COMMENTS TO JOEL ROBBINS ARTICLE “RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND VALUE
PLURALISM: RITUAL AND THE MANAGEMENT OF INTERCULTURAL DIVERSITY”

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Let us face it. Despite a well-intentioned and widely shared humane rhetoric, “pluralism” often becomes uncomfortable. We do not really know how to deal with it, neither at the policy level nor at the academic one. Sometimes—I must confess with embarrassment—I even wished it were true that each community had its own “culture”, its bounded set of values, its common past, its unity in destiny and all that jazz. Wouldn’t it be much easier to be an ethnographer, if the Bongo-Bongo had its monolithic Bongo-Bongo culture in Bongo-Bongoland? Perhaps it would (though a bit more boring, too) but, for better or worse, the reality is that we live in a plural world, or even perhaps in a plurality of worlds. Any single village today contains people with different religious identities, ethnic origins, languages, aesthetic preferences, gender understandings, etc. We may believe that is particularly so in the urban domain, but, as anthropologists such as Joel Robbins have shown us, even rural remote areas far away from urban centres can be quite plural in their composition. And yet, we anthropologists are still a bit too shy in proposing models to help us explain/understand (delete as appropriate) the plural facet of the human condition.

The article by Joel Robbins “Religious Pluralism and Value Pluralism” is therefore most welcome. The switch Robbins suggests from a focus on religious pluralism to one on value pluralism is a proposal that will, no doubt, be accepted by many of us. The argument he puts forth, with his usual clarity, is entirely convincing. Ritual is focused. It is a “magnifying lens”, as Jonathan Z. Smith would have it. One ritual reinforces or expresses one value, another one another value. By focussing on the relation between ritual and values, Robbins goes indeed beyond the limitations of models based on the plurality of religious traditions. Values, if I understand him rightly, are part and parcel of the conditions of possibility and of the structures of plausibility which allow for ritual to work (and which help explain why some ritual innovations do *not* work).

Upon a first reading of the article, my mind immediately generated many small questions and comments, clearly leaning more towards the value of misunderstanding than towards the value

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of disagreement or criticism. In any case, I would like to take this opportunity, for which I am truly thankful, to share them with the author himself.

Firstly, when reading the article I was reminded of the works of James W. Fernandez on the making of a “social consensus” in the Bwiti reformatory ritual, and I should like to invite Robbins to dialogue with it, if at all possible. In an influential article Fernandez published in *American Anthropologist* in 1965 (“Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformatory Cult”) he argued, in not too dissimilar a vein to a previous piece authored by Geertz in *American Anthropologist* (“Ritual and Social Change: a Javanese example”, 1957), that it is not the sharing of the interpretation that makes a ritual work (this sharing of meaning he called “symbolic”, or “cultural” consensus), but the fact that people are *doing it together* (what he called, in contrasts, “social consensus”). *Participation*, Fernandez suggests, is what is *valued* (these are his own words), rather than the specific meaning of one or other symbol or action. Would this idea work for the people among whom Robbins conducted his fieldwork in Papua New Guinea? Are they not also valuing participation in the ritual and *social* consensus rather than (or over) one of the two specific core values identified in the paper?

My second question is in fact linked to the above. It is the question of the origins of values, and I am aware of the risk of submitting a “chicken or egg” question here. Whether “representative” or “performative”, the main approaches to ritual invoked in the article seem to assume that values exist on one hand and rituals on the other. Ritual either represents or performs one pre-existing value or another. Where the values come from is left unexamined (except that we are told that, historically speaking, the value of “individuality” was introduced by Christianity), much as the origins of ritual are unexamined either. I know that dealing with “origins” is always very problematic (it would certainly make *me* feel very uneasy), but I wonder, nonetheless, whether we could not look for more integrative models of ritual, ones that could account for the role of ritual in “value-genesis” so to speak, either at a collective or at the individual level. Can rituals generate value?

Thirdly, since the data offered by Robbins falls into such neatly binary sets of oppositions, a question about duality and mediation (or lack thereof) came to my mind. If ritual is used to express or to perform one value or another (“individuality” or “relationality”), where do people find the mediation between them, the fulcrum point that would allow them to move *from* one end of the spectrum *to* the other one? Does this triadic moment happen outside the ritual, or are there meta-rituals, so to speak? Or is it in ritual that individuals are led to understand that they cannot really

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have one without the other? Or is the resolution of the tension, the Piercean “triad”, found through other devices beyond ritual?

A further question, or rather a comment, that came to my mind was produced by the lack of any sense of everyday, non-ritual difficulties, in contrast with the almost archetypal life portrayed in the ritual. The focus on the ritual moves away the article from giving attention to local idioms of suffering or to perceptions of the day-to-day complications of value coexistence. Is daily value cohabitation among the Urapmin as unproblematic as it seems? Perhaps having data on some of the hardships or even tragedies that living with a multiplicity of values may provoke would have helped the reader understand the force of the ritual much more effectively.

My final comment is about religions (note the plural) and values. Robbins attributes the “individuality” value to Christianity but not so the “relationality” one, which he attributes to tradition (here epitomized by the “Pig Sacrifice” ritual). But surely the Christian person is based on strong notions of relationality too (“we are all children of God”, “the Church is the Body of Christ,” etc.)? In fact, the Christian person in classic Western theology is much more relational than most anthropological works led us to believe, as the Catholic German philosopher Robert Speamann, in his milestone book *Persons: the difference between someone and something* (translated into English in 2006) has argued. In any case, by so closely associating individuality to Christianity and relationality to traditional sacrifices, I fear that Robbins may seem to be reconverting his value pluralism back into a religious one, which defeats his own initial purpose of moving us from one to the other. As a tentative hypothesis (I leave it to Robbins to tell me whether it is plausible or not) I would rather venture (based on a uncontrolled comparison with my own work in West Africa) that relationality and individuality were already present even before the arrival of Christianity, but in a very implicit and latent way, as cultural *a priori* templates or structures of plausibility. Christianity, in his particular case at any rate, clearly exacerbated the individuality aspect of the template rather than create a complete new value out of the blue. In other words, my hypothesis would contemplate the possibility that perhaps the early incorporation of Christianity into Urapmin society could be explained in a similar (but inverse) way to the one used here to explain why some rituals fail. This of course would not solve the problem of the *origins* of values, but it would iron out the somehow unexpected sense of reducing value-pluralism to religious pluralism with which the reader may be finishing this otherwise thought-provoking, original and engaging article.

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