

COMMENT ON JOEL ROBBINS “RELIGION PLURALISM AND VALUE PLURALISM”

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In his reflection on pluralism, Joel Robbins shifts the grounds of his discussion from religious pluralism to value pluralism, and from religion to ritual. Such moves are legitimate for the reasons Robbins cites, but it is also worth considering both what is gained and lost in making them. The move away from religious pluralism is really two moves, the first from religious pluralism to value pluralism and the second to value multiplicity. The advantage here is in offering a way to deal with conflicting values and/or to rank values within a system. On the other hand, broadening the discussion from religion to values is a retreat from the question of ultimate value inherent in discussions of religion, and leaves no reason to address tolerance among constituencies of different religious or value configurations fundamental to situations of religious pluralism. What is gained by the move from religion to ritual is the possibility of greater specificity in deploying data that are observable as behavior and performance in discrete social contexts while productively eliding boundaries between cultural systems or social constituencies. On the other hand, this move makes it difficult to identify pluralism in the form of equivalent systems of practice and situationally specific alternatives that can be understood as complementary aspects of a single system. Ultimately it becomes clear that a third shift is involved as well, from the intercultural diversity mentioned in Robbins’ title to the intracultural diversity that occupies much of the argument; and because this shift does not become explicit a certain ambiguity remains between intercultural and intracultural levels of analysis.

One issue that would bear more elaboration is the claim that rituals allow people to engage with one value at a time. The representational and performative theories of ritual Robbins invokes do not serve as convincing arguments for the thesis that rituals realize single values. Part of the issue is how to parse values and whether it is always possible or desirable to analyze values into superordinate and subordinate categories. Another issue is how or whether to distinguish between complex rituals and discrete ritual acts in identifying the locus of values, which Robbins does not address. Kapferer, one of the authors Robbins cites in this context, has provided analyses of complex Sinhalese exorcism

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rituals that address multiple values not easily reducible to a single one: healing, recognition of contingency, human intentionality, cosmological order, morality. Yet even a relatively simple ritual act such as blessing enacts both the value of benevolence and the value of hierarchy insofar as in most cases a certain status entitles one person to bless another but does not authorize a reciprocal blessing. To return to one of Robbins' own examples, while the ritual act of applause at the end of an academic lecture enacts the value of politeness, for those who really think the lecture was good it also enacts the values of performative efficacy and acknowledgment of intellectual contribution.

Moreover, the spirit disco and pig sacrifice of the Urapmin appear to realize single values most clearly only *relative to one another* in a structural sense. Not only is it unclear that these should be considered religious values, but it is not without question in Robbins' analysis that they might express/enact other values as well. The performance of spirit disco by a collectivity arrayed in a circle itself bears overtones of relationality despite the fact that individuals find themselves writhing on the floor in trance. The persistence of pig sacrifice as an isolated traditional rite in juxtaposition to spirit disco as a rite at the apex of all other Christian rites establishes a symbolic opposition that constitutes an unbalanced anchor not only for a single value but for a series of paired values of individual/relational, nature/culture, and traditional/modern. Robbins also suggests that an analysis in terms of religious pluralism would emphasize conflict between the two rituals as representing contradictory situations, but this is not necessarily the case because pluralism can be construed as alternative ways of doing the same thing, as complementary ways of addressing different issues in a division of labor, or as the prerogatives of different constitutencies that may be tolerant toward one another and even open to participating in one another's rites (e.g., a Christian attending a bris or a Jew attending a baptism).

What I find particularly intriguing about Robbins' discussion are the two instances of failed ritual, though I would give them slightly different interpretive spins than he does. The failed funeral ritual is fascinating not as an instance of failed value pluralism or multiplicity in the sense of trying to introduce a new value, but in how it offered a culturally unrecognizable way of interpreting a traditional value. Robbins suggests that the failure was due to one-way giving of food that abnegated the reciprocity that defines relationalism. An alternative explanation is that whereas relationalism in the traditional rite was expressed in terms of reciprocity (exchanging exactly equivalent goods then retreating into privacy), relationalism in the failed innovation was to be expressed in terms of

communality (everyone sharing exactly equivalent food alongside one another). The other failed ritual, one that would entail collective action by Spirit Women against all the nature spirits, performs the work of culture precisely by existing only as a virtual possibility, and also does so by implicitly recognizing incommensurable ways of interpreting the same value. According to Robbins this virtual ritual would not exorcize all nature spirits from Urapmin territory, but allow people to disregard them. In this case the value of the individual as the subject of salvation is juxtaposed to the negative value of the individual as source of sinful greed, and both are suspended in a state of permanent tension by the unrealized possibility of eliminating the relational influence of the nature spirits.

