

RESPONSE TO COMMENTATORS

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I am grateful to the scholars who have responded to my article on religious pluralism, value pluralism and ritual. The original piece is frankly experimental – an attempt to come at issues of differences and the relations they foster from an angle other than the one that guides most approaches to religious pluralism. More generally, it is a part of a larger effort, guided by the work of Dumont, Weber, Berlin and others to think about the potential place of a renewed attention to values in social theory (some of the theoretical background not found in the article is discussed in Robbins 2013 and Robbins Forthcoming). I am very appreciative of the care and intensity with which the respondents have engaged my arguments, pushing them, testing them, critiquing them but almost always approaching them very much in the open-ended spirit in which I meant to pose them. I have learned a lot from what they have written. Given that the vast majority of the responses are quite substantial, I do not have space to consider all of the valuable issues they raise in the detail the individual pieces deserve. Instead, I will address a number of issues that appear in more than one response and in this way take up at least some major themes from each contribution.

I laid the groundwork for my original argument by making two shifts away from standard approaches to religious pluralism: one toward a focus on values, rather than on religions, and the other toward a focus on ritual. The respondents display a wide range of opinions about the initial shift from religious pluralism to value pluralism. Among them, Thomas Csordas most openly regrets the way I have set aside the questions a straightforward interest in religious pluralism brings to the forefront, while Pablo Semán strongly endorses the importance of the new issues I had hoped my maneuver would raise. In his deeply thoughtful piece (one that deserves to be read as an article in its own right), Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte joins Semán in entering into the spirit of the gestalt

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shift I had hoped to bring out about by focusing on values, but he is also somewhat in accord with Csordas when he shows that this new focus does miss some key factors pertaining to the religious and secular organization of diversity in contemporary Brazilian life. This range of response to the move from religious to value pluralism is not unexpected. This is the most radical part of my argument, and as such it was meant only to be suggestive. As I noted in the piece itself, a focus on value pluralism is not meant to replace work on religious pluralism. I am pleased that for some readers it did have the intended effect of raising new questions about otherwise familiar materials, even as I appreciate the help they and the others have offered in learning to acknowledge its limits.

If my proposal to move from religious to value pluralism met with a mixed response, my suggestion that it would also be worthwhile to focus on rituals, rather than other aspects of religious life, faced a more uniformly skeptical set of judgments. The problem does not appear to be with my interest ritual per se – no one expressed the view that rituals are unimportant – but rather it is with my claim that rituals allow people to experience what it is like to realize single values fully, something I suggested it was not easy for people to do in the course of ordinary life. Almost no one endorsed this assertion wholeheartedly. The difference in response to my two proposed shifts is not surprising. The switch from religious to value pluralism is an exercise in changing vantage points, rather than in theory building, and as such it invites broad expressions of interest or disinterest – either you want to try making the move or you do not. But my claim about rituals and values is a proper theoretical assertion, and as such it invites more nuanced disagreement. The respondents' main criticism in regard to this claim is that rituals involve more than one value, though there is also some concern that rituals are not aimed at realizing values at all but are rather aimed at achieving pragmatic ends or at creating collectivities or ontologies. In making these points, the respondents draw on their own ethnographic materials and also offer some reanalyses of the Urapmin rituals I present. In taking up these criticisms, I will likewise switch back and forth between theoretical and empirical registers.

Quite a few of the respondents grant, at least implicitly, that it makes some sense to analyze rituals as social forms that express values by leading people to perform or achieve them. For some of them, however, my further suggestion that each ritual realizes one value very fully is a sticking point. Counter to this claim, they suggest that single rituals often involve many values at once. Maria Laura Viveiros de Castro Cavalcanti offers a useful version of this criticism, noting that in the Carnival performances of the Samba Schools she studies, the value of linear temporality represented by the parade cars conflicts with the notion of cyclical time represented by the repetitive use of music during the performance. As she puts it, “A carnival parade’s successful performance depends on the constantly tense articulation between these contrasts” showing that “Compromise solutions between disparate values are possible within the same ritual performance.”

Cavalcanti’s account of what she nicely calls “pluralism...as an internal aspect of specific rituals” is compelling, as are similar discussions of pluralism within ritual in several of the other responses I will discuss below. But the point that rituals at least often if not always end up expressing a single value as primary is sufficiently important to what I am trying to do in my article that I would like to make an effort to defend it despite its obvious failure to convince many of the initial readers of the article. Unfortunately, I do not know enough about Carnival in Brazil to be able to shore up my point using Cavalcanti’s own materials, but I will make an effort to do so by examining the data several of the other authors use to make critical points very similar to her own.

At the heart of my defense is a point I did not make sufficiently in the original article. My claim is not that rituals only represent or express a single value across the whole of their unfolding, but rather that however many values appear in a ritual, one of these values will be primary. This primary value is tied to the goal of the ritual, what it aims to accomplish. It is in accomplishing something that a ritual fully realizes, rather than just gives expression to, its primary value. Along the way to realizing its primary value, however, a ritual performance can express other values. Drawing on the discussion of value relations presented in the article, it is possible to find cases in which the secondary values expressed in a ritual support the accomplishment of the primary one, and others in which the primary one is shown to overcome the challenge of

conflicting secondary ones to emerge as the most important value only at the conclusion of the rite, when it has accomplished its work. Against the grain of Csordas question as to “whether it is always possible or desirable to analyze values into superordinate and subordinate categories,” this approach does assume that in fact values always establish relations of, to borrow Dumont’s terms, hierarchy and encompassment. Producing such relations is what values do and we cannot study values without examining such relations. It is possible that there are all sorts of anthropological questions that do not require us to be interested in values. But a focus on values does allow us, as anthropologists, to recognize, as James Laidlaw (2013: 60) has recently put it, that humans are “evaluative” creatures and that, as the philosopher Józef Tischner (2008: 50) notes “our world is a hierarchically ordered world and our thinking, a preferential thinking.” The way rituals engage this aspect human lives and the worlds in which they unfold is by hierarchically arranging an array of values and asserting that one of them, by virtue of being tied to the key purpose of a rite, is paramount within the ritual and in the context in which it is performed.

In one of the more compact empirical arguments against my account of rituals as forums for the realization of single values, Csordas suggests that Bruce Kapferer “has provided analyses of complex Sinhalese exorcism rituals that address multiple values not easily reducible to a single one: healing, recognition of contingency, human intentionality, cosmological order, morality.” It is not clear which of Kapferer’s discussions of exorcism Csordas has in mind, but in one of his most influential accounts (one that has influenced my own work and is likewise indebted to Dumont) Kapferer (2012) comes much closer to my position, suggesting that exorcism is based on a “logic” of “movement or process in hierarchy” (p. 55) such that it works toward its primary goal of “the restoration of the integrated order of the cosmic hierarchy” (p. 89). Along the way, the rite surely does give expression to the kinds of phenomena Csordas mentions, and even asserts the (subordinate) value of some of them, but on Kapferer’s account at least we would miss something crucial about the ritual if we did not recognize that the primary value it aims to realize is only one of those Csordas mentions: that of “cosmological order.”

Johanna Sumiala also raises questions about the ritual realization of single values by drawing on her research on ritual responses to the death of Margaret Thatcher and the ways they have been covered in the media. Like Duarte's, Sumiala's piece is a tour de force in its own right and deserves to be read as something more than a response to my own arguments. She very compellingly takes the questions raised by the original article onto the terrain of media, a subject to which I had not given any thought in writing it.

I find Sumiala's arguments about media and values very stimulating, but I would like to take issue with her concluding analysis. On the basis of her ingenious analysis of the values of the media, she notes that the media coverage of Thatcher's death did itself most prominently realize a single value – the ever-present media value of attention. But the various death rites the media covered, expressing as they did both love for and hatred of Thatcher, evidence a multiplicity of values. This is surely true, but I think an analytic chance has been missed in leaving the analysis at this point. An argument more fully in keeping with the theoretical approach I have tried to lay out, but at the same time one that is wholly in keeping with all the specific ritual analyses Sumiala has given us, would point out that each of the mourning/celebration rituals she discusses realized its own single value of supporting Thatcher's brand of conservatism or opposing it. The media in turn orchestrated a macro-ritual that gave expression to all of these diverse values, but subordinated them to its own "supervalue" of attention. The media thus enact precisely the kind of hierarchical encompassment of a plurality of lower order values under a primary one that I have argued is an aspect of ritual in general. What it means that we as media consumers also in the end participate in realizing this supervalue of attention, even more so perhaps than we do the values we might imagine we find more important (such as those realized in the mourning/celebratory rituals themselves) is the stuff of a kind of media critique I do not have the skills to undertake. But the fact that Sumiala's analysis can lead in this direction indicates one way a focus on the realization of values in ritual might open up unexpected areas for further exploration.

A final empirical challenge to the idea that each ritual realizes a single value most fully takes the form of questions several respondents raise about the Spirit Disco. Cecilia Mariz most searchingly, but also Csordas, note that the Spirit Disco appears to enact

collective values as well as individualist ones. As should be predictable at this point, my first line of defense here is to point to the fact that what the Spirit Disco most clearly aims to accomplish is the salvation of the Christian individual. In this respect, I take it as crucial that the ritual ends with the production of the figure of the possessed dancer, understood as a saved individual, collapsed on the floor of the church. This image encompasses the collective work, expressive of various values I did not discuss in my short account in the original article, it took to produce.¹ The individualism of the ritual conclusion is perhaps foreshadowed in the confession rites that precede the dance. Mariz speculates, reasonably enough, that confession for the Urapmin (though not always in Pentecostal-charismatic circles) involves a relationship between a penitent and a confessor, thus lending some support to relationalist values. We need to note, however, that when confessors at the ends of the confession rite pray over those who have just confessed, they often insert the formulaic phrase “God, my brother [or sister] has given his sins to you, not to me.” Confessors take pains in this way to stress that the relationship between penitents and themselves is not what the rite is working to develop. Only the penitent’s relationship with God, the one unique relationship that ultimately founds the Urapmin person’s individualism, is at stake. Arguably, then, the individualism of the Spirit Disco is present both in the rites that prepare for it and in its own conclusion, fully encompassing the collectivism that is represented in some ways in the course of the rite.

What to make of that collectivism, if we do not allow it push us toward a pluralist reading of the rite overall? One point to make about it, following the Dumontian tradition in which I am working here, is that because human beings are in reality products of society, individualism must always contract some kind of relation with what Dumont calls holism (which I take to include what we are here calling collectivism) (Dumont 1994). Even the fullest possible realizations of individualism as a value will have to be

¹ For those who might be interested in fuller accounts of the rituals discussed in the original article, I have discussed the relationship between the different values represented internally in both the Spirit Disco (Robbins 2004a: ch. 7) and the pig sacrifice (Robbins 2009a) elsewhere.

produced in tandem with some collectivist elements. Realizations of the value of individualism, to put it another way, will have to contend with the extent to which rituals, as social forms, “tend,” as Mariz puts it, “to reinforce collectivity” (Duarte makes a related point in relation to the social embeddedness of charismatic experience). But in some rituals, I am suggesting, individualism contends with this collectivism by enacting the encompassment of it

In relation to the Urapmin case specifically, there is also a second point it is important to make about collectivism. Mariz very astutely notes that in my monograph on the Urapmin, I interpret some elements of the Spirit Disco in ways she sees as collectivist, and I suggest these are of great importance for the Urapmin understanding of the rite (Robbins 2004a: chapter 8).² In some respects this is true, though there is a subtle difference between what I argued there and the assertion that the Spirit Disco is strongly collectivist. In my earlier discussion I argued that the Urapmin have great hopes that they can all be saved at once. They interpret the Spirit Disco, which for reasons I cannot go into here ensures the salvation of everyone who participates, as helping them at least momentarily reach this goal. But, again drawing on Dumont, I suggest that this version of collectivity is one that is very much shaped by individualism (it is what Dumont [1986] calls a pseudo-holism). As such, it is not opposed to individualism as a value in the straightforward sense that collectivism as a value would be. More than this, I would now be inclined to suggest that this pseudo-holism is an interpretation Urapmin make of the outcome of the Spirit Disco, but it is not in fact what they perform in the ritual, which is the salvation of individuals. I realize that this distinction between the enactment of ritual and its interpretation is a complex one, and its not one I have fully figured out or can fully justify here, but I wanted to mention that this is the direction in which my current thinking is tending concerning the problem of Urapmin ethnography Mariz has so productively brought to the fore.

In concluding my defense of the claim each ritual allows participants to realize one value

²I note this complication and discuss it in less developed terms than I do here in an earlier discussion of the Spirit Disco that makes the same point as the one in the original article (Robbins Forthcoming).

fully I would like to mention that I recently discovered that it is far from new. Since writing the original article, I reread one of Victor Turner's classic works on ritual. In the course of his discussion, he notes that:

...since different norms govern different aspects or sectors of social behavior, and, more importantly, since the sectors overlap and interpenetrate in reality, causing norm-conflict, the validity of several major norms has to be reaffirmed in isolation from others and outside the contexts in which struggles and conflicts arise in connection with them. This is why one so often finds in ritual that dogmatic and symbolic emphasis is laid on a single norm or on a cluster of closely, and on the whole harmoniously, interrelated norms in a single kind of ritual (Turner 1967: 40).

Virtually my entire argument is here. There is the point that everyday life is frequently governed by a mix of values (or norms) and the suggestion that ritual stands in contrast to this situation by realizing one value (or in Turner's version also possibly a group of closely linked values). Even if my arguments do not convince, then, perhaps this distinguished pedigree may lend the ideas behind them a bit more interest.

A second line of criticism of my argument about ritual and value does not worry over how many values might be involved in any give ritual, but instead questions whether rituals should be seen as importantly defined by their relation to values at all. As several of the respondents note, "ritual" is a broad term and there are many different theoretical approaches to the phenomena it contains. Given this, no single theory is likely to exhaust the analytic possibilities ritual presents. I therefore would not want to assert that the only thing worth saying about rituals is that they express values. But I do think it is worth considering some ways of answering the particular criticisms that have been raised here.

We can start with Mariz's suggestion that when Urapmin people turn to pig sacrifice, they are not so much interested in expressing the value of relationalism as they are in achieving the "pragmatic" goal of saving one of their children.³ Even if we do

³ Mariz also suggests that in turning from the Spirit Disco to the pig sacrifice people are leaving one sphere of life for another. I agree with this. Following Weber, as she also does, I think of these as value spheres, so that switching from one to another is also

decide to read the motivation of those undertaking a pig sacrifice in these terms, one of my key cultural theoretical points is that people in Urapmin cannot save children who have not been successfully cured by prayer without turning to a ritual that involves them in performing the value of relationalism. Performing this value may not be foremost in their minds, but it is in fact what they do. This is part of the human condition in Urapmin. Semán's very powerfully rendered ethnographic presentation of a similar situation among Argentinian Catholics who turn to evangelical prayer for healing helps us understand the stakes such ritually defined value choices can involve for people. In his analysis, participation in the Catholic Church performs the value of national belonging. Evangelical prayer is powerful for healing, but it does not perform national belonging at all. Therefore, those who for "pragmatic" reasons take part in Evangelical ritual feel a strong sense of value conflict. In this case as well, participants may not come to rituals with value considerations foremost in their minds, but they cannot escape the value consequences of ritual performance. This outcome, as with Urapmin guilt over performing pig sacrifices, indicates the extent to which ritual inevitably involves people in matters of value.

Vilaça, along with Mariz to some extent, raise the possibility that rituals are not geared to performing values, or are not primarily geared to this, but are rather geared to what Vilaça calls "creating the ontological foundation of a culture." I would like to respond to this point in general theoretical terms and also in ethnographic ones. Theoretically, I first want to note that ontologies, at least as I understand them, are not separate from values. Despite a certain vogue for the notion of flatness, I do not think there are any flat ontologies – all human worlds, as I noted above, are shot through with hierarchical relations and the evaluative stances they reflect. So I am not sure one has to make a choice between ontology language (though admittedly I do not use it in the original article) and value analysis. Secondly, I think it is important in anthropology and sociology not to be too loose with the language of creation. People live in worlds they do not constantly make (this is true even for those who live in worlds that lead them to

switching from one primary value consideration to another (see Robbins 2007 for my understanding of Weber in these terms).

imagine they do constantly do so, when in fact they do not create the very imagination that leads them to think this way). Turning back to the performative theory of ritual I draw on in the original article, and tracing it to its roots in speech act theory, we should remember that speech acts and rituals are based on conventions, and that this is what lends them their creative force. If I make a promise to you, I have created something new in the world. But what I have created is the relatively modest specific promise I have made. I have not by any means created the notion of promising and the conventions on which it rests. Similarly, in realizing a value and expressing the ontology we might say it presupposes by performing a ritual, I have done something in the world, but I have not really created an ontology out of whole cloth. To expect ritual to do this is, I think, to ask too much of it and miss what it really can and does usually accomplish.⁴

Turning to ethnography, both Vilaça and Mariz encourage us to ask how many ontologies are involved in any given social formation. For the Urapmin case, and also in many other cases as well, I have argued that by accepting local spiritual ontologies Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity do not set up a second ontology, but instead encompass traditional ones and subordinate their values (Robbins 2004b). I think in these cases it is more precise to say there is one ontology but conflicting systems of values that apply to it. The Wari', the paradigm case of what has become widely known in anthropology as a perspectivist society, appear to have allowed Christianity to set up its own ontology as one among a number that they recognize. In her response, Vilaça argues that because Christianity has room for the devil, it will routinely do this. But I think the Urapmin material, and as noted material from other places where people have converted from indigenous religions to Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity as well, do not evidence this pattern. Indeed, the very fact that in so many places a single Christian ontology already contains the devil suggests that his existence need not produce ontological multiplication. Such multiplication is something the Wari' bring to

⁴ This is not to say that rituals might not have an important role to play in situations of cultural or ontological change, and that sometimes in situations of change people might learn a ritual and become somewhat exposed to the ontology of presupposes even before they have come to fully inhabit that ontology (Robbins 2009b). But such situations are not the norm, and even when they occur they do not involve ritual single-handedly creating new ontologies.

Christianity, then, not something they find there. Indeed, for the Wari' moving between ontologies or contending successfully with the demands made on them by the threat of such movement is a primary indigenous value, and one Christianity has not displaced. Given this, it would be interesting to learn how this value might be expressed in Wari' ritual either of an indigenous or a Christian character.

Ramon Sarró's piece brings up a host of thought-provoking points. I regret that I do not have room to address the majority of them. One of the key ones, however, constitutes a third challenge to my postulation of the importance of value-realization for ritual. Sarró refers to James Fernandez's classic 1965 article "Symbolic Consensus in a Fang Reformative Cult," noting that in the article Fernandez, studying the then relatively new, very fractious colonial era Bwiti cult among the Fang of Northern Gabon, presents ethnography that shows that most participants in the cult's main ritual do not claim to know what its symbols mean, and to the extent that they hazard guesses as to its meaning, there is little agreement between the ones they forward.⁵ Participants do, however, agree that the ritual is effective in producing a state of social cohesion they call "one heartedness" (Fernandez 1965: 922). On Fernandez's account, these data indicate that the Fang ritual produces social but not symbolic (meaningful) consensus. Putting Fernandez's point in my terms, Sarró argues that the Fang value participation. Collective participation is the value the ritual aims to realize. He goes on to wonder if this is not true of the Urapmin rituals I discuss as well.

I agree with Sarró's argument about the main Bwiti ritual: he nicely interprets Fernandez's findings in the terms of my analysis. But in relation to his suggestion that we might apply Fernandez's analysis to the Urapmin rituals I discuss, I think it's important to look a bit more closely at what Fernandez tells us about the Fang members of the Bwiti cult. Subject of colonization and recently introduced to the capitalist market, their social lives are badly fragmented and subject to a rising tide of individualism. It is

⁵ Ritual experts, by contrast, do elaborate meanings for the ritual, but these also differ somewhat across different congregations, and the experts do not, in any case, participate in performing the rituals.

against this background that one-heartedness has become a key value for them. Although they live with a conflict between relational and individualist values, the Urapmin do not experience the kind of social fragmentation that marked Fang life at the time of Fernandez's fieldwork. Accordingly, though they do gather collectively to perform the Spirit Discos, and in smaller groups to perform pig sacrifices, the realization of the value of collectivity or one-heartedness is not the primary goal of these rituals (though something like this is a secondary Christian value in Urapmin, and is even more important in other parts of Papua New Guinea – see Schram 2013, Leavitt 2001). As is the case with turning the value the Wari' place on correctly managing the movement between ontologies into a claim about rituals in general, we need to be careful about assuming that the Fang value on collective participation or in fact any one value we find taking pride of place in a given fieldwork location governs ritual everywhere, even if rituals everywhere do often involve similar features such as collective action (or, for that matter, formality) and do, as I have been at pains to argue, always tend to promote the full expression of some primary value.⁶

I am coming to the end of the space allotted for my response. As I noted before, there are many worthy issues that my focus on the main criticisms of my argument about ritual and values has not allowed me to take up. To mention in conclusion just one of these, it is worth noting that a number of these responses pick up on tensions in Urapmin understandings of the value of individualism that are revealed by setting the Spirit Disco alongside the two failed ritual innovations I discuss. Csordas and Cavalcanti sensitively interrogate the different versions of individualism the various rituals express, and Duarte goes beyond this to offer a very thoughtful consideration of several versions of individualism at play in Brazilian life. Such considerations of varying kinds of individualism is precisely the kind of ethnographically subtle debate I hope a turn to value analysis in the arenas of religion and ritual, as well as in other domains of social

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□ This discussion of collectivity as a ritual value also returns us to the earlier discussion of how a collective ritual can support the value of individualism. Not all features of a ritual, as I noted there, necessarily reflect that ritual's primary value or telos.

life, might be able to foster. I want to express my gratitude to the respondents a final time for so thoughtfully and compellingly launching such a debate around my original article.

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