable from other threads in the tightly woven fabric of cultural life. Asad finds the roots of the Western understanding of religion as a separable category in Lord Herbert's seventeenth

century definition of religion as “beliefs... practices... and ethics” (1993, p. 40). Herbert’s work represented an early example of the centrality of propositional beliefs to the Western notion of religion. Also during the seventeenth century, John Locke argued for the primacy of natural science and for subjecting scripture to scientific critique. Confronted by a shrinking sphere of influence in the face of the scientific hegemony that ensued from these and other factors, churches, in their efforts to retain a modicum of influence, sought “to distinguish the religious from the secular.” This led to the privatization of religion with an emphasis on “belief,’ ‘conscience,’ and ‘sensibility” (p. 39). In this manner, Asad argues, Western society separated the notion of religion from other aspects of life. He emphasizes that this separation was a Western response to a Western situation and the anthropological understanding of religion as “symbolic meaning linked to ideas of general order... has a specific Christian history” (p. 42). In sum, in the West, “religion has come to be abstracted and universalized.” Because the Western definition of religion can be located in a specific historical and social context, Asad urges anthropologists to an awareness of the constructed nature of their understanding of religion similar to their awareness of the constructed nature of the religious symbols that they study.

Finally, Asad (1993), contra Clifford Geertz (2000/1973) also questions the notion that one can read and interpret cultures as texts. Viewing cultures as texts, Asad asserts, tends to perpetuate attempts at verbal translations of cultures when anthropologists would do better to “introduce or enlarge cultural capacities” by importing concepts from other cultures into their own (p. 193). Rather than attempting to adjust “foreign’ discourses” to Western understandings, he advocates allowing them to remain “a discomforting—even scandalous—presence within the receiving” culture (p. 199). Asad, then, is arguing that in our eagerness to understand others, we often force their thought into our own categories and in so doing destroy that which is novel in their thought. In the words of Geoffrey Lienhardt, “it is not finally some mysterious ‘primitive philosophy’ that we are exploring, but the further potentialities of our thought and language” (Lienhardt quoted in Asad, 1993, p. 192). We ought to allow our own cultural categories to stretch in response to other cultures rather than attempt to reduce those cultures to the limitations of our own categories.

A second anthropologist concerned with the application of Western categories to non-Western religion is Stanley J. Tambiah. As Asad traces the roots of the Western understanding of religion to the Protestant Reformation, Tambiah asserts that the Protestant use of the word magic as a derogatory label for Catholic ritual has influenced the way that anthropologists think about magic when they encounter it in other cultures. Early anthropologists, who thought of “science as the source of all truth,” he tells his readers, also believed “science dissolves animistic ideas of spiritual forces actuating on the universe” (1990, p. 50). In this, Tambiah seriously disagrees. Rather, he thinks that there are multiple ways of seeing the world, and that rational scientific thought is only one of those ways. A second way of thinking of the world is by a “holistic and configurational grasping of totalities” (p. 106). By this, I understand Tambiah to mean a synthetic rather than an analytical way of looking at the world that encourages a “felt relation between the self and person and the phenomena of the mythic landscape.” Thus, for Tambiah, magic enacts “the relation between man and the immanent and/or the transcendent” (p. 106), and occurs when people translate their relationship with “persons, groups, animals, and natural phenomena... into one of existential immediacy and contact and shared affinities” (p. 107). As important, then, as rational scientific thought is, there are other ways of relating to the world, and some of those other ways may do a better job of informing our “morality, choice and the values... [we] live by” (p. 151).

Where Asad and Tambiah see an epistemological problem with using Western categories for understanding non-Western cultures, Edmund Searles criticizes Western categories on what one might best call a spiritual basis. In conversation with thinkers like Thomas Carlson, Searles (2007) argues that moderns suffer from a condition that he calls “the secularization of the self” (p. 159). Quoting Carlson, he tells his readers, “The modern human subject through its rational and technological self-assertion, emptie[d] the world of mystical presence” (Carlson quoted in Searles, 2007, p. 158). Searles refers to the resulting state as “disenchantment” and argues that the role formerly played by divinity in identity formation becomes an autonomous function of the individual. As a result, “our bodies, our selves, our actions, the images we have of ourselves, the images we imagine we are to others are nothing more, nothing less, than objects in a universe of objects.” To Searles’ elegant assertion

that modern identity formation takes place in a context devoid of the divine, I would add that because moderns often objectify the vast majority of those with whom they relate, it also takes place in a context that is largely devoid of other selves.

Searles recognizes that the modern condition is not completely a negative condition. A sense of freedom from complete dependence on God has led to human agency once undreamt of. Thus, modern humanity takes charge of its physical environment. No longer completely dependent on religious healing, for example, it makes a frontal attack on illness and cures or ameliorates many previously intractable diseases. Likewise, through “new forms of commodification” humanity creates “unimaginable levels of wealth and power” (Searles, 2007, p. 158). Yet, he continues:

Loosened from a love and fear of God and the security of a faith-inspired sacramental life, the self has become an object of self-loathing and self-deception. Obsessed with a heightened self-consciousness, the self becomes trapped in its own images of itself and in the projection of its desires and insecurities onto the world... In these conditions, the self seems lost in a world devoid of sacramentality, of mystic presence” (p. 159).

Again, I would add, that the loss of “mystic presence” extends not only to a loss of relationship to the divine, but also to a general loss of relationship with other selves. Moreover, by objectifying our world in our attempt to bend it to our purposes we objectify other selves and compromise our own relational capacities. It is precisely by evacuating the world of other selves that we reduce ourselves to objects.

Limiting ourselves to traditional analytical lenses, then, exposes us to a triple loss. As Asad implies, by forcing the religious lives of others into Western analytical categories we deny ourselves the opportunity to realize “further potentialities” embedded in our own culture (Asad, 1993, p. 192). Additionally, as Tambiah shows us, by limiting ourselves to analytical knowledge we cut ourselves off from other ways of knowing that are more suitable to important human purposes. Finally, as Searles points out, by reducing other selves to objects of analysis, we render the world in which we live a spiritual vacuum, devoid of selves with whom we can form relationships, and we render ourselves

incapable of meaningful relationships. In our attempt to catalog and define the experiences of others, we perpetuate a worldview devoid of subjectivity. Fortunately, alternatives to the analytical lens exist, as I hope will become clear in what follows. Let me begin with a personal anecdote and a modern parable before tracing the development of some of these alternatives.

A Personal Anecdote

In 2007 I was rooming in a small graduate apartment at Drew University—a continent away from my home and family. My room was sparsely furnished and often seemed a bit sterile, lifeless, and lonely. Towards the end of that year, as part of my study of lived Jainism, I undertook the Jain practice of *pratikraman*, a repentance ritual practiced by devout Jains daily.

Before beginning my practice, I prepared the area in my room in which I would perform *pratikraman*. I did this by donning clean clothes and sweeping the floor on which I would place my *arsan* (a cloth on which I would sit). I swept not for cleanliness so much as to insure that I would not harm any insects by accidentally covering them with my *arsan*. Next, I carefully unfolded my *arsan*, inspecting it to insure that no insects had wandered into its folds. Then I gently laid the *arsan* over the area that I had swept.

Among the texts recited during *pratikraman* is the Irya Vahiyae Sutra. As I read this text, I acknowledged that “while walking, I may have pained or crushed living beings such as live animate seeds, live plants, live beings in the dew, living ant hills, living moss, living beings in water, living being[s] in earth, living web[s] of spiders.” Having confessed that I might have harmed one or several of these beings, I asked forgiveness of those that I might have harmed. “I may have covered whomever with dust,” the *sutra* continues. “Whomever may have been caused pain by my touching or tilting them; Whomever may have been tormented by being turned entirely upside down... May all that be forgiven” (Jain Study Center of North Carolina, 2001). Repeating words normally reserved for humans, like “whoever,” “whomever,” and “who,” nine times in a few short lines, the *sutra* emphasizes that, in the Jain universe, all beings, no matter how simple, are the ritual participant’s peers.

On the conclusion of my practice, I carefully refolded my *arsan* inspecting it again lest I trap an insect in its

folds. Oddly, or so it seemed to me, I found the preparation for and termination of *pratikraman* as meaningful as the ritual itself. As I swept the floor, inspected the *arsan* for insects, and carefully spread it over the newly swept area, I was keenly aware of my environment. I normally have the unfortunate tendency to divide my attention between the task at hand and tasks waiting in the wings and both of these foci limit my appreciation of my surroundings. During the moments that I spent preparing the ritual space, however, I became keenly aware of that space. As I took care to insure that I would not hurt an insect who might have wandered into the area, I also became aware that I shared my lonely room with other living beings. I realized that I was not then, and am never completely alone. Moreover, while my usual orientation to tasks isolates me from others in, to use Martin Buber's elegantly compact words, an "I-it" world (Buber, 1996, p. 56), as I swept the floor and carefully attended to the implements that I used for *pratikraman*, I found myself in an "I-You...world of relation" in which every creature is a "You." From my own practice of the ritual of another faith, then, I discovered a world populated by a myriad of other selves.

A Modern Parable

In *The Reindeer People*, Piers Vitebsky (2005) tells the story of Siberian nomads known as the Eveny. Their story provides a metaphor for the effects of an objectified and spiritually depopulated world on its inhabitants. With unusual sensitivity, Vitebsky describes the interdependence of the Eveny people and the reindeer that they herd. Beginning with the act of domestication itself, he asserts a symbiotic relationship between the people and their animals. Domestication, he tells his readers, is not an act of subordination, so much as cooperation. This is because the purposes of the domesticated animals "run alongside those of their human caretakers in mutual dependence and cooperation" (p. 263). It is, or can be, "an arrangement of mutual benefit... even a social contract between reindeer and humans" (p. 27). The Eveny world of relationships, moreover, extends beyond the reindeer, for Bayanay, the spirit of "undomesticated animality," weaves even the animals that the Eveny hunt into their cultural universe. Together, the humans and animals, both domesticated and wild, form a community in which only the wolves, as symbols of "a rejection of the taiga ethic of mutual support" have no place (p. 273). Indeed, so

extensive is the Eveny community, as Vitebsky describes it, that it includes the landscape itself, as "an animate world in which" even natural features enjoy "some degree of consciousness like our own" (p. 259). Thus, Vitebsky argues, Eveny culture "locates the divine inside the phenomena of the world" (p. 259).

Much of Vitebsky's work deals with modernity's impact on this vast web of relationships. He notes, for example, that colonialism led to larger herds as the Eveny attempted to trap fur-bearing animals over greater areas, to bring their furs to market, and to supply new settlements with reindeer meat. With the communist revolution, the relationship between the people and the reindeer changed again as the state confiscated "almost every reindeer in Russia" for state managed herds (2005, p. 34). Eloquently, Vitebsky summarizes, "even the reindeer became a different creature." Where once it had collaborated with humans in eking a living out of a difficult environment, it became "meat—an end product in its own right" (p. 44). Changes to Eveny culture, founded as it was "on... animals as metaphors for relations between humans" (p. 111), accompanied the changes to the relationship between the herders and their animals. As military-like leadership replaced the old patriarchal system, the Soviet Union's objectification of women as "unutilized labour resources" led to their employment in village jobs that precluded their following the herds with their brothers, husbands, and sons (p. 45). The introduction of village life affected Eveny culture in other ways as well. "By its mere lack of movement," Vitebsky writes, "the existence of the village changed the experience of space (p. 184). Whereas, "the very oldest people... recalled riding thousands of miles over the hunting trails of diverse clans... encountering their spirits, [and] adapting to their ecologies," village life reduced the Eveny focus to the village airstrip (p. 184). Only a tiny portion of the population remained nomadic and as the Soviet Union separated children from parents to school them in its national culture, it imposed on the Eveny a way of being that completely neglected their "relationship to their land" (p. 194). Ultimately, the state system, using a "factory metaphor, transformed the skillful, self-sufficient hunter into a wilderness proletarian" (p. 194).

Because the Eveny had come to rely on the state farms for wages as well as a market for the meat that the reindeer had become (p. 66), the collapse of the Soviet Union brought economic suffering to the no-

mads. Vitebsky tells us that because the state had destroyed the people's self-sufficiency "the community no longer knew how to function on its own... The factory model had failed, and the family model had been disabled in the process" (p. 253). Worse, the state left the people culturally impoverished as well. By reducing the reindeer to commodities, and evacuating the spirits from the Eveny world, first tsarist Russia, and later the Soviet Union devastated not only Eveny culture, but also the Eveny community. In this ravaged world, Vitebsky writes, "violent and premature death touched every family I knew" (p. 207). Murder and suicide stalked the population, especially males; "Men died sober, or they died drunk" (p. 208). "They killed each other intentionally or by mistake, not even knowing the difference as they reached in confusion for the knives at their waist." Men also used alcohol to try to fill, or perhaps just to rage against a world rendered void of relationships.

Quoting an elder's comments on a string of recent suicides, Vitebsky emphasizes the consequences of a world evacuated of selves. "The authorities usually blame it on alcohol." He records, "But that's too easy... These aren't weak people; these are people with strong characters" (p. 210). The lesson we learn from this modern parable, then, is that even strong people find it hard to endure the loneliness of a world rendered unfit for the habitation of selves.

Tylor's Lens

In Vitebsky's narrative, modernity is the villain that robbed the world of the selves with whom the Eveny had once enjoyed relationships. Modern commerce played a role; yet, much of the damage done to Eveny culture in the Soviet state was a consequence of the Soviet Union's efforts to operate the reindeer farms scientifically (2005). Science, as well as commerce, then must bear responsibility for the depopulating of the Eveny world. We turn now to a discussion of the modern anthropological lens to demonstrate science's collusion in rendering worlds incapable of supporting relationship. We begin with the father of ethnography (Haddon, 1930), Sir E. B. Tylor (1832-1917).

Predisposed to an evolutionary understanding of cultural development, Tylor speculated freely about contemporary oral and pre-modern European cultures, and divined in them the basic building blocks from

which modern Western culture was constructed. In a kind of thought experiment designed to uncover the origins of religious beliefs, he asked his readers to imagine themselves as members of an oral society. He believed that having done so the readers would have no difficulty understanding that "the idea of a soul... is the foundation of" religion (1965, p. 202). Through his thought experiment, Tylor tried to demonstrate that religion developed as humans noticed they sometimes "traveled" at night. Assured by their friends that they had not left their beds, early humans posited a soul that left the body during sleep. Noting that they still received visits from relatives and friends after these others had died, they concluded that souls survive death. Beyond providing an explanation for the origins of religion, death, or rather similarities between the funeral practices of ancient Europeans and those of contemporary oral cultures in distant lands, the thought experiment also demonstrated that people think similarly across both temporal and geographic distances.

While Tylor's work laid the foundation of modern anthropology, the lens that Tylor deployed for his anthropological project distorts the image of the cultures he studied in several important ways. These distortions are the natural byproduct of Tylor's belief that cultural evolution is normally from the lower to the higher. His statement, "elaborate arts, abstruse knowledge, complex institutions, these are the result of gradual development from an earlier, simpler, and ruder state of life" (1899, p. 15), demonstrates not only this assumption but also that it was accompanied by a rather well developed arrogance. Phrases like "simple notions of the lower races" and "the religion of the rude tribes" occur frequently enough in the work that it is senseless to dwell on them (p. 202). For our purpose, the effects of this hubris are of more interest.

One of the distortions produced by Tylor's hubris relates to the subject of morality. The fact that religion, like other cultural thought, progressed from lower forms to its height in European Christianity suggested a relative lack of morality in the "religions of the lower races." Thus he writes, "As a rule, the faiths of the higher nations have more and better moral influence than the faiths of the ruder tribes" (1930, p. 222). The problem with this line of thinking is that, by imposing a Western definition of morality, Tylor missed both the possibility that the "ruder tribes," rather than

lacking morality, may have had a form that differed from his own. More importantly, he also missed the opportunity that their definition of morality might have provided to expand European morality.

Tylor's assumption that pre-modern religion is a kind of primitive science also distorted his analysis of other cultures. Early in his comments on religion, he called pre-modern faith the philosophy of people "ignorant of the very rudiments of science" (1930, p. 202). By the word "philosophy," he alluded to his idea that those who embrace it explain the operations of nature in terms of spirits and souls. Gods, rather than physical laws cause rain and make "the grass to grow." Tylor's remarks were of a piece with his insistence that the culture of non-European societies on which he commented was in an earlier stage of development through which Western civilization had already passed. Thus, our culture's belief in spirits has receded as our understanding of "the physical laws of gravity and heat, of growth and decomposition," developed (p. 213). As we have seen, Tambiah notes the importance of non-analytical forms of thought, a point that Tylor might also have observed had he taken seriously the philosophy of those on whom he remarked.

Finally, Tylor's notion that modern science is superior to "primitive philosophy" also led him to take a dismissive stance towards non-European texts. He spoke, for example, of the hopeless mixture of fact and fancy in Maori legends. What is most interesting about Tylor's reflections on pre-modern texts is his frustration that he cannot easily make them serve his own purpose. Rather than taking the texts seriously and questioning how they served those who developed them as well as those who read or listened to them, he sought only to use them for historical purposes. He noted, for example, that sometimes the alert historian can "apply the test of possibility, and declare an event did not happen because he [sic] knows enough of the course of nature to be sure it could not" (1930, p. 236). On the other hand, moderns can employ some texts, which may "not have been intended as history" to "extract history from them" (p. 231). Even myth need not be "looked on as mere error and folly, but as an interesting product of the human mind." Though myth "is sham history" (p. 235), and though real historians "have had to strike out of their history the old myths of gods (p. 236), myths are still historically meaningful since they record "the intellectual state of the age

when it was held edifying to tell such wonders" (p. 245). Tylor, then, treated the texts of other cultures as, and only as, objects for analysis—works from which he could mine what he thought important—history. He failed to take them seriously as texts, and to inquire about the way that they served their audience.

As Searles suggests, the legacy of an anthropology that objectifies the subjects with which it interacts is a disenchanting world—a world depleted of other selves. This impoverishment is particularly obvious in Tylor's writing, in part because he so carefully catalogs the inhabitants of the pre-modern world. The ancients, he reminds his readers, thought of "the sky, earth, and sea as animated, intelligent beings" (Tylor, 1930, p. 215). Nor is Tylor entirely insensitive to the effect of an animated universe on the ancients as well as for contemporary members of oral cultures. He attributed, for example, "a quaint simplicity" to a Samoyed's description of her daily prayers. "At sunrise, bowing to the sun, she said, 'When thou, God, risest, I too rise from my bed!' and in the evening, 'When thou, God, goest down, I too get me to rest'" (p. 215). As charmingly quaint as such beliefs were, however, for moderns like Tylor the beings that populated the natural worlds of the pre-moderns became objects for exploitive analysis. Was it with nostalgia, ridicule, or some combination of the two that Tylor wrote: "Superseded by physical science, the old nature-spirits still find a home in poetry and folk-lore; the healing water-spirits of the old sacred wells have only taken saints' names, the little elves and fairies of the woods are only dim recollections of the old forest-spirits" (p. 214)?

Malinowski Polishes Tylor's Lens

With Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), anthropology took significant strides away from its tendency to objectify those it studied. In places like the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski developed the method now known as "participant observation." Where others had practiced "armchair scholarship" (Cunningham, 1999, p. 28), Malinowski lived for prolonged periods with the people about whom he wrote, and his relationship with those he studied had major implications for his work. For one thing, he rejected Tylor's notion that magic and religion grew out of early attempts at philosophy. Rather, he thought that it developed from "the comforting voice of hope" when people are

confronted with “the difficulty... almost the impossibility” of facing death (Malinowski, 1925, p. 51). Its origins, then, were emotional rather than intellectual. Malinowski wrote that religion gives a common cultural form to a “deep emotional revelation... the intense desire for immortality” (p. 51). The “dreams, shadows, and visions” that Tylor thought of as sparks for the intellectual imagination merely provided the material for the construction of religion. Religion for Malinowski was not so much the product of intellectual speculation as it was of an emotional response to the “crises of human existence, ‘the great events of life, birth, adolescence, marriage, [and] death’” (p. 22).

Malinowski’s reluctance to attribute the religious beliefs of others to primitive speculation suggests that he felt a modicum of sympathy towards the thoughts and feelings of those with whom he worked. It is true that living with those he studied had not completely freed Malinowski of Tylor’s hubris. He still spoke, for example, of “primitive man” and “savage races” (1925, p. 18), and his phrase for magic, “pseudo-science” (p. 87), is only a slight improvement on Tylor’s use of “primitive philosophers” for early theologians. Nevertheless, he clearly thought of the people with whom he worked as fellow human beings worthy of respect. This respect is evident in his desire to protect them from the colonial tendency to eradicate native beliefs. Thus, he argued, “savage creeds” are more than “idle superstitions... childish or diseased fancies... or... crude philosophic speculations,” and that, “to play ducks and drakes with ‘superstitions’” risks destroying native morality without offering an alternative (p. 69).

As fellow human beings worthy of respect, Malinowski worked hard to take the belief systems of those he studied seriously. Even magical beliefs were more than superstitions. He carefully informed his readers, for example, that those who practice magic also act practically. The same “native” that performs annual magical gardening rites also “knows as well as you do that there are natural conditions and causes,” so that “if you were to suggest” that he “scamp his work, he would simply smile on your simplicity” (p. 28). As would the gardener in England, the magician also repairs her fences! Moreover, their practical bent implies a kind of scientific thought. Even “the lowest savage communities” are aware “of a body of rules and conceptions, based on experience and derived from it by logical inference, embodied in material achievements and in a fixed form of tradition and carried on

by some sort of crucial organization” (p. 34).

Malinowski’s respect and empathy for those he studied also sensitized him to individual and social functions of their beliefs. Thus sensitized, he learned to value beliefs, even magical beliefs for what they contributed to human well-being. Anticipating Tambiah’s assertion that magical thought exemplifies a different way of viewing the world, Malinowski wrote, “Science is founded on the conviction that experience, effort, and reason are valid; magic on the belief that hope cannot fail nor desire deceive” (1925, p. 87). Further, he thought that just as magical beliefs and practices nurtured individual hopes, religious beliefs served important social functions. In particular, Malinowski argued that religion serves society by countering forces that tend towards communal separation. The community’s participation, for example, in the rituals that precede and follow a death strengthens its bonds with the surviving family. Funeral rites also promote community survival by countering the centrifugal social forces that accompany the death of a fellow community member. Confronted by the horror of death, the community faces a strong temptation “to abandon the corpse [and] to run away from the village” (p. 52). Doing so “would be extremely dangerous, disintegrating the group, destroying the material foundations of primitive culture.” For Malinowski, then, magical beliefs served individuals by promoting hope, and religious beliefs preserved community and with it, the cultural advantages that communities afford to individual human beings.

Finally, as Malinowski respected the people with whom he worked and took seriously their belief systems, he also took seriously the relatedness of the societies that he studied. He thought, for example, that magic “is the quality... of the relation between man [sic] and the thing” (1925, p. 75). Furthermore, animals as well as humans inhabited the worlds that Malinowski studied, and he remarked on the affinity that those with whom he interacted felt towards their non-human co-residents. Thus, he argued that a fascination with, and a desire to control animals leads to “to a belief in special power over the species, affinity with it, a common essence” (p. 45). Where Tylor imagined a world in which the triumph of science had consigned the forces of nature to the cold gaze of the scientific method, and the personalities once attributed to those forces to poetry and folktale, Malinowski attended more sympathetically to the roles of those

forces in shaping the people and cultures he studied.

Turner Refines the Gaze

As Malinowski's method led to a deep respect for those whom he studied, Victor Turner's (1920-1983) work marked an additional turning point for the study of other cultures. Among his contributions to anthropology was a revival of Van Gennep's theories on rites of passage—rites that mark important life transitions. Especially interested in initiation rites, Turner noted that they “have particularly well-marked liminal periods, where neophytes typically are removed, secluded... without rank or insignia” (1964, p. 234). He argued that these rites mark the passage of an individual from one social structure with specific obligations to another with different obligations (p. 236). In the “intervening ‘liminal’ period” individuals exist outside of social structures and Turner likened their experience during this period to “being ground down to a uniform condition” after which individuals are “fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life” (1969, p. 359). During the liminal period, “their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories” (1970, p. 97). From this ambiguity and paradox, an experience that Turner called *communitas* arises. Presented in the liminal phase “with a ‘moment out of time’” during which initiates experience “a blend... of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship” (1969, p. 360), they enjoy a sense of community impossible under the ordinary constraints of structured social relationships. It is a moment in which the initiates feel the “social bond” more deeply than they do in the context of the more usual divisions that differentiated social structures impose. Stripped of their station, they relate as one inferior to another.

Like Malinowski, Turner treated respectfully the beliefs and practices of those he studied. Indeed, he took exception to “simplistic treatment[s] of African witchcraft and sorcery” (1970, p. 114), recommending that anthropologists eschew the use of binary labels like witchcraft and sorcery, since such labeling tends to “sidetrack investigation from the study of actual behavior” (p. 126). In taking seriously those he studied, Turner also took seriously their religious beliefs and practices as well as the effects of those beliefs and practices. As had Malinowski, he asserted an important social function for religion and ritual. He felt,

for example, that ritual promotes socially desirable behavior by saturating “norms and values” with ennobling emotions (p. 30). In addition to promoting socially desirable behavior, rituals and symbols also asserted a curative effect on troubled societies. “Exposing... ill-feeling in a ritual context,” he argued, purges individuals “of rebellious wishes and emotions” and renders them compliant “to the public mores” (p. 51).

One can hardly overstate the importance Turner placed on rituals and symbols for the understanding of a given culture; yet, rituals and symbols were more than mere objects of study for him. His interest in symbols, for example, went beyond those of the culture that he studied and he devoted a great deal of thought to a comparison of Ndembu symbols to those of Eastern religions¹. Nothing, however, makes as apparent the depth of his personal interest in ritual and symbols as does his conversion to Catholicism and his efforts to compare its symbols with those of the people whom he studied (E. Turner and Blodgett, 1992, p. 9). More important perhaps to Turner than the rituals and symbols of those he studied were their effects. Among these effects was that of the experience of *communitas*, which Turner called “the ‘quick’ of human relatedness” (V. Turner, 1968, p. 372), “the ‘emptiness at the center’ which is nevertheless indispensable to the functioning of the structure of the wheel” (p. 372). He believed that *communitas* has “an aspect of potentiality” which derives from the fact that “it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men” (p. 372). I understand Turner to mean by this, that the relatedness that occurs with the dissolution of status in the liminal state offers new possibilities for both individual and social life. Thus, he wrote that initiations, because they produce liminality, do more than conserve tradition, they generate “new thought and new customs” (1970, p. 97). Significantly, he called the relationships that occur in the experience of *communitas*, “relations between total beings.” In doing so, he reasserted the possibility of a world populated by other selves rather than by mere objects of analysis. By sensitively attending, not only to the beliefs and practices of those he studied, but also to the effects of those beliefs and practices, he learned from other cultures the nearly forgotten possibility of living in a world in which real subjectivity is possible. It remained, however, for other anthropologists to add other beings to this universe.

Further Polishing the Lens and Refining the Gaze

Among those anthropologists who continue the refinements begun by Malinowski and advanced by Turner are a number of contemporary ethnographers who advocate a more radical approach to anthropology. It is an approach that seeks to grant yet greater subjectivity to those whose culture they study, as well as to allow for the possibility that the non-humans with whom their interlocutors share their world may possess a reality and subjectivity of their own. By respecting their conversation partners as coequals, even colleagues, they further distance themselves from Tylor's objectifying hubris; in some cases by suspending disbelief, and in others by actively believing, they display respect as well for those with whom their conversation partners share their social world, including, not only humans but animals and spirits.

Karen McCarthy Brown is one such anthropologist. In her groundbreaking *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (1991), she not only describes a world filled with spirits that most Americans would find exotic if not downright strange, but she also describes her own participation in that world—a participation that she considers a prerequisite to ethnographic inquiry into Vodou as practiced by her interlocutor. Of her relationship to Alourdes, she writes, “I found it increasingly difficult to maintain an uncluttered image of myself as scholar. ... I could not claim a place in her Vodou family and remain a detached observer” (p. 9). This was because:

The drama of Vodou ... occurs ... in the junction between the rituals and the troubled lives of the devotees. ... If I persisted in studying Vodou objectively, the heart of the system, its ability to heal, would remain closed to me. The only way I could hope to understand ... Vodou was to open my own life to the ministrations of Alourdes (p. 10).

Brown's approach marks an important shift both in anthropological method and in the discipline's self-understanding. Modern anthropology, seeing itself as a science once deprecated subjectivity; yet, in the later decades of the 20th century, it came to question the very possibility of objectivity and to embrace what it had once despised as anthropologists began to take a

sympathetic stance towards the beliefs and practices they studied. Some, like Brown, actively participate in those beliefs and practices, seeking to understand what they study by reflecting on how their experiences affect them. Discussing her marriage to a Vodou Spirit, for example, Brown calls her analysis “setting out to do fieldwork on my own psyche” (p. 134)

In *The Dialogue of Earth and Sky: Dreams, Souls, Curing, and the Modern Aztec Underworld*, Timothy J. Knab (2004) likewise describes a world filled with spirits, and like Brown, he participates in rituals that, as do his interlocutors, provide him the opportunity to interact with those spirits in dreams. Not only does he respect his interlocutors' references to the supernatural as “plausible and logical explanation[s] in a world where dreams are real” (p. 47), but he defends their unorthodox (by Western standards) therapeutic practices as having a validity similar to that of Western psychological practices and undertakes to learn “to cure with dreams” (p. 137)—a process that requires that he learn the geography of the underworld as understood by his conversation partners.

In her essay “On Presence” (2007), Petra Rethmann speaks movingly of an encounter with Shura Shishkin, a sub-arctic woman of Kamchatka. At this woman's house, she tells her readers, “the door was always open, and people would drop in just to sit with her for a while. It made them feel better, they said. And it was true. I, too, used to sit with her. It made me feel better as well” (p. 48). One of the reasons it made her “feel better” was because the moments she spent with this woman were moments of “presence,” a word Rethmann uses to speak of a moment in which one “does not dwell on the future or the past but reveals what is... the now” (p. 38). It is also a moment in which one connects “with something larger than the self” (p. 46). The moments that Rethmann spent in Shishkin's home, then, were moments in which she encountered presence in a double sense. They were moments spent in the timeless present, bracketed by neither the past nor the future, and they were moments in which two selves—two “total beings” to use Turner's phrase—were present each to the other. Because Rethmann took the subjectivity of her interlocutor seriously, because she did not reduce her conversation partner to an object of analysis, in those moments, both of their worlds contained selves capable of relationship.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to show that early modern anthropologists like Tylor, whose scientific triumphalism led them to disparaging their interlocutors' beliefs in the supernatural, contributed to a disenchanting worldview that objectifies selves, marooning them in a sterile world incapable of supporting relationships between whole persons. I have also shown that in the decades since Tylor, anthropologists like Malinowski and Turner have tended towards a more respectful stance towards the beliefs of those that they study and that many contemporary anthropologists not only take seriously the beliefs and experiences of those that they study, but actively seek to share in those experiences in order to better understand them. In doing so, these scientists contribute to the reenchantment of the contemporary world and promote a more relational worldview. I, in my practice of *pratikraman*, discovered that my room at Drew was not as sterile a place as I had thought; rather, it teemed with life that needed my protection. Similarly, Brown, in her work with Alourdes, found a world alive with other spirit-selves. Knab also found that he could commune with spirits in his dreams. Rethmann found in a sub-arctic woman who knew how to practice presence, a self that comforted her by her mere presence, and Vitebsky discovered that the land itself was alive.

In the final pages of this essay, I want to do two things. First, I want to confront two objections that might be raised against the theory and methods of the contemporary anthropologists that I have lauded. Then, I want to conclude by urging a cross-disciplinary approach to the study of lived religion.

The first objection that I wish to anticipate revolves around the charge that ethnographic writing that takes seriously the experiences of those it studies, particularly experiences that are not susceptible to empirical verification, are in effect romanticizing the experiences. Essays like this run the risk of encountering such charges and academics ought to respond thoughtfully to such charges. In regards to this particular essay, the issue is that those who make their home in a spiritually impoverished modern world like that described by Searles may impose an interpretation on the cultures encountered by contemporary ethnographers that is foreign to those cultures. That is, out of spiritual loneliness, it is possible in Searles' (and my) need for a world capable of sustaining spirit

that we may wistfully attribute to those that seem to inhabit such worlds feelings that are, in fact, foreign to them. The degree, to which one human being can share the experience of another human being, particularly when those human beings inhabit vastly different cultural milieus, remains a difficult question. Yet, in an important sense, asking the question removes much of its sting; for, by recognizing that we may be projecting our own feelings onto those we study, we remove the false sense of authority that might otherwise accompany our observations. Moreover, by asking the question, we demonstrate our good faith to our interlocutors. We understand them as best we can. More than that, however, we demonstrate our high esteem for them and their cultures by suggesting that their way of being in the world has implications for others with different ways of being in the world—even if those implications are undreamt of by our conversation partners.

A second objection might come from those who seek to bridge religious studies and the natural sciences (Taves, 2009, 2010). One of the impediments to collaboration between such disciplines, according to Ann Taves, is the fact that religious studies professionals tend to attribute a uniqueness to religion that sets it apart from scientific inquiry (2009). To remedy this she suggests an approach to religious studies based on the idea that things are religious only in the sense that people deem them religious. That is, people ascribe to them a greater valence than they do to other things. The problem, it seems to me, with Taves' ascriptionist approach is that it leaves little room for the possibility that supernatural things might exist. Indeed, she writes, "The ascriptive model claims on the contrary that religious or mystical or spiritual or sacred 'things' are created when religious significance is assigned to them" (p. 17). The greater context of her work makes clear that she does not mean to assert by this that such things did not exist prior to ascription. Still, I do believe her to be suggesting that the things to which people ascribe religious significance have no innate supernatural qualities. I am sympathetic to Taves' desire to push such an argument as far as it can go since an assumption of a supernatural quality to a phenomenon too easily truncates scientific inquiry. Here, however, I want to argue that one need not foreclose the possibility of the supernatural in order to avoid assuming the supernatural. One can simply suspend judgment.

A more problematic stance is that Taves also freely admits what should be obvious, that religious individuals do not see it her way. In the eyes of religious folks, things are not religious because they deem them so; rather, they deem them so because they are religious in nature. From an ethnographic point of view, willfully ignoring the viewpoint of an interlocutor seems a serious flaw, for doing so privileges the worldview of the scientist over that of the individuals and communities that the scientist studies. Donald Davidson rightly remarks, "If we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters" (Davidson, 1973-1974, p. 19). To do otherwise is to dismiss a conversation partner as idiotic or mad or both².

I want to conclude this essay by urging, as does Taves (2009, 2010), the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. Nor do the concerns expressed above suggest that I disagree with her completely. Indeed, I applaud her call to religious scholars to abandon *sui generis* claims for religion. We can and should, as Taves suggests (2009), compare such things as "experiences deemed religious" to other special experiences. However, neither such comparisons in particular, nor scientific observations in general need to be detached in order to be effective. We can and should learn much by detached observation; but, when it comes to the experiences of others, we may learn more by sharing to whatever extent is possible in those experiences, and to do so, we may need to suspend our doubts about the existence of the beings that we encounter in those experiences.

In concluding this essay, I want to hint at what I believe is an important implication of the argument that I have made. While space does not permit me to fully develop this argument, I nevertheless want to point out that anthropological knowledge alone cannot repopulate our world with other selves. The anthropologist can and should give voice to ways of looking at the world in which people still see deities and in which they still attribute sentience to the natural world. The construction of a world capable of nurturing selves who enjoy renewed subjectivity, however, is a theological task, for it is the job of the theologian to translate the ways of thinking discovered by the anthropologist from one culture's symbols to those of another. What I am asserting here, then, is a case for comparative theology that uses ethnographic tools to construct a worldview that allows for a meaningful experience of the numinous.

More than two millennia ago Ezekiel confronted a land stripped of its human and sacred inhabitants. Imagining a return of both the human and the sacred he saw a valley full of bones stripped of flesh. Asked if the bones could yet live, he replied that only God knew, and then he watched as sinew united bone to bone and as flesh covered the restored skeletal frames. Finally, in his vision, he prophesied to the winds and as they blew, breath filled the newly living bodies. Selves can return to worlds stripped of subjectivity, and using ethnographic tools, comparative theologians can nurture the conditions that make such returns possible.

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Endnotes

¹See for example, Turner's "Color Classification in Ndembu Ritual: A Problem in Primitive Classification" in (Turner, 1970).

²Dan Sperber (1985) might disagree with my assessment, for he imagines four different types of beliefs, ranging from those that are both propositional and factual to those that are representational and semi-propositional. By representational, he has in mind concepts embedded in factual statements. A factual statement might be something like "it's raining outside" when the person making the statement happens to know for a fact that water is falling from the sky. A representational statement, on the other hand, might be something like "I won a million dollars," when it occurs in the larger statement, "I dreamt last night that I won a million dollars." The factuality of the representational statement is, of course, unknown. Sperber uses the term semi-propositional to suggest fuzzy statements not fully understood by those who make them. A new initiate into Buddhism, for example, might state that Buddhists hope to achieve nirvana. S/he might have a good grasp on who Buddhists are while having only a fuzzy idea about nirvana, perhaps believing it to be a good place to which people go analogous to the Christian heaven. I have not treated Sperber's model in the body of this article because he deals with the beliefs of others rather than their experiences. Suffice it to say here that a personal experience might be fuzzy only in the sense that it is ineffable and that it cannot be representational in the sense that Sperber uses the word.