

Bones of Contention

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Historically, the conjunction of matter and the sacred has often been a source of unease for Christian thought (and other religions, obviously, though this is outside my research). Speaking of the Eucharist and the mediating role of medieval clergy, Hegel stated: "The Holy as a mere thing has the character of externality; thus it is capable of being taken possession of by another to my exclusion; it may come into an alien hand, since the process of appropriating it is not one that takes place in Spirit, but is conditioned by its quality as an external object. The highest of human blessings is in the hand of others." Beyond the Eucharist, Brown (1982) also saw this as an apt characterisation (though without the disapproval) of sacred matter in general and of relics in particular. It raises the perennial problem of how to define, fence in and handle the sacred, especially when it takes on material form. It seems to be a contradiction in terms, yoking together the incompatible: tangible and intangible, valuable and invaluable, this life and the next, Earth and Heaven. Relics – the proper focus of my research, the bodily remains of the saints and objects brought into contact with them – are such troublesome sacred matter. The notions of externality, thinginess, possession, and appropriation which Hegel invokes are fundamental for my work. At the heart of these notions, as I see it, unifying and driving them is the question over the relation of subjects to objects, in fact the very adequacy of these categories, and the question over the nature of agency – perhaps the central concern for a theory of material culture as well as for the social sciences more generally (Latour 1993). To ask this question within a religious context is to add further urgency, for the wrong answer will have implications not just for time, but for eternity. Relics may appear to be an obscure matter, yet they actuate these concerns quite vividly, all the more so since the advent of eBay, which has become – very much against the stern prohibitions of

canon law – the site for a small, yet vigorous trade in them; enough, at any rate, to prompt the relevant agencies within the Vatican and the wider Catholic church to reinforce the strict controls over the distribution of relics, at least as far as they are within their immediate reach. To begin with, relics represent a problematic legacy, hallowed by tradition and theology, yet always easily entangled with suspicions of materialism, fetishism, superstition and magic (all of them refractions, in one way or another, of the subject/object/agency debate) as they have to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, being both material and transcendent. What, then, are relics? Or should that read, what do they do? Are they (should they be) things or symbols, should they signify or should they effect something?

Theology offers (or appears to offer) fairly definite, if rather complex answers to these questions. It positions relics quite firmly within "discourse" and "linguistic-philosophical closure" (Pinney 2005), i.e. on the symbolical side of the argument, even though the charge of sacrilege that relates to the misuse of relics would suggest that they are something more or different than purely symbolic. Devotional practice, however, is a muddier affair, especially when it comes to "popular" practice, for who can say (let alone control) what the ordinary faithful see in relics and how they make use of them? The involvement of money, of course, as in the case of eBay, only heightens the thorniness of the issue. As Max Weber stated: "Ultimately, no genuine religion of salvation has overcome the tension between their religiosity and a rational economy" (quoted in Chidester 2005: 111). To adequate the sacred, to ascribe a quantifiable value to it, seems at first sight a violation of categories; surely the sacred is – virtually by definition – invaluable? Sacredness removes things from ordinary, calculated circulation, although anthropologists would possibly turn this relation

around and argue that it is removal from circulation that makes things sacred (at least this is how Graeber [2001: 45], usefully as I think, reads Weiner [1992]). That the mixing of commerce and the sacred is sacrilegious is, not surprisingly, the argument forcefully made by the Church and also some religious pressure groups which try to combat the goings-on at eBay. Yet money itself is a tricky thing as it raises the question of value, i.e. of adequate, i.e. truthful representation. It is at once material and an abstraction, adequating sign and matter (Maurer 2005: 140-143, 155-158) – a bit like a relic, really.

What price salvation, then, one might ask. Or perhaps, what price agency? For as Graeber (2001: chapter 4) points out, money and the capacity for action are intimately related. And if that is the case, we may try to reconsider the fraught intertwining of religion and commerce not with routine indignation, but as a subtle constant in Christian history (after all, trade in relics goes back as far the 9th century, at least) – as a manifestation of the eminently social nature of religious practice perhaps and of the divergent interests and powers this entails. Just as money-lending, usury could become a tolerable, if not exactly laudable activity that did no longer automatically consign its practitioners to hell (LeGoff 1986), there is maybe also room for a more even-handed exploration of that other grave sin of commercial nature, simony, the purchase and sale of spiritual things and graces.

In summary, my project is an investigation of religious practices, their interaction with and occasional hedging of doctrine, the creation of differing layers of value and meaning manifested in sacred objects and the arguments over subjectivity they give rise to. Beyond these concern, it is here that anthropological inquiry may also reach a point at which it faces its other, where an anthropology of Christianity meets a Christian anthropology that discusses the place of humanity within the scheme of creation and the rules of human engagement with the divine being.

Note on the Illustrations:

Relics are still often produced as a matter of course within the Catholic church during the process of canonization, the official investigation into a proposed saint's life, virtues and miracles. These relics can consist of bodily remains, usually minute bone fragments that are put into lockets (so-called thecas); or of contact relics, typically cloth, that may either be placed in thecas as well, or else, more commonly, be stitched onto prayer cards. Sometimes, one also finds relics set into medals or placed in small paper envelopes. In any case, the relic carrier will show some sort of seal to authenticate the relic. Thecas are secured with a wax seal, otherwise it is normally a paper seal, today often self-adhesive, that shows the crest of the issuing body (such as a religious order or congregation, sometimes the Vicariate of the Diocese of Rome) or of the bishop or cardinal who authenticated the relic in question.

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