



Webb Keane's *Christian Moderns* discloses a beautifully simple idea. Religious faith in the transcendent cannot help but be expressed through material forms and representations, in what Keane calls a "semiotic ideology". All worship, even the worship "in spirit and in truth" of a God so transcendent he cannot be named or represented in images, has to be materialized through human, and therefore social, media of expression, even where the medium is language (creeds, sacred texts) rather than material objects. This means it can never attain a condition sufficiently abstract or "spiritual" to preclude corruption, nor can it be wholly spontaneous and sincere because even inner contemplation involves socially constructed consciousness. Consequently, most faiths, particularly those that emphasize divine transcendence, are prone to recurrent bouts of "purification".

This is an idea that has found its time. There has been a recent spate of publications in the sociology of religion and religious studies dealing with religious dress, liturgical language, the choreography of ritual, religious architecture, and a new journal, *Materializing Religion*, in which something close to Webb Keane's idea provides the underlying rationale. What is distinctive about Keane's approach is the theoretical thoroughness with which he pursues the implications of the paradox of transcendence, which takes a particularly striking form in the Calvinist mission field of Indonesia where his own field work took place. He worked on the island of Sumba, where Dutch missionaries of the re-Reformed Calvinist Church have been meticulous in keeping the faith uncorrupted by syncretistic influences from the indigenous ancestor cult.

Mission statements

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CHRISTIAN MODERNS

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Christian Moderns is not an ethnography, though it deploys illustrations from historical and contemporary ethnographic work. Rather, it is a theoretical exploration of the way the paradox of transcendence works itself out in a missionary encounter between the most abstract and morally rigorous form of European "puritan" Christianity, and indigenous practices in which the materialization involved in ancestor cults, *marapu*, is elaborate, taken for granted and woven into the moral construction of the Sumbanese. Keane seeks to show that the drive to devalue the material, which the missionaries introduced, has had consequences beyond the immediate practice of religion, and ultimately alters the constitution of Sumbanese "subjects".

He draws on structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language and of representation, but remains flexible and eclectic, particularly in avoiding overdetermined models of symbolic action or language use. He takes his basic cues, however, from Bruno Latour, particularly Latour's use of the term "purification". The

argument is that human beings are chronically prone to displace their own agency on to objects – images, natural phenomena, animals, and so on, understood as the vehicles of invisible forces – in what is commonly known as "fetishism". "Purification" is essentially a classification exercise, sorting out persons (with agency) from things (without agency). The ideal of human agency, "freedom", "emancipation", at the heart of the moral project of modernity, is itself derived, via the secularization of the Enlightenment, from just this purification drive in Protestantism, from which it passed into European politics and science alike.

The problem Webb Keane addresses is none other than the classic sociological conundrum: if humans are the product of interaction with other humans, in the context of cultural forms they themselves did not create, how can they have pure agency without stripping themselves (an impossibility in any case) of all the things that went into making them human? Keane attributes this perception to Marx, but it goes back at least as far as the Enlightenment origins of the social scientific enterprise: it underlies Montesquieu's dilemma over assigning moral responsibility for the "climatically determined" institutions of slavery and polygamy, and Locke's attempt to devise a purely "objective" language as the vehicle for unbiased empirical observation. At all events it is, as Keane stresses, built deep into the project of modernity, and finds apparently secular or "cultural" expression in the drive to extend the distinction

between persons and things, good spirits and bad ones, to distinctions among objects and what they imply for the persons who possess, exchange or use them.

Webb Keane provides subtle and sympathetic analyses of the two-way adjustments and mutual incorporations that can occur where the Calvinist "representational economy" encounters that of the indigenous Sumbanese. Early in the colonial enterprise Dutch administrators and anthropologists, as well as missionaries, found it necessary to make an (inevitably) arbitrary distinction between what constituted "religion" and "culture" respectively, in order to protect local custom and define the legitimate field of mission activity. Its long-term consequences run through all the concrete instances of the mission encounter discussed in the book. The powerfully performative mode of ritual language spills over from the ancestor cult into the newly minted ritual of a convert announcing his imminent Christian baptism. Conceptions of bride-wealth mutate from the ritual and material goods that connect the families in a marriage exchange into a Christian-inflected valuation where they are dematerialized as symbols of the inherent value of an individual bride. Keane's final discussions of how the traditional description of the house is turned from a powerful ritual of communication with ancestors into an inert poetic text, and how the introduction of state-backed money articulates with the Sumbanese ritual exchange system, are rich demonstrations of the explanatory and interpretive purchase his theoretical tools have in concrete instances of modernization. He concludes we should never assume that, just because we use the same words, we fully know what even the modern Other means.