

Spiritual entanglement: Transforming religious symbols at Çatalhöyük

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The overall aim of the three-year interdisciplinary project at Çatalhöyük was to explore the extent to which spiritual life and religious ritual may have been involved in the momentous shift toward sedentism and agriculture, which are typically connected to the emergence of “civilization.” In *The Leopard’s Tale* (2006) Ian Hodder offered his own initial analysis of the role of the religious sphere (among others) in the social transformations that are evident through time and space at Çatalhöyük, proposing a theory of “material entanglement.” I find his interpretation plausible and compelling, and in this essay suggest a complementary perspective on the data that develops and makes use of the idea of “spiritual entanglement” as a conceptual framework for beginning to respond “theologically” to the four interrelated research questions that guided the project.

My strategy will be to take Robert Neville’s pragmatic theory of religious symbolism, which deals primarily with axial age religions and has been applied to contemporary interreligious dialogue, and apply it imaginatively to the study of religious transformations during the early Neolithic. Besides its general illuminative power, Neville’s model also commends itself to this task because its use of the semiotic metaphysics of C. S. Peirce provides a point of contact between the disciplines of theology and archaeology. Neville’s emphasis is on what symbols *do*, on their transformative power and the way in which they are transformed by intentional agents in concrete communities. As we will see, he describes *religious* symbols as those that persons “take” in particular contexts in their pragmatic attempts to engage the ultimate boundary-making conditions of their lived world.

Many of the terms in the preceding two paragraphs are highly charged and controversial. The concept of “religion” itself is ambiguous and

highly contested. The pairing of “spirituality” with “materiality” could easily raise suspicions about ancient and early modern dualisms, both metaphysical and epistemological. Moreover, many readers might have qualms about the very idea of an engagement between archaeology and theology as disciplines. In what follows I hope to provide enough clarification of my use of these terms, and of philosophical developments that have shaped the self-understanding of the academic field of theology (and religious studies), that at least some of these concerns will be alleviated and new possibilities for mutual interdisciplinary enhancement can emerge.

Matter, spirit and the bounds of religion

In one way or another all of the research questions addressed by the 2005–8 Çatalhöyük project have to do with religious boundaries: how to identify them and their causal efficacy (if any) in relation to human agents tending to the boundary conditions of social life. One of the reasons the project was so tempting to a theologian interested in interdisciplinary dialogue was the openness of the archaeological team to facing the difficult task of exploring the religious dimension of Neolithic sociality rather than ignoring it or trying to disentangle it from the web of causal forces in human life.

Nevertheless, all interdisciplinary boundary crossings bring challenges as well as opportunities. The idea that an engagement between archaeology and theology is even possible, much less potentially fruitful, may well be met with suspicion from participants in both fields. This is exacerbated by the lingering anxiety (on both sides) that the available options for interpreting the emergence of religion in human culture remain mired in an either–or dichotomy: either reduce everything to *material* explanations or introduce a separate interpretation that appeals to the *spiritual*. On this (stereotypical) model, archaeologists use objective tools to analyze material artifacts while theologians explore the subjective domain of spiritual intentions – and never the twain shall meet.

The good news is that scholars in both disciplines have increasingly challenged this forced choice between metaphysical monism and dualism, as well as the methodological ramifications that derived from impaling oneself on either horn of this dilemma. One of the most significant developments in this regard is the increased attention to theories of emergent

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complexity in the philosophy of science. Although some uses of the term “emergence” in the 20th century were (ironically) tied to both positivism and vitalism, the theories I have in mind here use the term in a way that is explicitly designed to avoid both of these outmoded approaches.

Instead of choosing between naturalistic reductionism and supernaturalistic interventionism, or between physicalism and dualism, emergence theorists can argue for a third way out of these forced dilemmas. As Philip Clayton explains, “Emergence is the view that new and unpredictable phenomena are naturally produced by interactions in nature; that these new structures, organisms, and ideas are not reducible to the sub-systems on which they depend; and that the newly evolved realities in turn exercise a causal influence on the parts out of which they arose” (2004: vi). This means, in the case of human agency or religious intentionality, that such phenomena are understood to be complex cases of autopoiesis, the naturally emergent self-organization of complex structures with new functionalities and capacities (cf. Gregersen 2003; Juarrero 2002; Murphy & Stoeger 2007).

For our purposes here it suffices to say that such approaches are philosophical elaborations of scientific insights into the nature of the relation between “matter” and “energy.” Insofar as the term “spirit” was typically used in ancient and early modern philosophy to indicate that which *energized* or moved things in the world, any continued use of the term “spiritual” in dialogue with contemporary science ought to account for relevant shifts in our understanding of such concepts. Early modern (Newtonian) classical mechanics reduced causality to the interaction of material bodies in absolute space ($F = ma$). Late modern (Einsteinian) physics insists that what we call “matter” is inseparable from the energetic flux of space-time ($E = mc^2$). The following exposition, therefore, will presuppose that the sphere of human “spirituality” is not quarantined from the material sphere – as though we were dealing with two types of substance (material and immaterial) – but wholly entangled within (albeit emergent from) the sphere of materiality.

We can see a similar shift in the social scientific study of religion. As Arweck and Keenan observe in the introduction to *Materializing Religion*, all religions “dwell amongst us” in material means, embedded and embodied within physical forms. However, rejecting a Neoplatonic (or Cartesian) notion of spirituality as detached from “matter” does not require rejecting the “spiritual” tout court. “Discarding this

limiting dualism allows the pursuit of an integrated or holistic intellectual approach which might trace along those fuzzy, yet critical margins where body-spirit and mind-matter fuse, mix and mingle . . . the boundaries between explication and appreciation, particularly in areas of the religious ‘imaginary’, are much thinner, and less dispensable, perhaps, than those of a more positivistic disposition are inclined to view” (2006: 8–9).

In the dialogue with archaeology, however, one resource for overcoming the dualism of matter and spirit, and its concomitant disciplinary dichotomizing, stands out as particularly promising. The work of the American pragmatist philosopher C. S. Peirce has been increasingly retrieved among both archaeologists and theologians. The “Peircean alternative” to structuralism, with its incipient dualism that dominated archeology for decades, is outlined in Robert Preucel’s book *Archaeological Semiotics* (2006). Peirce’s triadic (rather than dyadic) and pragmatic (rather than idealistic) theory of signs has contributed to new modes of archaeological interpretation. As Preucel observes, Peirce’s metaphysics resisted Cartesian dualism while acknowledging the real difference between types of symbol use. On this model, intentionality and meaning-making are fully embedded within the dynamic semiotic network that constitutes nature. I will explore Neville’s theological appropriation of Peirce in more detail later.

At this stage it is important simply to point out that Peirce’s argument for the complex ways in which signs may be “taken” or engaged by interpreters is embedded within his commitment to metaphysical synechism and triadic theory of knowledge. Avoiding a simple dualism between sign and object (signum–res, etc.), Peirce stressed the *triadic* relation between sign, object and interpretant. “A Sign, or Representamen, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object” (Peirce 1998: 272). Peirce is careful to emphasize that this cannot be reduced to dyadic semiotic relations or even to a complex of such dyadic relations. The mediating (triadic) relationality of signification is genuine and irreducible. Moreover, signs (including symbols) are not “merely” intelligible or ideational, but as “real” as all other phenomena in their dynamic continuity.

Before outlining the theories of Hodder and Neville and attempting to entangle them, I must return briefly to the notion of religious boundaries.

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One of the difficulties of interdisciplinary endeavors is attending to the semantic shifts within and across fields of study. This is especially true when the subject is a phenomenon as contested and ambiguous as “religion,” which in this day and age deserves scare quotes. The intrepidity, contestability and ambiguity of this phenomenon, however, should not lead us to avoid the task of trying to make sense of it. Interdisciplinary discussions about recognizing the “religious” and attributions of causality to religion are complicated by the fact that members of one discipline are often suspicious of the “other” discipline and sometimes force the other into conformity with the same categories with which their own discipline operates. Avoiding such hegemonic temptations requires humility and patience.

For the sake of this essay I will use a rough working definition of the “religious” dimension as that emergent sphere of human life in which social groups tend to their fascination with and fear of ultimate bound-ness, which shape and are shaped by all of the other dynamic modes of social (and material) binding and being-bound. As even its etymological root (*re-ligere*) indicates, religion has to do with the way in which one is ultimately bound together with others. Various sciences focus on particular proximate modes of social binding, on binding practices and practical boundaries. “Theology” (in the sense used here) is also interested in sociality but tends to the ultimate conditions for sociality itself. How do humans deal with their experience of being-conditioned, with limitation per se, with questions about the ground for all social (and material) binding whatsoever? How do humans attempt to bind themselves to that which confronts them as unbounded and unbindable? This requires attending to “infinity” (in the sense described later) as well as “sociality.”

The metaphors of “binding” and “entanglement” can reinforce one another. In a variety of disciplines, from quantum physics to marriage therapy, the concept of entangled fields of force has shown its illuminative value. As hinted in my subtitle, the question is about *transforming* religious symbols. How do symbols themselves change over time and in what sense do they change those who engage them? Religious symbols are transformed *and* transformative. Their entanglement within the bonds of human life makes them a force in transformation. In what follows, I will use Neville’s pragmatic theory of religious symbols as a starting point for a way of thinking about “spiritual” entanglement that can be

brought into dialogue with Hodder's interpretation of transformation at Çatalhöyük.

Ian Hodder's theory of material entanglement

In this short essay I cannot do full justice to Hodder's analysis in *The Leopard's Tale* (2006), but I do want to point to two specific themes: his emphasis on the way in which the people of Çatalhöyük were *bound* together and his understanding of the dynamics that shaped the *transformation* of these bindings. What I find fascinating is that Hodder's archaeological thesis that "more material entanglement and objectification lead to faster change" (2006: 258) could also be applied to historical developments during the past nine thousand years as well and, indeed, to our own technologically, electronically, informationally entangled age. From a theological point of view, it is interesting to explore what we can learn from studying this crucial period also for the sake of recognizing our own entanglement and capacity for transformation.

Part of the background for Hodder's analysis is the broader debate among archaeologists on the roles played by factors like sedentism, domestication, symbolism, tool use and art in the origins of "civilization." Like Cauvin (2000), Hodder believes that symbols played an important part in the emergence of culture, and like Renfrew (2001), Hodder argues that symbolism cannot be understood apart from human material engagement. However, Hodder's theory of "material entanglement" offers a unique proposal of how these features of human civilization came to be:

Material entanglement produced a representation in the object world of the social structure such that it could be contested and changed. . . . As material entanglement increased, the human as agent becomes more apparent. . . . I would argue that this shift towards a centering of human agency came about as the inverse of the entanglement process. People became more invested in a web of material relations so that their social relations were 'objectified.' . . . the social world became more malleable and susceptible to *transformation*. . . . humans came to see themselves more clearly as agents able to *transform* social lives by *transforming* material objects, artifacts, monuments and environments. (2006: 204–5; emphasis added)

In other words, "civilization" evolved slowly as a result of small changes in the way persons were increasingly bound to material objects and as

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their relation to one another became increasingly mediated through such objects.

Much of Hodder's analysis in the book is meant to provide warrant for his claim that phenomena like sedentism and domestication can be interpreted as the unintended by-product of a growing entanglement with material objects. As the quote indicates, he is particularly interested in understanding the changes or transformations within and around the "town" over time, especially the apparent increase in awareness of the power of human agency, which is displayed in the art and (arguably) the figurines.

To make sense of these transformations, Hodder introduces the idea of "spheres" of entanglement, spheres that "are comprised of groups of activities that involved sets of entanglements in social, material, productive, symbolic and other realms" (2006: 59). These spheres are not separate domains but reciprocal, dense networks that are intersecting and interdependent. This entanglement intertwines the spheres, networking webs of material, social and conceptual relations. Hodder illustrates this by demonstrating how practices such as the use of plaster for the walls and the burial of obsidian with ancestors require and reinforce such entanglement. This is consistent with his proposals (elsewhere) that archeological analysis should recover its interest in the role of meaning, agency and intention that was lost in some processual approaches (e.g., Hodder 1990, 1999).

However, in this context he goes out of his way to emphasize the irreducible role of *materiality* in his analysis of the dynamics and patterns evident in the way in which people are tied together and bound in their social relations at Çatalhöyük. "By engaging in material things more fully, humans were able to extend social ties in the giving of gifts. . . . So the social world produces the material explosion, but we have also seen that materiality involves sociality. . . . So there was a dual process of social and material entrapment pushing entanglement forward in a positive feedback loop" (2006: 240). The more people became entangled with the materiality of their interactions with clay, obsidian, bones and symbolic markers of animals, as well as hiding and revealing, the more the "house" became increasingly important as a bonding force for life together. However, the growing significance of the house and its productive potential throughout the Çatalhöyük time sequence cannot be explained in merely material terms; it emerged through different sets of entanglements that

“involved practical, symbolic, economic and aesthetic dimensions in a seamless web” (63).

Hodder observes that material objects “tie people together in the practicalities of their use. The objects are pursued because they allow greater sociality. But they also mean greater dependencies (material and social), and thus further shifts in practices, concepts, beliefs and orientations” (242). It was this “daily spiraling” of material-social engagements that led through a slow “march of the mass” to the conditions that allowed for an elaboration of the “prowess–animal spirit–hunting–feasting” network. Boundaries of all kinds are constantly teased and explored, hidden and revealed. The fascination with tensions such as fleshiness and permanence, living and dead, domestic and wild, presence and absence is brought within the houses in a variety of ways, including the use of plaster on walls and skulls, the use of horns and claws and burials (and the unearthing of skeletons), all within the house itself.

For Hodder the key question is not “Why was a new symbolic world created?” but “Why were symbolic worlds materialized at this time?” He argues that community was crafted slowly as people’s agency became more materially entangled in their social lives and as their material lives became more socially entangled. This entanglement was an important factor not only for driving the process toward sedentism and domestication, but also for the development of a stronger sense of human agency. Materializing social relations made them easier to change and organize, on the one hand, and enhanced their ability to endure, on the other. The increased sense of awareness of human agency is suggested by the prevalence of human forms in the art of the early Neolithic, contrasting significantly with Palaeolithic, which typically represents animals and other figures.

On the one hand, the individual “self” at Çatalhöyük was thoroughly embedded within the social, within the practices and relations of the house and its symbolism. But on the other hand, these practices and increased materiality “also produce a partitioning and a greater sense of difference as the practices are carried out. The individualized self does emerge as identified in its difference from others, and from the very emphasis on boundaries themselves – the ridges, edges, pedestals and the distinctions in symbolism, burial and activity. This is a social process that creates individual difference . . . [material and social] practices draw attention to the boundaries of an individual self” (228).

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For Hodder, the material and spiritual spheres are not mutually exclusive. “People crafted their own worlds by crafting the gods. They began to use things to effect change – economically and socially, but also *spiritually*. They became invested in materiality as part of trying to make sense of and control the world” (205, emphasis added). The material and social entanglement of the self as agent also shaped the “hunting–feasting–prowess–ancestry” network and contributed to culturally binding forms of interaction that would commonly be identified as religious or spiritual in some sense, including the “control of knowledge about and the objects of the spirit world” (250). One of the other few times that Hodder uses the term “spiritual” is in the context of the houses as connected to ancestors and possibly to interceding with animal gods or spirits: he observes the possibility “that elders within houses protected people with their knowledge of spiritual and material effects” (189).

Although Hodder does not deal in this context with the philosophical issues of Peircean metaphysics or emergent complexity theory, his theory of entanglement meshes nicely with such antidualistic and nonreductionistic models. He has engaged Derrida and Ricoeur more heavily than Peirce, but Hodder’s approach seems consonant with many of the intuitions of pragmatic semiotics. Before beginning to weave a theory of spiritual entanglement in relation to the patterns of human life exhibited at Çatalhöyük, I need to introduce one more type of conceptual webbing – an explicitly theological interpretation of human engagement that attends to the material, the social and the spiritual without collapsing back into a deleterious dualism.

Robert Neville’s theory of religious symbols

As indicated, I have selected Neville as a resource for the interdisciplinary dialogue because, more than any other theologian engaged in comparative religion, he has demonstrated the value of Peirce for interpreting religious symbols in late modernity (cf. Shults, in press). In *The Highroad Around Modernism* (1992), Neville argues that Peirce avoids the problems of both Enlightenment (especially Cartesian) modernism and pernicious and relativist forms of postmodernism. In *Religion in Late Modernity* (2002), he commends Peirce’s pragmatic theory of symbols in the context of a broader argument about the public role of theology in contemporary culture. Neville summarizes much of his prior work and

outlines his approach to theology as “symbolic engagement” in his more recent *The Scope and Truth of Theology* (2006).

My suggestion will be that his approach to interpreting religious symbols can be applied not only to contemporary comparative religions, but *mutatis mutandis* to ancient forms of human life as well. For our purposes here we can limit ourselves for the most part to Neville’s *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (1996). In that volume the relevant features of his proposal are sufficiently clear: an emphasis on interpretation as *engagement*, on the way in which symbols “break” when engaging the *infinite*, on the significance of intentional interpretants in particular *contexts* for understanding the meaning of symbols and on the pragmatic effectiveness of religious symbolic engagement for the *transformation* of persons.

Building on the insights of Peircean *pragmatic* semiotics and metaphysics, Neville’s analysis focuses on what symbols *do* (chap. 1). The human mode of being in the world, argues Neville, is best expressed not as a “mirroring” of reality in the mind (which assumes dualism), but as an “engagement” within the world. All organisms engage their particular environment in order to sustain themselves. Humans engage through the synthetic activity of imagination, which is a real interaction with realities, including people’s responses, habits, orientations and so on. Like Peirce, Neville rejects a dyadic separation between sign (or symbol, idea) and thing signified (object, reality). Reality is understood to be a dynamically interconnected web and human interpretation to be an irreducibly triadic (sign, object, interpretant) semiosis pragmatically embedded within that web.

What about *religious* symbols? For Neville, symbols are not “essentially” religious (or nonreligious). Like all other symbols, they are “taken” in a particular context with a (more or less intentional) pragmatic purpose. What makes religious symbols unique is that they are taken to engage the boundary conditions of the world, or the world-constructing boundaries of a person’s imaginative cultural engagement. For Neville, the human way of imaginatively engaging the world is (in a general sense) always and already *religious* insofar as its basic function is world-making or world-constructing. This is because “imagination cannot frame its experiential elements in a human way without the orienting importance of certain pervasively or seasonally appearing images that function as boundary conditions for worldliness.”

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Religious symbols intend to refer, according to Neville, to borderline or world-making things, “to things having to do with the very worldliness of the world, thus referring always jointly to the finite border and to the infinite within which the border is constituted” (1996: 11). A religious symbol may fail to engage this border, or engage it poorly, but what marks it off as religious is the intention to so engage these real boundary conditions. Here Neville proposes to use the technical phrase “finite/infinite contrast” for the intended (direct or indirect) referent of religious symbols:

The logic of the borderline contingency conditions, registered in at least many of the symbols of them, is that they mark the boundary between the finite and the infinite. That is, by focusing on some finite thing as a boundary condition orienting the experiential world. . . . They suppose a contrast with what would be the case without the boundary condition. . . . Precisely in being symbolized as contingent, as the focal points of contingency, as those things on which all other worldly orientation hangs, the boundary conditions are imaged as finite/infinite contrasts. (1996: 58)

Neville describes religion as the “enterprise that shepherds the symbols of the boundary conditions” of cultures (55), a description that plausibly fits Çatalhöyük as well, as we will see.

The problem (or solution, depending on how you look at it) is that – as Neville puts it in chap. 2, “Symbols Break on the Infinite.” *Religious* symbols are meant to point (indexically) to the infinite or unconditioned. When taken for this purpose, symbols “break” because the infinite (the unconditioned or ultimately conditioning condition) cannot be indicated under the same conditions as finite realities; otherwise, it would not truly be infinite. Insofar as they refer at all, religious symbols always refer indirectly, not only because they have networked polysemous layers and diverse practical uses, but most important because any such reference is – and can only be – through finite elements of the world.

Religious symbols or objects are finite things, but what makes them “religious” is that they also have “some world-constructing importance, either in a cosmological sense or a sense having to do with the ground, meaning and goal of human life” (1996: 70). This importance means that the object of reference is not simply the finite thing (bull’s horn, bird image, plastered skull) as such but “the finite thing in contrast with the infinite, with its supra-finite context, with the situation that would

obtain if the finite thing did not exist or have its world-constructing importance. In short the contrast has to do with the importance of the finite thing for the contingent existence of the world, in some respect, or the world of human meaningfulness.” The first main point appropriated from Neville’s theory, then, is that religious symbols have to do with the attempt to engage the infinite in some sense.

The second insight from Neville is his emphasis on taking symbols in context (chap. 4). Following Peirce, Neville insists on the pragmatic effect and engagement of the interpreter’s intentional taking of a symbol as constitutive for the meaning and reference of the symbol. He stresses that the way in which (or extent to which) broken symbols engage a finite/infinite contrast truly must be understood in light of the *intentional* context of the interpreter. The possible interpretations within an extended semiotic code are *extensional* interpretations. However, the extension within the semiotic system is not itself interpretation. For Neville the primary meaning of an interpretant is “an *intentional* act of actually interpreting something for which the semiotic code contains possible forms” (115).

Interpreting a symbol always takes place in a context, an existential location, and there is always purpose (intention) behind such interpretation; this must be taken into account in understanding any symbol’s effectiveness. Neville argues that the interpretation of religious symbols “consists in the impact of the symbol’s referent, usually some one or several finite/infinite contrasts, on the experience of the interpreter for interpreting community, as mediated by the symbol; this impact is the symbol’s content meaning integrated into practice” (119). However, the way in which (or purposes for which) an interpreter “takes” a religious symbol to refer in a certain respect to a religious object impacts the difference that putative referent makes in the experience of the interpreter.

Neville’s treatment of the kinds of contexts in which religious symbols can be taken is shaped by his own context in a Western university, and so he begins with the context of academic theology itself. For Neville, academic theology (in distinction to religious studies) aims to express the truth about divine matters by presenting a coherent set of symbols, which are always in need of correction (given human finitude). In such a context, one should acknowledge that all symbolic engagement that is intended to refer to “divine matters” must be taken as hypothetical and provisional. It would take us too far afield to discuss the nuances of his theological method, his theory of truth and his interest in interreligious

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dialogue, but this is not necessary for our purpose in this essay. The people of Çatalhöyük (so far as we can tell) did not engage in academic theology any more than they did in academic archaeology (although they clearly engaged “divine matters” in a general sense and were interested in digging up the past).

We can limit ourselves here to Neville’s observations about four other kinds of (overlapping) contexts in which religious symbols are taken, and explore the extent to which these observations might also shed light on our analysis of the transformations of Çatalhöyük. The first is what he calls *cultic* life. Among the things that religious symbols do is organize the life of a community, shaping the norms and actions of the community in response to the sacred, divine matters or most generally “finite/infinite” contrasts. In such contexts, argues Neville, religious symbols typically have double interpretants. An interpretant is “the meaning of a sign that is assigned to a referent in an act of interpretation” (113). In cultic contexts, a religious symbol is “taken” both representationally and practically. That is, the meaning of the symbol is related both to the finite/infinite contrast (the religious object) and to the practical life of the community. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of rituals, which are both linked to the divine (or world-constructing boundary) and shape social and moral codes.

The second context is what Neville calls *ordinary* life. He notes that he is using this term in the way developed by Charles Taylor, which demonstrates that Neville’s own context is shaped by social concerns after the rise of secularism. Ordinary life means “the realms of production (work) and reproduction (domestic life generally) as the locus of principal religious and moral significance in modern culture” (148). In most premodern societies (including Çatalhöyük), a strong distinction between cultic and ordinary life would not hold in the same way. Nevertheless, as a sphere of human life, the concept might still be applied if appropriately qualified. The religious symbols at Çatalhöyük were clearly brought into (entangle with) work and domestic life, which were not so separated (or gender biased) as in Western cultures. For the sake of analysis, however, we might speak of “ordinary” life at Çatalhöyük as that sphere in which the religious symbols were shaping concrete behaviors that supported the livelihood of the community.

Neville also refers to *extraordinary* life as a phenomenon in modern societies. Here he points to persons who press the envelope of ordinary

life, who seek to test the boundaries and accomplish something new or rare. He gives examples of great artists and poets, musicians and explorers or outstanding religious leaders. This third context in the late modern world may not be explicitly shaped by religious symbols, but Neville suggests that for some at least their pursuit has a performative religious reference (in the sense that he defines “religious”). In other words, such persons “offer their lives as ways to be rightly related to the ultimate boundaries of things” (149). Like the spheres of cultic and ordinary life, so with the context of extraordinary life the way of engaging “religious” symbols involves double interpretants; the symbols are “taken” (more or less explicitly) both representationally and practically – linked both to the boundary-constituting (world-making) object and to the practical shaping of the person in social relations.

The final context that is relevant for our purposes is what Neville calls *devotional* life. In this context, religious symbolic engagement involves not two interpretants (modes of taking), but two referents. In other words, argues Neville, the taking of religious symbols in the context of a person’s attention to his or her own transformation in relation to ultimate boundary conditions has “dual reference, primarily to finite/infinite contrasts and secondarily to the state and stage of the specific devotee” (152). The devotee’s taking of symbols intentionally in order to transform (or appropriately shape) his or her relation to ultimate reality involves a reference both directly to “the divine” and indirectly to the person him- or herself as symbolically engaged with the divine. Understanding what religious symbols do in this kind of intentional context requires awareness of the developmental stage and psychological condition of the individual who attempts to engage ultimate reality.

All symbols break on the infinite, but “broken symbols are a dime a dozen if they are dead,” that is, if they are not live options to persons seeking to engage “the divine.” The taking of broken symbols in devotional contexts may be more intense than in other contexts. The devotional use of symbols “stretches symbols beyond safe theological representationalism and responsible practical application to have a power of transforming the soul. The transformations at stake are radical, such as dissolving the soul completely, filling it with the infinite, transporting it across the finite/infinite boundary” (153). Often religious symbols must be bizarre or even terrifying to “work” in such contexts. Neville insists that the criteria for judging whether the symbols “work” devotionally

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will be case specific and quite different from how they work in other contexts. Such criteria must be pragmatic; either a religious symbol existentially engages a finite/infinite contrast in a way that transforms the person or it does not.

This approach to religious symbols obviously cannot be transferred directly to the data at Çatalhöyük, not only because it is a premodern society for which categories like “cultic,” “ordinary” and “extraordinary” would be anachronistic, but also because we cannot know much if anything about the psychological stages of particular devotees or even which symbols they “took” religiously. Nevertheless, Neville’s pragmatic theory of the contextual taking of religious symbols for engaging finite/infinite contrasts may provide a starting point for a theological response to the research questions about the role of spiritual life in the transformations of this ancient “town.”

Toward an interdisciplinary theory of spiritual entanglement

What I now want to attempt is what Peirce himself would call an “abductive” move: reconceptualizing Hodder’s analysis of the phenomenon of social transformation as material entanglement in light of Neville’s insights on the engagement of religious symbols in order to develop a complementary model of spiritual entanglement. The dynamics of “spiritual entanglement” have to do with the way in which persons take religious symbols (more or less) intentionally as they engage world-constructing boundaries (or finite/infinite contrasts) in various contexts, such as the overlapping spheres of public, cultic, ordinary, extraordinary and devotional life. This conceptual framework will need to be tested in other concrete cases to prove (or disprove) its illuminative power, but my goal here is simply to offer some initial indications of its potential application for Çatalhöyük.

As we have seen, the appropriation of Peircean categories in both theology and archaeology has helped to overcome the deleterious effects of dualisms such as matter versus spirit. For Neville, the human engagement with the sense of being-confronted by ultimate limitations that are world-constructing is symbolically meditated, and symbols are not “in the mind” (as opposed to the real, material world) but pragmatically and semiotically functioning throughout reality. For Hodder, all sociality is entangled within – and I would say emergent from while mutually

causally implicated in – materiality. Elsewhere (Shults & Sandage, 2006) I have outlined a way of speaking about spirituality that incorporates a holistic anthropology and the insights of emergent complexity science. This approach is consistent with many of the theoretical models of materiality and symbolism in contemporary archaeology (cf. Gamble 2004; Malafouris 2004; Shults 2007).

Human engagements with questions of ultimate limitation are embedded within and emerge out of the dynamics that characterize the spheres of material and social entanglement. “Spiritual” entanglement describes a particular emergent feature of human relationality that supervenes upon material entanglement and is causally efficacious in relation to this and other spheres. It has to do with the desire and fear that characterize attention to the ultimate boundary conditions of the lived material world as it appears to shape the binding and being-bound of human sociality. This tending to one’s experience of being-conditioned and (more or less) intense longing for transformed and transforming intentionality in relation to ultimate reality are entangled within but not reducible to the tensions that characterize the material, social and other spheres of human life.

It is crucial to keep in mind that the use of the idea of *spiritual* entanglement as developed in what follows is not meant to be a competition with the theory of *material* entanglement, but to be a different perspective on a different dimension or sphere of human life. This “spiritual” sphere, in my view, is as (metaphysically) entangled in the “material” as any other sphere. We are not talking about a separate substance or compartment of human life that is untouched by or released from the material. Human “spirituality” is entangled within “materiality” but not reducible to it, any more than sociality is “nothing more” than the aggregation of material things. However, each distinctive sphere must be explicated in a way that respects the integrity and emergent complexity of relations integral to that sphere, and not be reduced to the explanatory scope of another sphere.

One of the most significant tensions that shape the existential field of *sociality* is the dialectic of fear and love. Like all living organisms, humans tend to avoid that which seems to threaten destruction and pursue that which seems to promise pleasure. Social interaction is structured by both our longing for and dread of being bound to one another. Our social experience of being-limited is ambiguous. We fear being suffocated or

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absorbed by needy others, but we also fear being isolated or abandoned by significant others whom we hope will fulfill our needs. We desire independence from the painfully overwhelming demands of others, but our overwhelming desire for pleasurable intimacy demands our dependence on others. And so sociality is characterized by pushing away and pulling close, an interactive play of repulsive and seductive forces in which we are entangled.

In addition to the finite tensive dynamics of sociality, scholars of religion (and especially theologians) are also interested in the role of an agent's understanding and engagement of ultimate reality (or ultimate value, meaning) in his or her social and material entanglement. A *theological* interpretation of limitation (per se) requires us to attend also to the experience of being-limited itself, and especially to the longing among human persons for the transformation of and within their contexts vis-à-vis questions of ultimate concern. Such longing is fully entangled within the materiality of human life in all its sociality, but in the symbolic engagement with *infinity* we are dealing not with how persons engage in the finite space-time of sociality but with the question of the conditions for agency "at the limits" of human engagement.

Discourse on infinity does not escape the conditions of sociality (or materiality). It is embedded within a complex semiotic coding process, always and already signaling and being signaled in acts of signification. However, the discipline of theology (as the term is being used here) focuses on the significance of limitation itself, that is, on the existential negotiation of the ultimately significant limit of human existence. Religious phenomena emerge within the complex, dynamic field of human sociality, which itself is constituted by tensive personal relations always and already materially entangled. However, the phenomena of religious engagement with(in) the world is distinguished by the way in which persons are (more or less) explicitly attentive to their openness to and longing for a right relation to that which ultimately conditions any and all valuation whatsoever.

As humans attend to their material entanglement, they attempt to control (so far as possible) the various finite forces that might threaten them and finite resources that might nourish them. As humans respond to their spiritual entanglement, they also try to control forces and resources, those that feel utterly out of their control. Rituals and other "religious" practices are often oriented toward controlling or appropriately binding

the self or community to ultimate powers or the forces that constitute and control ultimate boundary conditions. Materiality, sociality and infinity all have to do with limits, with our struggle within and against our being-limited by and for others, a struggle saturated by both fear and love. Theological reflection on these overlapping spheres focuses on the way in which human interpretations of a sense of the infinite, the sacred or the ultimate world-constructing reality shape their understanding and practice of spirituality.

If we think of “religion” as having to do with the way in which humans bind themselves to that which they imagine ultimately conditions and orients their finite desires and fears then, *ex hypothesi*, all humans are “religious” in this sense. On this definition, the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük nine millennia ago were also religious, reflecting and acting and feeling within the bounds and bonds of life together while (implicitly or explicitly) thematizing, imagining ultimate boundaries. Insofar as attempts to illuminate and explicate the dynamics and value of particular contextual engagements with ultimate boundary conditions is one of the goals of academic theology, the following reflections on Çatalhöyük are meant to be initial “theological” responses to the research questions that guided our three-year interdisciplinary project.

**QUESTION 1: HOW CAN ARCHAEOLOGISTS RECOGNIZE
THE SPIRITUAL, RELIGIOUS AND TRANSCENDENT
IN EARLY TIME PERIODS?**

While it is notoriously difficult to define religion or even to list universal characteristics for identifying it, most people agree that they “know it when they see it.” This was true as well for the working archaeologists with whom I interacted at Çatalhöyük. How might the concept of spiritual entanglement help archaeologists feel more confident about recognizing the religious sphere in early time periods? If spirituality has to do with engaging the limits of highest *significance* to human life, then material artifacts that signal high engagements with world-constructing boundaries may plausibly be identified as examples of spiritual entanglement. In other words, accentuated practices that appear to manifest the inhabitants’ attempts to mediate, control or otherwise engage what they took to be the ultimate boundaries that conditioned their social and material life can plausibly be taken as potential indicators of a “religious” dimension within early cultures.



3.1. Painting of vultures and headless corpses from Çatalhöyük. *Source:* J. Mel-
laart and Çatalhöyük Research Project.

Combining the insights of Hodder and Neville, we can say that the religious sphere (or dimension) of human life has to do with the way in which persons (in community) attempt to make sense of their experience of the ultimate boundedness, of the world-making limits that constitute the conditions for social (and material) entanglement. Using this definition, we can suggest that archaeologists (or theologians) can warrant their claims that a particular artifact or pattern at Çatalhöyük (or other early sites) signifies the impact of human “religious” engagement with and in the world by showing how it indicates an imaginative way of dealing with ultimate world-making conditions that shape the boundaries and the bonds of everyday life.

For example, the dialectic of defleshing and refleshing that is found at Çatalhöyük (see Hodder and Meskell, Chapter 2) may be indicative of an attempt to deal with (and to some extent control) what they perceived to be an ultimate world-making boundary condition, namely, between the fleshiness of the living and the forces that deflesh (vultures, wild animals). The artistic representations of vultures taking heads and flesh (Figure 3.1) can be plausibly related to the wider narrative of hunting,

baiting, feasting and prowess, and to the practice of the (postmortem) disarticulation and burying of skulls. The refreshing of these skulls suggests some attempt to engage this boundary, perhaps to protect or energize or placate the ancestors or the forces that defleshed them. The almost continual replastering of the walls may also have had to do with attending to such boundaries. The burial and retrieval of plastered (and other) objects may plausibly be taken as evidence of the imaginative attempt to engage this world-constructing experience of the threat of defleshing and the hope for refreshing, and therefore of “religion” or “spiritual” entanglement in the senses developed earlier.

QUESTION 2: ARE CHANGES IN SPIRITUAL LIFE AND RELIGIOUS RITUAL A NECESSARY PRELUDE TO THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES THAT LEAD TO “CIVILIZATION”?

This question gets at the issue of causality. Did “religion” contribute to the emergence of changes such as domestication and sedentism? Despite disagreements about how to define “religion,” there was virtual unanimity among the team that this question should be given a positive answer. However, causality is a tricky concept for all disciplines. Some archaeologists, like Cauvin and Renfrew, have emphasized the causal force of the symbolic, including the “religious,” on these transformations. Hodder’s theory of material entanglement does not deny this but warns against a unilateral understanding of the causal direction of the shift toward civilization. As we have seen, he prefers to imagine a mutual relation between the material and the symbolic that has a spiraling effect; more material binding leads to more social binding and vice versa.

We can also think of *spiritual* entanglement as an integral part of this spiraling, an intensification of the human fear of and fascination with boundaries and the experience of being-bound. Insofar as the increased attention to that which conditions or shapes the limits of human life is entangled within the emergence of material, social and economic structures, perhaps we could say that changes like sedentism and domestication emerged alongside changes in human ways of tending to finite/infinite contrasts. In Çatalhöyük these “civilizing” transformations emerged through the intensification and complexification of the entanglements of the material and the spiritual spheres. It is not that one is a “prelude” to the other, but that they worked together (symphonically) as “interludes” of social change.

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As these spheres became increasingly entangled, their “hold” or binding force was intensified as new modes of dealing with boundaries (of all kinds) became more complex. One of the benefits of this pragmatic approach is that it helps us explain what religion *does* – what practical effects spiritual entanglement has on the rest of life. If we accept Neville’s idea that religion is the “cultural enterprise of shepherding the symbols of the boundary conditions for experiential worldliness,” then we can ask how this shepherding may have worked at Çatalhöyük over time as its inhabitants struggled to gather and guide their materially entangled symbolic engagements with(in) the conditions of ever intensifying economic and social structures.

This spiraling mutuality can be illustrated, on the one hand, by the way in which the material engagement with bulls early in the Çatalhöyük sequence shaped the “spirituality” of that period, whereas bull imagery declined in the art and architecture as bulls disappeared from the landscape. Earlier sites like Göbekli utilized a rather different animal imagery. On the other hand, the capacity for increasing temporal representation and the creation of time-depth, which was connected to the memory of buried (and occasionally unearthed) ancestors, altered the way in which materials were procured, valued and stored. This is perhaps most evident in the roles that obsidian played in material production and spiritual mediation, roles that should be understood to be robustly pragmatic in both cases.

QUESTION 3: DO HUMAN FORMS TAKE ON A CENTRAL ROLE IN THE SPIRIT WORLD IN THE EARLY HOLOCENE, AND, IF SO, DOES THIS CENTRALITY LEAD TO NEW CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN AGENCY THAT THEMSELVES PROVIDE THE POSSIBILITY FOR THE DOMESTICATION OF PLANTS AND ANIMALS?

The first part of this question requires archaeological analysis, and the answer appears to be a relatively confident yes. The second part lends itself more readily to theological reflection. As in response to Question 2, I would prefer using the terminology of spiraling intensification rather than saying that the centrality of human forms “leads to” new concepts of human agency. As humans became increasingly entangled materially and socially, awareness of intentionality became more intense. Most likely the increase in human forms in art and the growing capacity for intentionally controlling flocks and crops intensified together. As contemporary social

science has shown, human agency is dialectical. That is, becoming aware of one's self as agent is mediated through one's entangled relations with those who are not-self. Attention to identity and attention to otherness emerge together, as does the complexity of the agent's capacity to tend to the other and the self.

The art at Çatalhöyük offers itself as a case study for thinking about the contexts that Neville identifies as cultic, ordinary, extraordinary and devotional life. Of course, we cannot apply them directly to early human cultures, but they may serve a heuristic purpose. It seems plausible to suggest that aesthetic engagement at Çatalhöyük was entangled within all these contexts. Although specialists may have produced the art on the walls (extraordinary life), the figurines appear to have been constructed and handled by almost everyone, being molded within and in a sense molding ordinary life. If the inhabitants were biologically (and psychologically) modern humans, then we can imagine some of them "taking" symbols (figurines, paintings, obsidian) in devotional contexts, engaging ultimate limitations in fear and trembling, as well as with desire and fascination. Most likely such symbols were also intimately linked to (perhaps modeled after) rituals that were "taken" in cultic contexts as well. Understanding what religious symbols *did* at Çatalhöyük will require imaginatively indwelling the different "contexts" within which they might have been "taken" by its inhabitants to engage their world-constructing boundaries.

The relation between agency, spirituality and domestication can be illuminated by focusing on the element of control, which I suggested earlier is a natural element of the human engagement with boundaries and the experience of boundedness. We can imagine a spiraling effect between anxiety about the encounter with forces apparently outside human control and increased success in controlling some of those forces. Domesticating plants and animals would have empowered and strengthened the human sense of agency, but it also would have intensified the awareness of other, more powerful forces and the desire to mediate such boundaries. We can also see the issue of control in the structure of the houses. On the one hand, they are all huddled together and yet, on the other hand, each has its own walls. Attempts to balance and control collectivity and individuality are expressed in the architecture itself. Moreover, it is reasonable to interpret activities such as burying skulls or obsidian under posts as evidence of agency – the intention to control, both materially

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(holding up collapsing walls) and spiritually (creating or reinforcing history houses).

QUESTION 4: DO VIOLENCE AND DEATH ACT AS THE FOCI OF TRANSCENDENT RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE DURING THE TRANSITIONS OF THE EARLY HOLOCENE IN THE NEAR EAST, AND ARE SUCH THEMES CENTRAL TO THE CREATION OF SOCIAL LIFE IN THE FIRST LARGE AGGLOMERATIONS OF PEOPLE?

Nothing forces us to face our ultimate limits (finitude) more than death, and nothing draws our attention to the threat of death more than violence. I agree with the team's general consensus that the house society structure, with its differentiations and the dominance of history houses, can best be explained by appealing to the performance of rituals dealing with violence and death rather than to ordinary material production, and that this suggests a positive answer to the first part of the question. I believe that the definition of religion developed earlier in this essay and the concept of spiritual entanglement can be of service in reflecting on the second part of the question. If increased "spiritual" attention to ultimate boundaries, world-constructing limits and the human relation to them is entangled within (albeit emergent from) "material" and social life, then it makes sense that the one sphere would shape the other, as seems to have been the case in the Çatalhöyük practice of burying (hiding and sometimes revealing) the dead.

Death is the most existentially significant limit of human life, and an intensification of tending to this ultimate boundary would understandably contribute to the creation of new modes of social binding and being bound. Here too we might spell this out in terms of the engagement with finite/infinite contrasts in various contexts. The first large agglomerations of people appear to have been characterized by an intensification of the desire to control or engage the ultimate boundary that limits (or transcends) ordinary life.

If this "spiritual" sphere is entangled (or causally enmeshed) within the other spheres (including and especially materiality) that shape human sociality, then it follows that changes in "religious experiences" would creatively shape the emergence of social life in all of its material, economic and aesthetic dimensions. Death represents the most intense encounter with limitation, and we can plausibly conjecture that the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük "took" symbols that attempted to engage this existential

boundary in ways that were intended to organize the cultus, guide ordinary life, encourage extraordinary expressions and transform devotees at various stages of development.

Conclusion

My argument has been that we can use shared resources from the pragmatic turn in theology and archaeology to develop ways of conceptualizing spiritual entanglement that are complementary to Hodder's theory of material entanglement. This opens up a way of discussing the same differentiated phenomena (embodied human experiences of boundaries that shape sociality) from a new perspective: the human encounter with infinity (the boundary conditions for being-limited). I have suggested that we can refer to the latter dynamics as "spiritual" but insisted that this is not another substance or separate compartment of human life, but rather (like the social sphere) an emergently complex phenomenon that intensifies over time. It is not "immaterial" but an energetic spatiotemporal tending to our confrontation with ultimate boundaries of meaning, value and reality.

As I hinted at the beginning of the essay, engaging Çatalhöyük is not only a scientific exercise; it may also help us tend to our own existential anxiety about and longing to control our limitations. In her book *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt*, Lynn Meskell explores a similar entanglement between things, subjects, objects and symbols in Egyptian artifacts. She points not only to the object worlds evident in the materiality of Egypt, but also to the way in which contemporary consumers are fascinated with and desire connection to such objects. Why are we so interested in these past objects? "It is the spiritual resonance, esoteric and secret knowledge, notions of permanence and timelessness, aesthetics and bodily beauty, scientific achievement, and finally the possibility of life eternal, that are all tacitly embraced in both real and reproduced materials, and in the act of possessing them" (2004: 219).

The material object worlds of Çatalhöyük have not (yet) become (as) consumerized, but our fascination with this part of our human past is certainly increasing. The art and other artifacts from this ancient town display an increasing capacity among the inhabitants over time to mold and form their social and material lives. Their way of engaging religious symbols was transformative and transforming. Just as they were probably

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not always aware of this slow movement of the mass (Hodder), in the same way most of them probably did not explicitly thematize the slow shifts in their spiritual lives as they dealt with death, violence and other constant reminders of their finite limits. However, we can imagine that some mystics, shamans, prophets or artists among them became intensely aware of the sense of ultimate boundaries and the importance of tending to them.

Today we are faced with the same kinds of questions, concerns and practical challenges, even if they are in some ways more complex. How can we intentionally shape our social (and material) lives in ways that respect and care for that dimension of our lives that makes us *Homo sapiens* – the longing for wisdom (*sapientia*) – as we tend to one another in relation to questions of ultimate value?

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