

Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter. By Webb Keane. University of California Press, 2007. 336 pages. \$55.00.

In his weighty and much discussed volume *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor argues that the West has produced a modern self that is both “buffered” (autonomous and self-made, and thus insulated from the claims that hegemonic powers make upon it) and “excarnated” (most real in its rational capacities, and thus disentangled and distanced from the body). Modernity’s buffered self exercises a distinctive form of moral agency: Reason disciplines the unruly urges of the body, challenges the onerous claims of society, and thereby secures the self’s autonomy.

Taylor’s rendering of the modern self is familiar in its broad outlines. Webb Keane’s achievement in *Christian Moderns* lies in the complex story he tells about the globalization of this self and its agency. *Christian Moderns* opens in the early twentieth century with the “mission encounter” between neo-Reformed Dutch Calvinists and followers of the *marapu* religion on the island of Sumba in eastern Indonesia. The narrative then moves diachronically, charting the postcolonial aftermath of this encounter. Throughout his account, Keane explores intricate negotiations of what he calls “the moral narrative of modernity,” in which “progress” means “human emancipation and self-mastery” (6).

In the Calvinist worldview, agency ultimately resides in God. God’s will and human fate are both finally unknowable. But Calvinists did not respond fatalistically to this indeterminate situation. Instead, as Weber famously posited, an unknowable human fate induced an active, disciplined, and continuous reformation of self, church, and society: “In practical terms, as Weber recognized, Calvin’s doctrine ultimately threw humans back on their own resources” (57). Calvinists felt responsible for bringing the world in line with God’s will, which, by the nineteenth century, corresponded with a robust conception of freedom and subjective moral agency.

This Calvinist notion of an autonomous, self-determining agency lodged itself, Keane argues, in a particular “semiotic ideology” that conditioned missionary activity in Sumba. Semiotic ide-

ologies include both linguistic and non-linguistic signifiers—“music, visual imagery, food, architecture, gesture, and anything else that enters into actual semiotic practice”—in which particular moral and political interests are endowed (21). Keane writes, “Calvinism’s semiotic ideology sharpened the distinction between material expression in immaterial meaning and put them in a hierarchical relation to one another, endowing this distinction with grave moral consequences. It privileged belief, associated with immaterial meaning, over practices that threatened to subordinate belief to material form” (67).

Calvinism’s semiotic ideology simultaneously motivated an interrogation of agency in *marapu* practices, unsettling the objective, material locus of agency in that belief system with the autonomous, subjective conception of agency in the moral narrative of modernity. Keane, following Bruno Latour, calls this “purification.” The purifying intent of Calvinism’s semiotic ideology constituted the antidote to fetishism, the false imputation of agency in non-human, material objects. Fetishism, Keane writes, “[confounds] the proper boundaries between agentive subjects and mere objects” (77).

The mission encounter on Sumba is a semiotic drama in which fetish inevitably persists and purification inevitably fails. In part one, Keane examines the production of Protestantism and Sumbanese experience in the mission encounter. First, Calvinist preoccupations with the subjective experience of agency motivated “a general devaluation of materiality,” aimed at the objective, material loci of agency in *marapu* religion (64). But the antidotal practice of reciting creeds, intended to elicit a pure subjective agency, merely substituted one mediating semiotic form for another (chapter two). Second, missionaries required fine distinctions between Sumbanese culture and religion, a semiotic project that effectively produced both (chapter three). Finally, Calvinism’s semiotic ideology mediated the meaning of Sumbanese history. Missionaries, in effect, argued that conversion would set the Sumbanese past on a trajectory toward a common human future marked by the universal achievement of subjective agency (chapter four).

Part two analyzes missionary attempts to distinguish subjective from objective loci of agency in the effort to “purify” fetishisms. But these encounters, Keane argues, inevitably show the inescapability of the fetish for both Christians and *marapu* followers. Both Christian and *marapu* ideologies mediated assertions of agency in the story of one man’s conversion experience (chapter five). Christians and *marapu* followers both recognize an extra-human source of agency that places limits on human agency, and both affirm that divine agency is necessarily mediated. Thus, each can levy a “charge of fetishism” against the other (chapter six). Finally, this section explores the Protestant preoccupation with sincerity as a marker of conversion (chapter seven). It shows that sincerity is parasitic on “publicly recognizable, socially indexical, materially embodied forms of speech.” In short, Keane writes, “the work of purification cannot fully succeed” (222).

The third and final part is a relatively compact examination of the legacy of fetish and purification in the objectification of ritual speech and the abstraction of money. Both chapters move at a clip, obscuring the connections to fetish and purification that Keane in the earlier sections of the

book so carefully delineates.

For scholars of religious practice, *Christian Moderns* offers a complex framing of the relationship between meaning, agency, and practice that is particularly instructive for clarifying the changing shape of globalized religions. Keane's text pushes practical theologians to consider the legacy of modern conceptions of agency that persists in contemporary mission projects, even as the focus on conversion gives way to the discourse of aid, development, liberation, or empowerment.

John Senior
Emory University