



Daria Dubovka. A Review of **Amy Whitehead**. *Religious Statues and Personhood: Testing the Role of Materiality*. London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, 216 pp.

The Snares of the ‘Material Turn’ for the Anthropology of Religion

One of the fundamental features of the ‘material turn’ has been the tendency not so much to concentrate on things as objects of study, as to go, in their description, beyond the usual view of things only as symbolic reflections of real relationships between people.¹ The far-reaching prospects of this direction question the discipline’s fundamental distinction between animate and inanimate objects of study. There is an extensive literature that tries by various means to change the existing paradigm. Amy Whitehead, the author of this book, finds her sources of inspiration in Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold and Graham Harvey, who reimagine the relationship between people and things, either seeing the resulting network, the result of the interaction of various actors, as functioning without reference to whether the participants within it are animate or not, or else offering other, non-Western methods of conceptualising the world and humanity.

The anthropology of religion and study of material culture are Amy Whitehead’s main spheres of interest. She originally planned to research into museum exhibits, that is, the functioning of objects outside their usual context of use. However, after visiting a Catholic shrine in a little Spanish village, she became convinced that it would be much more interesting to study

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¹ See, for example, [Sotsiologiya veshchi 2006].

things in their natural environment. As an object of observation she chose a statue of the Virgin Mary in Andalusia, which has been revered by the local inhabitants for several centuries. For comparative material she turned to the neo-pagan cult of the Goddess at Glastonbury. The fieldwork — periodic visits to the Spanish field and regular short visits to the English one — took about three years. Besides observing the ritual life of the statues, the author used material from interviews both with ordinary believers and with religious experts, the priests and guardians of the shrines. In fact, half the book is taken up by the ethnography of these two case studies: description of the rituals, the structure of the community of believers, the religious ideas connected with the statues, practices of veneration and votive offerings. The author is particularly interested in all kinds of bodily or material manifestations of the interaction between the believers and the statues: touching, changing their garments, washing, conversations with them, legitimate and prohibited offerings. In the opinion of Clifford Geertz, a good anthropologist should know the breed of sheep kept by his informants, and Amy Whitehead is perfectly *au fait* with the scraps of material, types of wood, jewelled rings and all the other things which make up the life of the statues in their religious communities. The author's sincere emotions and her honest account of her difficulties and professional mistakes enliven what is already a dynamic picture of the believers' relationships to the statues. I suspect, however, that Whitehead would correct my expression to 'the relationships *between* the believers and the statues.'

Since the book does not set out to answer a particular research question, its main aim is to find a new theoretical language and to use it to describe the person's relationship to the statue as relationships between subjects (p. 4). Whitehead tries to leave behind social constructivism's accustomed view of things only as manifesting, concealing or reflecting relationships between people. In particular, Whitehead explicitly distances herself from Appadurai's approach (p. 99), since even if, formally, things which are transmitted, received and exchanged (things-in-motion) are at the centre of the approach he proposes, in reality these things are interesting only to the extent that they cast light on the functioning of human society [Appadurai 1996: 5]. Whitehead is no less critical of the official statements of Protestant doctrine, and, not so long ago, also of the Catholic authorities, that any form of the material in religious practice is only an image, a symbol of the Divine (pp. 23, 26–9). When they were asked, her Catholic informants usually answered in accordance with the proclaimed doctrine of the entirely symbolic nature of the statue. It is noteworthy that among the neo-pagans the percentage of those who were convinced that their statue was only an image of the divinity was even higher. In this the author sees the Protestant heritage of

modern England. However, the practices of interacting with the shrines in both groups did not correspond well to the official discourse.

After describing the ritual and everyday life of the statues circumstantially and in detail in the first chapters, the author starts painstakingly rewriting the ethnographical fragments in a new language. What is this language? The author cannot simply begin to write as if the statue were speaking, otherwise the book would be seen as a work of fantasy. Besides, Whitehead is well aware that even if the statue is in some sense the subject of the action, the researcher still cannot assume the right to speak in its name, being, so to speak, made of different stuff. Whitehead tries to find a way out of this difficult situation (looking at the world through the statue's eyes) by means of the usual description of the relationship of the person to the object, followed by commentaries indicating that from the statue's point of view it might be quite different. I shall quote an example of how the author writes. This is the passage where Whitehead describes her interaction with her favourite statuette of Ganesha.

'I have a small wooden statue of Ganesh that I am particularly fond of. He rests on the mantel piece over my fireplace, and I sometimes leave milk in a cup for him as an offering (Ganesh supposedly likes milk). <...> Arguably, the statue is not "living" until I have engaged with him in some way such as speaking with him, or leaving him milk. Consequently, from the perspective of the statue perhaps I am not living until I engage with him, too. It can be suggested that there is a tension between the properties of the wood with its own course of being, and the religious identity of Ganesh, which has, in a sense, been superimposed on the wood through its crafting, who might also have a deliberate, prescribed course of being. The tension might suggest that my Ganesh statue can be considered hybridic (part wood, part Ganesh identity, part person to me, part person in his own right). Beings (human beings, object beings) are *who they are*.' (p. 107, author's emphasis).

This sort of caution in describing subjects/objects may have been produced by the sensitivity to the field¹ that is so essential nowadays, and a wish to feel and convey the informants' experience. However, the author is looking for fundamental theoretical support for her way of describing reality. The chapters following the ethnographical part of the book consist of a description of the ideas of different sociologists and anthropologists and the composition of a new mosaic out of these ideas. Unfortunately, Whitehead does not examine the ideas that take her fancy very deeply, nor does she aim

¹ See, for example, Robert Orsi's use of his own childhood memories of Catholic statues during his analysis of field material and his stress on the emotional experience of the researcher studying a community of believers [Orsi 2006: 158–161].

for coherence amongst her borrowed notions, so that the result is more like a *macédoine* of theories than a comprehensible, workable construction.

Let us look in more detail at the way the author uses the works of Tim Ingold, whom she frequently cites. It is a question of the capacity for action (agency). Whitehead disputes the ascription of this capacity only to human beings. One of the quotations that she uses to support this is Ingold's assertion that the capacity for action requires a central nervous system, so that it is ridiculous to ascribe this capacity to anything that does not grow, does not develop and, accordingly, has no skills, and the movement of which is unconnected with perception (pp. 112–13). Perception, which is alien to objects that are not alive, is for Ingold a central concept, by which the interaction of beings within the world may be explained [Ingold 2011]. But Whitehead carries on differently: 'According to devotees, these statues can heal (which is a skill), answer petitions and take centre stage on procession days where they move about and greet their fans' (p. 113). She notes that her interpretation does not accord well with the quotation that precedes it, but it will all be logical so long as the capacity for action is defined not as a quality inherent in everyone and everything, but as a property of relationships and interconnexions. Whitehead calls her approach the animist perspective, according to which a thing becomes a subject not when somebody regards it as inhabited by a spirit (the nineteenth-century understanding of animism), but when the thing takes part in interaction as a subject (p. 103). That is, statues involved in rituals with which the believers' expectations and hopes for healing or other mercies are connected may be regarded as subjects. Admittedly, they retain their status as subjects only for as long as their immediate interaction with their worshippers lasts. So what happens to statues while people are not involved with them? The author considers that this remains unknown to us.

I think that Whitehead's chief omission is her failure to distinguish between the status of a subject and that of an agent. Strictly speaking, being an agent, unlike being a subject, is ascribed by many social theoreticians not only to persons. We often recognise social groups, states, and even more abstract entities like colonial politics or capitalism as capable of action [Wilson 2006: 176–83]. Latour [2014] took a critical view of making such products of the social imagination an explanatory force, but his network and his understanding of agency look very different from the use Whitehead makes of these concepts. In Latour's network (which for me is just a synonym for good ethnography) all the participants are equal, a person may decide not to do something after all, a thing may go wrong: a ship leaks, a pencil breaks, a battery goes flat, and all this leads to a breakdown in the network (obviously, with different

consequences). In Whitehead's ethnography, the statues themselves remain unchanged, and it is only the interpretive and ritual activity of the believers around them that changes.

However, the actor-network theory is a great temptation for researchers into religious groups. What better field, apparently, for the application of ideas about the equalisation of subject and object and even the irrelevance of the very distinction? Anthropologists of religion are used to hearing that the statues speak, icons renew themselves, and springs heal. And, of course, such objects require the believers to approach them in a particular way. But the inclusion in the network of Pasteur's microbes or of scallops was a source of surprise and curiosity for the uninitiated reader, even one inclined to be critical of the new ontology, because it was provocative in its interest in objects which did not exist in the world of the social sciences. In the case of the material with which the anthropology of religion is concerned, it is impossible to understand how Whitehead's new theoretical language differs from the words of her informants. All these phrases about relationships, connexions, and the power which the statues possess appear altogether appropriate in the speech of the believers. For this reason, while reading them one gets the impression that the author is trying to put her informants' emic viewpoint forward as a new theory.

This impression is reinforced by the fact that Whitehead's informants, followed by the author herself, constantly stress the statues' properties as subjects. The statues can be angry or well-disposed, they hear the believers' prayers and can in some way participate in communication. The attribution of such emotional and cognitive capacities to the works of human hands has been examined by Boyer [2001: 51–91] as one of the conditions for the creation of a religious concept. In his opinion, people have certain ontological expectations of the behaviour of other people, animals, plants, inanimate nature and man-made objects. When a wolf starts to speak with a human voice, or a mountain swallows travellers, this violates ontological categories and becomes the reason why objects to which such abilities are ascribed are worshipped. The same thing has happened to the statues in this book, since in the believers' perception they combine the properties of subject and object. Therefore Whitehead's descriptions appear to confuse cause and effect: these wooden artefacts are worshipped because various human and super-human qualities are ascribed to them, and not because, as Whitehead says, there are special relationships and relationalities between people and things.¹

¹ 'Relationality' is a key word in Whitehead's work, meaning 'a co-inspired form of active, mutual relating that emerges from the unique, personal, even intimate relationships that take place between human and other than human beings' (p. 100).

However, the questions which may have been the reason why the book was written are more interesting than the answers proposed by the author. I have in mind the calling into question of the concepts of early anthropological thought: fetish, totem, animism, and the refusal to see all these phenomena as manifestations of false consciousness on the part of the believers and the attempt to take their personal religious experience into account. Whitehead unambiguously prefers her informants' emic descriptions to critical social theory. I hope that a better solution is yet to be found.

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