

Envisioning a Pragmatic Approach to the Archaeology of Religion

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, many archaeologists have lamented over the parlous state of what is often labeled the “archaeology of religion.” Although much of the problem with the development of a satisfying approach to the study of religion in the past lies with religion itself, a notoriously difficult concept with a plethora of definitions, archaeologists themselves must acknowledge that they too bear responsibility for this unsatisfactory situation. Archaeologists have turned to the analysis of ritual in the past because it is easier to see ritual in the archaeological record than religion. But the result has been the creation of a corpus of disembodied ritual that may not fully capture the essential role that religion played in the past as a force for conservatism, transformation, or both. In this essay I argue that religion be reintroduced into the field by reminding archaeologists of what religion does. I illustrate how this can be accomplished within a program of philosophical pragmatism and an examination of contexts, contrasts, and combinations of archaeological data using two case studies. [religion, ritual, pragmatism, Classic Maya, pre-Buddhist Tibet]

Most archaeologists are profoundly unsatisfied with current theoretical approaches to the study of religion in prehistory, yet there is little consensus on how to move the discipline toward a set of more satisfying theoretical constructs. Much of the problem lies with the nature of religion itself, which defies easy definition. It is a complex social phenomenon that resides in human societies at multiple scales, ranging from the privacy of the mind to the overtly public display of religious practice. Anthropologists and others have wrangled for decades on what constitutes religion and how it should be defined, and not surprisingly, there is little agreement on the core features of religion. Concepts such as “sacred” and “profane,” once seen as essential, are now seen as blurry and prone to misuse. While all students of religion acknowledge that religion for all humans is at least concerned with “spiritual experience,” the very existence of religion in small-scale societies is often doubted. Obviously, this reflects a bias in definition in favor of the religious practices observed in the canonical traditions of more complex

societies (Insell 2001:3–10), but it is true that religion in simpler societies is slippery and difficult to define since it is so tightly entwined with other aspects of life.

If religion is a problem for the ethnographer, pity the poor archaeologist. For the archaeologist, religion, however it may be defined, is only perceived when it is expressed through some act that has material consequences, and even then, identifying what is religion and what is some other form of social discourse remains problematic. To capture religion, we are enjoined to conceptualize approaches to it such as the “materializations of ideology” (DeMarrais et al. 1996) or “ritual technology” (Marcus 2006; Scarborough 1998). While useful, these approaches say more about archaeology than they do about religion. An obvious and practical consequence of our focus upon the material has been to look for the archaeological signatures of categories of religious experience, institutions, or practice; examples include shamanism (Price 2001; see also Whitney and Keyser 2006), religious institutions such as the cult (Barrowclough

and Malone 2007), or more esoteric categories of belief and practice, such as witches (Walker 1998).

Although I acknowledge that this type of research is essential, it also has a downside, and that has been the narrowing of archaeological focus from religion (perhaps writ large) to the idea of the ritual (writ small or, perhaps, writ narrow). It seems that to many archaeologists, ritual is religion, or at least the only possible avenue to understanding prehistoric religion at our disposal. Ritual is thought to be accessible whereas religion is not. This focus upon ritual fits nicely with our increasingly intense emphasis on agents (Dobres and Robb 2000) and practice theory (Pauketat 2001), and the whole enterprise bears the intellectual imprimatur of a distinguished scholar of ritual, Catherine Bell (1992, 1997), the citation of whom helps to justify our elevation of ritual over religion as an object of study. Our field has over the past two decades or so seen a veritable explosion in interest in ritual in articles, books and edited volumes, symposia at our national and international meetings, and review papers (for some of the most prominent examples, see Barrowclough and Malone 2007; Bradley 1998, 2005; Brück 1999; Fogelin 2007; Garwood et al. 1991; Insoll 2004; Kyriakidis 2007; Plunket 2002).

At the risk of overstating my case, I would argue that this has created a corpus of disembodied ritual, wherein the identification of the ritual process or presumed ritual venue is deemed more salient than a sustained discussion of the importance of the ritual to those who conducted it and what it might have meant for understanding continuity and change in the lives of these peoples. In other words, I argue that our obsessive focus upon ritual as a category of analysis has led us to forget that what we are really looking at is *religion in action* in some long-dead, ancient society. And before I am accused of being a hypocrite, let me acknowledge that I am guilty as charged; in 1993, I published a paper entitled "Ritual, Hierarchy, and Change in Foraging Societies." Although my goal in the essay was to argue that ritual was a key element in the development of inequality in foraging societies, I was really talking about *religion* as the enabler. I have since extended this argument in a discussion about bringing back consideration of religion itself to help us better understand the emergence of persistent inequality in transegalitarian societies. I suggest that religion

can be used by agents to maintain tradition, conservatism, and egalitarian rules and roles. It can also be transformative, however, and challenge those egalitarian rules by appropriation of traditional identities, roles, or symbols cast into new forms with new meanings, or even the introduction of wholly new ones. The problem, of course, is to determine the circumstances under which religion is traditional or becomes transformative.

and how the material aspects of religion reflect (or fail to reflect) societal change and the appearance of more robust and persistent forms of social inequality. [Aldenderfer 2010:81]

In thinking of religion as an enabler, I am less interested in what religion is than what religion *does*. I do not intend this interest to be a return to a sterile functionalism but instead a recognition that religion is a dynamic entity within all societies and has multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory functions and roles in the hands of agents with different and competing agendas. Religion can be used to promote conformity or to break with it. In essence, we need to remind ourselves that religion is involved to greater or lesser degrees in the daily lives of actors in the past, and therefore, it is incumbent upon us to develop effective approaches to seeing it in the past as well.

In the remainder of this essay, I outline my thinking on what constitutes a pragmatic approach to the archaeology of religion. Following a brief discussion of what religion does, I will then outline what it means to adopt a pragmatic approach to the study of religion. I then turn to elements of this approach, which include a consideration of contexts, exploration of contrasts, and effective combinations of data and theory to create robust interpretations of the role of religion in the past. To illustrate this, I will examine what role religion played in the Classic Maya collapse as revealed through research in ritual caves in Belize (Moyes 2007; Moyes et al. 2009) and follow that with a discussion of the use of standing stones—*rdo rings*—as an element of religious practice on the Tibetan plateau in the pre-Buddhist era (Aldenderfer 2003, 2007).

What Religion Does

Although it is well known and much lamented that there is no widely agreed-upon definition of religion, it is worth taking a brief look at what some of the major scholars of it have proposed. By carefully combining the primary themes of these definitions, it becomes possible to create an approximation of what religion does. Although this list is necessarily selective, I believe it faithfully represents the received wisdom about religion that has been developed over the past century (Aldenderfer 2010).

Edward Tylor (1871) saw religion as an engagement with "spiritual beings" and argued that religion was best seen as an attempt by people to understand the world in which they live. Karl Marx (1970) saw religion as inextricably connected to power relationships within society. Religion served to disguise power relations by masking the individual's alienation from the fruits of labor through the

creation of a false sense of community that served the ends of those in power. While serving to foster group integration and harmony, it did so through subversion. Emile Durkheim sought to characterize religion as a social fact and suggested that it served as a “unified system of beliefs and practice relative to sacred things, that is to say, things which are set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all of those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1995:44). He also believed that religion was essential to social cohesion and social solidarity, thus anticipating a functionalist view of religion. Bronislaw Malinowski (1954) also saw religion as promoting social solidarity but was more interested in exploring the emotional foundations of religion and how it provided psychological solace to believers in times of crisis. In so doing, religion reinforced a sense of group cohesion in the face of crisis. He also saw religion as a powerful moral force, one that defined right conduct. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) saw religion as a set of codes that reflected innate structures of the human mind. He argued that these codes and symbols, most prominently expressed through myth, formed the conceptual basis for examining and representing social reality. Anthony F. C. Wallace (1966:25–29), while emphasizing the role of religion as the fundamental societal force for social control, identity formation, and value definition, also portrayed it as a means by which social contradictions could be rationalized and justified. He also suggested that in some contexts, religion could be seen as a source of inspiration for social change. Victor Turner (1967) explored religion via ritual and emphasized the ways in which symbols represented religious beliefs. He further emphasized the importance of understanding ritual, thus religion, as both process and performance and saw ritual as a means by which conflict within society is overcome and a heightened sense of community is created. Continuing with the emphasis on symbolic approaches to the understanding of religion, Clifford Geertz (1966, 1973:90) saw religion as a cultural system embodied by a collection of symbols that created “pervasive moods and motivations in men,” which conceptualized the nature of existence and defined values, social roles, and beliefs. Maurice Bloch (1992) saw religion and politics inextricably intertwined across all levels of sociocultural complexity but noted that relationships among symbols, religion, ritual, politics, and action can be extremely complex. That is, a ritual event sanctioned by religious belief may remain constant and unchanging through periods of dramatic socioeconomic transformations. Here, religion may appear conservative, but through its use in novel and new contexts by emerging leaders, a traditional form is used to justify new social circumstances. Finally, Harvey Whitehouse (2000, 2004) defined two modes of religiosity—imagistic and doctrinal—

and showed how the two act in different, but often complementary, ways to promote social reproduction and the maintenance of group cohesion.

This compilation of ideas detailing what religion does should underscore the real difficulty scholars of many fields have had in trying to develop a coherent and comprehensive definition of religion. As Fogelin (2007:59–60) notes, the slipperiness of religion has led some archaeologists to narrow their focus and rely upon quite restrictive definitions of religion to explore the past, while others, seeing it much as I do as a complex phenomenon resting at the nexus of a variety of social contexts, have tended to lament that because religion is “everywhere,” distinguishing religion from the quotidian is a formidable, and quite possibly futile, task. For example, Renfrew (1985:21–22), in his laudable goal of creating a set of criteria by which cults in the past can be observed, acknowledges that the criteria he proposes will likely lead to the exclusion of religious rituals with less robust archaeological signatures. As Fogelin (2007:59) notes, this is at least in part due to his structuralist theoretical position on religion. In another instance, Insoff (2005:111–112) takes Brian Hayden (2003) to task for relying too heavily, in his opinion, on a “cultural ecological” theoretical perspective in his explanation of the evolution of religion. While both Renfrew and Hayden make important progress in understanding the nature of past religions in the domains of their studies, I argue that neither narrowing nor pessimism is the appropriate response to the fuzzy nature of religion. Instead, we need to employ a pragmatic research philosophy in the study of religion in the past.

Philosophical Pragmatism and the Study of Religion in the Past

Much of the perceived problem with the archaeological analysis of religion lies with archaeologists themselves and what appears to be their unrealistic expectations about what theoretical constructs of religion should look like. Discussion tends to devolve into comparisons of broad constructs like cognitive processualism (Renfrew 1994), practice (Aldenderfer 2008), memory (Van Dyke 2003), power (Schachner 2001), or structure (Insoff 2004). While each of these has value in the study of religion, no single theoretical perspective can nor should hope to capture what religion and its material representation “mean,” precisely because religion sits at the nexus of multiple social, cognitive, and behavioral domains. Thus, to pursue an “archaeology of religion” from any one of these approaches is quixotic and counterproductive to our goals, one of which surely is to develop a more robust and satisfying exploration of the past.

Power *may* be important, memory *may* be important, and experience *may* be important, but none are necessarily capable by themselves of providing a well-rounded vision of the action of religion in the past.

If this is true, how do we proceed? I argue that archaeologists need to remind themselves of what theory is supposed to do and how it should be applied to the study of the past. I suggest that a philosophical pragmatism, developed variously in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, serve as the basis of the archaeological analysis of religion. Philosophical pragmatism in scientific research is widely misunderstood. The title of a recent essay by an advocate of a more thoughtful approach to the study of religion reflects this point nicely: “The Wedding of Psychology, Ethnography, and History: Methodological Bigamy or Tripartite Free Love?” (Lawson 2004). To many, as Lawson suggests, pragmatism implies a less than rigorous treatment of data, method, and theory and is thought to reflect an inappropriate emphasis on getting the right answer and supporting a cherished hypothesis as opposed to finding out whether that hypothesis is actually supported. This critique misses the point of a pragmatic philosophy; it is not about “anything goes” in scientific research, but more about asking the question “What difference would it make to us in our interpretation of the past if some statement about it were true?” Here, outcomes, not origins, are what matter (Kaplan 1964:42). Does our use of some theoretical construct or combination of them advance our understanding, interpretation, or knowledge of the past, and in what way? Done properly, pragmatism encourages borrowing, which is certainly a necessity in the study of religion since it has a multiplicity of meanings and serves a variety of social ends.

Philosophical pragmatism has a long and august relationship with the study of religion. William James, in his monumental *On the Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), used his version of pragmatic philosophy to explore mysticism and the personal dimension of religious belief. More pertinent to this essay, however, is the philosophical pragmatism of Charles Peirce. Although the bulk of his work was concerned with the development of logic and hypothesis testing, his version of pragmatism has clear implications for the study of ancient religion:

When [Peirce] said that the whole meaning of a (clear) conception consists in the entire set of its practical consequences, he had in mind that a meaningful conception . . . must somehow be capable of being related to some sort of collection of possible empirical observations under specifiable conditions. [Burch 2010]

This observation has two important implications: first, pragmatism helps us better understand how theory can be used most effectively. Theories have fields of relevance (or Peirce’s “specifiable conditions”), and in the social sciences, those fields tend to be relatively narrow. Theories are tools of inquiry and are designed within some well-defined context to extend our understanding of some phenomenon or process. There are no true theories, but there are theories that advance our understanding further than others. Theories can and should be combined in profitable ways to shed light on the topic at hand. Although pragmatism as well as other schools of philosophy see theories as constructed based upon what is known, as Alison Wylie (1994) notes, the use of any theory must take place within a context of evidential constraints and accepted bodies of independent data that can be used to test and examine the assumptions, linking arguments, and contents of these theories for their correspondence with what we have learned from them.

Second, Peirce’s pragmatism creates a context for exploring how conceptions are given meaning within a specific context—his theory of “semiotics,” which is similar to, but not the same as, Saussure’s (1974) semiotics. Peirce’s theory of signs is composed of three parts: representamen, interpretant, and object.

A sign . . . [in the form of a *representamen*] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or ates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. [Peirce 1931–58, vol. 2:228f]

What is attractive about Peirce’s theory of signs is that it has a strongly materialist orientation (Pruce and Bauer 2001). That is, while signs can be purely mental constructs, Peirce argued that signs can have what he termed “an objective reality,” although there is no necessary physical connection between the representamen (or the form of the sign; see Nith 1990) and the object that the sign is meant to reference.

In an archaeological context, the representamen may take any material form—pot sherd, structure, rock art—anything. The interpretant is the assumed mental construct that takes the representamen—the archaeological “thing”—and gives it meaning in reference to the object. The problem, of course, is that all of this has to be inferred from the material record. This is where theory comes in; it provides the framework of “specifiable conditions” wherein the interpretation of the signs can be attempted, that is, a

reasonable argument of the larger meaning of the archaeological “things.” And finally, to do this, we must now turn to what archaeology does best—examine contexts, contrasts, and combinations—in the “things” of our studies with a specific focus upon religion.

Contexts, Contrasts, and Combinations in the Archaeology of Religion

Although archaeologists are faced with a myriad of problems when studying the past, we have found ways to overcome the worst effects of some of them. We have had reasonable success in defining the contexts of the societies we study. By contexts, I mean the broader ecological, demographic, economic, and political settings of these groups. Not surprisingly, these are the domains of human societies that are most closely tied to the material record of the past, and which are of course located in the lower rungs of Christopher Hawkes’ (1954) ladder of archaeological inference. As we track these evidentiary domains over time, we can monitor changes or stability in such constructs as population growth and density, sedentarization, resource intensification, factional competition, social and environmental circumscription, and many others. Based on our readings of ethnography, which has informed us about how people in general respond to change in these constructs, we then evaluate hypotheses about the nature of change, if any, within other, less visible, domains of the societies we study, such as leadership and its varied forms or, for the purposes of this essay, religion. In effect, we are attempting to develop an understanding of the field of play in which religion is to be found.

As an example, I have recently described how religion was used to justify the increasing inequality of Enga big men in New Guinea as well as to resist its extension on the part of other social actors (Aldenderfer 2010). The context, described by Wiessner and Tumu (1998) as the long-term consequences of the introduction of sweet potato cultivation into the region, is one of increasing population growth and density, group fissioning and subsequent movement into previously unoccupied areas until these were filled up, intensifying levels of intergroup conflict, a ramping up of the ceremonial exchange of valued objects, and demands for unsustainable levels of support by big men from their followers. Within this context, big men transformed a traditional religious initiation cult—the Kepele—to support and justify the growing inequality between themselves and their followers by making an explicit association with agricultural fertility, a female principle, and the increasing generation of wealth by the big men. New symbols of the transformed cult prac-

tices were created, and new venues for ritual practice were constructed.

But within this very context, religion was also used to resist the extension and justification of the inequality of the big men and the crushing demands placed on their followers by their incessant competition. A new cult, Ain’s, calling for the rejection of Kepele cult practices, was created by four brothers who were respected men in their community but who were not big men. This cult, which used the sun as a powerful symbol, enjoined its followers to give up war, destroy the symbols of the Kepele cult, and resist the demands of the big men. In so doing, its followers would themselves become big men and would be sustained by the magical appearance of pigs, sweet potatoes, and ceremonial objects.

The temporal span of these social, economic, religious, and political transformations took place over some 300 years, but most, especially population growth, apparently accelerated within the past 220 years (Wiessner and Tumu 1998:355). In many areas of the world, especially in later prehistory, 200–300 years is the length of a typical archaeological phase or period. Although many of the events that transpired, such as the transformation of the cults or specific performances of the rituals associated with them might well be archaeologically invisible, it is the case that the majority of the context-related bodies of evidence could have been recognized within this span of time. This observation is consistent with Beck et al. (2007) and their discussion of “eventful archaeology” and the ways in which significant structural transformations in society can be reflected by abrupt changes in aspects of material culture, settlement patterns, and other features of society that I here describe as context.

My point in this presentation of the meaning of context is this: evidence for the role of religion during periods of relatively rapid change in these contexts should become routine. When we observe acceleration of rates of change or outright transformation in the status of these contexts, it is likely that religion in some way is in play. This does not mean, however, that when these contexts are relatively stable, religion is not active or playing a significant role in societal reproduction. As Wiessner and Tumu (1998:377–379) note, cults of all kinds were created, modified, and forgotten within the recent past in the New Guinea highlands. Most of these cults were directed at social reproduction and, as such, were essential to the inculcation of social roles, values, and worldview. But it is the case that a few of the cults were used by agents to effect or resist social transformation. A careful analysis of context, then, can help us determine when the action of religion is likely to be the most visible from an archaeological perspective.

Contexts, then, tell us how to look for the multiple roles of religion in past societies and when the manipulation of religion might take on heightened significance. Contrasts, however, give us a sense of what to look *for*. Saying so, however, does not help that much. We know that artifacts have multiple social and symbolic roles, and these are frequently contested (Robb 1998). Thus an artifact does not inherently signify religion or some other social domain. Artifacts are assigned roles via practice, and in the sense of Peirce's signs, they are used to represent concepts, ideas, or even other objects within a social group. The problem, of course, is that we must find ways to identify those objects—our archaeological “things”—that signal religion in some social context with reasonable certainty. There is a certain amount of truth in the old, stale joke about artifacts: if we do not know what it is, we assign it to the “ceremonial” category. Artifacts that are associated with religion and religious practice are frequently “special” in the sense that they may have decorations, forms, and disposal practices that distinguish them from more quotidian objects (Osborne 2004). We may find them in “different” or “unexpected” spaces, or otherwise find that they are “treated differently.”

But contrasts can only be recognized if we have sufficient control over variability in the archaeological record, which means that we have to excavate and sample with greater care and insight. Limited samples mean limited contrast unless we are very lucky. And it is here that the middle-range research into ritual and ritual assemblages has the potential of being so useful despite my somewhat disparaging comments expressed above. We need this kind of work because this is the only way in which strong contrasts in artifact type, placement, and treatment that might signal religion at work are going to be recognized for what they are.

Combinations put it all together: contexts, contrasts, and the set of theoretical perspectives thought to be of use in explaining the patterns seen in the archaeological record. In effect, combination is all about solving problems in the past and making an effort to craft plausible, but also empirically grounded, explanations. I will illustrate this with two case studies: the Late Classic Maya drought cult and the pre-Buddhist use of standing stones in far western Tibet.

The Late Classic Maya Drought Cult

The Classic Maya collapse is perhaps one of the best-known and most hotly debated topics within archaeology. Popularized by many authors, including Jared Diamond (2005), it serves as a cautionary tale for modern societies, one that involves environmental degradation, political tur-

moil, population removals, and the downfall of the Maya elites and the political economy that sustained them. Numerous explanations for the collapse have been offered, but broad consensus has emerged that the events that ultimately are known to comprise the collapse were triggered by three periods of drought beginning around C.E. 754 and lasting with varying intensity until C.E. 922. Drought continued to plague the Maya lowlands until well into the 13th century C.E. (Gill 2001). Droughts of this magnitude made increasingly difficult for agricultural production to support both commoners and elites with the surpluses necessary to maintain societal reproduction and the elite political economy.

Although many early explanations evidenced a suspicion that religion and ideology played a role in the collapse it has only been within the past decade or so that serious attention has been paid to just how religion fit into the causation mix. Holley Moyes (2006, 2007) and her colleagues (Moyes et al. 2009) have argued that the idea of a “loss in faith” in Maya elites and their religious activities has become increasingly popular as a potential explanatory factor of the collapse. As good as this idea sounds, it has never been adequately tested. Fortunately, Moyes and her colleagues set out to do just that by looking at changes in ritual practice within Maya caves before and during the time frame of the collapse. Through careful analysis of paleoenvironmental data, stratigraphic excavation, judicious use of ethnographic analogy, the examination and comparisons of artifacts of cave assemblages across much of southern and western Belize, and finally, multiple theoretical perspectives on religion, they were able to define a unique ritual response to the drought. In their view, ritual practice conducted within these caves was transformed by Maya elites who used religion to ameliorate the effects of the drought and to bring rainfall back to their people. Even more interesting was that the structure of ritual performance changed significantly as the drought worsened. That is, using well-constructed proxy measures of cave use, Moyes and her colleagues were able to show that ritual was conducted in different places in the caves at the very height of the period of drought when compared to the predrought period and that the ritual assemblage itself changed.

Let's examine this case study from the framework for the analysis of religion in the past I have proposed in this essay: philosophical pragmatics, contexts, contrasts, and combinations. Moyes and her colleagues explicitly identified religion as what they were seeking to find. They did this by making a strong case for the habitual use of caves as venues for religious practice in the Maya world and by using ethnographic analogy in two domains: to connect caves to water-related religious beliefs in Maya cosmology, and to connect Maya

elites, kings in particular, specifically to rainmaking rituals as one of their most important functions. In other words, one of their perspectives on religion was to identify it with power and power relationships within Maya society, a role assigned to it by Marx as well as more-modern authors. They temper this implicit perspective on religion with two others: the use of religious ritual to effect change, and a phenomenological viewpoint on the esoteric nature of the ritual practices and the implications this has for both the actors (presumably the Maya elites) and the witnesses (commoners and others). That is, the rituals must be performed within liminal, hidden spaces by a select few. The placement of objects within the cave in new locations—hard-to-reach ledges that are also difficult to see—suggests to the authors the heightened importance of even more esoteric venues for the performance of the rituals.

The context within which these changes in ritual practice are taking place is obvious: there is a real crisis in agricultural production that threatens to undermine social reproduction and elite political economy. This observation is derived from the extensive use made by the authors of the excellent paleoenvironmental record of the region. It is clear that, at least from an ecological perspective, things are not well in the Maya lowlands. Ethnography, used extensively here, is replete with examples of how kings and other elites charged with rainmaking functions turn to religious solutions for answers to these crises. It would be surprising that religion would *not* be used in these circumstances.

To develop contrasts, Moyes and her colleagues did a number of obvious and not-so-obvious things to extract from the archaeological record data to support their argument. The obvious one was to excavate. Most archaeologists analyzing cave deposits in the Maya world have been content to examine surface assemblages, and while that research has created the foundation for our current understanding that caves were used as ritual venues in the Maya world, the lack of excavated contexts means that it is also nearly impossible to look at change through time since many of these surface contexts are highly mixed palimpsests of use over considerable spans of time. For Moyes and her colleagues, excavations in one of these caves—Chechen Ha—provided the fundamental basis for monitoring changes in artifact assemblages over time and thus for potentially being informative of contrasts in artifacts present, their treatment, and disposal. They also sampled a wide range of locations within the cave and were able to identify not only changes in artifact assemblages over time (as the drought intensified, large, but broken, water jars were hauled into the cave; this was not characteristic of predrought ritual performance) but also changes in the locations of these artifacts and, more generally, the way in which the cave was used. In predrought times, multiple loca-

tions within the passageways of the cave were favored areas, whereas during drought times, the difficult-to-reach-and-see ledges became the locations of ritual performance. Instead of moving through the cave and stopping at multiple locations, ritual practitioners moved directly to areas beneath the ledges and apparently moved little beyond them.

The not-so-obvious way in which Moyes and her colleagues created contrasts was to study the distribution of charcoal patterns both horizontally (through the cave passages) and vertically (through cave stratigraphy). The Maya used pine torches to navigate through caves, and through actualistic experiments, Moyes and her colleagues were able to define different kinds of charcoal rain from these torches. Then, using photomapping technologies of excavated surfaces (Craig et al. 2006), they were able to observe changes in how cave spaces were used over time. Standing still in one place with a torch creates a distinctive pattern of charcoal rain when compared to that created by movement through the cave. In turn, these patterns of charcoal distribution could then be correlated with artifact variability in time and space. In sum, the combination of traditional archaeological practice and innovative methods allowed them to create a rich body of contrasts that could be placed in time and space.

The combination pulls it all together: distinct lines of theoretical positions on religion were used to situate the ways in which religion may have been used by actors both before and during the periods of drought. Potential actors—Maya kings—were carefully tied to rainmaking, caves, and ritual performance by ethnography and ethnographic analogy. The context of these performances—the long period of drought faced by the Maya over almost 200 years—was clearly defined and shown to be of sufficient magnitude to create significant resource shortfalls. Contrasts of all kinds were created by an effective sampling strategy for the cave and the careful analysis of artifact types, their locations, and other measures of the use of space. These contrasts, combined with the insights into how religion is used in crisis from multiple theoretical perspectives, have created a richly textured, well-supported explanation of how the Maya responded to the droughts and have convincingly demonstrated that they did in fact perceive the consequences of the drought.

In this instance, philosophical pragmatism has been used to identify multiple theoretical perspectives and their relevant domains with the intent of limning how together they can show the action of religion in the past via the analysis of ritual performance. It is not the ritual per se that is the focus of attention, but the way in which changes in the rituals signal likely societal and political changes in place during a period of prolonged crisis.

The Standing Stones of Pre-Buddhist Far Western Tibet

Unlike the Classic Maya, relatively little is known of the archaeological cultures of the Tibetan plateau in the pre-Buddhist era. The dominant polity in the time period in question—ca. 550 B.C.E. to C.E. 100 in far western Tibet—is thought to have been Zhang zhung, which is described variously as a small-scale polity, a state, and even an empire. Although its scope and extent remain a mystery, much more is known of aspects of settlement patterns, residential architecture, and ceremonial features (Aldenderfer 2006).

One of the most important artifacts that signals power and possibly religion is the *rdō ring*: the name is a Tibetan term that is glossed as “standing stone.” These stones, variously described as menhirs, cromlechs, and dolmens by the early explorers and visitors to the Tibetan plateau, come in a variety of shapes and presumed functions (Aldenderfer 2003:3–5). *Rdō ring* are today prominent features of the Tibetan mountain cult, which many scholars believe is the remnant of pre-Buddhist religious practice on the plateau. Mountains have had varied meanings in plateau religion, and over time these meanings were assimilated and absorbed into Tibetan Buddhist religious ideology and terminology. At the core, mountains were associated with clan divinities—

pho lha—and their associated lineages. At a more regional level, such deities may represent territorial divinities—*yul lha*—that have responsibility for the protection of multiple valleys, villages, and regions. And as absorbed by Tibetan Buddhism, these deities became known as “Protectors of the doctrine,” or *chos kyong* (Blondeau 1998:9). Shrines are constructed near and on these mountains, and they are the scenes of pilgrimages at varying scales and ritual events. Especially in western Tibet, *rdō ring* are placed in these shrines at the foot of the mountain, but also atop them in some instances (Aldenderfer 2003).

The *rdō ring* that are the subject of this analysis were first discovered at the residential site of Dindun, a Zhang zhung era village (Aldenderfer and Moyes 2004). Stones were found in two distinct locations: on the east and west sides of the village, and in a small chamber in the largest, most complex residential structure at the site (Figures 3.1 and 3.2). The *rdō ring* on the eastern side of the village was once housed in a small rectangular enclosure (Figure 3.3); the stone on the western side of the village appears to have been moved and is not now found within a structure. Subsequent survey within the Yarlung Khabab drainage near Dindun has discovered a number of village sites that have *rdō ring* in similar locations on the village margins and housed within small rectangular structures (Aldenderfer in



Figure 3.1. Plan view of Structure 4 at Dindun.



Figure 3.2. The rdo ring within Structure 4 at Dindun (photograph by the author).



Figure 3.3. The rdo ring at the eastern side of Dindun. Note the remains of the rectangular structure toward the upper right of the image (photograph by the author).

press). Finally, John Bellezza (2001) has described a similar *rdo ring* from a large, complex domestic residence at rDo Dril bu on the northern Tibetan plateau (Figure 3.4; see also Aldenderfer 2007:fig. 32). The structure and the placement of the *rdo ring* within it are very similar to the residential structure at Dindun.

A third kind of *rdo ring* has now been discovered near Zhang zhung era villages (Aldenderfer in press). At BYK2, a large toppled *rdo ring* was found in a complex mass of nonresidential features along a ridgeline that lies above a Zhang zhung village. Surrounding this stone are large and small stone circles of indeterminate function and low platform forms with multiple steps. Although larger than other *rdo ring* found in domestic contexts, this stone was shaped in a similar manner to them.

Once again, we can examine this case study from the framework for the analysis of religion in the past: philosoph-

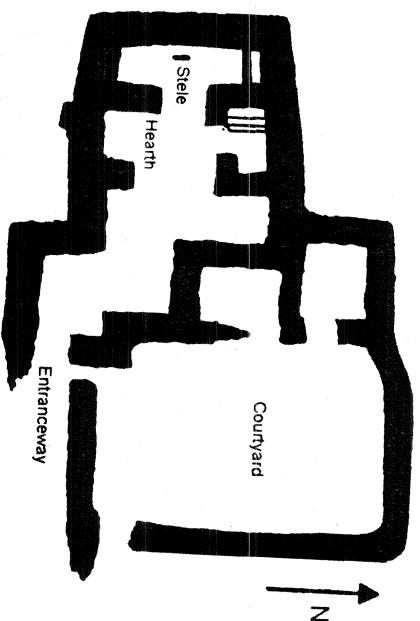


Figure 3.4. Plan view of the "Founder's House" at rDo Dril bu (after Bellezza 2001:237–243, 411).

ical pragmatics, contexts, contrasts, and combinations. This discussion closely follows Aldenderfer (2007). The initial warrants for thinking these stones have a religious meaning come from ethnography on the modern Tibetan mountain cult and its presumed antiquity. A second, somewhat more indirect, warrant is provided by the multiple, contrasting contexts within which the stones are found. Although found in quotidian contexts—villages—they are found in special, different, or unusual spaces in and around the villages. A third warrant comes from an unexpected direction—the human propensity for the semantic categorization of visual information. Visually salient objects, such as mountains, are known as "focalizing" symbols that condense the importance of activities performed on them, near them, or within sight of them (Hanson 1994). Our eyes are drawn to the large, the unusual, and the different within the visual field, and Bradley (2000) has used this propensity to great advantage in crafting satisfying explanations about the relationships between monuments and topography. My approach, therefore, is a combination of phenomenology and practice or, in other words, how these stones might have been perceived and experienced in their varied locations. As such, this is consistent with Victor Turner's (1967) emphasis on the shared experience of religious practice (and its materialization).

Unlike in the case study of the Classic Maya collapse, there is no sense of a cultural or regional crisis that may be driving some sort of transformation within the Zhang zhung polity at this time. Many of the easily identified proxy measures of context, such as population growth or changes in population density, are not known in this region. On the contrary, this examination of the standing stones is more

about the maintenance of tradition and the exploration of what the meaning of the placement of the stones might imply for societal reproduction.

Despite the lack of data that speak strongly to context, we do have reasonably good information about contrasts. Stones are placed in a number of locations in Zhang zhung villages, and further, ethnography suggests that very similar stones are found on mountaintops or at their bases. We can profitably compare and contrast variation in visibility, access, and representation as means by which to employ a phenomenological and practice-based theoretical framework. *Rdo ring* within high-status houses can only be seen from within the houses. In the two examples of these structures that we have, the stones are in very similar locations. Thus while passersby were likely aware of the presence of the stones within these houses, the stones could not be directly seen. The degree to which the stones in the small rectangular structures at the edges of the village could be seen is not clear. If the structures were roofed, it is likely that the stones could have been seen only by walking past the doorway. However, the structures themselves would have been visible both within the village as well as from approaches to the village, and thus the presence of the stone was recognized. Finally, the large *rdo ring* above the village would have been difficult to see from below, but the stone itself would have been visually prominent to anyone approaching the village from virtually any direction.

Access to the stones within the domestic residences was quite limited, and further, the small chamber in which the stones were housed suggests only a very small number of people could enter and be near the stone at any time. Possession of the stone by the householders is implied as is control of visual awareness and physical access to the stone. The stones in the small structures at the edge of the village also have limited access since the interior spaces of the structures are small. However, entry into the structures is easy, and the stone itself is easily approachable once inside. Control of access to the stone appears to be important, but the location of the structures within the active areas of the village suggests that possession in the narrow sense (like that of the stones within the domestic structures) is not likely. The stone above the village was accessible only by leaving the village, climbing above it, and navigating the narrow space of the ridgeline.

The stones themselves, although of different sizes, are very similar in treatment and detail. They are triangular, have massive bases, show shaping of the tip, and are devoid of artistic embellishment. In the case of Dindun, the stones were quarried from a stone field at the base of a modern sacred mountain known locally as Mumbu (Aldenderfer 2003).

Turning to combinations, a number of insights into how these stones were used can be offered. Limited access to the stones within the domestic structures and the buildings at the edges of the village speaks to control but also inclusion. Within the domestic structures the residents have a clear relationship to the meaning of the stone and the right to display it to themselves. Others in the village do not have this privilege. But the placement of the stones at the edges of the village suggests inclusion and the identification of the village as a corporate entity with the meaning of the stone. Finally, the stone above the village signals a different message. Although not seen from below, it can be seen from afar, and it identifies the village below and its included inhabitants as belonging to this place. The stone thus creates a relationship with the village and the surrounding landscape. At the same time, however, the stones have been brought into the village and into a select few domestic residences.

But are these patterns reflective of religion? I believe they are, and I turn to two of the warrants—ethnography and visual salience—to support this claim. The patterns of placement of the stones suggest they are special, and their similar form and shape suggests they are meant to send a consistent meaning. I argue that the stones are a mimesis of mountains. The stones physically resemble mountains and high peaks. The *rdo ring* above the village is located within a nondomestic, most probably, religious space, and the stones suggest that the mountain has been brought into it. The stones in the village focalize the religious activity that takes place above it and literally bring it into the community. And the stones within the high-status residences suggest an intimate identification of this religious practice and its inhabitants. These patterns are very reminiscent of those observed in modern mountain cults. The stones are the literal representations of the power of the protector deities of the sacred mountain, and this power has been brought down to the village to both identify and protect it.

In this example, philosophical pragmatism has been used to craft an explanation of the placement and possible meaning(s) of the standing stones. In Peirce's terminology, the *rdo ring* is the representamen—the archaeological "thing." Two different theoretical perspectives are brought to bear to provide access to the meaning of the stone to the inhabitants of the villages—*rdo ring* defined through ethnography as symbols of social and religious significance, and the idea of their visual salience as a focalizing symbol. These perspectives offer a number of "specifiable conditions" that can be used to frame a series of "interpretants," using Peirce's terminology. Although these are not directly accessible in the archaeological record, possible and plausible interpretants include clan or lineage, inclusion and

exclusion, and deities. Finally, the object in this example is the mountain itself.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have made an attempt to refocus archaeological attention on religion. This effort is not meant to be at the expense of ritual, but instead, I hope this essay serves as a reminder that ritual is usually deeply embedded *within* religion. And while I believe that ritual is a proper thing to examine in the past, we should never forget that ritual is only one aspect, perhaps the easiest accessed, of religious life in the past. We should also think less about creating an "archaeology of religion" but instead turn our attention to finding religion in the past and analyzing what it does. In other words, I advocate problem-oriented thinking that brings religion back into the causal mix of why things stay the same (religion as conservative) or why things change (religion as transformative). By focusing our attention on what religion does, we can avoid many, if not all, of those sterile debates on what religion is. This also encourages a more philosophically pragmatic approach to religion in the past, and one that can help situate religion within the causal mix. By examining in detail contexts, contrasts, and combinations within a flexible theoretical framework, it becomes possible to see religion more effectively.

The examples I have offered in this essay show two complementary ways of using philosophical pragmatism: first, as a way to combine distinct theoretical perspectives to identify "specifiable conditions" as to whether explanations derived from them are plausible (i.e., does the explanation advance our understanding of the past) and second, by using Peirce's theory of signs, to assign meaning to material culture associated with religious practice in a plausible, and ultimately meaningful, manner.

Religion in the past can be almost triely obvious and yet be subtle to the point of invisibility. But wherever one finds oneself along this continuum, it behooves us to remember that religion can be one of the most powerful social forces in any society at any time. Forgetting or ignoring this is not an option if we wish to construct truly satisfying interpretations of the past.

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