

Rotting Bodies: The Clash of Stances toward Materiality and its Ethical Affordances

Webb Keane

Abstract

Any community supposedly identified with a “single” kind of Christianity is likely to contain conflicts and divisions due to the different logics and temporalities associated, respectively, with ecclesiastical institutions, popular practices, and scriptural texts. These conflicts may extend even to basic ontological assumptions. This article looks at clashes concerning popular practices surrounding relics and icons in Eastern Orthodoxy. It asks what are the ethical stakes when people insist on the powers of material things even in the face of withering criticism and contempt from inside and outside their church. That criticism, which can have both theological and atheist bases, often focuses on the allegedly instrumental reasoning and selfish motives of people who expect to receive divine intervention from objects such as relics and icons. I argue that popular practices that focus on the agency of objects may above all be responding to material properties as ethical affordances. These affordances provide ways of treating the world as ethically saturated. In the Eastern Orthodox context, this may be one way for ordinary villagers to take lofty theological claims about the divine nature of humans in concrete terms.

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By now it is widely accepted that even the most austere and other-worldly religious traditions must take some material form. But why should that matter? I’ve suggested some answers to this question elsewhere (Keane 2007, 2008), as have many others (e.g. Meyer and

Houtman 2012, Morgan 2010, Yelle 2013). This article attempts to develop a different approach by asking what are the *ethical* stakes when people insist on the powers of material things even in the face of withering criticism and contempt from inside and outside their church. That criticism often focuses on the apparently this-worldly goals, instrumental stance, and selfish motives of the kind of (supposedly) simple folk who expect to provoke or receive divine intervention from objects such as relics, icons, amulets, holy water, and so forth. By stressing the ethical dimension, I want to suggest an alternative, or at least a supplement, to this familiar viewpoint. I will argue that popular practices that focus on the agency of objects may above all be treating the world as ethically saturated.¹ In the Eastern Orthodox Christian context that I discuss here, this may be one way for ordinary villagers (or anyone else who responds to that agency) to take lofty theological claims about the divine nature of humans in concrete terms.

The conflicts I describe in this article exemplify, in certain respects, the kinds of deep ontological and semiotic divides that we are likely to find in *any* community supposedly identified with a “single” religion.² These conflicts tend to fall into certain patterns. Christianities (a baggy category, to be sure, but an indigenous one) are continually shaped by interactions among three components of their ongoing religious self-formation. These components are (a) *ecclesiastical institutions*, (b) *popular practices*, and (c) *scriptural texts*. To be sure, categories like this can only be rough heuristics. And certainly they articulate with all the political, economic, technological, demographic, and other dynamics that shape any history, religious or not. Moreover, in any given context, they are likely to be deeply intertwined with one another. Clerics may try to co-opt unruly visionary shepherds, nobles and soldiers take monastic vows, institutions control scriptural education, money lenders must mind moral legislation, millenarian leaders repurpose liturgical devices, reformers strip churches bare,

egalitarians try to do away with priesthoods, revivalists denounce theologians, spontaneous pilgrims seek officially sanctioned holy water, and somewhere there's likely to be a scriptural text for just about anyone. Yet institutions, popular practices, and texts also have their own, rather different, historical dynamics, and there is something to be gained by keeping them analytically distinct. They follow different logics, are shaped by different causalities and follow different temporalities. Each offers its own kinds of affordances on which new institutions, practices, and ideas may draw.³

Their interactions are, in part, provoked by the distinct kinds of problems that materiality poses for social organizations, ongoing practices, spoken and written words, personal emotions, and ideas.⁴ Because institutions, popular practices, and scriptures are semiotically mediated in different ways, they are also prone to developing divergent semiotic ideologies. These are the major forces “internal” to religion (to put this in crude shorthand) that give a distinctive shape to its history. They are further complicated when confronted with forces that define themselves as “external” or even opposed to religion, such as the Bolshevik proponents of atheist materialism discussed below. But it is important to bear in mind that, as in social worlds generally, conflict and contradiction are inevitable parts of any religion, no matter how hegemonic it may seem, and they are hardly confined to novel situations introduced only by outsiders.

In order to recognize such distinct temporalities, logics, and causalities, anthropologists must be ethnographic. But we cannot stop at being *only* ethnographic: we must also think with and beyond our particular observations. As I have argued elsewhere, our strongest insights grow neither from the intimacy of the fieldworker nor the distant gaze of the theorist, but from our constant *movement between* these poles (Keane 2003a). To my mind, this means we must reinvent the comparative endeavor, in order to learn from one another. If anthropology is to be

comparative, anthropologists must be able to work with one another's ethnographies.⁵ With such an undertaking in mind, I have written this article as an exercise in thinking through some ethnographic materials from Eastern Orthodoxy that I cannot claim as "mine." The purpose is to see what insight we might gain by bringing to these materials some of the questions that arose in my own fieldwork with a different kind of Christianity.

1. Relics, Representations, and Revolutions

In a recent book about saints' relics in late Imperial and early Revolutionary Russia, the historian Robert Greene quotes an exchange that took place in 1919, between an Orthodox bishop and a Bolshevik commissar over the exhumation of the remains of Saint Feodosii Totemskii. This exhumation was part of an ongoing campaign by the Bolsheviks to discredit the church and prove to the lay public that they had been hoodwinked by the clerics. It was an opening volley in a long campaign to use the techniques and findings of modern science to demonstrate scientific materialism and disprove religion which, in various permutations, would run throughout the Soviet era (see Husband 2000, Luehrmann 2011, Peris 1998). The exhumations focused on the materiality of bodies. In the first decade of Bolshevik rule, more than seventy "relic inspections" were carried out, intended to demonstrate publically that the supposedly incorruptible saints were in fact decayed and therefore mortal flesh (Greene 2010: 104). The presupposition of these inspections was that believers in miracle-working relics expected them to be sacred, and because they were sacred, immune to corruption. This incorruptibility was in turn supposed to be the proof any believer should expect of the sanctity of the relic. The Bolsheviks' expectation was that once the ordinary materiality of saintly flesh was

exposed, the simple believers would come to their senses (or perhaps more accurately, the evidence of their senses would bring their minds around) and become disillusioned with the clergy, the Orthodox church, and, by extension, religion altogether.

It was against this background, then, that the bishop spoke of the sacrilegious treatment of Saint Feodosii. The commissar answered that his complaint was misguided, since “The exhumation confirmed that the remains of the venerable Feodosii in no way constitute uncorrupted relics as the church billed them, but are, rather, the ordinary, mortal remains of a human body” In response, the bishop argued that the church had never held that relics must necessarily be uncorrupted, and those who thought so are “possessed of a zeal for God beyond the bounds of reason. . . . One-sided and incorrect, the opinion of these people brings much harm to the church.” To this the commissar sarcastically retorted

Even if you, a man well-read in church books, think that relics are only the remains of a body, principally bones, can you really hold the position, then, that all peasants, think the same, [peasants] who have not read Professor Golubinskii, or the *Sinaksarist* of Nicodemus . . . ? The majority of the faithful (that is, primarily the peasantry) understand relics as uncorrupted bodies, not as the remains of bones. No one would have believed in bones, no matter how many of them there were. You cannot persuade some naïve peasant woman to worship bones and expect a ‘miracle’ from them. No one calls bones relics. It is in vain that you turn to philology for help (all quotations in Greene 2010: 18-19).

And so tumultuous revolution, following on the heels of devastating world war, instigated an earnest argument about materiality, belief, and religious practice. Running through this debate are the threads of three contending stances toward the materiality of religious things: those of the

atheist revolutionaries, of the learned clergy, and, present here only as shadowy figures imagined by these writers, the peasantry. The revolutionary's attack on the relic clearly manifests an explicit ideology of modernity and materialism. Yet the iconoclasm of the Bolsheviks converges with the defense of the relics in some important respects. Both appeal to reason. Both insist on a distinction between material things and something else, an agency or meaning, that is not material. Both consider the peasant, in contrast to those who have reason, to be ignorant. That ignorance is manifested in practices that reveal the peasant to misconstrue to true nature of material things. In different ways, moreover, each sees that ignorance to pose a real threat. In the bishop's view, peasant misunderstanding brings harm to the church.⁶ The commissar, for his part, exemplifies the position of the revolutionaries: common superstitions make workers and peasants susceptible to the depredations of the church as it enriches itself at their expense. Here too, misguided understanding of materiality leads to social harm.

Greene remarks that the commissar was "better skilled in dialectics than in doctrine," since the official position of the church since the seventeenth century had been to de-emphasize incorruption; the real proof of a relic was that it had effected miracles (Greene 2010: 19-20). Moreover, by the nineteenth century, as the church increased its efforts to enlighten and educate the laity, it emphasized what we could call the more representational stance toward relics. That is, relics are best understood as teaching the faithful about their spiritual salvation, rather than bringing worldly benefits. Even when relics are miraculously preserved, their primary value was as evidence of something else, their pedagogical or demonstrative function to inculcate doctrine or invigorate faith. Thus one priest wrote in 1896, "by their silence, [they] are the most eloquent preachers of the truth and the life-giving nature of our holy Orthodox faith" (quoted in Greene 2010: 34).

And yet, however other-worldly the stance expected of the faithful, the immediate materiality of the saint's body in this world still mattered. Here, I think the commissar, crude though his theology (and sociology) may have been, was responding to a real tension within the church's position. As one visitor to a shrine wrote around 1900, "The tangibility, so to speak, of the relics makes a very powerful impression on those who pray to them and touch them. Everything is up front and straight-forward here, and there is no room for flights of fancy. See and believe . . ." (quoted in Greene 2010: 39). The powerful effects of real, material relics, which could compel unbelievers and heretics to accept Orthodoxy, were widely reported in popular writings. In this respect, perhaps, the commissar was not so far off: the materiality of the relic was essential to its persuasiveness (and not only to the uneducated and the rural people who were often the focus of the critics).⁷ If the commissar likewise counted on that very materiality—revealed, in this case, to be the decayed state of the body—to persuade the viewer of the untruth of religion, the point remained that the evidence of the senses was a powerful and, it would seem, direct effect of concrete experience.⁸

Like the accusation of fetishism launched in the Protestant West against Roman Catholics, and the colonial missions against non-Christians, the imputation of ignorance about the true nature of material things by those who take them to have "magical" powers—one manifestation of a clash between semiotic ideologies—contains an intriguing hint of anxiety (Keane 2007). By semiotic ideology, I mean people's assumptions, either tacit or explicit, that guide how they do, or do not, perceive or seek out signs in the world, and respond to them. Those assumptions help shape people's expectations about what is likely to be good evidence for a causal chain to be tracked down, an intention to be construed, or a code to be deciphered. Given one semiotic ideology, a bolt of lightning is a candidate for being a sign of divine

intentions and thus requires a serious ritual response; given another, it manifests nothing more than atmospheric conditions, warranting no further attention beyond, perhaps, installing a lightning rod. Note, then, that semiotic ideology is hardly a peculiarity of any particular historical moment (such as modernity) or social world (such as the Protestant West).

The word “ideology” is fraught with ambiguity (see Eagleton 1991). I want to be clear that I am not using it in the common sense of “false consciousness” or “deception,” nor that of an explicit doctrine or program. Yet the debates over semiotic ideology, between Calvinists and ancestral ritualists, or Orthodox bishops and commissars, often do turn on explicit doctrines and accusations of false consciousness. Doctrines and delusions are *part* of the story, just not the whole story. In order to sort them out, we need to attend to the sociality and politics that enter into distinctive responses to signs, and to other people’s purported misreading of signs.⁹

The bishop, the commissar, and the peasant do not simply represent three distinct positions. They represent articulated *responses to one another*, each position the outcome of imagining the other’s position, the other’s accusations, and thus, how one appears in the eyes of the other. Here’s where the bishop and the commissar share some common ground. Living in a world of debates and doctrines, newspapers and books, schools and ministries, and mandated to correct the errors of others, the bishop and commissar are constantly articulating their semiotic ideologies in explicit verbal terms. They are engaged in and committed to projects of objectification, and quite self-conscious about the surrounding presence of people who (they assume) do not objectify or take a reflective distance on things in quite the same way.

The real differences among semiotic ideologies in this case may lie less along the doctrinal divides between East and West, or pre- and post-Reformation, or even pre- and post-Revolution, that those between the *explicit* concepts of clerical (and revolutionary) high theory,

on the one hand, and the largely *unspoken*, or at least unheard, implications of practices (whether humble or elite), on the other. I will return to this shortly. What I want to stress here is that the bishop, the commissar, and the peasant, in certain broad respects, all inhabit the same social world and speak the same language. Most of all, their actions and reactions to one another play out as they navigate a shared landscape of cities and rural districts, educated elites and illiterate masses, churches and state institutions, icons and propaganda posters, rituals and political theatre. Like the inhabitants of the heteroglossic world depicted by Bakhtin (1981), they may be moving within more or less carefully patrolled social boundaries, facing different life chances and legal restrictions, thinking and speaking in quite distinct registers and dialects--but for all that, they are not strangers to one another.

In fact, as I will argue below, we cannot understand their explicit claims without considering the context in which each remains at least a virtual participant in dialogue and debate with the other.¹⁰ As Sonja Luehrmann remarks of interdenominational arguments taking place in the former Soviet republic of Marii El a century later, their general thrust “is already anticipated in the Orthodox theology of the icon, which, having been elaborated through centuries of fierce controversy, has given liturgical practices of icon veneration an aspect of demonstrative defiance performed before an imaginary audience of critics” (Luehrmann 2010: 56).

The presence of that imaginary audience is not only an instigation to explicitness and rationalization. It also induces the sense of what I have called markedness (Keane 2008), that one’s religious practices may stand in contrast to the largely unnoticed default assumptions of everyday life, with the result that they seem strange even to the practitioner him- or herself. Thus the words of one nineteenth-century Orthodox hymn addressed to a Kazan icon of the Virgin Mary, “Strange and doubtful it sounds to the unbelievers how from Your icon flow

streams of grace and living odors exude” (quoted in Luehrmann 2010: 60). One conclusion we might draw from these words is that the miraculous character of the icon is proven by that very sense of strangeness. And this sense of strangeness seems to depend on, or at least is most emphatically brought home to the believer by, the presence of others, by seeing oneself through the eyes of the unbelievers. But in the clash over rotting bodies, we have the priest and the commissar each seeing the other through one another’s eyes, and also through the eyes of imagined peasants. The shared space within which this recursive envisioning takes place rests on the ground of the material things whose sensuous presence, it is assumed, each party shares.¹¹

2. The Palpability of Things

The idea of semiotic ideology works best, I think, if it is grounded in some understanding of a common ground of possible sensuous experiences. It requires that people share some basic phenomenology of material things, and at least the possibility of imputing or denying intentionality and agency on the basis of, or in response to, that phenomenology. Differences in how experiences are taken as signs are not differences of experience as such. This is one reason why fetishism can seem so dangerous to its opponents, because they *share* something with the fetishist—they recognize the temptations of fetishism (see Keane 2007).

To be sure, what experience offers is underdetermined, hence it can be nothing more than a source of affordances. *Affordance* refers to the properties of something in light of what those properties offer to someone who perceives them (Gibson 1977). For example, the properties of a wooden chair can afford sitting on it, but also using it as a step ladder, as a paper weight, as firewood, as a weapon, as a barricade, as a hat hook, and so forth. What is crucial about the idea

of affordance is that it is not deterministic. The objectively real features of the chair afford its use as a stepladder or hat hook, but it is a human agent who decides whether or not to respond to them, and if so, which ones to take up, and to what purpose.¹²

Ethical affordances are those features of the world, as people experience it, that can be construed in ethical terms. By ethics, I refer to people's ability to evaluate acts as good or evil, people as virtuous or vicious, lives as worthy or worthless, and to their awareness of being themselves evaluated in turn. Typically these evaluations arise in interactions with other people, but they may involve any entity at all (such as divine beings) whose actions can be judged in these terms, and so that can be held responsible for purposeful harm or benefit.

Let me start with the phenomenology, and then turn to intention-seeking. Doing so requires me to broaden our ethnographic scope to encompass icons and other aspects of Orthodox materiality that have also provoked critics, and to other branches of Orthodoxy, whose ethnographers allow us a closer look at similar practices.¹³

Here is Gabriel Hanganu's account of how common Orthodox practices in villages in the Romanian region of Moldovia at the turn of the twenty-first century create a shared sensory world:

Pilgrims often visit famous icons hosted in monasteries and spend long hours praying in front of them, passing under them, and touching them. Many rub against their glass covers clothes belonging to sick relatives or friends, in the belief that the icons' spiritual power can be transferred through physical contact with another material. . . . On special annual occasions, such as before Christmas or Epiphany, the icons of the approaching feast are carried by the priests to every household People commonly display icons at home and employ them in daily devotion by crossing themselves, kissing them, and

kneeling and lighting candles and oil lamps in front of them. Together, these icon-centered religious practices create a particular sensory background, which adds to the conceptual and psychological layers of religiosity, and influences the devotees' relationship with the divine (Hanganu 2010: 46)

The sensuous experience of icons and relics (both of which are surrounded with votive gifts, candles, incense, in spaces often crowded with bodies and saturated with the sounds of hymns, chants, and the cries of the petitioners) is motivated. A clerical view is that this sensuousness should induce or reinforce faith that, in the absence of palpable experience, might falter. It is not simply a didactic representation or reminder of doctrine.¹⁴

But material practices are a problem, since these proper responses to things are in constant risk of going too far, spilling over into “a zeal for God beyond the bounds of reason,” as the bishop put it in his debate with the commissar. Whether this zeal is something that must be countered, or quietly ignored, clearly varies across historical and geographical contexts. In contemporary Marii El, for instance, “What matters [to the priests] . . . is the spirit of reverence or willfulness in which people encounter such grace-filled objects as icons, rather than where they locate the source of the grace. This criterion allows for a variety of stances toward the materiality of the icon, a variety perhaps best accommodated by thinking of icons as persons” (Luehrmann 2010: 70).

In nineteenth century Russia and in contemporary Moldova and Marii El, clerical efforts to raise lay practices to a higher, more spiritual plane, seem also to be responding to a problem posed by the church itself. The temptation that icons present was evident early on:

The Orthodox cathedral of Kerkyra (Corfu) contains an icon of the Byzantine empress Saint Theodora, who in 843 A.D. reinstalled the veneration of icons In her hands

the canonized empress holds not only an icon of the Theotokos and Christ, but also a *rotulus* bearing the words ‘If you venerate the icons like God, you are three times condemned’ (Hann and Goltz 2010: 23n. 16).

Historically, the use of relics and icons was motivated in part by ideas about human weaknesses, which required the concreteness of things to shore up faith (Pelikan 1974). By the beginning of the twentieth century, when the scope of the church’s educational efforts had broadened beyond literate elites, similar condemnations may well have been addressed to the ignorant peasant who, presumably, was most prone to such errors.

Of course a shared sensory world may provoke quite opposite responses. The Bolshevik commissar, I imagine, would have looked on the scenes in Moldavia with scorn or pity. The sacred chants of the Catholic church sounded, in Martin Luther’s ears, like so much “babbling and bellowing” (quoted in Pelikan 2003: 165). Although Romanian state socialism was unable to eliminate religion, it did suppress its public expression. When religious practices came back into public view in the 1990s, there was a generation or two that had never had any explicit religious education. Yet these people had been exposed to the sensory experiences of popular religiosity in baptisms, weddings, and funeral:

even the villagers who were not believers or regular churchgoers were familiar with these diffusely distributed forms of devotional activity. Previous social events in which they had taken part had familiarized them with the idea that spiritual power can be ritually associated with human bodies and material objects (Hanganu 2010: 47)

The differences at play in this scene are not simply those between believers and non-believers. Among the faithful there are significant differences of practice and its interpretation. For instance, Hanganu describes a case in which villagers suffering from drought had borrowed an

icon from a nunnery to process it through their village to request rain. When rain failed to come, Hanganu found several explanations within the community. The priests attributed the failure to villagers' poor focus while praying, the nuns to the weak moral fiber of the village. Among the villagers were those who agreed with the priests, others with the nuns, some who blamed the choice of icon (it was not a wonder-working icon and a different one should have been used), and others who asserted that there's nothing you can do to make it rain at all.

What's at stake in the question of whether a different icon would have been more effective? According to Hanganu, the nuns' stance is due to the tenor of their vocation, which orients them to the moral improvement of the community. Therefore the role of the icon remains somewhat muted in their view of events. The perspective of the priests is shaped by their commitment to education in theological doctrine. The theology of the icon centers on two fundamental claims (Ouspensky and Lossky 1982, Pelikan 1974, 1990). One is the anti-Manichean assertion that the material and spiritual are united. The second concerns the place of humans within divine order. Humans, in this theological anthropology, were the first and highest created likenesses of God. Thus they are referable to their invisible archetype. In effect, a parallel relationship to divine archetypes holds for icons. Thus what is really being venerated is not the material thing but the divine archetype (Hann and Goltz 2010: 12). Therefore, there can in principle be no spiritual difference among particular icons since their value derives from the divine prototype they all share.

In practical terms, this distinction between the material specificity of the icon and the spiritual or ontological unity embodied in its archetype is summarized in the contrasting stances in the village:

The villagers' insistence on carrying the icon in procession showed that both the intercession of the depicted spiritual beings and the physical location of the icon mattered to them for the successful fulfillment of the ritual. For the priests, however, the ritual's main power came from the special prayers read during the rain-seeking service. To them any icon would have been equally useful as a means for prompting the depicted saint to intercede on behalf of the community (Hangenu 2010: 36)

What about the villagers who think the problem is they should have borrowed a more proven wonder-working icon? It would seem that they are responding to their past experiences with icons. Now some of them may know the doctrine of the prototype and find it unpersuasive or irrelevant. Others, lacking even that much religious education, may not know it at all. In either case, however, I suspect what is stronger is habitus structured, in this case, by the structuring structures of village practices around icons—touching and addressing them as if they were persons with strong if somewhat occult powers.

3. Affordances

But why should different icons have different powers? Consider the idea of affordance. The material icon has all the characteristics of other objects: it has solidity, shape, size, weight, and is located in a particular place in a spatial world. As I have stressed elsewhere (Keane 2003b), that fact that qualities are bundled in the same object gives rise to an indeterminate number of possibilities, depending on which aspect is brought into focus by a practice or reflection. As a physical thing, the icon also has at least the potential for being recognized as possessing a self-identity that distinguishes it from other icons, no matter how much they may

resemble one another or derive from the same divine prototype. This, after all, is what makes it possible for the nuns to have a different icon from the purportedly more efficacious icon of the same saint that could have been sought in another village. Thus, in contrast to the unifying prototype, the material icon is manifestly different from others. You can tell it is not the same: it is in a different place. As Michael Herzfeld observes of Greek icons, this spatial distinctiveness allows them to be claimed socially—a given icon belongs to a particular village or other social group. Thus the actual practices around icons, he argues, reproduce the lines of social conflict that are denied at the level of official doctrine, which stresses the unity and harmony identified with the prototype. Notice that the official view attributes villagers’ treatment of icons not just to ignorance, but to selfish instrumentality: “The holy figures have a universal value, whereas icons all too easily become the instruments of selfish ends. . . . [W]hether reverence for an icon venerates a specific picture or some superior, all-encompassing, and unifying principle is, at another level, a question about the role of personal interest in relation to both the local community and the encompassing collectivities of nation and religion” (Herzfeld 1990:112).

The material properties of the icons and all that surrounds them, including the places in which they are to be found and the actions people perform toward and with them, serve as affordances for further actions and reflections on them. They are invitations and provocations. People’s responses to those invitations and provocations may or may not pick up on certain aspects of experience (see Keane 2013). That experience may include speech, things they have been told by priests or nuns or their grandparents or, say, commissars. What they have heard and learned enters into the mix but doesn’t necessarily determine it.

Recall that the commissar and the bishop both focus on what saints’ remains look like, emphasizing the visibility of the relic, in contrast to its efficacy or other sensual experiences such

as smell, which played an important role for defenders of incorruptibility. As Luehrmann points out, both Soviet atheist pedagogy and modern Orthodox theology stress visuality (rather than, say, bodily practices such as having the icon pass over the body of the pilgrim) as a principal source of evidence and persuasion (2010: 65). This would seem to be consistent with the treatment of icons as representations, to the extent they stress the impalpable concepts to be drawn from them rather than the bodily interactions that they might enter into. By contrast, the Romanian villagers focus less on what the icon looks like than on the fact that it can be carried, that it can pass over one's own body, that it can be stroked and kissed. Nor do the priests deny these properties. Theologically, they ought not to denigrate the physicality of the icon or the relic altogether. But they should insist that the faithful not stop there.

4. Intentions and Ethical Life

The debates among clerics, commissars, and their imagined overhearers in the village are, of course, about many things. Certainly they include struggles over the relative authority of clerics and commissars, as well as of texts and practices; they may encompass differences over class conflict, economic resources, pedagogical strategies, the salvation of souls, community identities, eschatology, and the nature of reality itself. But they play out over the question of one's stance toward material things and their status as signs, a problem of semiotic ideology. The intensity and persistence of the debates suggest that differences over semiotic ideology are not just esoteric questions. In order to grasp what might be at stake, I want to stress a key semiotic concept: "A sign does not function as a sign unless it be understood as a sign" (Peirce MS 599:32, quoted in Parmentier 1994: 4). Here I want to develop one aspect of this point,

which we can call second order reflexivity, as an alternative to the view that popular practices surrounding relics and icons are best understood as merely instrumental and selfish.

The second order reflexivity involved in semiotic phenomena makes it possible for people to take their experiences of things and events as evidence of a hidden agent with intentions. As I will suggest intentions, unlike mechanical causes and effects, can be construed in ethical terms, as value-laden. Experience would, in this case, be replete with signs of actions that might be good or bad, friendly or hostile, divine or satanic. (Note that I am not arguing that *all* ethics necessarily depends on intentionality. The point, rather, is that when people *do* seek out signs of intentionality, it may be because they are interested in their ethical weight.)

This argument is rooted the special characteristics of human sign-using capacities. These capacities facilitate the degree of self-awareness and choice-making that are preconditions for full fledged imputations of responsibility on which many (but not all) ethical claims rest. Knowing that a sign is a sign, and not that entity of which it is a sign--is what gives full-fledged sign use its relative freedom from direct determination by natural causes, such as instinct. This reflexivity and the freedom it affords are two preconditions for ethics: the abilities to take up the perspectives of other persons, and to be responsible for an action. The reflexive recognition that signs are signs makes possible inferences about the intentionality of the sign user, and its address to the sign interpreter.

The ethical implications of reflexivity are brought home by P.F. Strawson, who writes “[i]f someone treads on my hand accidentally . . . the pain may be no less acute than if he treads on it in contemptuous disregard of my existence. . . . But I shall generally feel in the second case a kind and degree of resentment that I shall not feel in the first” (1974: 5). That is, the objective causes and painful consequences might be exactly the same in both cases, regardless of whether

the act is accidental or intentional. What differs is the ethical import, the understanding that only in the latter case has one been treated contemptuously. To grasp that an action is intentional requires that one distinguish between the physical action and that which it is, or is not, a sign *of*. The full ethical impact hinges on a double reflexivity: in Strawson's example, the feeling of resentment toward another person requires that I recognize both *her intentions* (to step on my hand) and *her recognition of my feelings* (that I will be insulted). In other words, the dialectic of recognition depends on being able to take some elements of one's experience--and not others--as signifying both the intentions of an agent, and the fact that some of those intentions are directed toward oneself. It is on the basis of this double reflexivity that people come to know themselves as having a *value* (negative or positive) for others. The taking of signs *as* signs is crucial to what gives to social interaction its *ethical* character, being something more than, say, a means of accomplishing a task.

5. Ethical Saturation

The ability to be correct about the real nature of intentional signs and the true locus of the agency behind them, and to distinguish them from, say, mechanical causality, is an important part of what characterizes accusations of fetishism or magical thinking. Let me bring this back to relics and icons. On the one hand, the learned accuse the illiterate peasants of misunderstanding the true nature of material things. The position of the commissar is perhaps the most straightforward: the peasant is a fetishist who imputes agency to what is in reality a world of merely material causes and effects. The priest is in a somewhat more complicated situation. The error of the peasant is perhaps in seeing the thing itself as having agency, rather

than the divine prototype—the saint and beyond the saint, God. (The basic position was laid out in the defense of images in the Second Nicaean Council of 787 , which held that icons themselves were not worthy of veneration, only their prototypes). But the priest cannot deny the role that material relics and icons play as embodiments of divine agency. The distinction is subtle but it rests on the status of the sign: the peasant fails to take the icon or relic as a sign of its prototype, or if taking it as such, overemphasizes its consubstantiality with that prototype at the expense of its subordination to it. Thus Luehrmann reports of Marii El that “it is important to the contemporary Orthodox clergy to impress on believers the correct understanding of this semiotic relationship, an understanding that they often find lacking among their parishioners” (2010: 57). So in some cases, the more comfortable accusation is that of selfish ends: the peasant is animated by this-worldly desires for immediate and personal gain, rather than focusing on salvation, or on their obligations to the church.

But does the priest fully understand the peasant? Perhaps--and certainly I am in no better position of authority to speak on behalf of our silent interlocutor. But consider some further materials from the broader world of Orthodox icons. Ethnographers of Greek Orthodoxy report common themes in the stories villagers tell about icons.

We hear no account of visual details even in stories about miraculous discovery, usually either through the sighting of a flame at the location of the icon or through its discovery by a stray flock animal Such stories, which are ordinarily aetiological explanations of the association of a particular saint's cult with the village, emphasize the icon's relation to a specific set of characters, time, and location, and virtually ignore its iconographic properties (Herzfeld 1990: 114).

The origin stories of particular icons make clear that icons have agency. They want to be found and take a hand in it, emitting light from under ground or casting themselves up on shore or into fishermen's nets (Danforth 1989, Dubish 1995, Stewart 1991); in Russia too, both icons and the bodies of heretofore unknown saints revealed themselves to rural peasants, sometimes over the objections of church officials (Levin 2003, Shevzov 2003).

Icons, in this perspective, manifest the active stance of divinity toward each ordinary person. By treating relics or icons as having agency in themselves villagers are insisting on the saturation of life with ethical implications. That is, the possibility of social interaction with divine actors is everywhere, and social interaction can always be construed as having ethical import. Since divinity might crop up anywhere, and in all sorts of ways, people face a world that is not neutral; at any moment it holds at least the potential for an ethically significant event.

As Herzfeld suggests, the way that the agency of icons grounds them in specific locations in the physical world interpellates villagers into specific locations in an ethical universe. Recall that signs of intentions reveal not only the agent who stands behind them, as it were; they also place the observer in the field of play. Intentional signs, at their most pertinent, are meant *for me*. Thus the villagers are not only acting as if the material universe is full of intentions and agency, by their interactions with icons they are also insisting that *they themselves are significant agents within and for that universe*. Perhaps we could even go so far as to say this: in the face of a hierarchy that would subordinate the ignorant villager to forces that lie beyond his or her knowledge and agency, the peasant who tries to get results from relics or icons by treating them as persons, in an ethics of reciprocity, is insisting on taking at its strongest implications the theological assertion that humans are created in the image of God. This doctrinal principle seems to be well known, at least among the Greek villagers studied by Charles Stewart (1991).

So consider again the three positions. To the extent that the commissar treats the icon and the relic as signs, they indicate the intentional deceptions practiced by the church, through the agency of the clerics. This is not to say the commissar lacks an ethics; a sense of obligation to peasants, party, and Bolshevik state may be precisely what animates his revolutionary passions. But as a matter of principle, the realm of merely material objects, such as icons and relics, must lie beyond the range of ethical evaluations. For the bishop, the primary ethical mandate is that which binds the peasant to the church, the community, and God. To lay too great an emphasis on the relic in its materiality is a matter of degree, a display of excessive zeal, but perhaps not of complete ontological error.

But the peasant is perhaps the one who, by extending the range of experiences that can be judged as intentional beyond the limits of what either the commissar or the bishop would recognize, most insists on the ethical *saturation* of his or her world. To the extent that icons and relics might turn up anywhere, the immanence of divinity in creation (a good, orthodox theological position) takes on immediate material reality. As a result, there are no accidents, and no neutral causality, and *any* event or thing might turn out to be a sign of an agent (and most significantly when they are divine or satanic), something subject to ethical evaluation. To the extent this approaches at least one common stance in the village (for as Hanganu makes clear, there are several), it may be more than just the selfish desire for immediate, magical outcomes: it may equally express that insistence that everyday life is full of ethical import. The semiotic ideology embedded in apparently magical or fetishistic practices takes things to be signs of intentions and agents, and therefore, as ethically consequential.

6. Conclusion: What Shapes Christian History

To conclude, let me briefly to return to a remark I made at the beginning of this essay. I suggested that any community is likely to give rise to deep conflicts about people's ontological assumptions and the semiotic ideologies they encourage. In the history of institutionalized religions with a relatively stable set of scriptural texts, we should expect to see certain large order patterns in these conflicts. At any given moment, I want to suggest, the conflicts within a Christian community will be the outcome of three more or less independent kinds of forces interacting with one another. As a shorthand, we might call them *institutions* (such as priesthoods, councils, liturgies, laws), *popular practices* (which can including anything from quietist piety to carnivalesque celebrations, from the use of amulets to pilgrimages, from visionary upwelling to private magic), and *scriptures*. The conflicted status of Orthodox relics and icons is one example of how these forces can share the same objects, rituals, and spaces, and even acknowledge the same social authority, yet still give rise to different outcomes, operating along different temporalities and on the basis of different premises.

Ecclesiastical institutions are prone to making things explicit (often producing textual artifacts like doctrines, rules, legal findings, commentaries, sermons, pedagogies, juridical procedures). Their regulatory efforts are typically directed both internally (institutions must govern themselves) and outward, especially in response to the force of popular practices. Faced with the inventions and passions of popular practices, institutional agents will try to suppress, constrain, or take advantage of their energies. People immersed in popular practices, for their part, are also compelled to respond to the efforts of the institutions, whether through malingering, full-fledged rebellion, enthusiastic embrace of one institutional party and dogma or another, dutiful routines, or simply keeping their heads down. Popular practices are not

necessarily mute, but whether they come to be rendered explicit as explanations, justifications, instructions, doctrines, and so forth is very much a matter of the press of circumstances. Often enough those circumstances occur in their encounter with the institutions, such as when people, accused of heresy, are forced to justify themselves to clerics (see the classic explorations by Ginzburg 1992, Ladurie 1978).

And then there are scriptures. They never speak for themselves, but their authority often depends of people *taking them* to be doing so, and from the fact that other people seem to agree that they are all reading the same text—even when they are not. Texts are notoriously open to diverse readings—even when people insist on their univocality (Crapanzano 2000, Malley 2004). If the devil may quote scripture, so too can bishops, peasants, and even commissars. Although somewhat in the background in the debate with which we started, they remain a shadow presence, for the debates presuppose there should be a correct practice grounded in an authority that goes beyond that of particular clerics or commissars. Scriptures' objectified status *as* texts (see Silverstein and Urban 1996) gives them a distinctive place in this triad, endowing them with certain qualities of persistence over long stretches of time and a potential to cross contexts independent of either those institutions or popular practices that might claim them for themselves. This is an important flyweight, as it were, and one more element among those contending forces that make religious history more than just a political struggle between self-interested factions, an unfolding of conceptual structures, or an expression of personal psychological states.

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¹ Although the debate with which this essay opens focuses on the practices of peasants, the term “popular practices” can apply to any social group. The point here is that people of all sorts are prone to inventing new practices more or less independently of official approval or doctrinal authority. We might include here someone like Rasputin who, although accused of heresy by the Holy Synod, was favorite of the royal family.

² The anthropological use of the category “religion” is subject to a well-known set of criticisms (see Asad 1993, Masuzawa 2005), but its use in this article attempts to be consistent with the indigenous category.

³ I refer here to interactions among different *components* of what we are calling “religion” rather than those among different groups or doctrines such as occurs in reform, schismatic, or missionary movements. But the play among institutions, popular practices, and scriptures can be a factor in the more or less agonistic dynamics between groups, which are the subject of several papers in this collection (e.g. Bialecki, Handman, Marshall, Vilaça). As Caroline Humphrey observes, oppositional dynamics can take the form of mirroring, an antithetical focus on the *same* ritual-liturgical elements as those possessed by the opposing group. Even movements that avoid scripture (Engelke 2007) are by the same token shaped by it. And of course, as Hoskins’ example of Cao Dai in this volume shows, the dynamics can also be emulative or appropriative as well as oppositional.

⁴ “Materiality” includes sound (see Bandak in this volume and Harkness 2014), and one’s own corporeality (see Mayblin in this volume).

⁵ Of course I am not the only one calling for a reinvention of comparative anthropology. In this volume, Cassinini and Luhrmann do so as well. But their approach, being focused on individual psychological states, is not geared toward including those sociological and semiotic dimensions of religion that give them the historical impact I would like to keep central to the project. And this volume as a whole arises out of Joel Robbins’ rather different vision of comparison in the form of an anthropology of Christianity (see Robbins 2003). I take his grounds for comparison to be not human universals, such as cognition, or ideal types, like charisma, or analytical

constructs, like power, but orders of things united by empirically particular genealogical relationships. This is one attempt to avoid the problem faced by “comparative religion” in light of the difficulties of establishing a non-ethnocentric category of “religion” for the entire range of human societies (see note 1).

⁶ More than a century later, in the religiously pluralistic Volga region republic of Marii El, Orthodox clergy tended to avoid polemics with other faiths, focusing instead on the “struggle of the ‘teaching of the Holy Fathers’ against the ‘teaching of the grandmothers’” (Luehrmann 2010: 69).

⁷ With little apparent sense of irony, in later years the Soviet state came to appreciate the persuasive power of the incorruptible body in its own terms, as a product of modern science, when it embalmed Lenin for eternity (nor was this an isolated case of socialist and post-socialist states appropriating the powerful presence of bodies for political and ideological ends; see Verdery 1999; for a striking comparison in a post-Socialist Buddhist context, see Bernstein 2011).

⁸ The uncorrupted condition of the relic also has a more specific doctrinal function in Orthodoxy, prefiguring the bodily resurrection of the flesh on Judgment Day (Greene 2010: 33).

⁹ For contemporary Russian debates over the semiotic ideologies of social interaction, see Lemon 2008.

¹⁰ As Caroline Humphrey suggests in the version of her chapter presented at the Sintra conference, “the October Revolution . . . was a revolution in some sense *within*, not against, an encompassing ‘religious’ conception of society.” In many specific cases, the Orthodox and the atheists were quite intimate. Some of the militant Bolshevik atheists were former clerics (Peris

1995). Others hailed from clerical backgrounds, notably P. A. Krasikov, the architect of the exhumation campaign, who was raised in the home of his grandfather, an archpriest (Robert Greene, personal communication). Conversely, after the fall of the Soviet Union, some teachers of atheism found their skills well suited for Christian preaching (Luehrmann 2011).

¹¹ Or at least they are sensually present in principle, if not in fact. For there are many stories of icons and relics vanishing when the iconoclasts or materialists try to seize them, only to reappear elsewhere (Luehrmann, personal communication).

¹² The idea of affordances should constrain the sheer heroic willfulness sometimes evident in anthropology's stronger versions of social constructionism (Keane 2014). But I hasten to add this is not meant to return us to any naive effort to ground knowledge either of self or others in the so-called authority of experience (see Scott 1991).

¹³ Of course Eastern Orthodoxy is not a single, undifferentiated entity. But some forays into the ethnographic present will, I think, give us sense of the appeal of icons and saint's relics within an official tradition that both accepts and criticizes them in ways that are quite distinct from the western churches.

¹⁴ According to Sonja Luehrmann (personal communication), Russian Orthodox Christians like to say that in other Christian denominations Biblical events are merely "remembered", whereas in Orthodox liturgies they actually "happen" or "unfold".