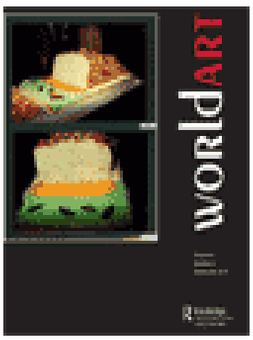

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A cross-cultural theory of relics: on understanding religion, bodies, artefacts, images and art

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This paper argues that relics and, especially, relic-related behaviour, are a fundamental part of religion as a global human cultural practice. Using examples of artefacts and artworks from a variety of religious traditions and periods, a cross-cultural definition and theory of relics is proposed that encompasses and aims to explain a wide range of behaviour, from structured worship to celebrity adulation. A crucial distinction between religious doctrine/theology and religious practice is drawn, and the analytical utility of the distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' is challenged. Throughout human history, special personages – gods, ancestors, kings, queens, saints, heroes, celebrities – have been regarded as sources of power. Their body parts, items their bodies have touched, and images made of them, have, by the operation of a mechanism of transfer and equivalence, also been attributed with power. A new tripartite theoretical framework is outlined that extends the definition of relics from body parts and contact artefacts to images, helping to explain the power of images in different cultural contexts. The attribution of power to special personages, artefacts and images is intrinsically connected to theories of causation; these aetiological concerns have given rise to much of what is called art, to the great value assigned to art and, more recently, to the value of memorabilia.

Keywords: relics; religion; bodies; images; art; portraiture; memorabilia; celebrity; value; aetiology

Several strands of research have converged in this essay. Anthropological research in Fiji led to an examination of the relationship between, and equivalence of, whale ivory valuables and the bodies of chiefs – both being analysed as material manifestations of divinity (Hooper 1982: 181, 253–4; 2013). Subsequent anthropological and art-historical research into the nature of images in pre-Christian Polynesia, and their contested status as 'idols', revealed that a number of images functioned as reliquaries for the deposition of bones of divine ancestors (Hooper 2006: 44, 121, 194–5; 2007; 2014). Questions arose concerning the sanctity of such Polynesian

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images. Were they inherently and permanently sacred, or had they only acted as temporary vehicles for divine presence during ritual? Were reliquary images different from other images? Once their sacred contents had been removed, did they become redundant containers, or did they retain sanctity by association?

Such ontological and theological matters are of more than theoretical concern because when displayed in museums or exhibitions, such images can receive veneration from the cultural descendants of their original makers – an issue that must be taken into account in curatorial practice. For example, when the three surviving large temple images from Hawaii were temporarily reunited by Noelle Kahanu in an exhibition at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu in 2010, a great deal of care was taken by the Hawaiian curators with their positioning and their separation, ritual as well as spatial, from visitors. They were in effect treated as sacred persons (Tengan 2010).[1] Similar concerns attended the *Treasures of Heaven* exhibition at the British Museum in 2011, where reliquaries containing Christian relics were displayed alongside empty reliquaries, though their relative sanctity remained ambiguous.

The precise status of images – either as gods ('idols'; the focus of idolatry) or, less contentiously, as representations or commemorative visualisations of gods – has for a long time and in many parts of the world been an important and vexing matter for religious practitioners, theologians, evangelists and iconoclasts alike. The history of Christianity and Islam has often turned on such matters. Explanations of image-making in human history are usually couched in religious terms, so images offer a window into the nature of religion as a global cultural phenomenon. Recently, sophisticated theoretical propositions about the nature of images and art in the context of religion have been published by scholars in several disciplines, and this essay, which foregrounds relics, is intended as a contribution to this theoretical debate.[2] The main focus is on the important role that bodies – and extensions of bodies in artefact and image form – play in human apprehensions of the nature of power and its sources. Religion, in its many global forms and over many millennia, may be characterised at a fundamental level as an exchange mechanism through which humans attempt, by cultural means, to manage and influence sources of power for human benefit. In short, humans make offerings of various kinds in exchange for divine blessings. This endeavour, as an operational practice, has for the greater part of human history been creatively manifested in what is now classified as art – architecture, sculpture, painting and music. It has also led to the phenomenon of celebrity memorabilia, of which more later.

Reliquaries and relics

In autumn 2000, I spent an hour contemplating one exhibit at the British Museum, the remarkable image from Rurutu Island in the Pacific that is covered with 30 smaller images and has a close-fitting panel concealing a carefully excavated chamber at the back (Figure 1). Although perhaps the most famous of all Polynesian sculptures, usually referred to as an image of the god A'a, little is known about its use prior to it being offered to Christian missionaries by newly converted islanders in 1821, when it contained smaller 'gods'. In preparation for a lecture, I was pondering how the sculpture had been made and why the detachable panel had been carved so precisely to fit the curvature of the head. Also, why had the image been given such a deeply hollowed form, which would have involved difficult and time-consuming work in the eighteenth century when the image was most probably carved? Having lived with canoe builders in eastern Fiji, I knew that Polynesian carpenters would not do

Figure 1. Reliquary image of the god A'a; wood; h. 117 cm; Rurutu, Austral Islands, probably eighteenth century. British Museum LMS 119 (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

technically demanding work without reason. It then occurred to me that the spherical cavity in the head was large enough to admit a human skull, and the cylindrical cavity in the body long enough for limb bones. It became clear that the sculpture had originally been a reliquary, a highly accomplished work of art that could be analysed as both god image and repository for the bones of a deified ancestor. In this regard it was equivalent to anthropomorphic caskets for bones known from elsewhere in Polynesia, notably New Zealand and Hawaii (Fox 1983; Rose 1992). When given to the missionaries, the image's original role as a reliquary was obscured by the fact that its contents had been removed and the vacant cavity used as a convenient shipping container for smaller 'gods' – frustratingly not described in the missionary literature, but which were taken out in a grand trophy show in the mission chapel and subsequently dispersed.[3]

Important questions arose in relation to this image. As a reliquary, a repository for the bones of a divine ancestor, did it retain sacred status once the bones were removed? Was it a 'god image' if the 'god material' was no longer present? Was it now an elaborate but redundant box, or did previous proximity to and contact with the god material (notably bones) render it permanently sacred by the operation of some form of holy contagion or power transfer? This reliquary analysis of A'a, with its attendant questions, prompted a search for a theory of relics in European and Asian scholarship that might illuminate the Polynesian case. In what ways might the A'a image be equivalent to famous image reliquaries of Christian saints, such as that of St. Foy at Conques in France, or to relic containers in Buddhism and Islam? Somewhat surprisingly, a general theory of relics appeared to be lacking. In most published studies, the identity of a relic was assumed rather than defined. Definitions were implicit rather than explicit, usually relating to body parts and to items associated with eminent religious personages.

In light of this unsuccessful search for a theory of relics to apply to the Polynesian case, this essay proposes a cross-cultural definition and theory of relics that can be applied to all cases. It incorporates existing partial definitions and includes additional material connected to profound human concerns about life, power and causation. By this means it is hoped that a range of cultural behaviours throughout human history, some previously thought to be unconnected, can be linked and explained. These include such activities as Neolithic people moving bones about the European landscape, the religious practices of Christians, Buddhists and Polynesians, the adulation of celebrities such as Lord Nelson or Michael Jackson, the way we treasure family heirlooms and the value attributed to images, memorabilia and much of what is called art. It is argued that the power of art is related to the power of relics, that 'relic-related behaviour' in relation to body parts, artefacts and images is a widespread cultural

practice with very ancient roots, and that such behaviour is an ontological mechanism by which humans have engaged with sources of power in order to derive benefit from them. Relic-related behaviour is therefore fundamental to religion and art and the systems of value which those domains encompass.

A brief synopsis of the theory will be followed by evidence in the form of a series of case studies. A short review of relic-related literature is then followed by fuller elaboration of the proposed theoretical framework.

A theory of relics

A definition of relics is proposed that distinguishes three types of material manifestation of 'special personages' (gods, ancestors, kings, queens, saints, heroes, celebrities). The three types are: (A) Body relics, (B) Contact relics, and (C) Image relics. The inclusion of supposedly 'secular' heroes and celebrities in the category 'special personage', and the extension of the definition of relics to include images, are significant features of the theory. The aim is to see beyond conventional culture-specific classificatory schemes in order to provide a coherent explanation of the common features of apparently disparate material. All three types of relic are attributed with the life-giving and life-enhancing powers of the original special personage; they embody the exceptional, thaumaturgic and talented qualities of the prototype and provide a focus for human engagement with such sources of power. To prepare the ground for the exposition of the theory, several examples of relic-related behaviour will now be outlined.

Relic-related behaviour: pilgrimage

A major index of the value accorded to things referred to as relics is the number of people willing to make journeys to see them, or more specifically to make pilgrimages to places whose specialness is determined by their presence. Such journeys to be close to, interact with, and derive benefit (often medical) from relics can involve considerable sacrifices of time, energy and resources, including money – and sacrifice (the initiating phase in an established exchange relationship) is fundamental to religious behaviour. What has come to be called pilgrimage appears to be a practice of worldwide occurrence and very great antiquity. For instance, it is likely that Stonehenge in the third millennium BC was to the Neolithic people of Britain and northwestern Europe what Rome and Medina/Mecca were and are to later Christian and Muslim devotees: important places to which people journeyed to undertake periodic mass devotional rituals associated with the remains and relics of special personages.[4]

Christian pilgrimage

There are numerous pilgrimage sites in Catholic Christianity – Rome, Jerusalem, Mexico City, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, Fatima in Portugal, Aparecida in Brazil, Lourdes in France – most of them associated with saints. These places continue to attract millions of pilgrims every year. The basilica at Lisieux containing the relics of St. Thérèse, who died in 1897, is visited annually by more than two million pilgrims – second only to Lourdes in pilgrimage popularity in France. Over the last few years, selected body parts of St. Thérèse have gone on tour to Ireland, China and other countries, bringing relics to the people, who queue at designated tour locations in order to come into close proximity to them. In 2009, during a tour of Britain, large crowds assembled to venerate arm and leg relics of St. Thérèse contained in an elaborate chasse-like reliquary within a Perspex case (Figure 2). On arrival at Portsmouth Cathedral, the *Guardian* newspaper reported what also occurred at many other locations: 'Many could not resist touching the glass [*sic*], getting as close as they possibly could to the holiness they believed lay just millimetres away. Others pressed beads, religious figurines, even cuddly toys to the protective case and hoped that the goodness would somehow rub off. The ill prayed to be healed, and relatives of the dying pleaded for a miracle.'[5]

With respect to Orthodox Christianity, at the Marian shrine at Tinos in Greece, built on the site of an earlier Byzantine church and a Dionysian

Figure 2. Reliquary for the bones of St Thérèse of Lisieux at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool, September 2009, during the UK tour of her relics. Visitors touching the Perspex cover of the casket (courtesy Catholic Church, England and Wales).

temple, Orthodox Christians, some of whom have crawled in penance up a kilometre-long carpet from the port, queue to bow, prostrate themselves and kiss the jewel-encrusted cover of an icon of the Virgin that is said to have miraculous healing powers and to have been discovered at that spot in 1823 after a vision by a local nun, St. Pelagia.[6] The route to the shrine is packed with stalls selling replica icons and all kinds of devotional memorabilia that, although relatively modestly priced, have high personal commemorative value for devotees. Almost all publicly accessible shrines, Christian and others, have a range of portable memorabilia available for sale to pilgrims who acquire them as enduring physical manifestations of their journeys and acts of piety, and as a focus for continuing devotion at home.[7] The business of pilgrimage is, and always has been, good for business. Local communities at shrines have derived substantial wealth from supplying accommodation, food and other needs of pilgrim visitors.

Contrary to popular understandings, post-Reformation Protestant Christianity is not without its pilgrimage sites and relic cults. For example, Robert Scribner's analysis of Lutheranism argues that Protestant leaders 'effectively created a cult of Saint Luther' (1986: 68), in which thaumaturgic images and 'Luther relics' (66) played a prominent role. Luther's image at Oberrossla in Thuringia was said to produce blood, tears and sweat. Other images were reported incombustible, pilgrimages were made to 'Luther holy trees' and 'Luther springs' with healing waters, while devotees visiting Luther's house cut splinters from his bed (contact relics) and came into close proximity to his clothing on display. Scribner concludes, 'There is no doubt we can speak of a Luther-cult in early modern Germany' (66) and that 'the Reformation was neither as radical nor as successful a break with the past as traditional Reformation historiography has led us to believe' (68). Rublack (2010) documents continuities in relic use in and beyond Wittenberg, focusing on Luther 'grapho-relics' and Luther's wonder-working attributes, while noting the doctrinal shift in Lutheranism away from false Papist relics (vehicles for miracles) towards describing them as vehicles for memory. How fully this distinction was appreciated by lay devotees is unclear. It appears that anti-Papist pronouncements at one level were not reflected in long-established and deep-seated religious practices at a more fundamental level. The Protestant Christian case, and later developments in 'secular' celebrity culture, support the argument for the historical tenacity of relic-related behaviour which underlies the theory proposed here.

Buddhist pilgrimage

There are many pilgrimage sites associated with Buddhism throughout Asia. Some, in northern India and Nepal, are associated with Gautama Buddha's birth, enlightenment, teaching and death. Other sites are

associated with stupa, burial monuments containing the relics of eminent Buddhist leaders.

The number of pilgrim journeys undertaken by Buddhists annually is incalculable, but one of the most popular destinations is the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka, where, despite warfare in recent decades, huge numbers of people gather for the annual *Perahära* festival when the tooth (*Daladā*) of the Buddha is removed from its shrine and paraded before devotees. A long myth authenticates the relic as an upper canine tooth of the Buddha, supposedly taken from his body at death in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh. After passing through several hands, it was eventually brought to Sri Lanka where for centuries its possession validated rulership and where it was venerated as 'a god', because according to Seneviratne (1978: 14) and others, 'in the Sinhalese Buddhist mind the Buddha was both a human being and a god.'[8] Schopen (1997) and Strong (2004; 2010) have recently argued that a focus on philosophical aspects of Buddhism has obscured the fundamental role that relics have always played in Buddhist practice. In observations relevant to this essay, Strong (2010: 184) notes that 'the comparative study of relics across cultures is, in many ways, in its infancy', and that 'relics in Buddhism are just as numerous and cultically just as important as they are in Roman Catholicism'.

Muslim pilgrimage

Besides the well-known annual *hajj* to Mecca, Medina and their environs – with the principal focus of reverence at Mecca being the 'dressed' Ka'aba and the shrine for the preserved footprints of Ibrahim/Abraham (McGregor 2010; Wheeler 2006; 2010; Porter 2012) – many other sacred sites have been destinations for Muslim pilgrimage, including Cordoba, Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, Jerusalem and Baghdad. In 2011, during a visit to the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, lines of pilgrims/tourists filed reverentially past the 'Sacred Trusts' that were viewable in glazed cabinets behind protective barriers. The hair, tooth and footprints of the Prophet, bones of St. John the Baptist and Moses's staff were displayed alongside old parts of the Ka'aba and other items from Mecca. In a sumptuous anteroom could be glimpsed an elaborate reliquary-like case containing the Holy Mantle – the Prophet Mohammed's personal robe – one of the greatest treasures of the Topkapi that is periodically brought out for more intimate viewing and which is featured prominently in a lavish publication available at the museum (Aydin 2004: 52–65). Pilgrims also throng to Hagia Sofia to be in the presence of its magnificent mosaics (classified in the theory here as image relics). Originally a church, then a mosque and now a museum, Hagia Sofia has an ambiguous but still inspirational status for pilgrims and visitors.

Relic-related behaviour has not been prominently featured in public understandings of Islam, but recent scholarship, for example by Josef Meri (2002; 2010), emphasises its importance in Muslim practice.

'*Cultural*' *pilgrimage*

The final example of pilgrimage is that which is not explicitly religious, yet which, at the level of practice, is profoundly similar. The remains of a saint such as St. Thérèse taken on tour – temporarily translated so they can be venerated by devotees who congregate and queue for the purpose – elicits behaviour similar to that associated with large blockbuster exhibitions, such as the famous *Tutankhamun* exhibition at the British Museum in 1972, where crowds queued for hours round the block; or the 2011–12 *Leonardo* exhibition at the National Gallery in London, for which demand for timed tickets was intense, even though quiet contemplation of the masterly drawings and paintings (contact relics of the artist) was impossible in the crowded galleries, as is the case with most blockbusters. We may sense intuitively the strong similarities between an explicitly religious pilgrimage and a journey to Graceland or to a blockbuster exhibition because they involve equivalent behaviours that collapse the unhelpful distinction between pilgrimage to religious/sacred site and visit to secular/profane display. Seen at the level of practice, or behaviour, both activities involve sacrifices of time and resources in order to engage with something that has the power to be life-enhancing physically, spiritually, medically, emotionally, intellectually or socially. The equivalence of relic displays and art exhibitions was noted by Livia Cárdenas (2002: 120) with reference to the *Heiligthumsbuch* of 1509, an illustrated catalogue by Lucas Cranach commissioned by Frederick the Wise for his large relic collection at Wittenberg. Rublack (2010: 146) notes that the Wittenberg relics 'could only be seen in the midst of policed crowds and guides shouting out what they were. The *Heiligthumsbuch*, as Cárdenas puts it, can therefore be regarded as the first precursor of the exhibition catalogue'. This kind of hubbub will be familiar to anyone who finds themselves in the vicinity of the *Mona Lisa* or the *Venus de Milo* in the Louvre.

The equivalent nature of relic displays and art exhibitions was recently manifested in the *Treasures of Heaven* exhibition at the British Museum in 2011, when many visitors reportedly expressed ambiguity about whether it was a religious or secular experience. Kissing of display cases necessitated extra cleaning, as visitors/devotees touched them and kissed them in attempts to get closer to the sacred items within (Reissland-Burghart 2011: 30). Travelling to exhibitions to be in close proximity to original works of genius by artists such as Leonardo or Picasso, and returning elated with memorabilia in the form of catalogues, postcards and narrative

accounts, reproduces pilgrimage behaviour previously classified as religious. The common observation that museums and galleries are the new temples is more than a metaphor: it is true at the level of practice.[9]

Relic-related behaviour: celebrity memorabilia

Competitive bidding at auction can be a significant index of cultural as well as commercial value. As was widely the case in the medieval period, body relics continue to be commercially available, though the Catholic Church now disapproves of relic sales, especially those that take place on eBay (Geisbusch 2012: 123). For supposedly 'secular' celebrity items there are no such proscriptions, and on 22 February 2011, at Holloway's auctioneers in Banbury, England, a lock of Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson's hair was offered for sale as lot 381. Martyr-victor of the battle of Trafalgar in October 1805 which delivered England from the threat of Napoleonic invasion, Nelson was an English national hero of colossal proportions who received the kind of extreme adulatory attention that can perhaps best be compared to recent behaviour towards Diana, Princess of Wales, in life and in premature death. Vast crowds assembled to cheer Nelson in London during shore leave in August 1805, and vast crowds mourned him during a lengthy funeral procession by river and road to his final resting place in an elaborate tomb-reliquary in the crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral. The lock of hair at auction in 2011, according to a manuscript provenance document, had belonged to Lady Hamilton and was accompanied by one of her own – thus providing the additional frisson of their scandalous romantic liaison (Figure 3). With a pre-sale estimate of £3000–5000, the two insubstantial wisps, folded within their validating document (strongly reminiscent of labelled Catholic relics), sold for £62,400.

Besides body parts, artefactual relics associated with Nelson are also regularly offered for sale. At the bicentennial auction of Trafalgar memorabilia at Sotheby's in London (5 October 2005), a large number of 'Nelson' lots sold well above their pre-sale estimates. Lot 184 was 'The Victory Watch', an inscribed pocket watch that Nelson was probably wearing close to his body when he died aboard HMS *Victory*. A watch of this type without provenance would have been worth about £10,000–20,000. Sotheby's, knowing a thing or two about relics and celebrity, decided to give it an estimate of £200,000–300,000, but even their optimism paled in the face of a bidder who eventually paid £400,000.

The question therefore arises, how can we account for this enormous difference in value, commercial and cultural, between an ordinary item and a celebrity one – a 'body relic' and a 'contact relic' closely associated with a hero's death? This question also arises in relation to lot 77 in the Trafalgar sale, a portrait of Nelson, c. 1800, by Lemuel Abbott, a respectable portraitist of the late eighteenth century. It was one of a series

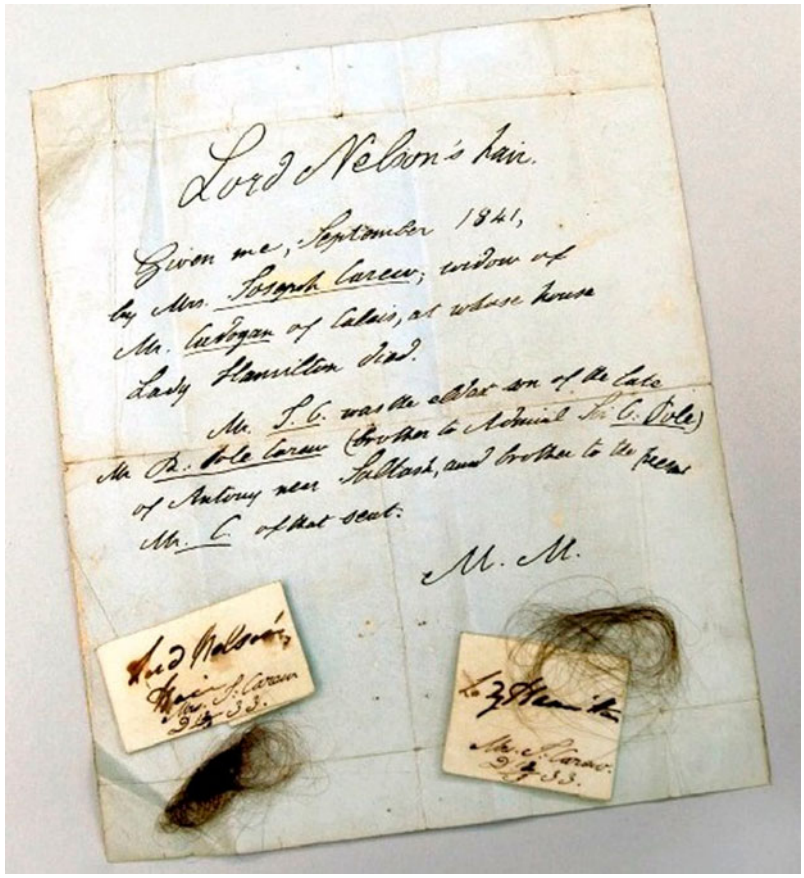

Figure 3. Wisps of Lord Nelson's and Lady Hamilton's hair, with their provenance document, sold as lot 381 at Holloway's Auctioneers, Banbury, England, on 22 February 2011 (courtesy Holloway's, Banbury).

based on a sitting in 1797 (Figure 4). The portrait was given a pre-sale estimate of £80,000–120,000 and it sold for £299,000. Meanwhile, a comparable portrait by Abbott, painted c. 1795, was also in the sale (lot 146). Very similar in size, framing and even quantities of oil paint to the Nelson portrait, it was an equivalent artefact in every way – except that it was not of Nelson, but of another now obscure Admiral: Sir Robert Bruce-Kingsmill (Figure 5). This portrait carried an estimate of £5000–7000, and sold for £8400. The reason for this difference in price between the two pictures at auction, and thus in value according to a major global mechanism of value assessment, is at once obvious yet problematic. Of course, the Nelson portrait would be worth more because it is of Nelson. But why? Why should a Nelson portrait be worth over 35 times more than an equivalent portrait by the same artist of another admiral? To someone unfamiliar with European history, the only observable differences between

Figure 4. Lemuel Francis Abbott (1760–1802). Portrait of Admiral Horatio, First Viscount Nelson (1758–1805), oil on canvas, c. 1800, 735 × 610 mm (courtesy of Sotheby's).

the two images would be the facial features and minor costume details. It could also be argued that the Bruce-Kingsmill portrait is a much better painting, since the brushwork on the Nelson portrait is less assured. In addition, the Nelson portrait is one of a series by Abbott (who was cashing in on the original sitting), which would normally reduce value, whereas the Bruce-Kingsmill is a one-off. Despite these negative factors in relation to the Nelson portrait, the identity of the sitter has clearly increased its value to a very considerable degree. This conundrum encapsulates an analytical problem with images, statues and icons, and their relationship to body and contact relics, that the designation 'image relic' in the theory proposed here aims to resolve.

Two further cases will now be presented that bear on the issue of premature death and martyrdom, and how auctions are arenas for the establishment of relic value in the global cash economy. At an Edinburgh

Figure 5. Lemuel Francis Abbott (1760–1802). Portrait of Admiral Sir Robert Bruce-Kingsmill, Bt. (c. 1730–1805), oil on canvas, c. 1795, 718 × 572 mm (courtesy of Sotheby's).

auction on 23 March 2003, an early nineteenth-century walking-stick appeared for sale with a silver mount inscribed: *Made of the spear which killed Captain Cook, R.N.* Although an unprovenanced walking stick of this type might have been worth £500, an estimate of £5000–8000 was given because of a family tradition linking it to the famous navigator. However, there was no conclusive proof connecting the stick/spear to Cook's death at the hands of Hawaiians in 1779; nor was any claimed by Lyon and Turnbull, the auctioneers. In fact, there is no evidence that it was even a spear that killed Cook; the most reliable sources mention a dagger and stones. Nevertheless, at the auction, bidders from all over the world were busy on the telephones and the stick sold for £153,000. Again, how might we account for this extraordinary price difference between

an 'ordinary' walking-stick and one that might, if disbelief was suspended, have been made from the spear that spilled the celebrated captain's blood?[10]

In Los Angeles, in 2009, the 'moonwalk' glove worn by the recently deceased Michael Jackson was offered at auction with a pre-sale estimate of $40,000–60,000. The following report was released by *Associated Press* (27 November 2009):

> The shimmering white glove Michael Jackson wore when he premiered his trademark moonwalk dance in 1983 was auctioned … on Saturday. Winning bidder Hoffman Ma of Hong Kong will pay $420,000, including taxes and fees, for the rhinestone-studded, modified golf glove. […] As the price of the glove soared, fans roared and squealed, echoing the kind of frenzy that accompanied the pop star when he toured the world. 'That's what death brings upon celebrity,' said Brendan Doyle, a college student … 'Jackson's death was such a tragedy at such a young age that it pushed up prices'. The pop icon [*n.b.*] died June 25, aged 50… Auctioneer Darren Julien said prices for Michael Jackson memorabilia now outstrip those for items belonging to Elvis or Marilyn Monroe.

To bring home the point, it was a cheap golf glove. Also available online at that time were replica rhinestone-studded 'Michael Jackson Tribute' gloves, priced at $7.50. The fact that the original had touched the doubtless sweating hand of the 'pop icon' made it a contact relic of great value.[11]

What, then, have these vignettes, and numerous other case studies, ancient and modern, relating to the high cultural value attributed to Holy Blood, the crown of thorns, the Buddha's tooth, ancestors' bones, early copies of the Qur'an, Jane Austen manuscripts, Gandhi's spectacles and Marilyn Monroe's dresses, in common?[12] What are the factors that connect them, given that they all involve items widely referred to as relics? In addition, what connects them to images of gods, kings, saints, heroes and celebrities worldwide, including Egyptian, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu statues, Orthodox Christian icons and Andy Warhol portraits of Elvis Presley – all images that have never been touched by the original special personage, so cannot be classified as contact relics? Also, is it analytically useful to classify some items as religious relics and others as secular relics? What is the relationship between relics and memorabilia? Can they be 'the same'?

These and other questions are addressed by the theoretical framework which accommodates apparently disparate material of this kind, and also accounts for relic-related behaviour across cultures and throughout history. However, before further elaboration of this comparative project, some terminological and definitional issues need to be resolved.

‘Religious’ and ‘secular’, ‘belief’ and ‘practice’, and other terminology problems

In order to clear the way for a cross-cultural perspective, some terminological iconoclasm is required, since certain key terms that have become commonplace in relic studies merit scrutiny. Culturally specific assumptions, categories and vocabulary deriving from Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Polynesian or any other tradition need to be set aside or used with care, so that common underlying patterns of behaviour can be recognised and identified.

To start with basics, etymologically the term relic is related to the Latin *reliquiae*, meaning remains or things left behind (Greek λείψανα). At one level of analysis, it is a general term applied to things of all kinds, human or otherwise, that remain from the past. The substantive and metaphorical uses of the English term relic, or of equivalents in other languages, are often hard to disentangle, though there seems to be agreement that relics are things that have human body properties and associations, or have been connected with human activity through manufacture or use. The body part of a Christian saint or an ordinary person can be called a relic, as also can be artefacts such as the spear that pierced Christ’s side or Nelson’s pocket watch. ‘Natural’ things that are simply old, such as geological specimens or fossils, tend not to be classified as relics, unless the fossil was owned by a famous person, such as Darwin, when it would become a contact relic of Darwin by virtue of being associated with him through ownership and touch, and its value would be increased accordingly.

Any study of relics must take account of what has come to be called religion, but familiar European classificatory categories, and especially the oppositional juxtaposition of religious and secular, need to be challenged from an analytical point of view, even though they have strong currency. In most cultures a rigorous religious/secular distinction is neither demonstrable nor illuminating, distorting discussion of behaviour into artificially circumscribed categories that can prove a hindrance to profound understanding. The analytical distinction between religious and secular is deeply ingrained in Western academic writing, yet it is a distinction that for most cultures around the world – including Western ones – is at best problematic. To define as secular such domains as food-gathering, house-building, making journeys, buying things or voting in elections does disservice to people’s relationships with gods, spirits or ancestors and to the pervasive influence of those entities on supposedly mundane ‘secular’ activities. For most, if not all, cultures in human history, religion has been intrinsic to all aspects of life, and relic-related behaviour is most productively viewed as having a religious character, even if it is not explicitly part of the practice of a particular religion. In addition, with respect to Western systems of

classification that have often been inappropriately transferred to the analysis of other cultures' arrangements, Arthur Hocart's perceptive dictum (1952: 23) is a salutary corrective: 'How can we make any progress in the understanding of cultures, ancient or modern, if we persist in dividing what the people join, and in joining what they keep apart?'[13] So, some classificatory scepticism is called for, particularly in relation to the notion of 'secular', as this will free us to think comparatively about a range of behaviour. It also permits us to see connections in human behaviour that allow more nuanced understandings of aetiology, religion, medicine and celebrity/hero culture worldwide and over many millennia.

A second heresy needs to be committed in the service of developing the theory, and this is to ignore all culturally specific theological or philosophical expositions about 'belief' (doctrine, dogma, creed), because in terms of a cross-cultural theory they can be obstructive. Valuable as written or verbal versions of beliefs are for specific studies of Christianity, Buddhism or Islam, and for comparative religious studies, an exclusive focus on them can prevent us from observing similarities in practice. Accordingly, an essential process in developing the theory will be to focus on what people *do* and *have done* in relation to those persons or things attributed with special powers and qualities, rather than what people *say* or *write* about them. The focus will be on practice, not expressed belief.[14] It is argued that throughout human history, practice – what people do – has constituted religion for the great majority of people, not verbal or written intellectualisations by an elite minority. The scholar of Buddhism Gregory Schopen lends support to this approach when he advocates studies 'on the ground'. He recommends that we should be 'preoccupied *not* with what small, literate, almost exclusively male and certainly atypical professionalized subgroups wrote, but rather, with what religious people of all segments of a community actually did and how they lived' (1997: 114, emphasis in original). There remain fundamental similarities in practice, if not in doctrine, in all religions: people assemble periodically at special places, often associated with the dead, to sing/dance/process, to recite formulae and to make offerings to sources of power. These sources of power – gods, ancestors, spirits – are attributed with sometimes capricious life-enhancing and life-destroying powers that are nevertheless considered amenable to human influence under prescribed circumstances (ritual). At its core, religious behaviour is about the establishment and maintenance of mutually beneficial exchange relationships between humans and sources of power. Sacrifices of time, skill, energy and resources, including money, animals, plants and even human life, are made to higher powers in order to solicit divine blessings that bring about abundance, prosperity, health and success – in effect providing the means for the production of new sacrifices to continue the cycle.

A focus on practice not dogma, and rejecting the religious/secular distinction, allows us to make meaningful observations about connections between apparently disparate behaviour across cultures and over long time periods.

Defining/theorising relics

A survey of recent literature shows burgeoning activity in relic studies, moving away from hagiography to develop increasingly sophisticated analyses and theoretical frameworks for discussing relics in specific cultural and historical contexts, notably late antique and medieval Christianity. This has led to much brilliant scholarship and new insights, apparent in, and stimulated by, the work of Peter Brown, Patrick Geary and others, and manifested in recent publications such as *Treasures of Heaven* (Bagnoli *et al.* 2010), *Relics and Remains* (Walsham 2010) and *Relics in Comparative Perspective* (Trainor 2010). The last two also exemplify a developing trend in studies of relics in non-Christian traditions including Buddhism and Islam.[15]

However, despite this recent intellectual energy in relic studies, the theoretical framework proposed here is a definitional exercise that seems not to have been undertaken hitherto. For example, the volume *Relics and Remains* extends the range of relic scholarship by presenting a series of conference papers dealing with Egyptian, Greek, Buddhist, Islamic and Christian case studies, as well as others on subjects as diverse as Holocaust writings and Chairman Mao's mangoes. Each study is anchored in thorough scholarship; yet underlying many of the essays in that book (and many other publications) appears to be an uncertainty about what is and what is not a relic, and about how to explain why disparate yet patterned behaviours involving bones, images and the like seem to be connected. Most of the papers probe at the relationship between body parts, artefacts, statues, gods, heroes and ordinary mortals, but the full analytical potential of some of the case studies remains unexploited because of the absence of a theoretical framework to structure discussion.

Alexandra Walsham, in her introduction to *Relics and Remains*, gives perhaps the most recent definitional overview of the term relic, though she considers it 'inappropriate to insist upon a single or precise definition', and acknowledges 'the slippery, elastic, and expansive nature of this concept and category, and the nebulous boundaries that separate it from other classes of entity' (2010: 11). She refers to the two familiar types of corporeal (body) and non-corporeal (contact) relics, but considers (perhaps following Freedberg) that a relic 'is ontologically different from a representation or an image: it is not a mere symbol or indicator of divine presence, it is an actual physical embodiment of it' (12). It is with this statement that a fundamental aspect of relics is missed, and one essential to a definitional

completeness that can encompass 'other classes of entity'. The notion that images are 'mere' symbols or only indicate divine presence, rather than embody it, seems to be at odds with religious practice in most parts of the world, including Christianised ones. However, she notes the anomalous position of icons and concedes her classificatory uncertainty when she writes that 'it is unhelpful to situate relics and replicas, sacred objects and imitative artefacts, in sharp opposition. The interface between them is both unstable and frequently breached' (13). It is at this interface that we are likely to find insights by connecting rather than separating, an issue also hinted at by Derek Krueger in his opening essay in the *Treasures of Heaven* catalogue. There he acknowledges the 'complex relationship between image and relic'; he refers to the important connection between bodies and images in his discussion of a mosaic of St. Demetrios, where he states that 'St. Demetrios and his miracle-working power were present and available *here* in the icon' (Krueger 2010: 12, 15, emphasis in original).

Robert Morkot wrestles with the apparent absence of relics in ancient Egypt, but his problem seems to reside in a narrow definition of relics as body parts that leads him to state that, in Egyptian interactions with the divine world, 'whilst the vehicles used (mainly statues) are not what we would consider to be relics, they did serve some of the same functions' (2010: 37). His restrictive definition of relics as body parts inhibits him from expressing what he intuitively senses from his own extensive knowledge: that images can be relics, in the sense that behaviour in relation to images and to body parts is equivalent. He admits that 'the Egyptian dead were revered, and their tombs became places of pilgrimage for many reasons' (40), yet the absence of much evidence for body-part distribution post-Osiris leads him to conclude that relics were not an important feature of ancient Egyptian religious and cultural practice. If his definition of relics was more encompassing, to include images, it could be argued that relic-related behaviour was in fact fundamental to religious practice in Egypt, as elsewhere.

There thus appears to be no agreed academic definition of relics, and the limiting nature of some definitional assumptions, both about relics and about religious/secular distinctions, troubles scholars who acknowledge the importance of images, memorabilia and celebrity, but struggle to fit them into a coherent scheme. There also appears to be no formal Christian definition of relics. Bernie Fife-Shaw (personal communication 23/3/2012) of the National Catholic Library, St. Michael's Abbey, Farnborough, explained that there was only one 'borrowed from practice', and no official definition appears in the authoritative *Catholic Encyclopedia* (Herbermann 1913). With respect to other religions, there are not, as far as I am aware, official definitions of relics in Islam, Buddhism, Judaism or Hinduism, though Bentor (2003) has reviewed relic categories in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism.

Christian doctrine concerning relics has been ambivalent, betraying elite theological anxiety about associations with magic, superstition and paganism. However, since at least the fourth century, intense relic-related behaviour has characterised the practice of Christianity (not just Catholicism) by ordinary people, and in many cases continues to do so. Among the most valued relics are those associated with the body of Christ and his Passion – pieces of the True Cross, thorns from his crown, the spear that pierced his side and other items such as shrouds (all associated with his blood, similar to 'the spear which killed Captain Cook'). Actual body relics of Christ are rare, though the ingenuity of devotees has provided us with Holy Blood, notably that which impregnated the soil around the base of the cross, and several prepuces purportedly taken from Christ during circumcision. Also highly valued in Christianity have been the bodily remains of saints, notably martyrs, and of Mary, principally her milk. Items closely associated with saints – for example clothing – have also been regarded as powerful relics, as have other items (including pieces of cloth, *brandea* in Latin) that have come into contact with saints' bodies or relics of the Passion.[16]

Overall, across many traditions, we have a picture of widespread high valuation of, and veneration for, the body parts and associated artefacts of gods and other eminent personages – so-called body relics and contact relics. We also have widespread valuation of, and veneration for, images, though in some traditions, such as Islam and some branches of Protestantism, this is suppressed and displaced into non-figural artefacts that are considered to embody divinity such as books like the Qur'an and the Bible. In addition, we have definitional uncertainty about relics, and the deployment of theory, however sophisticated, only in culturally specific studies. The task here is to propose a general cross-cultural theory that connects rather than separates equivalent patterns of human behaviour, while also satisfying, or engaging in debate, relic specialists of different traditions.

A cross-cultural theory: bodies, artefacts, images

In presenting a new theoretical framework, existing terminology is adapted to create a tripartite scheme. Expressions such as 'body/corporeal relic' and 'contact/touch/secondary relic' have wide currency in relic studies, but added to them here is a third category, image relics, that encompasses images and artworks. Some authors, including Alexander Nagel (2010: 214), have discussed 'relic-images', but not in the context of a formal definitional framework. In the interests of cross-cultural analysis, the largely Western distinction between religious and secular is discarded. The three types of relic proposed are:

- *Type A: Body relics/Corporeal relics, or relics by substance* – Body remains, whole or fragmentary, of a special personage (Christ's Holy Blood; saints' bones; the Prophet's hair; the Buddha's tooth; Polynesian chiefly bones; Nelson's hair).
- *Type B: Contact relics/Touch relics, or relics by association* – Artefacts that have come into direct contact with, or close proximity to, the live body or body relics of a special personage (pieces of the True Cross; a saint's tunic; Luther's bed; the Prophet's Holy Mantle; Polynesian chiefly cloaks; reliquaries; Michael Jackson's glove; Nelson's watch; a painting by Leonardo or Picasso).
- *Type C: Image relics/Substitute relics, or relics by equivalence* – Images or objects that are equivalent to, and/or substitutes for, the body of a special personage (an icon of the Virgin; Leonardo's *Last Supper*; a statue of a saint; a Qur'an; a Bible; Buddhist, Hindu or Polynesian statues; Fijian whale ivory valuables; Nelson's portrait).

In this scheme the special personage in the particular cultural context will be attributed with significant powers and qualities, and will by definition have high status. This context may not be explicitly religious, but the behaviour patterns towards the special personage will have a religious character, involving veneration, adulation, respect and dedicated journeys leading to altered medical, psychological and emotional states among devotees or fans. In recent history the range of special personages has become broader. In addition to gods, ancestors, saints, kings, queens, grandparents and heroes, specialist practitioners such as artists, musicians, actors and sports stars, whose skills transcend those of 'normal' human beings, have developed a global reach. They become modern-day heroes and the focus of celebrity cults. Over time the status of special personages may wax and wane. Some, such as Christ, the Prophet and the Buddha, maintain or increase popularity, others drift into obscurity as the number of people who sustain their cults diminishes.[17]

With respect to relics, their value is linked to the status of the special personage in the cultural context. For example, relics associated with Christ, the Virgin or a saint will be highly valued in a Christian context, but will be less so or not at all in a non-Christian one. In the context of contemporary global popular culture, relics associated with Elvis Presley have high value, as evidenced by visitor numbers to Graceland and prices for his memorabilia on the market. In a more limited way, relics associated with my grandmother will have value within my family, but not beyond (unless she happened to be a celebrity). Accordingly the value of, and competition for control of, body parts, artefacts and images associated with these kinds of personage will differ. People will not bid large sums at

auction for the hair of my grandmother, or for her clothing or her portrait, nor will they make pilgrimages to my house where I might keep such things. But they will do and have done these things for body parts, artefacts and images associated with a Christian saint, the Buddha, the Prophet Mohammed, Nelson, Gandhi, Picasso and Elvis Presley. Graceland, Elvis Presley's house, attracts huge numbers of visitors/pilgrims. Elvis was originally buried in 1977 at Forest Hill Cemetery in Memphis, but after attempts were made to steal his coffin his body was translated to the shrine-like security of the Meditation Garden at Graceland.

Special personages

What is the quality that distinguishes a special personage? In many cultures it is characterised as vitality, an active life-force, a miraculous power that inheres in gods and ancestors and in their artefactual embodiments – which can take the form of 'ornamented' human descendants – kings and priests. These, at a fundamental level, are artefactual constructions combining human bodies with appropriate cultural paraphernalia. The coronation of monarchs and consecration of bishops are examples of cultural processes that, through the application of distinctive clothes, regalia and insignia, marks a person out as no longer an ordinary human being but as an image-artefact and embodiment of divinity.

The quality that suffuses the bodies of special personages, and their associated artefacts and images, is generally rendered linguistically as power or force. In the Pacific it is *mana* (and cognate terms), an efficacious power deriving from gods that can inhere in humans such as chiefs and healers, and in objects such as images of wood and ivory (Shore 1989: 139ff.; Hooper 1996: 257–60). Among the Yoruba of Nigeria and diasporic communities in the Americas it is *ase*, translated widely as life-force (Abiodun 1994; Sansi 2007). In early Christianity, this quality was rendered as *virtus* in Latin, *dunamis* in Greek and virtue in English. In his examination of early texts and the cult of relics, Charles Thomas (1973: 2–4) highlighted the healing aspects of the term, noting St. Luke's account of how Jesus knew he had healed someone in the midst of an excited throng. Jesus affirmed, '*Somebody* hath touched me; for I perceive that virtue has gone out of me' (Luke 8: 43–50). On another occasion a great gathering had come to be healed, 'And the whole multitude sought to touch him; for virtue went out of him, and healed them all' (Luke, vi, 17–19). Thomas describes *virtus* as 'miraculous power, a miracle in itself, and virtue inherent in God, as well as healing virtue residing by God's will in individual persons.' *Virtus* is also attributed to saints, where in one case it is described as 'a mystic curative influence resident in, and flowing from, the enshrined remains of St. Ninian'. Thomas also reports that the relic hand of St. Ultan '*curat virtute superna*, cures through *virtus* from on

high'. Evidence in Christianity for the widespread attribution of active divine power (*virtus*, *potentia*) to Holy Blood or saints' bones and for the presence (*praesentia*) of the original holy personage in body relics can be found widely in the literature (see Bagnoli *et al.* 2010 for a recent scholarly compendium) as well as in behaviour such as pilgrimage.

To give one further example of this active force, for Buddhism Gregory Schopen writes that, 'relics are characterized by – full of – exactly the same spiritual forces and faculties that characterize, and, in fact, constitute and animate the living Buddha' (1997: 154). In his meticulous textual analysis he renders the Sanskrit term *paribhāvita* as 'impregnated with active force … invigorated or enlivened by', and he notes that it is used 'in reference to living persons and to that which animates living persons, or to objects that contain life'. It is also used for relics, which are 'saturated or invigorated with virtue and wisdom'. In the *Buddhacarita*, the relics of Sakyamuni are considered to be 'full of virtue' (155). Schopen concludes his discussion by stating that it is 'possible justifiably to assert that this conception of the relic – the conception that takes the relic as a living presence animated and characterized by the same qualities that animated and characterized the living Buddha – is the one conception that had general currency in the Buddhist world [in the third/fourth centuries]' (156). A relic was not 'a piece or a part of the Buddha'; it was 'something that contained or enclosed the Buddha himself, something in which the Buddha was wholly present. But if the Buddha was present in the relic, the relic could not represent – as has sometimes been argued – a token or reminder of the past and "dead" Buddha: for the Buddha to be present, he would have to have been thought of as alive' (158). This view is in line with Scribner's assessment (1986: 54) that images of Luther were more than commemorative. Similar observations about life-force can be made for body parts of 'the very special dead' (Brown 1981: 69–85) in many cultures, including that on Rurutu which created the A'a reliquary with which this essay began.

In addition, artists, heroes and celebrities, though not explicitly religious figures, are also considered to have god-given talent, and as special personages can also be attributed with divine qualities. Mozart and Leonardo were and are regarded as vehicles for divine or divinely inspired intervention in the world, and their works are valued accordingly. In popular culture we have screen goddesses, sports stars, pop icons and the like – a metaphorical vocabulary that evokes a religious dimension to their status.[18]

It is through engagement with life-giving and life-enhancing special personages, or via their material manifestations (relics as defined here), that humans can derive benefit, which, put simply, means health, wealth and happiness. The main mechanism for engagement is sacrifice – an initiating or repeated process in what is regarded as a productive exchange

relationship with higher powers. Sacrifice involves worship, veneration, adulation, journeys and resource expenditure (nowadays cash), offered in exchange for blessings that are considered to have the power to bring about health, abundance, prosperity and an enhanced emotional condition. These blessings can be formal – delivered to a congregation by a priest embodying a god – or informal, such as a pop star's interactions with an audience at a rock festival, generating a sense of euphoria and well-being.

The powerful qualities attributed to special personages are immanent in their bodies, and relics derive their value and importance from their connection to the core body. How does this work? With respect to body relics (Type A), it is well established in Christian and Buddhist studies, for example, that body parts are considered to retain the life-giving vitality of the original body, and that this is not diminished by fragmentation. They are, in their very substance and in their metonymic character, the original body, with its associated powers and qualities. With respect to contact relics (Type B), what establishes their value is the link, through touch and proximity, to Type A relics, the original core body or its fragmented parts. By the putative operation of contagious magic, holy contagion or contagious transfer, items that have been touched, used or created by the special personage, or that have touched their remains, have transferred to them the specialness of the core body.[19] Elizabeth Taylor's recently auctioned jewels, which fetched colossal sums in 2011, way beyond their value as gemstones, come into this category, as do items associated with a martyr's blood, such as pieces of the True Cross, 'the spear which killed Captain Cook' and Nelson's watch.[20] Other items such as original Mozart scores, Jane Austen manuscripts or Picasso paintings, touched and created by genius, are also highly valued. Digital reproductions of these items, however good, will not have the same value, either in terms of price at auction or pilgrim/visitor numbers to an exhibition, because the authentic original – touched – matters.

Analysing artworks such as paintings or music scores as contact relics helps us understand more clearly the logic of the art market and its anxieties over issues of authenticity. The classification of certain supposedly secular things as contact relics also helps us to understand aspects of celebrity culture. Tennis wristbands impregnated with Roger Federer's or Rafael Nadal's sweat, thrown into the crowd at the end of a heroic triumph, will be fought for, remain unwashed and be treasured by devotees as valuable memorabilia – veritable *brandea* of the modern age.

The 'value' of art and images

But what of image relics (Type C)? How do images of gods, saints, heroes or ancestors fit in when they may never have been touched by, or come into close proximity to, the core body of the special personage? It is here

that the crucial issue of representation comes into play, and the nature of 'the power of images'. Although Freedberg (1989: 93 ff.) contests the equivalence of relics and images, considering them to be operating in different ways, this may be too rigid a position. We need to explain why Abbott's portrait of Nelson attracted a £290,000 premium over his better-painted portrait of a little-known admiral, and why a Hindu image, an Orthodox icon or a saint's statue can become the focus of intense devotion.[21] Part of the answer is that, in many cultures, images are considered to be the personage represented, to be a material embodiment of them, equivalent to body and contact relics. Jon Mitchell (2010: 265), in his study of Catholic images in Malta, observes: 'Saints were also present in statues. As three-dimensional depictions of saints' bodies, their significance was not merely symbolic, or representational. They did not "stand for" or symbolize the saint, nor "communicate" saintliness. Rather, they brought saints into being, generating a presence – *praesentia* – and a power – *potentia* – of their own, and of the saint'. He later concludes that statues are 'substantial embodiments of saintly presence, which are both conduits of spiritual power and agents of such power in and of themselves. They are … endowed with the capacity to act, and their presence is confirmed both through being performed with, and through their own performances' (275).

To many Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Hindus, New Zealand Maori and numerous other groups this presence and power in images is a reality that informs cultural practices; it causes veneration and prompts pilgrimages to be close to or even kiss the object of devotion, as in the case of icons. Alfred Gell's theoretical work on agency is important here in relation to what might be called a 'principle of equivalence'. He argues persuasively that images, artworks or objects can be substitutes for, and equivalent to, persons (who may be gods, saints, heroes, artists or ancestors – 'special personages'), and that these artefacts can exercise person-like agency in human affairs (1998: 5–7). In this way Nelson's portrait, or an image of the Virgin, becomes part of what Gell calls their 'distributed personhood' (96 ff.), which, like their Type A and B relics, can continue to have effects in the world.

A portrait can also be regarded as a contact relic of the artist who painted it, and part of their distributed personhood. In the case of Abbott, because he is not regarded as significant in the context of British art, his touch adds little to the value of the Nelson portrait, the value of which is almost entirely founded on its status as an image relic (Type C). However, if Nelson had been painted by a famous artist such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, then that portrait would have fetched far more than £290,000. Accordingly, when both artist and subject are special personages, the value of the work as both contact relic and image relic will be

high: an Andy Warhol portrait of Elvis Presley fetched $37 million at Sotheby's in New York on 9 May 2012.

With respect to the agency of images, this can be activated by specific procedures during their production, notably consecration. For example, Hindu and Buddhist images can be empowered by painting the eyes, allowing participation in *darshan*, mutual 'seeing' that facilitates human benefit transfer.[22] Such consecration rituals can be repeated to reactivate images when required. Hirini Mead, New Zealand Maori curator of the *Te Maori* exhibition in the USA in 1984, for which opening consecration rituals were performed, considered that for living relatives 'the taonga [treasure/artwork] is more than a representation of their ancestor; the figure is their ancestor, and woe betide anyone who acts indifferently to their tipuna (ancestor)' (1997: 184). For Maori, the act of artistic creation can transfer the essence of the original special personage into the image, which can then serve as a vehicle for that personage to have agency in human affairs.

Image relics need not be anthropomorphic or zoomorphic. The violent furore in March 2012 over the US Army's burning of copies of the Qur'an in Afghanistan demonstrates that the book, as an artefactual embodiment of the word of God transmitted through his Messenger, is, by the logic of this theory, a Type C relic. It is equivalent to and consubstantial with the personages Mohammed and Allah, making its destruction equivalent to homicide and deicide – hence the outrage and retaliatory killing. Similar views are expressed by some fundamentalist Christians about the Bible. Transubstantiation during the Eucharist provides a further example of how non-figurative materials can through consecration become equivalent to, and embodiments of, a god, thereby enabling them to play an important role via veneration and ingestion in the generation of human well-being.

Collapsing the person/object distinction and crediting certain objects with animate person-like qualities allows us to understand human behaviour more clearly, especially religious behaviour. Religion is likely to have had its origins in early human aetiological concerns with natural phenomena and particular events, productive and destructive, and especially with sickness. Religious practice developed as a mechanism for influencing such occurrences for human benefit, by engaging in active exchange relationships with the sources of power considered to cause events – entities usually characterized as 'gods'. Blessings and beneficially altered personal conditions are what humans seek from sources of power, and a principal means of engaging with and deriving benefit from power sources is via relics of the three types enumerated here. Over time, major shifts take place in the value of particular types of relic. For example, in some Western cultural contexts the enduring importance of relics has been masked by a shift away from medieval Christian practices to post-Reformation ones focused on royalty,

heroes, artists and celebrities. But reclassifying art and celebrity memorabilia as relics allows us to understand recent behaviour from a *longue durée* perspective. Because artists and celebrities have an elevated status that was formerly restricted to gods, kings, saints and heroes, their nature as exceptional, talented and well-known persons is registered through pre-existing modes of engaging with special personages – adulation, veneration, journeys, enhanced emotional states and competition for their relics.

It is hoped that the application of this theoretical framework, by assessing to what extent things may be relic types A–C, will assist scholars to see some of their materials in a fresh light and help resolve analytical problems concerning the physical manifestations of human engagement with sources of power, evident in art and religion. It will also help explain the differential value of a wide range of things, and why people are motivated to compete for access to and possession of them. A cross-cultural approach to relics, with a focus on practice (on relic-related behaviour), may help us understand some fundamental aspects of being human – especially the nature of religion – and allow us to see connections that previous classificatory schemes have obscured.

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Notes

1. These three images now belong to the British Museum in London, the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, and the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu.
2. There is an enormous literature that is culture- or tradition-specific concerning images, but some notable contributions to broader understandings include Belting (1994), Freedberg (1989), Gell (1998), Latour and Weibel (2002), McClanan and Johnson (2005) and Boldrick and Clay (2007).
3. Although very frequently published as a great work of art, this sculpture had not previously been identified as a reliquary. The reliquary hypothesis was proposed at the William Fagg Memorial Lecture at the British Museum in March 2001 and in the book *Pacific*

Encounters (Hooper 2006: 194–5). A full study of the image and its history was published in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* (Hooper 2007). Having been acquired by the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1821 as a trophy in the war against heathenism (to use a prevailing idiom), it was displayed in the LMS museum before being transferred to the British Museum in 1890.

4. Recent research at Stonehenge and nearby Durrington Walls confirms that the site contained elite burials and was a place for periodic large-scale gatherings of people from as far away as Scotland (Parker Pearson 2012). The stones are also attributed with healing properties and Stonehenge remains a contemporary destination for Druidic neo-pagan pilgrimage.
5. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/16/st-therese-relics-uk. Relics of St. Thérèse have toured the world; in Ireland in 2001 an estimated three million people, almost half the population, went to see them, or at least to see the reliquary and be close to its contents (http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2001/jul/02/catholicism.religion).
6. The Tinos shrine was visited in August 2009. The icon is purported to be the work of St. Luke, so on that account can be regarded as both a contact relic of St. Luke and an image relic of the Virgin. See Dubisch (1995) for an extended discussion of the shrine.
7. Souvenirs in the form of plastic images of the Virgin from Lourdes or holy soil from Jerusalem derive their value from being materialisations of memory and experience, specifically being evidence of the proximity achieved to special places. They play a metonymic role as partial, miniature and microcosmic versions of the original (see Mack 2003: 121 and 2007: 77 ff. for perceptive discussion of these issues). Along with such things as memento fridge magnets their value is largely personal, rather than general, for it is linked to personal experience. However, if the person involved has significant status, then the commercial and cultural value of the items they accumulate may be high. A reproduction of an image of the Virgin owned by a Pope will have more commercial and cultural value than an identical image owned by an ordinary devotee.
8. Seneviratne (1978) provides a full ethnographic account and analysis of the rituals of the Temple of the Tooth and the annual Perahära festival. Strong (2010) perceptively analyses Buddhist and Catholic attitudes to relics and their destructibility/indestructibility, focusing on the alleged destruction of the Buddha's tooth by Portuguese Catholics in the sixteenth century. For a study of the role of Buddha relics in South Asian state formation, see Blackburn (2010).
9. Publications such as those by Duncan (1995), Paine (2000), Bouquet and Porto (2005) and others in museum studies have discussed this issue comprehensively. Geisbusch (2012: 116–18) reflects on how different modes of presentation have implications for 'the museological and the religious gaze'. Stier (2010) has discussed secular/

religious ambiguity in the displays at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

10. The significance of spears and holy blood will not be lost on Christian relic specialists interested in the Passion (see Klein 2010: 60–61). The 2003 Captain Cook 'spear' auction and the Christie's 1972 auction of 'the club that killed Captain Cook' are discussed in an article in Anthropology Today (Hooper 2003).
11. This must be the highest price ever paid for a golf glove. Even those worn by deceased golfing 'icons' such as Severiano Ballesteros (died 2011, aged 54) would be unlikely to reach such heights.
12. The last three have fetched high prices recently at auction. Jane Austen's 1804 manuscript draft of *The Watsons* was sold at Sotheby's in London on 14 July 2011 for £993,250. Gandhi relics, including his spectacles, sold at Antiquorum in New York on 4 March 2009 for $2,096,000. Marilyn Monroe's 'subway' dress sold at Profiles in History in Los Angeles on 18 June 2011 for $5,200,000.
13. On this subject and on the origins of 'government' in ritual/religion, see Hocart (1970).
14. This is not to devalue what individuals or groups believe or say they believe. Rather, it is that this is not the subject of analysis here. There is increasing scholarly interest in 'the materiality of religion' and in drawing an analytical distinction between belief and practice; see Keane (2008) and Morgan (2010).
15. No justice can be done here to the extensive literature on relics, but key publications that have stimulated recent scholarship are by Brown (1981), Geary (1986; 1990) and Howard-Johnston and Hayward (1999). Meri (2002, 2010), Schopen (1997), Trainor (1997) and Strong (2004) have made significant contributions to the study of Islamic and Buddhist relics, emphasising their major, if largely ignored, role in the history of those religions. See Flügel (2010) for a similar study of Jainism.
16. Examples are extensively covered in the literature on Christian practice, for example Brown (1981), Holsbeke (1996), Vincent (2001) and Bagnoli et al. (2010). These examples are overwhelmingly Catholic but, as noted earlier, Lutheran Protestantism was not without its saint/relic cultic aspects.
17. There is no space here to discuss the role charisma plays in relation to special personages – as part of what leads to the attribution of their specialness. See Weber (1968), Lewis (1986) and Glassman and Swatos (1986) for discussion of charisma.
18. These modern celebrities usually have some quality that marks them out as exceptional in their field, whether this is acting, sport or popular music. The recent phenomenon of C-list celebrities, people with no particular talent who happen to be physically attractive or prone to extreme behaviour, is largely short-lived and driven by the popular media. These celebrities have no enduring cultural impact once 'dropped', and their temporary fame is partly connected to envy

of their apparently exalted lifestyle, misrecognised as evidence of having been blessed with talent.

19. Within anthropology, the concept of contagious magic was developed by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1990; 12-volume 3rd edition originally published 1906–15) as an aspect of sympathetic magic which privileges contact. John Skorupski proposed the notion of 'contagious transfer', in which the quality of one object can be transferred to another, but not necessarily by contact (1976: 176). Both definitions contribute to the meaning suggested here, which is that contact, or close proximity, facilitates the transfer of qualities from one person or object to another person or object. The term magic is problematic, with its connotations of irrationality, although John Mack discusses the widespread attribution of the power of magic to small things (2007: 163–81). An informative review of theories concerning the relational power of saints and relics, in the context of a study of the Jain case, is provided by Flügel, who uses key anthropological sources, such as Tambiah (1984). Considering relics as objectifications of social relationships, Flügel's own view is that 'the power of relics to act as catalysts derives from the individuals who are oriented towards them and from the emotive energy with which relics are invested, not from their intrinsic qualities' (2010: 480).
20. After her death, Elizabeth Taylor's jewels were sold at Christie's, New York, on 13–16 December 2011, for $137.2 million. Many 'ordinary' items fetched over ten times their already inflated estimates. The celebrity frisson of Elizabeth Taylor's tempestuous love life, especially with Richard Burton, no doubt encouraged the pre-Christmas buying frenzy for items that had once been in intimate contact with Ms. Taylor's body.
21. Such intense devotion has recently been the subject of a documentary film made in Peru by my colleague Aristoteles Barcelos Neto (2012).
22. See Gell (1998: 116–21) and Schopen (1997: 116–17, 137–8). Also noteworthy is a life-size wax image of Luther, its face cast from a death mask and animated with glass eyes (Scribner 1986: 54) that survived until the twentieth century. Ostensibly playing a role in Lutheran 'memory culture' (Rublack 2010: 163), its impact on devout viewers is likely to have been more complex.

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