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The Fetish of Theology

The Challenge of the
Fetish-Object to Modernity

Colby Dickinson



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Praise for *The Fetish of Theology*

“Dickinson’s path-breaking research on the fetish not only brings together an enormous wealth of original sources but also sheds new light on some of the most crucial debates in continental philosophy and theology today. His suggestion that the dichotomy between the fetish and the sacrament, and even between the profane and the divine, needs to be surpassed is brilliantly argued for. With this new book, Dickinson once again proves to be one of the most prominent voices in those domains where continental philosophy and theology meet.”

—Stéphane Symons, *Associate Professor, Institute of Philosophy,
KU Leuven, Belgium*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Fetishes are terribly difficult to define. Yet the history of the West in the modern era makes clear that they could easily be defined by what they were not: sacramental-objects. Despite this problematic and colonial distinction, however, there is really little theoretical difference between these all-too-similar material realities. The history of Christianity contains within itself a deep record of faithful expectations that the relics of a revered saint or other holy figure might produce some supernatural, miraculous intervention within the world. Many hopes and dreams, especially during personal and collective times of crisis, have routinely been centered on the perceived ability of a particular holy object to protect, heal, or assist an individual in their lives and beyond their own capabilities. Medieval European Christians, for example, often expected supernatural outcomes from the use of, or proximity to, various sacred relics and the Eucharist in particular, to such a high degree that, for many believers, an essential practice of the Christian faith was simply to journey to the shrines of such objects in order to discover a desired relief from illness, torment, or affliction. The act of pilgrimage itself, which began to flourish in Europe around the turn of the millennium, developed into a pious religious ritual that emphasized a movement toward such material objects at the same time as it underscored the ultimate significance of these objects in the first place.

What should fascinate us historically, and perhaps more than has been the case thus far, is that this rise in the prominence of relics within western

society has run parallel to (though really also in conjunction with) the constitution of an instrumental logic (*causa instrumentalis*) in the twelfth century, the rise of the Enlightenment and historical-critical methods in general and, eventually, a specific social understanding of the use of technology.¹ Such developments were not removed from theological understandings of sacred objects; indeed, the notion of the sacrament, as Ivan Illich has described it, seemed to evolve a technological, instrumental side during this time period, one that placed unique emphasis upon the sacrament being an instrument of the divine (*instrumenta divina*), so to speak.² In the words of Giorgio Agamben, “Modern technology does not derive only from the dream of the alchemists and magicians but also and more probably from that peculiar ‘magical’ operation that is the absolute, perfect instrumental efficacy of the sacramental liturgy”.³ This suggestion was formulated alongside the insights of Illich explicitly, and it signals the appropriation of a modern technological context for comprehending sacramental-liturgical ends as well, ones that certainly overlap with what modernity would often label as the “fetishistic”, as we will see soon enough.⁴

What has subsequently become clearer to this context is that the rise of an instrumental, technological logic is one that dominates the modern landscape and our conceptualization of the human person (an anthropology), though it is a logic that is rarely perceived historically for what it is. The lack of nuance or comparative understanding in our usage of the terms “sacrament” or “sacramental-object”, “fetish”, and “technology” should alone indicate the difficulty in discernment that has plagued modern theorists and theologians alike. As Bruno Latour has suggested, technology has been utilized more recently mainly to foster the modern division between theory and practice that would have been wholly unfamiliar to the premodern world, leaving us moderns mainly bereft of a more comprehensive vision for how all of these various pieces actually fit together in reality. That is, we are left to wonder how something like the technological-sacramental might

¹ See Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2005), pp. 76–77.

² Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, pp. 78–79.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV*, 2, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 77.

⁴ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, pp. 72–73.

generally cohere with the technological-fetishistic.⁵ If Latour's intuition is correct, then technology may be that which "freezes" a particular historical moment within a much more complex metamorphosis or network of relations that actually underpin a given identity or situation.⁶ Technological intervention, from this angle, might be seen as an oversimplification or reduction of a more complex set of relations (an "ecology" in his phrasing) that is yet necessary to formulate at times in order to preserve a shared sense of cultural intelligibility. Though such clearly defined identities (*as* technologies) will often appear as neutrally existing, mere objects, they are anything but "objectively" situated. Technological objects are always engaged in our world in either positive or negative ways, embodying a dualistic valence that we will likewise observe in the dichotomy between the sacrament (historically taken in the modern West to be the positive element) and the fetishistic (often conceived and critiqued as its negative counterpart). Though the facile dichotomy between the fetish and the sacramental-object will be shown in the end to fail to hold firmly together, it has become the predominant modern dualism in the West that must be invoked and explored in order to be simultaneously, and continuously, de-constructed.

Though tracking the development of technology in the modern period falls outside the scope of the present work, I do want to advance the conversation concerning technology in the modern era that much further through a direct look at one of the most significant, overlapping terms for materiality in our world: the fetish. I pursue this term in the present study because I believe that the ways in which fetishism has been understood in modernity actually say a good deal about what constitutes our relationship in the West to modern technology, as well as how we might be able to move beyond the philosophical and theological impasses that continue to obfuscate the developments of both categories. By implication, and as I will note occasionally throughout this study, the various conceptualizations of the fetish within modernity have tremendous significance for how we perceive not only humankind's relationship to technology but also the fetish's religious counterpart, the sacramental-object.

The present study was undertaken with the intention of providing a foundation for a comparative approach between modern and late modern theories of fetishism and contemporaneous sacramental theologies insofar

⁵ Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 218.

⁶ Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, p. 225.

as both discourses share an obvious but rarely juxtaposed affinity for locating a divine presence within specific material realities. I believe, in fact, that no theory of technology or especially of sacramental theology can be explored today without taking the modern legacy of fetishism more seriously than it has. This is a point that is of course not hard to suggest, for such connections up to this point have been almost entirely unexplored. Perceiving the nature of the fetish-object anew, as I hope to show, yet has the potential to completely refashion our conceptualizations of sacramental-objects and sacramental realities in particular.

THE “SACRAMENTS OF SIMPLE FOLK”

What is often encountered in the search to define the fetish are those typical connotations of fetishism in popular culture that resonate deeply with the religious languages of “devotion”.⁷ The overlap in general devotional and liturgical practices between “fetish” worshippers and traditional western religious practices is so pervasive that we should more often than not have cause to rethink religious categories entirely, though western viewpoints have been overly cautious to keep a firm boundary between them. For example, we might note how widening theories of the sacramental in order to address any object that has been sacralized in any form, such as what R. R. Marett sought to outline in his Gifford Lectures of 1932–1933, titled *Sacraments of Simple Folk*,⁸ allows us to perceive an overlap between fetishes and sacramental-objects that had been mainly ignored beforehand. This insight should, of course, be nothing new to Christian theological thought, as historical examples of such overlaps abound: one need only think of how certain objects, both indigenous “fetishes” and western “sacraments”, literally become invested with the presence of the divine upon their consecration in order to note such a parallel theoretical formulation. Yet, as one commentator at the end of the nineteenth century equally noted, “As to the Holy Cross *qua* fetish, why discuss such free-thinking credulities?”⁹

The tendency rather among western, Christian theologians at least—and this was to be indicative of western trends on the whole—was to

⁷ See, for example, Ray B. Browne, *Objects of Special Devotion: Fetishes and Fetishism in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982).

⁸ R. R. Marett, *Sacraments of Simple Folk* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933).

⁹ Andrew Lang, *Modern Mythology* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1897), p. 119.

ignore any alleged similarity between the sacramental-object, or any other Christian religious object, and the fetish, in order to pretend as if their obvious correlation were an insult to an established western, superior culture and not worth discussing in the same breath. This distinction, one that is barely able to sustain itself in a contemporary postmodern culture intent on self-critically assessing its own identities and their failings, no longer holds sway. Yet the stereotypes formed have been incredibly slow to cede their hold upon cultural, political, and religious categorizations and divisions. We might take note, for example, of how certain temples in India house holy objects said not to be created by human hands—a notion often quickly dismissed by western tourists—while the “people of the Book”, who may in fact be the very same tourists to India, fiercely claim that their scriptures were written by God’s own hand. Detecting such sentiments of cultural, ethnic, and even racial superiority proceeds from a vantage point that is willing first to enter into a critical appraisal of one’s own (often inherently theological) foundations, performed with an openness toward recognizing the almost inevitability of the fetishistic *within* the sacramental and the possibility of the sacramental *within* the fetishistic, whatever such realities may or may not be in the end. Without such a willingness to see these forms of an otherness within the construction of the self, we westerners, at least, remain at a permanent loss to articulate a truer sense of identity and so continue to do violence to those who remain unseen or underrepresented—a problematic that must be considered anew within a quickly growing *postcolonial* world.

The questions I am asking in this book are therefore questions that maintain deep consequences for theological study as they lay at the foundations of western theological discourse—that is, insofar as western theology, as one discourse in particular among many, continues to attempt to remain a narrative separate from other religious, cultural, political, and economic discourses. These questions are also wholly dependent upon the nature of our response to what exactly constitutes a fetish and what defines a sacramental-object. What can be considered purely of human construct and what entirely of the divine? In such a vein of inquiry, and so keeping the question of the fetish before our eyes, we have every right to ask with renewed force: What exactly is the Incarnation? What is Scripture? What is the Church? And so forth, ending each question with the critical rejoinder: *if not possibly a fetish-object?* For that matter, what are we to make of such things as Evangelical chastity rings sold in Christian bookstores, Catholic relics and objects said to belong to the saints, or even Orthodox

icons, if not to note that some among the “faithful” within each grouping do indeed at times hold such objects fetishistically?¹⁰

Such questions are not just peripheral to theological inquiry. The answers we give to such questions often say more about the relationship between philosophy and theology, the East and the West, or between enlightenment (modernity) and superstition (or “mythology”) than we might ever suspect. For example, each of these objects is considered a “hybrid” object, each truly a *corpus permixtum*, the product of human hands, immanent to the world in which we live. But each is also taken to be somehow a unique connection to the divine (in varying degrees, of course, for not everything is deemed to be a genuine “sacrament”), beyond the capacity of human beings to fabricate material realities. The fundamental question, posed in a variety of ways, concerns what is made with our hands and what is not; what is immanent to reality and what is transcendent or metaphysical in origin; what is natural and what is revealed; what is a representation and what is a presentation—the *presence*—of the “thing itself”. These are, to be sure, as much political distinctions as they are theological ones, and so in framing things as such we are placed squarely before a larger set of questions in need of addressing directly, such as: how do so-called fetish-objects function in western religious terms today if not as boundaries between a (self-perceived) superior western culture and everyone else underneath it? In other words, how does an economy of salvation within a western theological setting parallel imposed western economies of commodity fetishism in a globalized context?¹¹

The fact that theology as a discipline has been so dependent on these potentially fetishistic concepts without developing a proper critical comprehension of the fetish-object is, I would argue, what allows western theology to continue to mask its deeper political and ideological roles within

¹⁰We should of course note the political role that relics and other western religious objects have played throughout history, such as when the trade in relics boomed during periods of fierce anti-Semitic persecution and when the Catholic Counter-Reformation seized such holy objects in order to unify Catholics across Europe. See, among others, Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), esp. pp. 189–190, 262–264. See also the parallel conclusions drawn in Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), esp. p. 93.

¹¹For more on this link between economics and fetishism, see Judith Grbich, “The Problem of the Fetish in Law, History and Postcolonial Theory,” *Law Text Culture* 7 (2003): 43–70.

our world. Hence, theology frequently masquerades as something other than theology, performing tasks that are perhaps not truly part of its essence and purpose (e.g., securing political power). Therefore, in many ways, what the present study offers the reader is an attempt to reread a type of political theology through the history and theoretical entanglements of the fetish-object so that we might begin to see the political valences of the use of (mainly western) theology in our world. What is at least clear at this point is that for far too long theology has been content to look for vague signs of the sacramental among “pagan religions”, rather than to investigate the political tensions and “fetishes” inherent within its own claims to locate an infinite divinity within material reality.¹² Rethinking theological motives through the critical presence of the fetish-object within western discourse is consequently a task which both theoretically and practically implicates the sacramental-object as well. This is the trajectory that the present work charts as a course not only for itself, but also for the re-imagining of political-theological conversation on the whole.

What I am mainly wagering in this book is that there is another way to contemplate the political functions of fetish-objects and sacramental-objects alike rather than see them as solely pitted against each other—a false dichotomy that is in constant need of undoing. Both idols and ideologies can become material realities that promise to lift us beyond our world, but which can also turn quickly into that which they sought to oppose.¹³ How do we detect a sickness (or “fetish”) within the body of theology and its “sacramental” dwelling? How might we locate the very “fetish” of theology itself? What would our diagnostic tools even look like in this regard? How would we wield them and to what end?

FETISHES THROUGHOUT THE WESTERN WORLD

The first thing to be done in order to develop a critical perspective on fetishes is not only to examine the long history of western writings on their existence, but also to acknowledge their presence within western

¹² See, for example, the wording given to the quest to find the “sacrament in pagan religion”, which begins a study of the sacraments, but quickly moves into the Christian understanding of divine materiality alone, in Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, trans. Paul Barrett, Mark Schoof and Laurence Bright (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 7–10.

¹³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 100–140.

culture. Fetishes were not simply that which existed elsewhere, other than in European and generally western, modern cultures. They permeate nearly every facet of western life, from its politics and religious institutions to its economic forms and varied literatures. By learning to see their presences as already embedded in the West, we might begin to see how a more proper analysis of the fetish might develop.

In Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiography *The Words*, for example, we witness his quest to face the fragmentation of language and its consequence for human identity, yet to do so in and through the words themselves: "No one can forget or ignore me: I am a great fetish, tractable and terrible".¹⁴ I take here his calling himself a "great fetish" to be more than simply emblematic of the main problem which all writers face—the necessity and yet limitations of language. Rather, I read such an inescapable and tension-filled gesture as entirely characteristic of fetishism. As I hope to show, the fetish is in some ways that which we are constantly seeking to transcend, but also completely incapable of ever fully leaving behind. It is the modern quest to escape one's fetishistic relation to the body, but it is also the fate of late modern writers to once again embrace their embodied state of existence. To label himself as a fetish was, for Sartre, at once an effort both to distance himself from himself (alienation) and to recognize as well that he can never truly accomplish such a separation. Making the claim that we can escape "the words" that bind us is as impossible as saying that they can exhaustively define us. Both options are neither desirable nor truly possible—a paradox of human life and of being the embodied creatures that Sartre knew all too well as the foundation of human existence.

To begin a study that will hinge upon various historical attempts to "correctly" categorize a number of dualistic patterns of thought—freedom/fetish, enchantment/disenchantment, sacred/secular and so forth, as we will soon see—*by first recognizing the impossibility of providing such nicely demarcated distinctions* means that I want to open the discussion up that much further toward nondualistic frameworks for thought, being, and embodiment. Hence we must face the complexity and paradox that our human life grants us. For a large part of recorded history, however, such complexity was either reduced and simply ignored, mislabeled or conveniently, when possible, misdirected into easily comprehensible (dualistic) frameworks. In debates concerning the nature of enchantment from

¹⁴Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1964), p. 195.

the Middle Ages onward (and, in the modern era, as concerns any potential for disenchantment), for example, we find many formulations of fetishism that were ignored because prevalent representations deemed that such material instances, especially when concerning one's special "holy objects", could *not* be fetishistic, thus preventing any genuine sense of self-reflexive critique or self-discovery from taking place. Such category confusion prevented individuals from seeing how certain representations of the divine actually hampered efforts to discern the true political motives that lay underneath material reality, giving rise to an "enchanted" worldview that concealed a deeply entrenched hierarchical order.¹⁵

As the eleventh-century French monk Guibert of Nogent made abundantly clear in his colorful writings on Catholic life in medieval Europe, the world and its myriad objects were once believed to be thoroughly enchanted, with demons and angels lurking around every corner, and cursed objects likely to kill you should you embrace them in the wrong way. As Caroline Walker Bynum has put it, the problem for the medieval Christian was not how to get so-called holy or evil objects to talk, but how to make them *stop* talking.¹⁶ Guibert's autobiography, *Monodies*, and his catalog of objects *On the Relics of the Saints* both give a more or less accurate depiction of what a modern theologian has chosen to describe as a time when "there was no secular".¹⁷ For Guibert, the enchanted nature of things was more than just a theologically derived conclusion: it was a frightening and judgmental reality that barely concealed his rampant anti-Semitism, hostility to foreigners and willingness to search for a scapegoat for any malady afflicting his community. Any apparent supernatural intervention was cause to proclaim God's judgment upon humankind, from lightning strikes to outbreaks of plague. In this perceived state of things, numerous "holy" and "evil" objects alike were capable of spreading their effects widely throughout the entire, unseen fabric of human-divine relations, while in reality reductionistically miming and ordering much more complex political and social relations.

¹⁵ See the analysis of disenchantment in the modern period given in relation to the modern "disciplined society" in Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

¹⁶ See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone, 2011).

¹⁷ Guibert of Nogent, *Monodies and On the Relic of Saints: The Autobiography and a Manifesto of a French Monk from the Time of the Crusades*, trans. Joseph McAlhany (New York: Penguin, 2011). See also the famous opening line from John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

What I want to demonstrate in the present study focused upon the existence of fetishistic (and so also sacramental-objects) is that the split between the sacred and the secular is itself a misnomer, an overly simplistic reduction of a much more complex reality wherein both the secular (often taken as a catchphrase for material relations) and the sacred (or what constitutes the realm of the spiritual) play a vital role in the formation of certain material objects said to embody something of a spiritual or divine essence. The terms I am choosing to pursue parallel to one another, and which must always be understood as bound together on a continuum, as both fetish *and* sacramental-object, are but merely the particular terrain by which to ascertain these profound political and social dynamics at work, though they are not necessarily the only ones through which to perceive the complexity of human relations. Throughout modern history, there have been many terminological and classificatory efforts to represent relations that are ultimately unrepresentable. It is no surprise that the connections that linger theoretically between enchantment, animism, and fetishism often overlap in large measure.¹⁸ The fact that (post)modernity continues to struggle with just how these terms, and the objects they describe,¹⁹ are entangled together in often highly complex ways, and yet how they can still offer us insight into human relationships and cultures is further evidence that a renewed understanding of their relationship is a priority for contemporary theoretical (and theological) discourses.²⁰

As but one salient example of the dynamics undergirding the analysis of fetishism in the modern period, Eric Santner has addressed the issue of enchantment as to highlight a modern transition toward perceiving objects entirely anew, and in such a way that we cannot simply go back to an “enchanted” world such as what Guibert of Nogent once knew.²¹ A relevant theory of fetishism, such as Marx and Freud developed in relation to

¹⁸ See, for example, the connection made between animism and fetishism in Alphonso Lingis, “The Voices of Things,” *Senses & Society* 4:3 (2009): pp. 273–282.

¹⁹ A good deal has already been written recently to describe the “turn” to objects in contemporary thought, one that attempts to push us past our anthropocentric viewpoint and to take much more seriously the role of objects within human relations. See, among others, Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

²⁰ On the “entanglement” of humans and objects, see Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

²¹ On this connection of animism, materiality, and libidinal investment in his work, see Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 120ff.

modern forms of social relations, from capitalism to sexual norms (and which I will be addressing in Chaps. 3 and 4 respectively), illustrates perfectly how fetishism has not died and gone away with the other “myths” of religious longing.²² Rather we are, as Santner describes it, “libidinally implicated” in a world that we find enchanting precisely because we are “implicated” in it, a position that allows us to see matter as “animated” through our relationship to it.²³

What Santner exposes for viewing is the very reality that points to our having bodies and yet our frequent inability to fully account for those very same bodies. This explains why we can only understand fetishism in the West by first understanding our own complicated relationships to our own bodies. In his words, one’s fundamental to understanding the role of modernity as a “disruption” in social relations²⁴:

[...] human beings have a capacity—and indeed live under the compulsion—to wriggle or twitch in a way that is quite different from the way of flies or any other animals (even when in pain), that their wriggling bears witness to a different kind of animation, one born in the semantic vertigo that infects the conceptual field of “the animate” and that enters human life by way of the procedures by which such life comes to be “naturalized”.²⁵

²² Santner takes up the Marxist analysis of fetishism in relation to modern forces of secularization and the “primitive” forces of animism directly in his *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 45–46, 80–82 and 106. Peter E. Gordon’s response to Santner, however, delivers the critique that Santner’s analysis may be in fact one-sided and lacking a more proper theological account of fetishism in that the fetish, in Marxist terms, is a point of both mystification and demystification at once, prompting us to take religion as more than just a form of idolatry. See Peter E. Gordon, “Secularization, Dialectics, and Critique” in *The Weight of All Flesh*, pp. 199–202.

²³ Further, he states, “What is at issue in the so-called disenchantment of nature cannot, finally, be captured by the notion of a ‘fitness’ of embodied subjectivity and world, which is ultimately a secularized version of what the religions of revelation call *providence*; what is at stake is rather the possibility of feeling *libidinally implicated* in the world, of being in love with the world—*of finding the world to be enchanting*.” Santner, *The Royal Remains*, p. 122.

²⁴ To this Santner adds, “[...] modernity introduces a fundamental disruption in this love relation, literally and metaphorically a kind of breakup *with* and so *of* the world (and self). At some level, human subjects are no longer able to fully throw in their lot with the world in a libidinal sense. Their inscription into the space of meaning has become depleted of erotic charge, fails to secure a powerful libidinal bond with social reality. We are there, in the midst of the social space, but this space feels dead and we, too, no longer feel alive.” Santner, *The Royal Remains*, pp. 122–123.

²⁵ Santner, *The Royal Remains*, p. 124.

It is for this reason that Santner has gone on to tackle the subject of fetishism in the modern world more directly, albeit briefly, in the hopes of understanding this (post)modern return to a fetishism as animism or animism as fetishism that signals our contemporary context. We return to animism—much in the terms often ascribed to the Holy Spirit within the Christian traditions²⁶—as those forces lurking both beyond us *and* under our skin, pushing human beings beyond the realm of the earthly and toward something like the “divine” while also remaining within the material conditions of existence. To stand in this space means to take seriously the particular way in which the transcendent has been said to inhabit the material realm in which humanity dwells. In this configuration, we consistently return to the overlap between this fundamental orientation to our material world and those all-too-worldly objects that are said to be inhabited with the divine—that are “enchanted” as it were.²⁷

To invoke the term “fetishism” today, as many modern accounts attest, is to describe a series of related movements from early modern anthropological accounts of indigenous “fetish worship” to the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism to psychoanalytic analyses of sexual perversions often labeled as somehow too fetishistic.²⁸ It is also, however, to rethink western relationships to the body and to our being embodied creatures.²⁹ To use the term is thereby to enter into the dynamics of attempted descriptions of a polyvocal phenomenon that has no singular source or definition and which may in fact be constituted by the impossibility of ever achieving any coherence at all. Though the term has a central prominence in modern discourse and though it seems to be a major critical player in the establishment of boundaries between peoples and religions, it maintains a high degree of ambiguity that is somehow also constitutive of its character. It is this ambiguity, I will argue, that has prevented people in the West from more fully comprehending the role of the fetish within everyday existence.

²⁶ See the links drawn, but also potential theological points of contrast identified, between animism, fetishism, and pneumatology in Sigurd Bergmann, “Fetishism Revisited: In the Animistic Lens of Eco-pneumatology,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 6 (2012): pp. 195–215.

²⁷ See Anselm Franke, “Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls, or: The Sudden Disorganization of Boundaries,” *Animism*, vol. 1, ed. Anselm Franke (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), pp. 11–51. On the subject of animism in relation to a concept of the fetish that still remains to be theorized, see Rosalind C. Morris and Daniel H. Leonard, *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles de Brosses and the Afterlives of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

²⁸ See, among others, Roy Ellen, “Fetishism,” *Man (New Series)* 23:2 (1988): pp. 213–235.

²⁹ See the commentary offered on fetishism and the body in Christopher Lauer, *Intimacy: A Dialectical Study* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 71–82.

BEGINNING TO SEE THE THEORETICAL PROBLEM WITH EMBODIMENT

Contemporary references to fetishism are consistently crisscrossed with references to a series of articles written by William Pietz on “The Problem of the Fetish”, which seemingly set the course for multiple contemporary examinations of the subject.³⁰ What Pietz made clear was that the fetish-object is a placeholder for a complex set of social and political relations that appear as “mysterious” insofar as they are indescribable, permanently situated on the border between belief and unbelief.³¹ Pietz highlights the tendency apparent in numerous modern analyses to view fetishism as a creative response to difficult, colonial cross-cultural encounters. Such complex interactions produced a reality that allowed him to conclude that “[...] the fetish is precisely *not* a material signifier referring beyond itself, but acts as a material space gathering an otherwise unconnected multiplicity into the unity of its enduring singularity [...]”.³² This was, for Pietz, mainly the reason why one cannot identify any material object as “inherently” fetishistic. The gathered “multiplicity” of meanings within such a singular, material object transgress any fixed determination of the object’s possible identity. The fetish, as it were, always exceeds any given definition

³⁰William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (1985): pp. 5–17; “The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (1987): pp. 23–45; and, finally, though its numbering “IIIa” would imagine a fourth article that was not in fact published, “The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa: Bosman’s Guinea and the Enlightenment Theory of Fetishism,” *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 16 (1988): pp. 105–124. This list could be expanded to include, as well, his entry “Fetish” in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 306–317, as well as “Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx” in Emily Apter and William Pietz, eds., *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 119–151.

³¹“‘Fetish’ has always named the incomprehensible mystery of the power of material things to be collective social objects experienced by individuals as truly embodying determine values or virtues, always as judged from a cross-cultural perspective of relative infinite degradation, “dénusés de valeur symbolique”. Fetish discourse always posits this double consciousness of absorbed credulity and degraded or distanced incredulity”. Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I”, p. 14.

³²Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I”, p. 15.

or explanation and it is this *excess* of meaning that allows such an object to appear as “more” than its material parts. It is what gives the fetish its particular “shine”, as Freud would have put it, or “aura”, in Walter Benjamin’s parlance. It is precisely what constitutes for many its “transcendent” or “holy” status.

Pietz’s significance in terms of comprehending the relevance of the fetish-object only increases, to my mind, when he brings the discussion of the history of fetishism into the context of Christian theology and its myriad attempts to identify and denounce forms of idolatry, and this claim is made despite the fact that fetishism will represent to him “a new historical problematic outside the horizon of Christian thought”.³³ Though his tendency to draw a sharp line in the end between the linguistic acts that undergird sacramental-objects and the material realities that define fetishistic objects might be somewhat reductionistic of the larger role that fetishistically held sacramental-objects have held throughout western Christianity, his intuition of a secret alliance between the fetish and the sacrament is one that demands to be explored in much further detail, and as I intend to point toward throughout what follows.

These nuanced distinctions aimed toward revealing the complex relations between fetishes, sacraments, idols, and icons, mirror those of Paolo Virno who has more recently attempted to draw a line between reification, an act that moves from an external reality (or structure) to an internalized state, and fetishism, which projects an internal state onto an external reality. He locates the former in the “Word” become flesh that is God’s Incarnation in the person of Jesus.³⁴ Concerning the latter, his caution is much more pronounced: “Alienation and fetishism are derived possibilities that articulate negatively our reified way of being in historical and social terms. Alienation is a negative possibility; fetishism is a distortion.”³⁵ In this Virno shares somewhat with Louise Kaplan’s challenges to a commonly perceptible “fetishism strategy”, namely (1) that it tries to control persons or situations but ends up reifying them both, (2) that it tries to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty but only ossifies creativity, (3) that it highlights particular experiences while hiding (or “deadening”) others, (4) that it draws humans away from authentic human experience, and (5)

³³ Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, II”, p. 36.

³⁴ Paolo Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*, trans. Giuseppina Mecchia (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015), pp. 137–140.

³⁵ Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, p. 166.

that, finally, its erotic nature functions as a mask over our humanity.³⁶ These are typical charges brought against commonly labeled fetishists today.

Reification, on the other hand, at least as Virno utilizes the term, reflects actually existing social relations as they inscribe themselves on the individual, establishing the individual's consciousness along the way, and producing a positive outcome for a process that might otherwise be understood as issuing forth from the very dynamics that ground fetishism in the first place, and I will point later to a similar dynamic present in the work of Georg Lukács.³⁷ What I would caution both authors to remember, however, is that there is a deep foundation for fetishism that stretches back beyond these seemingly “negative” indicators. That is, though I believe there is a great deal of truth in their critiques—as such fetishists certainly do exist—there is also a dependency upon the facile dualism of sacrament (or whatever *positive* term) and fetish (as historically the *negative* term) that implicates the entire framework of a critique of embodiment.

Beyond these forays into contemporary interpretations of fetishism, one of the most comprehensive accounts of the subject to date can be found in Hartmut Böhme's *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity*, which explicitly traces the many permutations of the term throughout the modern era.³⁸ What Böhme deftly illustrates, and here going far beyond both Pietz and Virno, is the manner in which modernity's best theorists of the fetish utilized the term's inherent ambiguity in order to project so many variable meanings upon it that the term itself eventually ceased to bear much weight at all, though it also refused to disappear as well. It is this persistence of the fetish-object as a culturally creative concept that, in the end, gives the term a potentially renewed significance. The complexity of cross-cultural relations, ones that cannot be reduced to a simplistic (e.g. dualistic or obvious cultural representational) economic form, means we will continue to create fetishes as physical embodiments of particular social paradoxes that we cannot symbolize, represent, or even completely understand. Fetishism, in this sense, is shown to be hard-wired into humanity; we are simply unable to extricate ourselves from its pull, though we are capable of re-defining our

³⁶ Louise J. Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 5–9.

³⁷ See Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, p. 167.

³⁸ Hartmut Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity*, trans. Anna Galt (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).

relationship to fetish-objects, as well as making almost infinite substitutions of one object for another.³⁹ Böhme's conclusion is that modernity's quest to eradicate the fetishes that seemed to constrain its autonomy is at long last perhaps over. In a contemporary setting where fetishes seem to flourish and are becoming more boldly and culturally pronounced than ever, this particular death knell is one that actually opens humanity up to alternate readings of fetishism, ones that self-reflexively allow us to gain a better understanding of ourselves in the process:

For it is quite clear that a mechanism as ubiquitous as this, both in the field of cultural practice and in the field of drives, cannot be summed up with one-dimensional interpretations. In that sense, the insight of the conglomerate structure of the fetishistic object is a real step forward. *It highlights fetishism's polyvalent, semantically over-determined, materially random (polymorphous), functionally multiple, genetically multi-causal and typologically and phenomenologically endlessly processual form.* As long as one "tinkers" at some explanation of this or that fetish (and this must be done due to the singularity of the cases), one is under the influence of the fetishistic mechanism: by putting the partial (*one* interpretation) in place of the whole (the conglomerate), we reproduce the fetishism we think we are analysing. Just as the fetishist collects fetishes, so the analyst collects interpretations of them.⁴⁰

In the pages that follow, I aim neither to catalog all the diverse interpretations of fetishism nor to produce a new, definitive interpretation of the fetish, which, by this point it should be clear, is not really possible. Rather, I pursue a selected number of interpretations of fetishism in modernity so that I may lay a foundation for future theoretical uses of fetishism, in particular as a conceptual challenge to theological and sacramental understandings of the presence of the divine within material reality and as a way to work toward the problems of embodiment. In this sense, I aim to be more constructive in my account than Böhme, while also more attentive to the theological registers active within the various literatures on fetishism that I am reading. With these goals in mind, I want to turn briefly to two recent accounts of fetishism—that of the sociologist Webb Keane and the "prince of networks" Bruno Latour—in order to more properly illuminate the argumentation of the present work.

³⁹ See Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture*, p. 273.

⁴⁰ Böhme, *Fetishism and Culture*, p. 358, emphasis in the original.

THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN FETISH CRITIQUES

Webb Keane's study of Dutch Calvinist missionary efforts on the Indonesian island of Sumba certainly brings to life the theoretical difficulties of a Christianized West encountering its religious, colonized "other", a point that returns us again and again to the various attempts to ascertain the "origins" of fetishism. The clash between these vastly divergent cultures, on a "religious" level at least—assuming such a thing could ever be fully isolated from its many other social influences, something I very much doubt—leaves us wondering about the status of the fetish-object as perceived by both sides in the exchange. As the history of modern fetish critiques tells us, diverse cultures never before in contact with one another began to engage each other and some "cross-pollination" was bound to occur as sailors, merchants, and missionaries interacted in new global contexts. The political stakes involved in such exchanges, however, typically dictated that any resultant hybridity remain outside its domain of representation. In other words, the more different cultures began to interact, the more strict boundaries began to be drawn, introducing new forms of racial and religious discrimination. As Keane elaborates:

Purification requires an opponent, that which is to be purified. One of the many categories by which the opponents of purification were named was "fetishism". Put briefly, the idea of fetishism concerns the sorting out of potential agents and modes of action in the world. Developing a suggestion of William Pietz's, I define fetishism as an imputation directed at others who have confounded the proper boundaries between agentive subjects and mere objects. The accusation sorts the universe into things (bodies, rocks) that are material and subject to natural law, and other things (souls, thoughts) that are immaterial and subject to other forces—human agency, say, or divine intervention.⁴¹

Keane's definition of the fetish, that it "confounds the boundaries" between subjects and objects (as also between subjects and other subjects mistaken to be objects), is another stab at trying to determine what exactly was going on in these multicultural encounters. It is not, however, an exhaustive definition, as we will continue to see. From Keane's viewpoint,

⁴¹ Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 77.