the materiality of sacred economies

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Introduction

This conversation is an invitation to think about the place of material forms of exchange in the study of religions. From Karl Marx's notion of commodity fetishism to Bronisław Malinowski's consideration of the economy of cowrie shells among South Sea Islanders to Marcel Mauss' seminal work on the gift to Max Weber's enormously influential essay on Protestantism and capitalism, scholars of human sociality have long been interested in religion and economy as a powerful intersection for describing the social and economic functions of religion (Malinowski 1922, Marx 1977, Mauss 1990, Weber 2001). In more recent years the work of Patrick Geary (1986) on relics and Annette Weiner (1992) on inalienable possessions have enriched the sense of the circulation of religious gifts and objects.

Important work by Fred Myers has directed attention to the material culture of exchange and demonstrated the anthropological approach to doing it (Myers 2001, 2004). The contributors in this forum highlight anthropological research as well as historical and behavioral economic approaches to investigating the place of images and objects in systems of exchange. If we are to materialize the study of religions, it is important to assess the material culture of exchange and objects.

Trade goes to the heart of the human animal and its social life, and therefore we should not be surprised to see trade extended to the webs of connection that tie humans to their gods, demons, ancestors, saints, spirits, and angels.

Is this to propose yet another kind of reductionism in which religion is understood as nothing more than a set of economic structures? That is certainly not what the contributors to this forum have in mind. Religion is a very complex phenomenon, not reducible to one sort of human activity. And the economies we are talking about are not merely a substitute for monetary exchange. The brief expositions comprising this forum suggest how the sacred is socially produced by forms of exchange that regulate experience, negotiating problems of scarcity, disadvantage, loss, and misfortune. Sacred economies work by doing at least three things at once. They organize the exchange of goods in which one thing is given for another; they help generate the value of both what is received and the stature of the party giving it in exchange for a promise or pledge, for devotion or adoration, for gratitude or praise; and finally, sacred exchange often operates in competition with a counter-economy, a rival way of producing value.1

Barter is a fundamental aspect of the pilgrim's vow in Catholic Christianity. The devout, faced with need, make pilgrimage to a cathedral or shrine devoted to a saint, where they make a promise. As Frank Graziano explores here, the barter, building on a relationship between saint and petitioner, takes the form of a searching address: if you grant me this favor, I will vow to do thus and so in your honor. Other pious actions such as prayer before an altar will elicit an indulgence, which is a kind of credit drawn on the heavenly treasury of merits amassed by Jesus and the saints. The indulgence decreases the amount of time to be spent after life in purgatory, purging the sins commit-

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ted during life. In another economic form, as Jessica Boon discusses, Jesus himself becomes the principal commodity within the context of early modern Spanish mysticism. And in still another popular version of sacred economy, paying reparations for the debt that sin incurs is an additional aspect encouraged in the modern era by such popular devotions as the Marian apparitions at Lourdes and Fatima and by the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Protestant conception of free grace was defined in contrast to this sacred economy, insisting that salvation was a gift that should inspire charity and the return to God of everything that he offers the redeemed.

The coin of quid pro quo negotiations with deities and saints can be images or gifts of tokens or precious objects. But it can also take the bodily form of suffering rendered as a sacrificial offering to those who have the power to respond with favors sought by the devout. A striking instance of dramatic or extreme rituals, as Panagiotis Mitkidis calls them, is practiced by Hindu devotees of the god Murugan in Mauritius. There a pledge is made to the deity and paid in full by performing rigorous acts of painful endurance in order to secure the god's favors.

Quite a different sacred economy operates among Buddhists in the acquisition of merit to cancel the karmic debt of transmitted ills. Merit-generating activities like spinning the prayer wheel, purchasing images of Buddha for devotional use, or prayerfully applying gold leaf to bronze figures of the Buddha, as Thai Buddhists popularly do, all reveal expansive forms of sacred commerce that move across the landscape of Buddhist life. Amulet production and purchase is an important part of the everyday life of Buddhism in Thailand and elsewhere. Amulets provide their owners such values as protection and blessings of happiness and success in business, and their producers with income as well as notoriety. The trade in amulets, as Justin Daniel shows in his contribution, is widespread.

Whereas amulets operate quietly as kinds of automatic technologies in one's pocket or hanging from the rearview mirror of one's automobile, yet other economic initiatives among Buddhists involve a fiery negotiation with hungry ghosts. In China, feeding the haunting ghosts is a ritual practice especially at work during the seventh month of the lunar calendar when the ghosts visit the living. They are offered food, drink, and "hell money" to placate them, which includes burning simulated money on ritual occasions. The traditional practice has long been intermingled with Confucian ancestor worship and with Buddhist regard for one's family members suffering from rebirth in hell. Sacrifice is clearly the preeminent ritual procedure for conducting sacred economies. To sacrifice is to offer, to enter into a contractual relationship whereby sin is expiated or paid for, redemption purchased. In the Confucian tradition sacrifice to the ancestors consist of, in the words of one classic text, "repaying one's roots" (Chu Hsi 1991, p. 6). Confucian sacrifice to ancestors conducted an economy of tribute that solicited assistance and secured social order in exchange for food and memory. In addition to the offerings of sustenance such as wine and grain, devotees engaged in divination to learn what the ancestors might have to tell them about important matters. This exchange took place in a classically designed space in which the sacrifices were made. The ceremony consisted of offerings prepared before an altar space that featured two large ancestor tablets. These bear the names of ancestors and are the focal point of the offering hall and the ritual practice of making sacrifice to the ancestors.

What can we expect from this approach to the materiality of religion? Several things, I think. Economies of the sacred operate as ways for groups to distinguish themselves from one another in the larger competition for cultural resources and adherents. This is not a way of morphing religion into capitalism, but of recognizing that humans have always competed for the scarcity of goods and religion is no exception to that material reality of human existence. This urges us to see in such familiar polemics as iconoclasm, attacks on "idolatry," and opposition to such material goods as luxury items, relics, or images the effort to pit one sacred economy against another.

Second, exchange is a form of mediation, and mediation is where materiality becomes inextricable from whatever it is hosting, enabling, and shaping. A material medium offers certain affordances to human practices, and it behooves the material culture scholar to understand how that is so. The shimmer of gold, for example, affects viewers in a powerful way and lends to rel-
iquaries, cult statues, and altar paintings a presence that becomes very materially part of religious experience and value. The same holds true for stone, glass, and other metals. Sensation is a fundamental ingredient of the study of any sacred economy.

Third, the relations between sacred and 'profane' or non-religious economies can be volatile when the latter threatens to absorb the former. Thus, it became necessary for medieval popes to ban the sale of relics. And in the late colonial era, tribal object makers among Aboriginal Australians, Native Americans, and Africans began what continues to be a thriving trade in the commercial production of statuary, images, and masks for art collectors (Myers 2004, pp. 165–204). The two economies are made to overlap and compete, resulting in the evisceration of the sacred when the profit of commerce rivals the reward system of the indigenous community. On the other hand, commerce and such religious practices as pilgrimage have probably always gone hand-in-hand, as Victor and Edith Turner once noted (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 20). It may even be very difficult to distinguish clearly between the two in many instances. Most Christian worship services, for example, include the collection of money for the expenses of the church and its social ministries. Even when sacred and commercial economies can be clearly delineated, they are commonly at ease working together. And in many instances they

influence one another in important ways. So it seems critical to describe them each very carefully as well as their rivalry and their commingling.

Finally, sacred economies are also extremely interesting as ways in which people seek to regulate the scarcity of existential goods. Sometimes money and other forms of wealth cannot buy the things people need—children, mates, health, social status, allies, liberation from oppression or threat of destruction. That is where sacred economies enter: saints, ancestors, spirits, and gods have access to resources that mortals do not. By begging, bartering, or vowing devotion, human beings enter into negotiation with super-human forces for the things they need and cannot be easily acquired otherwise. This is often no mere transaction because a powerful ingredient in the exchange is the disposition to remain obliged, to remain dedicated to the super-human others, who, for their part, may also want the devotion and reverence offered them. A sacred economy may be defined in this respect as a way of human and divine coming together in an act of exchange that is more than an act—it is part of an ongoing relationship that encompasses not only the individual, but one’s family, clan, even nation.

notes and references

1 For a history of Christian sacred economies since the sixteenth century see Morgan (2015), chapter three; for a discussion of sacred economies of the image see Morgan (2012), pp. 84–101.


