



# **‘Don’t make it a doctrine’: Material religion, transcendence, critique**

**Bruno Reinhardt**

Utrecht University, The Netherlands

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## **Abstract**

Once a matter of beliefs, symbols, values and worldviews, religion has progressively appeared in recent anthropological works as material religion, a highly concrete phenomenon based on affects, senses, substances, places, artifacts, and technologies. But what happened to transcendence, the dimension of religious worldmaking that remains beyond – hidden, untouched, unseen, unheard or unfulfilled? Is it necessarily the ‘other’ of material religion, a residual category that carries no ethnographic value? Retaining an emic concern with authority and a reflexive awareness about processes of boundary-making, in this article I approach material religion as a field of problematization inhabited by anthropologists and religious subjects alike. I examine some of the protocols whereby Pentecostal Christians in Ghana engage critically with the problem of materiality in their own religion, and argue that this operation lends ethnographic access to the role of transcendence in material religion’s everyday.

## **Keywords**

Africa, anthropological theory, anthropology of Christianity, critique, material religion, transcendence

Anthropology has experienced a paradigmatic shift in recent years towards a more systematic engagement with the materialities of lived religion. Once a matter of beliefs, values, meanings and worldviews articulated at the intersections of rituals and symbolic systems (Lindquist and Coleman, 2008), religion is more likely to appear in contemporary works as material religion (Houtman and Meyer, 2012), a concept in which materiality is neither infrastructural nor supplementary, but

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## **Corresponding author:**

Bruno Reinhardt, Utrecht University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Janskerkhof 13, 3512 BL Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Email: [bmreinhardt@gmail.com](mailto:bmreinhardt@gmail.com)

intrinsic in its very definition. By reclaiming the active role of materiality in various religious traditions, anthropologists have undermined the now proverbial Protestant bias of our discipline while lending to the concept of religious materiality a wide reach. Formerly equivalent to objects and artifacts, such as icons, statues, and shrines, it has come to include in its repertoire a vast set of somatic experiences, along with substances, places, environments, and even technologies, imparting an axiomatic status to the notion that 'all religion is material religion' (Engelke, 2011: 209).

In this article, I pursue an alternative set of questions: What about transcendence, the dimension of religious worldmaking that remains beyond – hidden, untouched, unseen, unheard or unfulfilled? Is it just a naïve or paradoxical project of immateriality that inflects the ebbs and flows of matter with preconscious blind spots? Is it necessarily the 'other' of material religion, a residual category that carries no ethnographic value? According to Lambek, religious traditions are primarily concerned 'with articulating (in thought and practice) the boundaries and relationship between immanence and transcendence' (2014: 16), so to take the question of transcendence as exogenous to a material religion approach would be equally insufficient.

Religious transcendence is co-constitutive with religious immanence. It both shapes and flees from the phenomenal world while leaving behind specific footprints: Calvinist anxieties about election (Weber, 2003), Islamic ethical affects (Hirschkind, 2006), Pentecostal immediacy (Meyer, 2011), the 'second spear' of Zande witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard, 1976), the multiple 'refractions' of the God-creator among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard, 1956), the 'deconstructive' potentialities of shamanic power (Holmberg, 2006), and so on and so forth. That is why religious immanence is never immanence in general, as it operates according to a distinctive temporal horizon, even when it is aligned at a sensorial scale with the 'immanent frame' of secular modernity (Taylor, 2007). A devout Calvinist and an atheist might share many aspects of the 'moral narrative of modernity' (Keane, 2007), and yet it would be unwarranted to simply equalize their ways of living. Material religion flourishes differently because it is organized ecologically and authoritatively around certain forms of transcendence, both these domains bringing necessary ethnographic input for the anthropologist of religion.

I am especially concerned in this article with one of these potentialities: how the excessiveness of transcendence provides religious subjects with a practical leeway from which to contemplate their own material religion critically, but still from within its embodied resources. Like transcendence, skepticism cuts across religious traditions (Levi-Strauss, 1963; Graeber, 2015), and can be considered intrinsic to their ethical and spiritual apparatuses. According to Barber, for instance, it is 'at the heart of the [traditional] Yoruba devotional attitude' (1981: 740). Following Ahmad (2011), I call the practice of suspending religious veridiction from within immanent critique, and explore how this ethical fold helps us to reintegrate religious transcendence vicariously into the study of material religion.

I start by revisiting material religion's recent trajectory of semantic dilatation, warning that it might obscure the fact that religious materiality is not an empirical

field, but a space of problematization and moral inquiry inhabited by anthropologists and religious practitioners alike. This leads me to define immanent critique and highlight the virtues of integrating this modality of religious reflexivity into the study of material religion. Pentecostal Christianity is an interesting case to think through, because, as a charismatic spirituality, it renders divine immanence pervasive, heterogeneous, and controversial, requiring from practitioners a non-contradictory oscillation between a visceral experience of God amidst things and a reflexive awareness about these very experiences operating at a second order of discourse (Silverstein, 2003). I present a more focused version of Pentecostals' immanent critique of material religion by reconstructing debates about 'points of contact' happening in a Ghanaian Bible school where intercessory matter is authorized not through a sharp divide between good and bad objecthood (Mitchell, 2005: 188–200), but as a cultivated critical sensibility about the fetishistic potentialities nested in any materiality. I conclude by showing how such a broad notion of the fetish reflects a specific way of engaging with transcendence as non-appropriative flow, which defines proper Christianity as neither immaterial belief nor material religion, but mostly as immanent critique.

## Material religion as problematization

A number of theoretical perspectives can be invoked as contributing – more or less self-consciously, and with different degrees of complementarity – to the rise and establishment of the current material religion gestalt among anthropologists of religion: phenomenological (Csordas, 2001; Obeyesekere, 2012), late Foucauldian (Mahmood, 2005; Hirschkind, 2006; Faubion, 2011), and cognitivist but somatic (Whitehouse and Laidlaw, 2007; Luhrmann, 2012) approaches to embodiment and sense perception; conceptual tools that allow us to examine the shifting boundaries between words and things beyond the regime of mental representation, such as language and semiotic ideology (Engelke, 2007; Keane, 2007); scholars exploring the prosthetic interpenetrations of religion and technology as forms of mediation, such as the 'religion-as-media' paradigm (Stolow, 2005; Meyer, 2009); and overarching theories tracing the distribution of agency across the human/non-human divide, such as Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2008) and the ontological turn (Henare et al., 2007; Espirito Santo and Tassi, 2013).

Through these various efforts, it has become almost inevitable today to consider religion as deeply entangled in all sorts of materialities, a terms that has encompassed an ever increasing number of phenomena. According to Asad: 'in identifying what we call "religion" – whether musical, pictorial, or textual – the materialities of religion are integral to its constitution' (2001: 206). Latour articulates a similar opinion through a more open-ended notion of 'things': 'religion...does not speak of things, but from things', a category that includes 'entities, agencies, situations, substances, relations, experiences, whatever is the word' (2010: 101). Houtman and Meyer also mobilize thingness and expand their ethnographic repertoire to 'images, artifacts, bodies, bodily fluids, as well

as spaces and technology' (2012: 17). Daniel Miller is more synthetic, claiming that 'different understandings of immateriality become expressed through material forms' (2005: 21).

By rendering the notion of materiality ubiquitous, these statements invite a negative question: What is not material after all? More than a set of extended objects standing in front of unextended matter, anthropologists have progressively recast materiality as an immersive environment with no outside position. Indeed, such a diffuse perspective finds explicit articulation in theoretical schools whose influence in this scholarship remains unsystematic, despite obvious resonances, such as the new materialism (Coole and Frost, 2010) and its Deleuzian focus on the 'vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans' (Bennett, 2010: viii) or Ingold's (2011) recent incursions on the vitality of matter through an analytical shift from bodies and objects to the ecological and flux-like properties shaping and traversing them. Given the pervasiveness of materiality in human affairs highlighted by these scholars, it is easy to understand why material religion tends to endless dilatation: from texts, shrines, statues, and bodies in devotion toward spaces, substances, music, words, breath, inner voices, imaginations, audio-visual emissions, relations or, according to Latour's purposively elusive comments, 'whatever is the word'. If we are in matter like fish are in water, religious life, like life in general, can only be saturated in it.

Albeit accurate from a certain ontological stance, this position engenders obvious vicissitudes, especially a loss of discernibility, which might undermine its very analytical value. In this sense, material religion might become something like Jorge Luis Borges' (1998) perfect map which, by covering the whole territory it is supposed to represent at the most precise scale, ends up losing its purpose. As with anything ubiquitous, material religion can be analytically reclaimed from various angles, articulating etic and emic stances according to specific strategies and purposes: to gain further insight into non-hegemonic religious sensibilities, to widen or reject anthropological notions of culture, to undermine Protestant projects of immateriality and its secular inheritances, to reshape dominant notions of religious publicity, to problematize the divides between facts and values, nature and culture, private and public, or between religion and other domains, such as politics, technology, esthetics, etc. This is to say that material religion is obviously not an empirical field waiting passively for more and more ethnographic coverage.

Similar to religion as such (Asad, 2012), material religion is likely to appear in practice as part of a field of problematization, or 'the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought' (Foucault, 1988: 255). As such, definitions of materiality become intrinsically and performatively bound to questions of intervention – thus of normativity, authority, difference, and freedom – that anthropologists cannot waive. As I explore in the next section, a major virtue of the notion of immanent critique is that, by giving privileged ethnographic access to emic forms of boundary-making, it invites us to reintegrate materiality into the

broader apparatus sustaining religious traditions in time as forms of ethical inquiry and self-inquiry.

### **Immanent critique: Tradition as reflexive materialism**

In an important chapter of his *Genealogies of Religion* centered on public argument in the Middle East, Talal Asad (1993: 200–38) calls attention to modalities of criticism integral to the Islamic public sphere. Showing how young Saudi *ulema* made vast use of traditional speech genres like *nasiha* (advice) in the wake of the Gulf War to question authority, Asad dissociates criticism from the Kantian notion of transcendental critique, understood as the fruit of an individual and civilizational maturation process leading away from ‘blind’ obedience to traditional authority and toward rational and reflexive self-government. As in other sections of his work, Asad is interested in questioning the secular exceptionalism implied in the opposition between traditional heteronomy and rational autonomy, this time by exploring spaces of freedom and reflexivity existing within religious projects.

Although not with the same intensity as his genealogy of religion-as-belief, Asad’s argument on religious critique, closely bound to the first, still had important repercussions in the anthropology of religion and secularism. It is the basis, for instance, of Saba Mahmood’s (2009) provincialization of the protocols of secular publicity in examining the Danish cartoons affair. According to Mahmood, the notion of belief as a set of propositions one mentally assents to detaches religious veridiction from its immanent grounds of emergence, including specific semiotic ideologies. This submits religious veridiction to secular judgment by establishing that ‘unlike religious belief, critique is predicated upon a necessary distantiation between the subject and object and some form of reasoned deliberation’ (p. 861). Mahmood argues that the liberal dissociation between commitment and critical reflexivity ‘not only caricatures the religious Other but, more importantly, remains blind to its own disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments, and subject-object relationality’ (p. 861), allowing, for instance, the celebration of moral harm as freedom.

Irfan Ahmad’s (2011) engagement with the problem of critique resonates with, but also differs from, Mahmood’s, given its focus on spaces of criticism unfolding within religious projects. He does so by revisiting Asad’s original argument and appropriating the notion of immanent critique from critical theory in order to define it as ‘criticism that uses tenets, histories, principles, and vocabularies of a tradition to criticize it in its own terms’ (p. 109). His article evokes a number of cases involving Islamic ‘high traditions’, especially theological deliberation vis-à-vis authoritative texts, but also more everyday concerns with proper/improper materiality that serve as a good comparative entrance to some of the cases I will be dealing with here.

Drawing from the scenes of a Pakistani university campus, Ahmad exemplifies:

Wearing of a beard is often regarded as typical of Muslimness. Do we sufficiently know what it connotes, however?... On the university campus a beard was looked at

in many ways. For those who grew it, it was a sign of deep piety. Some clean-shaven students, however, told me: 'the greater the length of the beard the more hypocritical and selfish the person is'. Clearly, criticism is at work here: does Islam value appearance or essence; is symbol more important than substance (i.e. ethics)? It was not simply the difference between a beard and the lack of it that mattered. Interestingly, what was fervently debated was also its size and shape. Most Tablighi Jamaat (a reformist movement launched in colonial India) activists grew a full beard and had their moustache either fully or partially trimmed. Students from the Bareilvi group (considered 'traditionalist' and Sufism-oriented) also had a full beard but their moustache was rarely trimmed. By contrast, Islamists had a fairly short beard and untrimmed moustache. (2011: 123)

The relation between true Islam and the beard as a corporeal form of religious thingness is therefore a highly contested issue. Nevertheless, all the positions revisited by Ahmad articulate Islamic criteria of judgment against themselves, and thus have immanent grounds. That includes approaches more in tune with a liberal dissociation between inner attitudes and bodily attachments, such as those of 'clean shaved' students, as well as different positions within a more traditionalist framework, such as that of Sufis and Islamists. Nevertheless, dissent in the cases above was not governed by an opposition between obedience and freedom, but mostly through more elaborate questions around how obedience should be exercised, what type of obedience one should display, and whom or what one is ultimately obeying. Immanent critique can be therefore defined as skepticism predicated on commitment, but also one that thrives on the plurality of ways whereby commitment can be concretely enacted.

Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre articulates a similar opinion when he argues that 'what constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations. If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew' (1977: 460–1). This is especially the case in secular pluralist environments, where clear-cut forms of religious regulation, like heresy, have lost traction, pushing rival versions of traditions to dwell closely together in the public arena as part of a single and mutually-oriented field of recognition.<sup>1</sup>

Despite current views in the anthropology of ethics (Laidlaw, 2014), I believe MacIntyre sees no contradiction between contingency, reflexivity, and an Aristotelian approach to ethics as embedded teleologically in authoritative narratives and practices. If his focus on ethical teleology against Liberal deontological and utilitarian reductionisms does imply a general shift from a juridical to a craft-like model of ethics, from judging a state of affairs to engaging at an embodied level with prescriptive practices whose goods and experiences are deemed intrinsic, it also recasts ethical life as an ongoing project, an effort, a life course whose unity resides not in its completeness or success, but mostly in its directionality, a position not so different from that of the late Foucault (Mahmood, 2005; Marshall, 2014).



MacIntyre summarizes this perspective later in his work when he defines a 'living tradition' as a 'historically extended, socially embodied argument, precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition' (MacIntyre, 1984: 222; see also Scott, 1999: 106–28).

Attention to such overlapping of ethical teleology and reflexivity is relevant to material religion scholarship because it avoids a too sudden shift from a critique of immaterial belief toward an over-stabilized notion of religious veridiction based on hermetic embodied regimes. This critical space of suspension is, on the one hand, irreducible to a 'moral breakdown' (Zigon, 2007) and, on the other, still embedded in authoritative models for action and cultivated sensibilities, thus transcending the tacit dimension stressed by the 'ordinary ethics' (Lambek, 2010) paradigm.<sup>2</sup> As I start exploring in the next sections, ethnographic attention to immanent critique gives access to moments in which religious subject formation oscillates between viscosity and reflexivity, making material religion a site of both commitment and skepticism.

## **Pentecostal immanent critique in Ghana**

Pentecostals in Ghana are constantly debating basic definitional questions more likely to be attributed to external observers, such as what and who is a Pentecostal Christian (Robbins, 2003; Garriott and O'Neill, 2008). This process of self and mutual interrogation unfolds either directly or through more situated questions about Christian or unchristian ways of performing particular practices, from fasting, praying, tithing, evangelizing, and preaching to dressing, befriending, watching TV, listening to music, marrying, raising children, etc. They stem from the pulpit, and are an intrinsic part of everyday church life, informal interactions, and religious media production, eventually finding a more visceral version as a matter of 'spiritual discernment' (Luhrmann, 2008; Daswani, 2013), when converts ask themselves: Is this feeling, dream, voice, image, artifact or practice 'from God'? Is it the fruit of my or someone else's mind? Or even worse: is it 'from the devil'?

Causes for such critical suspension are multiple, starting with the fragmentary place of authority in a 'charismatic tradition' (Cartledge, 2007) that struggles to overlap in practice doctrines based on biblical precepts with a 'live and direct' (Engelke, 2007) relationship with God. Although contemporary Pentecostals have shared a number of iterable traits at a global scale – such as an immanent engagement with the Holy Spirit through spiritual gifts, prayer, and excited forms of praise and worship, the quest for holiness according to the list of virtues known as the 'fruits of the Spirit', and some variety of end-times eschatology, prosperity and spiritual warfare theologies – these traces are loosely bound in a theological meta-language. As a result, all these basic doctrinal pillars become sites of disputes, engendering a number of rival versions while combining with each other in kaleidoscopic forms.

Experienced Pentecostals in Ghana are nevertheless able to visualize the revival and recognize the multiple styles of Pentecostal piety it offers them. This is done by

evoking churches' alternative 'visions' and 'missions', but mostly through sensible markers like 'The Church of Pentecost is a guardian of holiness. They dress with modesty'; 'Winners Chapel has the faith anointing. You can feel it in the way they say "Aaaameeeen!"'; 'In Lighthouse Chapel, they have the evangelism bug'; 'In Action Faith they have the prayer anointing. Their prayers are "hot"'; or 'In ICGC they are good teachers, everybody takes notes when the pastor is preaching'. If Pentecostalism is indeed a good contemporary example of spirituality, in Foucault's sense of a 'search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth' (2005: 15; Marshall, 2009), the apparatus whereby this quest unfolds is obviously composite, giving rise to a number of concrete configurations.

Capacity to distinguish among Pentecostal assemblages is vital, since converts often cultivate enduring church allegiances, but also eventually circulate across this heterogeneous corporate body and its transnational media production while soothing their spiritual needs, a process authorized by the minimalist notion of proper Pentecostal Christianity as having a 'personal relationship' with Christ and the Holy Spirit. In his work on the Church of Pentecost, Daswani (2015) observes a similar oscillation between practical commitment and reflexive judgment within individual conversion careers, arguing that to embrace Pentecostalism as a way of life 'entails finding the appropriate convergence between acceptable and unacceptable forms of religious practice, balancing different values that might seem incompatible with each other, as well as demonstrating discernment with respect to a hierarchy of values' (p. 66).

My interlocutors' most common reaction toward 'abuses' involving prosperity theology, for instance, was not a stark defense or denial of it, but a discursive pattern that both asserted its biblical truth and warned about the need to 'balance' expectations of prosperity with holiness and diligent work, so the practice did not decay into a mechanical procedure. The same kind of moral reasoning was applied to holiness itself, or the embodiment of Christ's virtuous character, which was obviously recognized as a norm, but one that should be 'balanced' with love, or might render converts 'self-righteous' and judgmental. Self-righteousness is not only a sin, but also a hindrance to evangelism, another Christian prescription. The relation between intercession and personal piety is another major source of inner tensions, since one should hold faithfully to God's willingness to 'bless' converts through men of God, but also never merely outsource one's personal relationship with the Holy Spirit.

This process of ethical homeostasis (Reinhardt, 2015: 425–9), in which converts examine the multiple ethical stances (Keane, 2010) that compose a Pentecostal life, goes on, and implies that Christian goods can also produce negative feedback whenever isolated from their broader compositional structure. Pentecostals in Ghana are likely to define their post-conversion lives not only in terms of a temporal break with a pre-conversion Self and its former allegiances (Robbins, 2007), but also as a constant quest for 'spiritual maturity' (Reinhardt, 2014: 318–22), that is, an everyday effort to produce homeostatic combinations between prescriptions



and expectations while seeking practical knowledge from the Bible and the Holy Spirit, as well as from ministers, peers, and mentors.

If reflexivity is a vital tool for dwelling and wayfinding (Ingold, 2000) in a religious movement marked by a composite ethical apparatus and a social dynamic of both normative co(n)fusion and distinction, individuation and allegiance, revival and church (Bialecki, 2014), it has gained additional urgency in Ghana for a number of more contextual reasons. Extraordinary growth through intense religious mediatization (Gifford, 2004; De Witte, 2008) not only included in the Pentecostal fold a number of personal agendas and levels of commitment, but also multiplied its rival versions in the public sphere to a point of ebullition, generating widespread concerns with fakery and 'the occult'. Pentecostalism's inherent flexibility has been frontally challenged by what we might call 'exogenous' processes of differentiation, driven by aestheticization, commodification, and a deregulated religious entrepreneurship (Meyer, 2004; Shipley, 2009).

Distinguishing the current Pentecostal crisis of discernment in Ghana from a passive 'suffering slot' (Robbins, 2012), Shipley (2009) argues that anxieties about fake Christians have become part of 'a sphere of moral deliberation' (p. 524) inhabited by converts and non-converts alike. This sphere is a privileged ethnographic arena from which to access, for instance, the contradictions between Pentecostals' Christianized focus on entrepreneurship via prosperity preaching and the vicissitudes of peripheral modernity. However, the figure of the fake Christian is also openly embraced by churches and ministers as a 'form of moral discipline that produces what it claims to mitigate against' (p. 547), thus acquiring a pedagogical function. Ghanaian Pentecostals are indeed likely to display a surprisingly non-reactive attitude while dealing with accusations of inauthenticity addressed to their own spirituality, often mobilizing the fake as a way of situating themselves in the movement through deliberation and critique.

Such a skeptical disposition is further legitimized by the pre-millenarian temporality reproduced by most of these churches, which assume that the body of Christ is living in the 'end-times', a stage in the history of salvation marked as much by miraculous signs and wonder as by the sabotaging influence of the devil. The end-times church is marked by a spirituality that is actively public as well as permanently destabilized, as summarized by the title of the popular eschatological treatise written by pastor Eastwood-Anaba: *God's end-time militia: Winning the war within and without*. We might interpret the allegory of a war in which friends and enemies appear in protean categories as the fruit of an eschatological ethos that resonates with the post-colonial 'crisis of government' (Marshall, 2009: 92–127), thus framing Pentecostalism in Africa not as a spirituality in crisis, but as a spirituality of crisis. But we might also avoid overarching diagnostics, and simply assume that self-examination and criticism have become valuable spiritual weapons to wage the end-times war, thus emphasizing the resilience of Pentecostal normativity.

Pentecostals legitimize this experimentalist disposition as biblically prescribed by referring to moments of committed skepticism, such as John's exhortation to

'not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 John 4: 1) or Paul's homeostatic reflections on the relations between charismatic power, responsibility, and virtue, such as 'The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets' (1 Corinthians 14:32) or 'If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal' (1 Corinthians 13:1).

I am particularly interested in Pentecostals' immanent critique of material religion, especially relevant in a context still haunted by the colonial ghost of 'fetishism' (Meyer, 1999, 2012). Critique is further necessitated by the very pervasiveness acquired by divine presence in the Pentecostal lifeworld, where the Holy Spirit finds a spectrum of immanent manifestations akin to the polysemic notion of 'thingness' evoked in my introduction, traversing inner states, speech, bodies, relations, substances, places, and artifacts while realigning them as a single plan modulated by divine affects and inscriptions (Reinhardt, 2015). Authoritative boundaries become inevitably hard to draw and sustain, especially when it comes to intercessory matters like 'points of contact', immanent media loaded with divine agency.

Pentecostal intercession articulates a great variety of material forms interchangeably as points of contact: ranging from somatic matter like breath (De Abreu, 2009), 'thing-like' words of faith (Coleman, 2006) and laying on of hands, to substances like oil, water, and honey (Engelke, 2007), and a number of artifacts, like handkerchiefs and shofars. It also promotes surprising innovations, such as the transference of divine power through electricity and audiovisual media emissions (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005b). The problem becomes how to separate the wheat from the chaff in authentic points of contacts while managing such a plastic material religion. As I explore in the next section, immanent critique in this case assumes a double meaning: it is immanent in Ahmad's sense of stemming from within the multiple resources assembling a discursive tradition authoritatively, but also a question of judging sacred immanence or presence by relating sensible manifestations positively or negatively to God's transcendental wholeness.

## **The critique of fetishism in a Pentecostal Bible school**

During 15 months of fieldwork research, I examined the role of religious pedagogy in the ethical and institutional flourishing of Ghana's Pentecostal movement (Reinhardt, 2013). As do most anthropologists working with this religious movement, I visited many church services, crusades, and followed their media production and circulation, but I dedicated most of my time to moments of informal and formal Christian discipleship, small group meetings concerned with prayer and Bible reading, pre-marital and marital counseling sections, pastoral conferences, and Bible schools, where neophyte pastors are trained. As in most pedagogical contexts, Pentecostal spirituality was not only practiced at these sites but also objectified reflexively as a competence, operating at two orders of discourse (Silverstein, 2003). This is especially the case among denominational Bible schools,

Pentecostal seminaries concerned with the authoritative transmission and reproduction of Christian norms across specific church networks.

International Central Gospel Church (ICGC) is a Pentecostal-charismatic denomination founded in 1984 (Larbi, 2001; Gifford, 2004: 113–39; De Witte, 2008). Today it is a network of hundreds of churches spread throughout Ghana, having Christ Temple, its mega-church in Accra, as a central node. It has also opened international branches in other African countries, Europe, and America, and founded one of the most prestigious private universities in the country. The preaching, books, and videos produced by ICGC's founder and overseer, Mensa Otabil, set the denomination's tone, articulating a politically inclined pan-African theology, a business-oriented version of prosperity theology, and more conventional aspects of Pentecostal spirituality, such as miracles, evangelism, prophecy, holiness, demonology, empowering faith, fasting and prayer, and Bible reading. All these discursive threads can be observed at the level of transmission in their Bible school.

Central Bible School accepts yearly groups of 12 students (a reference to the 12 apostles), who live in the institution for three years before being ordained by Otabil. Pastor Priscilla Nketia is the school's director and a branch pastor based in Tema, Greater Accra region, where the school also lies. She is a deeply pious Christian endowed with many spiritual gifts, including a healing ministry. At the seminary, she also taught classes on pastoral ethics, spiritual gifts, and healing, and like most committed Pentecostals in Ghana was always trying to draw the line between embracing this spirituality fully, as a living experiential faith, and acknowledging the existence of error in the body of Christ.

My analysis will be based primarily on one of our many exchanges about points of contact, which I reproduce below:

We do have different objects that we use as points of contact. We use the anointing oil, handkerchiefs as a bless cloth, and other things. If it's prayed over, I can take it home. All these things can be abused, but they are biblical facts, you know? When people pray over handkerchiefs, aprons, etc. this happened in the Acts of the Apostles. When they use these objects to release people who were sick, it is biblical. But when you make it a doctrine, if that's what you do every day, from Monday to Sunday, it becomes a fetish. So, if God gives you a prophetic direction: 'go, put salt in the water and give them to drink', that's God's way. If I turn my church into the 'Blessing of Water and Drinking Church', it becomes a doctrine and not God's direction. Sometimes you hear about a church where they are using salt because they are going back to the days of Elijah, you know, when Elijah put salt in water and purified it... But then everybody drinks this water every day and they miss God's direction. Again, it becomes a fetish. A friend told me about a church she was going to that used powder for the body. They eat powder, they put it all over them, don't ask me what it means, I don't know, it's crazy. Some of these churches, they use lime, the fruit, very acid. They use it on the body. If you have an eye problem, they use it! People develop ulcers. It's crazy. If you're using these objects on a daily basis, something is wrong.

When there's a peculiar anointing, a peculiar direction . . . I mean, God doesn't work in the same ways all the time. When I minister, he might ask me to do something strange, but it is done and accomplishes his will, shows his glory. It doesn't mean that I should do that mechanically from now on, make this direction a doctrine. Then it becomes something else, not from God.

Pastor Priscilla's comments are a good token of the shifting stances embodied by Pentecostals when they engage with the immanent critique of divine immanence. She affirmed the legitimacy and authenticity of miracles in general while she still tried to draw limits for their contextual validation, the most basic resource being the Bible's authoritative truth. Her comments were guided by the norm of having 'biblical experiences', that is, experiences that are living, dynamic, and spontaneous, like the Holy Spirit, but whose material traces replicate biblical textuality through citationality (Hollywood, 2002).

According to Keane (2014), religious traditions are often composite in terms of materiality, which implies that their material repertoire can be disassembled into parts and examined in terms of the various affordances they offer to religious subjects. Gibson's (1979) notion of affordances comes in handy because it recasts materiality primarily as a matter of enablement, that is, of converting materially nested potentialities into capabilities, or 'action possibilities'.<sup>3</sup> Although texts are inherently polysemic, Keane argues that their materiality still affords a necessary sense of impersonal stability, detachability, and transposability, qualities that both 'entextualize' (Urban, 1996) religious discourses and actualize transcendental truth iconically.

I am interested in how citationality 'makes flesh' (John 1: 14) and breathes new life into these textual worlds by reinscribing them in practices and artifacts through performativity. As these practices gain relative autonomy through imitation and repetition, the material detachability of texts remains an authoritative source for reflexive judgment. Pastor Priscilla reproduces this procedure when she argues that practices like praying over handkerchiefs or water glasses actualize behavioral models found in Acts 19: 12 and 2 Kings 2:20-21. The entanglements between text, experience, and artifacts are often more complex than a one-to-one type token relation, and might have their legitimacy reinforced by building longer citational chains, pointing both into the world and across the Bible. Tomlinson (2014: 22-47), for instance, shows how evangelists skillfully weave and draw their audiences into textual webs during co-performance, biblical parallelism providing a thick discursive environment whereby the Holy Spirit gains transpersonal 'motion'.

In the case of Bible schools, 'teaching' sections at church or Bible reading groups, biblical textuality operates mostly retrospectively, as a form of dissecting and testing if particular practices and experiences are 'from God'. For instance, in her own class on spiritual healing in Central Bible School, Pastor Priscilla elaborated on the material qualities of salt in general, claiming that 'salt is a purifier and preserver', referring the students to the salted fish sold by street vendors in Ghana. 'We didn't have refrigerators. Many people in the villages still don't have them.

But they have salt, and the fish can last a long time without deteriorating. Salt purifies, avoids putrefaction. Amen?" By giving a metaphorical use to material qualities drawn from salt, she built a homology between this substance and the Word of God [salt/fish:: Bible: man], arguing that Bible reading brings 'taste' and 'life' to an otherwise insipid life. The legitimacy of salt was further supported intratextually, by quoting biblical exhortations like 'Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt' (Colossians 4:6) and the fact that Christians are addressed by Christ in Matthew 5:13 as 'the salt of the earth'. In sum, what was a one-to-one relation between textual and non-textual matters can also flourish and gain in legitimacy through homologies and longer scriptural webs linking Old and New Testaments.

When approached through similar criteria, other materialities evoked by the pastor, say, powder, immediately acquire 'bad objecthood' (Mitchell, 2005: 188–200), becoming a fetish. First, powder does not resonate with biblical textuality as easily as salt. There are other reasons as well. A pastor might find the word 'powder' in the scriptures, build persuasive links between its material qualities and Christian life, and mobilize the substance during a church meeting, but then the surrounding world becomes a hindrance to the textual webs. Powder is metonymically connected in Ghana to the material repertoire of so-called fetish priests and priestess, which reduces it almost intuitively to suspicious matter. We realize that, although biblical textuality is a powerful tool of discontinuity and context-making, this process is always open to frictions vis-à-vis given cultural and spiritual expectations.

Another source mobilized by the pastor to de-legitimize powder, this time more sub-consciously, was ICGC's globalized piety style, in which spiritual practices assume a more aseptic countenance. As a result, the church often removes from the main stage of Pentecostal spirituality forms of unruly physicality, usually related to affliction or pain. This factor applies to powder and the other example of bad objecthood brought up in the quoted passage, lime, but also to more nuanced cases. An example: people pray in tongues fervently during ICGC's prayer vigils, and yet, whenever I compared this affective regime to the one underpinning more popular 'all-night' prayer meetings I attended in Accra, I noticed much less intense expressions in terms of tears, sweat, and shaking bodies. The very guttural and desperate glossolalic cries I heard elsewhere would not resonate in an ICGC temple, but appear as bodily matter out of place (Douglas, 1966). In consonance, whenever a deliverance case requires exorcism in an ICGC temple, the person is discreetly led backstage; demons never enter the main pulpit.

I am arguing that the difference between good and bad objecthood in the cases above is not about the presence or absence of artifacts or bodily passions in piety, but mainly about how those appear, that is, a matter of style and decorum. A set of implicit rules governs spiritual life in this intuition, operating at the level of sensibility, and they make the very idea of having people smear powder or lime on their bodies quite surreal. This is not a Ghanaian particularity, and we might see similar

selectivity being applied even to material evidences that are clearly biblical, but too physically extreme, such as snake handling and drinking poison. Although promised as legitimate evidences of the Holy Spirit in Mark 16:17–18, these practices have fallen into convenient oblivion among most Pentecostals worldwide (cf. Hood and Williamson, 2008).

Bible schools are explicitly concerned with reproducing normative sensibilities among neophyte ministers, exemplifying the political and institutional components often embedded in religious reflexivity and critique (Tambar, 2012). This process is indubitably a matter of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) or even branding (De Witte, 2011), but one should not simply reduce its spiritual components to an epiphenomenal level.<sup>4</sup> As I travelled across Pentecostalism's vast denominational and socio-economic spectrum in Ghana, I realized that it is also unwarranted to simply reduce the tensions as well as the methods used to authenticate points of contact evoked by Pastor Priscilla to a specific type of church.

Indeed, this is clarified by the final source of immanent critique she mobilized, which was indeed articulated explicitly as rule-governed behavior: 'Don't make it a doctrine'. These words of warning were repeated over and over again to her apprentices during school lectures, but also echoed in many other church communities and Bible schools in which I spent time. The message conveyed is a pedagogical double-bind: almost any form of thingness can be a point of contact, as long as we know that any kind of thingness can easily decay into 'bad objecthood'. I call this norm *the primacy of flow-matter over artifact-matter*, and understand that its basic axiom is that the Holy Spirit is a constant and non-objectifiable flow, even when it becomes condensed, channeled or shaped through artifacts like salt, candles, electronic media, water glasses, anointing oil, and handkerchiefs. In this sense, whereas some expressions of material religion would fall squarely into a forbidden domain, say powder, because it is metonymically connected to African traditional religions, unbiblical, and a break of church decorum, or lime, which is unbiblical and a break of decorum, any other point of contact may also become a fetish.

Pastor Priscilla articulated the fetishization of authorized material religion by pointing to an inherent tension between inspiration and repetition, spontaneity and ritualization (Csordas, 2001), which is indeed homologous to the material distinction between unbounded flow and bounded artifact. Inspiration, spontaneity and flow were stressed when she evoked the common Pentecostal maxim, 'God doesn't work in the same way all the time', also often rephrased as 'Don't put God in a box'. It implies that, although believers can and should access divine agency habitually (Brahinsky, 2012) and through more stable biblical frames, they should also know that God's will remains sovereign and eventful, thus addressing as legitimate moments of dissociation between charisma and what Faubion (2011) calls the 'themitical' component of ethical regimes, concerned with the normativity of everyday routines.

Pastor Priscilla admitted that, when she is ministering, in the heat of her skillful and inspired performance, God might ask her 'to do something strange'. And yet,



'it is done and accomplishes his will, shows his glory. It doesn't mean that I should do that mechanically from now on, make this direction a doctrine. Then it becomes something else, not from God'. She exemplified the difference between a 'direction' and a 'doctrine', materiality 'from God' and 'not from God', through the salt and water example. Salt and water 'from God' are interventions that enliven an established liturgy through revival. Salt and water 'not from God' are the undue repetition of a direction to a point of fetishization, when human faith is excessively attuned to a single artifact, producing a heretic assemblage of humans and non-humans she comically calls 'The Blessing of Water and Drinking Church', that is, a church that worships salt and water, not God.

The fictive church Pastor Priscilla had in mind referred to Pentecostal churches whose engagement with materiality she deems dubious. But this was not merely a criticism of others within the Pentecostal fold, since she was also warning that the fetishization of Pentecostal material religion is ubiquitous and cuts across churches, denominations, and styles. In this sense, Pastor Priscilla articulates an argument quite similar to Houtman and Meyer (2012), who maintain that fetishes refer not to 'distinct types of material objects' but rather to 'particular human attitudes toward and modes of using "things"' (p. 14). Both secular and religious actors recognize here that religious materiality is always nested with positive and negative affordances, thus being inevitably bound to forms of moral investment that unleash from things particular action possibilities. Albeit obvious, it is still relevant to stress that in order to make such a claim, Pastor Priscilla was not using social theory, but mobilizing critically a number of resources Pentecostal spirituality has equipped her with, especially a specific engagement with transcendence, which I address as I conclude.

### **Concluding remarks: Transcendence, immanent critique and flow**

In this article I argued that one of the potential problems of making religion equivalent to material religion is that it might prevent us from reflecting on the place of transcendence in religious world-making and, by default, on the positionality of claims about materiality. Such awareness gains in relevance once we understand transcendence as neither the monopoly of Abrahamic or of axial religions (Robbins, 2009a) nor a homogenous residual category, but as co-constitutive with religious immanence, both varying interdependently across a vast spectrum of religious traditions. Transcendence can also play multiple roles within a single spirituality. For instance, Pentecostals engage with 'this-worldly' transcendence through question about charismatic experiences and points of contact but also with 'out-worldly' transcendence through questions of salvation and eternal life.

Moreover, I stressed that religious traditions are often composite in terms of materiality, hence the importance of integrating 'thingness' into broader ethical and spiritual resources, which in the long run assist religious subject formation.

One can access Pentecostal material religion by attending a prophetic meeting or a healing service, but it might appear differently from the point of view of what my interlocutors call the 'walk with Christ', a lengthily process of self-transformation happening through miracles and experiences, but also prescribed practices, institutions, texts, relations, communities, and, as I focused on here, acquired modalities of religious reflexivity and skepticism.

Ethnographic attention to immanent criticism recasts material religion as part of a continuous debate about the limits of materiality waged within the flexible but resilient confines of religious traditions, allowing error to populate a regime of truth without necessarily breaking it. Methodologically, it avoids responding to Jean Pouillon's early insight that 'it is the unbeliever who believes that the believer believes in the existence of God' (1982: 2) by positing a type of hypersensitive religious subject who only feels, sees, hears, and touches divine truth, calling this ontology, phenomenology, or cognitive attunement. It also departs from the contemporary tendency to 'consider materiality directly, not vicariously, through the quest for immateriality' (Miller, 2005: 42), that is, to focus directly on the 'agency of things', instead of tracing vicariously how our interlocutors encode or engage with it.

Bruno Latour (2010) is probably the most vocal promoter of such a direct approach to things, often rejecting questions of recognition as 'subjectivism'. Latour's argument that 'what we fabricate goes beyond us' (2010: 22–3) is a powerful attack on Western hegemonic divides between nature and culture, lending to the agency of things a transgressive, liberating moral quality. But it is also situated, and his general, often dualist statements about how we are either fetishists or 'factishists' and how iconoclasm can only be a transfigured form of iconophilia become less productive when anthropologists deal with the concrete entanglements and disentanglements between religious subjects and things. This is because religious actors are always already imbued with some degree of normative awareness about the slipperiness of material religion. If applied to contemporary Pentecostals in Ghana, for instance, Latour's celebration of contingency and the inevitability of material passages is likely to appear as either obvious or problematic, since this is the very horizon of crisis they live in, necessarily a force to be contained, or at least managed.

As a mature Pentecostal subject whose mission is to usher others – through the pulpit and the classroom – into a 'prescriptive apparatus' (Marshall, 2009), Pastor Priscilla was morally and spiritually aware, not only epistemologically aware about the inevitability of 'thingness' to religious life. She was neither anxious nor celebratory about it, but passionately critical. But what are the life-world and the protocols whereby such criticism becomes operational? This question is best addressed comparatively.

First, as a charismatic spirituality, Pentecostalism diverges greatly from historical Protestant traditions or more conventional definitions of liberal Protestantism (cf. Klassen, 2011), which actualize transcendence preferably as the omniscient, non-participatory gaze of a super-subject: *Deus Absconditus* or *Deus Incognito*.

But it also strives to remain irreducible to these traditions' Other: 'idolatrous' or 'fetishist' subjects who worship *artifacts*. Evading altogether the materiality = artifacts equation, Pastor Priscilla conceived transcendence primarily as *flow*, a force whose sacred externality is granted not through the quality of non-participation, but mostly as an intense participation amidst things followed by *non-appropriation*. Instead of the *Deus Absconditus*, she presented us to a *Deus Fluxus*, the Holy Spirit, whose agency is often addressed by Pentecostals through phenomena like water, oil, wind, fire, and electricity. All of them share a specific quality: amorphous, non-objectifiable, non-retainable tangibility, thus affording both contact and detachment. In this sense, things amplify the desire to touch divine presence, focusing attention and faith-investment, whereas flow grants non-substitutability, and thus transcendence.

The first type of Christian tradition draws a clear-cut boundary separating divine transcendence from immanence, inciting anxieties about election and grace, and encouraging an interiorized, phonocentric, semiotic ideology with multiple gray zones (Keane, 2007). The second type of transcendence is part of Pentecostals' 'en-Spirited naturalism' (Smith, 2010: 97). It is an overflow, a wave of transcendental power that pours over immanent grounds and 'democratizes' charisma (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005a: 96–131) as a desirable promise looming large upon anyone willing to 'give her life to Christ' and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Religious immanence in this case is singular, but diffuse, being mobilized not through a dualist grammar of presence/absence, but preferably through a vibrant lexicon of modes, affects, and intensities of presence that carries surprising resemblances with the new materialism (Reinhardt, 2015). The Holy Spirit acts somatically through feelings like 'joy' and 'peacefulness', but also ecstatic 'burning', 'clouds of glory', and 'holy laughter'. One can 'yield to', 'soak in', and 'charge' oneself with the presence of God through periodic mediation, Bible reading, fasting, and prayer. Bodies can be 'plugged' corporately as they sing and sway or pray 'in the Spirit', giving rise to 'revivals', a mix of synchronized practices, increased emotional energy and intensified presence (De Abreu, 2008; Robbins, 2009b). Pentecostals often demonstrate a porous sensitivity to the tangibility-spirituality of almost anything: from inner voices to public 'words of faith', from intimate dreams and visions to digital images and movies, from volitional states ('prompts') to things, substances, and technologies used as 'points of contact'. Such potential interchangeability of religious media testifies to this spirituality's sensorial emphasis on contact-transmission, which often makes it look like a religiously informed exploration of the haptic potential of any sensorial experience (Howes, 2009; Reinhardt, 2014).

As part of this presence-statured environment, Pentecostal critique is not pre-conscious 'purification', how Latour (1998) refers to the secular modern misrecognition of human and non-human 'hybrids'. It is a prescribed tool for mature Christians to dwell in, instead of simply be thrown at, a dazzling spectrum of material religion. It is a religiously informed version of practical reason or *phronesis*, the ever-situated capacity to 'judge and to do the right thing in the right places

at the right time in the right way' (MacIntyre, 1984: 150). Pentecostals engage with critique by reaching out to the Bible's textual detachability, since 'the Holy Spirit will never contradict the Bible': both stem from the same perfect transcendental source. But they can also fold and contrast spiritual modes, rubbing them against each other reflexively. That was the case when I had to leave a church in Accra hastily with my friend and Bible instructor Richard Agyeman after he 'felt in his Spirit' that the preaching was not 'from God'. Prophets have become too many in Ghana to be taken by their word, and many of my interlocutors 'prayed about' the prophecies they received, and asked the Holy Spirit for 'confirmation'. We realize that immanent critique in the Pentecostal case is always critique from the perspective of God, be that through his Word or his Spirit. In this sense, it is also transcendental critique, but Pentecostal-style.

Albeit specific, Pastor Priscilla's invocation of transcendence-as-tangible-flow while addressing points of contact is not unique. Formally, it is quite similar to Eastern Christian distinctions between material icons and the immaterial archetype dwelling in them (Elsner, 2012). Both theological tools recognize the need of devotional media while simultaneously addressing the negative affordances nested in them. In this sense, they try to regulate material religion authoritatively by framing the relations, expectations and modes of addressivity whereby things can flourish as sacred connectors, material forms that yield to transcendental presence, instead of condensing it. Icons can become idols as much as points of contact can become fetishes. To be a competent Christian is to be aware of and dwell in this problem-space.

Engelke defines what he calls 'the problem of presence' or 'the simultaneous presence and absence of God', as a 'core paradox of Christian thought' (2007: 9). But from a Pentecostal stance, such a liminal state is far from paradoxical. It is not morally paralyzing, but morally axiomatic, since it is part of a history of salvation. It is the very temporality of a subject who has restored charismatically her relationship with God while still being submitted to the material constraints of a world that has fallen from grace. Even in the Pentecostal case, transcendental presence can only be a glimpse of, or an episodic flow into, God's eschatological fullness. As a result, normative Pentecostal experience can only be actualized as it oscillates between transcendence and immanence, spontaneity and ritualization, flow and artifact, highly cultivated sensibilities and unexpected affects. By recognizing that, Pastor Priscilla defined the Pentecostal life neither as immaterial belief nor as material religion, but mostly as immanent critique, the art of seeking closeness to God equipped with a pregnant desire to touch him and a commitment to let him go.

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### Notes

1. According to De Certeau, during secularization processes, '[h]eresy becomes alterity which is insinuated into the margins next to common law' (1988: 151).
2. According to Lambek, ordinary ethics is 'relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule... and happening without calling undue attention to itself' (2010: 2). It pervades the social fabric, and thus undermines the difference between ethics and morality (Mahmood, 2012).
3. According to Gibson, affordances are accumulative (air affords to humans breathing, visual perception, and hearing), relational (water does not afford walkability to man, but it does to some insects), and situated (a flat and tall vertical surface prevents trespassing, which can be a positive or negative affordance). They are also learned, for instance, when swimming techniques render water 'swimmable' for humans. As such, affordances are irreducible to subjective 'interpretations' or 'representations' as much as they are to pure material functions. 'An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us understand its inadequacy' (Gibson, 1979: 129).
4. In this sense, whereas Bourdieu's reduction of habitus to social reproduction makes consciousness redundant (Mahmood, 2005: 119), the instrumentalist reduction of Pentecostal styles to 'branding' and maximization within religious market niches misses the Christian quality of such maximizing consciousness, which is indeed normalized by Pentecostals' unapologetic evangelistic ethos.

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**Bruno Reinhardt** holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. He is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. He is author of *Espelho ante Espelho: a Troca e a Guerra entre o Neopentecostalismo e os Cultos Afro-Brasileiros em Salvador* (Attar/Pronex, 2007) and has published articles on anthropological theory and the anthropology of religion and secularism.