

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

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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. Indeed, 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 the 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 (Guédon, 1998; 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 who see in religions only objects for analysis, participate in the construction of a world 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 a world that can support 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 post-colonial thinkers. Next, taking the work of E. B. Tylor as an example, I demonstrate the validity of their criticisms. Then, I illustrate these same criticisms using a modern parable based on Piers Vitebsky's work with the Eveny of Siberia (Vitebsky, 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 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 (Asad, 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” (Asad, 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’” (Asad, 1993, p. 39). In this manner, Asad argues, Western society separated the notion of religion from other aspects of life. This separation was, he emphasizes, 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” (Asad, 1993, 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 also questions the notion that one can read and interpret cultures as texts (Asad, 1993). Viewing cultures as texts, he 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 (Asad, 1993, 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 (Asad, 1993, 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, then, 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” (Tambiah, 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” (Tambiah, 1990, 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” (Tambiah, 1990, 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” (Tambiah, 1990, 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” (Tambiah, 1990, 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 (Searles, 2007) argues that moderns suffer from a condition that he calls “the secularization of the self” (Searles, 2007, 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 Searle’s 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” (Searles, 2007, 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. By objectifying our world in our attempt to bend it to our purposes, moreover, 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 ourselves incapable of meaningful relationships. In our attempt to catalog and define the experiences of others, we perpetuate a worldview devoid of subjectivity. A modern parable may help to make the theoretical concerns of these thinkers concrete.

A Modern Parable

In *The Reindeer People*, Piers Vitebsky (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” (Vitebsky, 2005, p. 263). It is, or can be, “an arrangement of mutual benefit... even a social contract between reindeer and humans” (Vitebsky, 2005, 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 (Vitebsky, 2005, 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” (Vitebsky, 2005, p. 259). Thus, Searles argues, Eveny culture “locates the divine inside the phenomena of the world” (Vitebsky, 2005, 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 (Vitebsky, 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” (Vitebsky, 2005, p. 44). Changes to Eveny culture, founded as it was “on... animals as metaphors for relations between humans” (Vitebsky, 2005, 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 (Vitebsky, 2005, 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 (Vitebsky, 2005, 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 (Vitebsky, 2005, 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” (Vitebsky, 2005, p. 194). Ultimately, the state system, using a “factory metaphor, transformed the skilful, self-sufficient hunter into a wilderness proletarian” (Vitebsky, 2005, 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 (Vitebsky, 2005, p. 66), the collapse of the Soviet Union brought economic suffering to the nomads. 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" (Vitebsky, 2005, 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" (Vitebsky, 2005, p. 207). Murder and suicide stalked the population, especially males. "Men died sober, or they died drunk" (Vitebsky, 2005, 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" (Vitebsky, 2005, 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 (Vitebsky, 2005). Science, as well as commerce, then must bear responsibility for the depopulating of the Eveny world, and, we turn now to a discussion of the modern anthropological lens to demonstrate that science's collusion in rendering worlds incapable of supporting relationship. We begin with the father of ethnography (Haddon, 1930), Sir William 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 (Tylor, 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" (Tylor, 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 (Tylor, 1899, 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" (Tylor, 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" (Tylor, 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 (Tylor, 1930, 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" (Tylor, 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" (Tylor,

1930, 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” (Tylor, 1930, p. 235), and though real historians “have had to strike out of their history the old myths of gods (Tylor, 1930, 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” (Tylor, 1930, 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 disenchanted 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’” (Tylor, 1930, 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" (Tylor, 1930, 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" (Malinowski, 1925, p. 51). The "dreams, shadows, and visions" which Tylor thought of as sparks for the intellectual imagination, merely provided the material for the construction of religion. Religion, for Malinowski then, 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'" (Malinowski, 1925, 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" (Malinowski, 1925, p. 18), and his phrase for magic, "pseudo-science" (Malinowski, 1925, 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 (Malinowski, 1925, 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" (Malinowski, 1925, 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" (Malinowski, 1925, 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" (Malinowski, 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" (Malinowski, 1925, 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" (Malinowski, 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” (Malinowski, 1925, 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” (V. Turner, 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 (V. Turner, 1964, 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” (V. Turner, 1969, p. 359). During the liminal period, “their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories” (V. Turner, 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” (V. Turner, 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” (V. Turner, 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” (V. Turner, 1970, p. 126). In taking seriously those he studied, Turner also took seriously their religious beliefs, 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” and ennobling emotions (V. Turner, 1970, 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” (V. Turner, 1970, 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

religions. Nothing, however, makes 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, especially that of the experience of *communitas*. Turner called *communitas* “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” (V. Turner, 1968, 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” (V. Turner, 1968, 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” (V. Turner, 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, to not only 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 post-modern 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, and 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.

Petra Rethmann is one such anthropologist. In her essay, "On Presence" (Rethmann, 2007) she speaks movingly of an encounter with a 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" (Rethmann, 2007, 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" (Rethmann, 2007, p. 38). It is also a moment in which one connects "with something larger than the self" (Rethmann, 2007, 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.

Marie Françoise Guéron (Guéron, 1988) provides an example of a post-modern anthropologist willing to take seriously the subjectivity not only of her interlocutors, but also of those to whom her conversation partners granted subjectivity. Guéron tells her readers that, her conversation partners “made it clear that I could not learn about Dene ways of life and language without growing into this learning” (Guéron, 1988, p. 41). As they would a child, her instructors socialized her so that she formed relationships not only with the human community but also with the land that that community inhabited. In this process, she discovered that the proscriptions she learned were not rules so much as they were “expression[s] of my personal relationship with streams, paths, door-steps, men, food, and even myself” (Guéron, 1988, p. 42). Learning about the land involved learning to see the land as part of the cultural environment. As she did so, the land, for her, became “a process... an unfolding story” (Guéron, 1988, p. 47). Moreover, its story was one of “relationship with the animals, the materials, [and] the environment” (Guéron, 1988, p. 48). As Rethmann found in her sub-arctic friend, a fellow self with whom she could relate; by taking seriously the subjectivity that those she studied ascribed to the land and its non-human residents, Guéron discovered a world populated by other selves, including some that were not human.

Victor Turner's widow, Edith provides a third example of a post-modern anthropologist who discovers a world replete with other selves. Redefining participant observation as being "an actual participant, not just an actor going through the motions," she actively engages in the healing rituals that she studies, including its trance states. Turner's use of the first person plural in her book, *Experiencing Ritual*, signals the depth of her participation. "We sang... we soon found ourselves... we went wandering" (E. Turner and Blodgett, 1992, p. 129). Well into the description of one ritual, however, perhaps to emphasize the extent of her participation, and perhaps to suggest her own certainty of her observations, she changes to the first person singular. "I drank... I felt..." (E. Turner and Blodgett, 1992, p. 131) "I clapped like one possessed" (p. 149), until finally, she writes, "I *saw* [her italics] with my own eyes a giant thing" and then describes a spirit that she had helped to exorcise from a Ndembu woman (E. Turner and Blodgett, 1992, p. 149). Like Rethmann and Guédon, then, Edith Turner discovered a world in which one might encounter and relate to other selves. For Turner, moreover, those selves were, at least occasionally, spirits.

Conclusion

In the final pages of this essay, I want do three things. First, I want to confront a question that has occurred during the writing of this essay. We will not have the space to address the issue adequately, but it may provide a direction for further research and reflection. Next, I want to turn the lens that we have so carefully polished on the ethnographic project itself. Finally, I want to argue that the work being done by the post-modern anthropologists that we have just considered is, or ought to be interdisciplinary in nature.

The question that I wish to raise revolves around the charge that ethnographic writing that takes seriously the experiences of those it studies, particularly those 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, whether implied or actual. In regards to this particular essay, the issue is that the spiritually impoverished modern world described by Searles, may impose an interpretation on the cultures encountered by the post-modern ethnographers that is foreign to those cultures. That is, it is possible in Searles' (and my) need for a world capable of sustaining spirit—in our spiritual loneliness, we may wistfully attribute to those that seem to inhabit such worlds, feelings that, are in fact, foreign to them. The issue may be amenable to either sociological or ethnographic investigation, or both. 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.

My second task in these final pages is to use the ethnographic lens that we have been discussing as a mirror for reflection rather than the analytical tool for which it is traditionally deployed. By this, I mean, that it I intend to use anthropological theories to understand the ethnographic process itself. In doing so, I make several bold assumptions. First, I assume that

progress, if there is such a thing in human history, is more like a spiral than Tylor's straight line. Because of this, those who would progress must continually revisit who they were in order to recover what they have lost in their change. Thus, throughout the essay I have urged that modernity can (re)learn from other cultures the possibility and the importance of a world populated by more than objects. To learn from pre-modern cultures we must, as Malinowski did, respect them enough to believe that we can learn something, not only about who we were but also about who they and we are. Finally, I assume that Victor Turner's assertions about liminality, *communitas*, and the potentiality that ensues from the state and the experience are helpful, and that we can apply his insights to the ethnographic project.

The work of the post-modern ethnographers that we discussed in the previous section appears to support this last assumption. Certainly, they placed themselves in a liminal state. While they behaved no longer as academic observers; the color of their skin, their physical appearance, the language that they spoke, and, especially their own patterns of behavior spoke loudly of the fact that they were not, perhaps could not be, full participants in the cultures that they observed. In order to understand the beliefs and practices of others, in some cases they suspended, and in others abolished life-long beliefs and ways of being. One post-modern ethnographer even said that her instructors socialized her, as they would have a child, in order that she might learn to be a culturally competent adult. The experiences of these post-modern ethnographers suggest the accuracy of Turner's assertion that the liminal state produces an experience of *communitas*. Thus, by being "reduced or ground down... to be fashioned anew" (V. Turner, 1969, p. 359), the ethnographers experienced relationships they otherwise would not have. Stripped of the academic rank that elevated her status above those she studied, Rethmann,

for example “felt better” as she sat as peer with peer in Shishkin’s home, and reduced to the status of a child, Guédon discovered that “my very own thoughts... mattered to the community, to the family, to the living things around us” (Guédon, 1998, p. 56). In their vulnerability, these ethnographers discovered what it was to relate as “total beings” to “total beings.” Moreover, they discovered more than the satisfaction of deep relationship. They also discovered that Victor Turner’s assertion that *communitas* “has an aspect of potentiality” is spot on. Gods and other selves broke “through the interstices of structure,” as liminality dissolved “the norms that govern structure and institutionalized relationships.” These ethnographers became pregnant with worlds of beings capable of restoring those objectified by modernity to full humanity. Yet, the anthropologists who discovered and documented the possibility of such relationships leave the job unfinished, and my final task in this paper is to suggest that the completion of the job is, or ought to be an interdisciplinary project.

The Eveny described by Vitebsky are not the only peoples amongst earth’s populations to have lost their subjectivity to modernity. Indeed, those of us in the West who have most fully embraced modernity may be the most impoverished by the abandonment of the gods. Carl Jung believed this to be the case. In his eloquently compact *The Undiscovered Self*, he argues that science, because it deals with universals, reduces individual humans to an “ideal average” (Jung, 1959, p. 17) in its attempt to understand them. He writes, “Under the influence of scientific assumptions, not only the psyche but the individual man [sic] and, indeed all individual events whatsoever suffer a leveling down and a process of blurring that distorts the picture of reality into a conceptual average” (p. 21). It is a process that “robs the individual of his foundations and his dignity” (p. 24). Moreover, a loss of agency accompanies this loss of dignity, for Jung also

argued that when the “statistical reality is the only reality, then it is the sole authority. There is then only *one* [his italics] condition, and since no contrary condition exists, judgment and decision are not only superfluous but impossible” (p. 30). A recovery of dignity, then, entails both the recovery of the identity that derives from uniqueness and the recovery of agency. Subjective selfhood capable of relationships requires not only the retention, in the face of modernity’s tendency to reduce individuals to an average, of the uniqueness that makes an individual an individual. It also requires the retention of real agency and that requires an ideal around which an individual can construct a unique identity.

For Jung, the second condition of subjective selfhood, the retention (or perhaps the re-establishment) of agency requires a religious answer. To escape bondage to “the otherwise inevitable submersion in the mass,” people need the “moral autonomy” that derives from “an extramundane principle capable of relativizing the overpowering influence of external factors” (Jung, 1959, p. 34). Such autonomy is possible only in the presence of an “inner, transcendent experience” like that sometimes understood as the presence of the divine. If a person would free herself from the vacuity of a universe populated only by very large numbers of people devoid of selves, then she must find an authority to which she can respond. Such an authority, for Jung, was the divine as encountered in religion.

Jung’s argument implies that knowledge of universal human characteristics, whether anthropological, sociological, or psychological, is inadequate to rescue humanity from a world evacuated of living selves. Anthropological knowledge alone cannot repopulate our world with other selves. The anthropologist can certainly give voice to ways of looking at the world through which people still see deities and by 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. 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, is a case for comparative theology that uses ethnographic tools, to construct a worldview that allows for a meaningful experience of the numinous. Moreover, it is a prophetic task as well as a theological task, for the comparative theologian that would construct a world capable of habitation by whole selves must necessarily confront those forces that led to the demise of those worlds. In particular, she must confront the arrogance that would reduce to objects of analysis and manipulation, people and the environments in which they live their lives. On the one hand, the comparative theologian that uses ethnographic tools for her work must resist the temptation to use those tools to know about people rather than to know people. On the other, she must resist the forces in her own culture that would reduce people and the world they inhabit to commodities. Finally, she must offer an experience of the numinous as an authority around which individuals can construct selves that transcend the statistical mean.

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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