

1

Ontology, Mimesis, and Divine Intervention: Understanding Catholic Visionaries

Jon P. Mitchell

This chapter focuses on an example of divine intervention from contemporary Malta. In January 2006, Angelik Caruana, a care worker from the coastal town of Birzebuggia, noticed that the statue his wife had recently bought, of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, had begun to weep tears of blood. Subsequent to this, Angelik began to see visions of the Virgin Mary, and receive messages. She asked him to establish a shrine on the prehistoric hill-temple site of Borg-in-Nadur, outside Birzebuggia. Here, weekly prayer meetings are held, at which Angelik receives messages and visions in front of assembled crowds of up to several hundred people. As well as these weekly encounters with Our Lady, Angelik also experiences the presence of his guardian angel, fights against demons and the devil, and feels the pain of Christ's passion. The phenomenon is highly mass-mediated. Film of his weekly revelations are promptly published on YouTube and the blog site <http://ladyborginnadur.blogspot.co.uk/>. Angelik is regularly covered in the Maltese national press, and no fewer than three editions of the popular current affairs television programme *Xarabank* have been dedicated to his statue, his visions and the messages.

Divine Intervention

Anthropologists have struggled to account for phenomena such as this—of divine intervention. A recent special issue of the journal *History and Anthropology* attempted to develop a framework for the anthropology of divine intervention, principally in Christian Europe and its bordering areas. “[V]isions and public apparitions of divine figures, in particular of the Virgin Mary or some saints” (Valtchinova 2009: 204), argue the issue editors, pose particular problems for anthropologists charged with “taking seriously the religious experience of others” (ibid.: 203, citing Cannell 2006:

3). The solution, for them, lies in locating such experiences within the time-honored historiographic dialectic of structure and event. On the one hand, divine interventions are events that emanate from deep cultural structures within which divine agents exist. On the other hand, those structures are the means by which strange, uncanny or unusual events can be interpreted as divine. Mediating between structure and event is the social actor, for whom divine intervention is a symbolic means of asserting power or authority.

Divine intervention presents a classic example of the type of phenomenon that has driven the development of a key strand in anthropological theory since the late nineteenth century—that of “apparently irrational beliefs” (Good 1994; Holbraad 2012; Sperber 1985). There have been different versions of the apparently irrational belief: from things that occupy two different categories (twins as birds, gifts as spirits, animals as ancestors, etc.) to enduring credulity in the face of apparent contradiction (not fearing the kin of a witch when you know that witchcraft is hereditary, maintaining faith in an oracle when its divinatory powers falter) to belief in things that plain don’t exist (dragons with golden hearts, fire engines that suck up human blood, or demons, devils and water spirits).¹

There have broadly been two approaches to the analysis of apparently irrational beliefs—forms of rationalism and forms of relativism. This is not the place to re-rehearse the extensive arguments and debates over rationality and relativism in anthropology and philosophy (Hollis and Lukes 1982; Wilson 1970). Instead, I intend to use these debates as they have been developed by anthropologists invoking an “ontological turn” in anthropology to explore the potential for an anthropology that combines cognitive, sensory, and performative approaches.²

The Angelik case has provoked lively debate in Malta. Skeptics tend to take a rationalist approach, proceeding from the assumption that Angelik’s experiences are not authentic, and seeking explanation in delusion, mental illness, or worse—charlatanry. Curiously, relativist approaches to such phenomena also proceed from the starting-point of assuming inauthenticity. As with interpretations of other examples of divine intervention (Bax 1995; Christian 1989, 1992, 1996; Zimdars-Swartz 1991; Kaufman 2005), Angelik’s revelations might be seen as symbolic of deeper social tensions or anxieties—about the morally erosive influence of European secularism, or the impact of increased African migration to Malta: both themes that recur in Angelik’s testimony. Both rationalist and relativist approaches, then, tend to “explain away” apparently irrational beliefs as things other than they really are: delusion or symbolic representation.

Anthropologists of the ontological turn, however, suggest that rather than representing something else, we should take such apparently irrational beliefs at face value, taking them seriously as products of particular ontologies; ontologies whose obscurity confirms their alterity, but ontologies nonetheless. By this reckoning, those who believe in, or experience, apparently irrational phenomena or divine intervention are neither credulous

irrationalists nor creative symbolists nor psychiatrically compromised, but are right. The task of anthropologists is not to “interpret” such beliefs or representations, but to think our way into a position from which we can acknowledge they are right, using this confrontation with radical alterity to reconfigure anthropological theorization.

For the ontological turn, both rationalist and relativist accounts encompass a naturalism in the final instance. Nature as a fixed reality underpins both the universality of rationalism and the plurality of relativism. The same might be said of cognitive anthropology (a form of rationalism) and the anthropology of the senses (a form of relativism). Cognitive anthropology seeks explanation in terms of cognitive representations (of nature) that are rooted in processes that are evolutionarily beneficial. In the analysis of apparently irrational beliefs—or indeed divine intervention—one of the key tasks of cognitive anthropology has been to demonstrate why representations that appear on the face of it to be irrational or ill-adapted to the main job of knowledge—representing nature as it is—nevertheless endure. This is usually because they either correspond to, or “tweak” in significant ways, forms of cognition that are either necessary or beneficial in evolutionary terms (see Boyer 2008; Cohen 2008; McCauley 2011; Sperber 1996). The anthropology of the senses has focused on cultural and historical variations in the way the senses are classified and conceived—and with that the way nature is perceived and represented (Classen 1993, 1997; Howes 1991, 2003; Howes and Pink 2010). Apparently irrational beliefs, or perceptions of divine intervention, can be explained by understanding the particularities of different cultural classifications of the senses, which govern the range of possible attributions of sensory data. This explains, for example, how for the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea, birdsong is the voices of ancestors (Feld 1982) and how in Malta a moment of queasy claustrophobia might be seen as the presence of Christ (Mitchell 1997).

The radical move of the ontological turn is to abandon this reliance on a single nature underpinning human cognition and sensoriality, and propose instead a world of “multiple natures,” each equally “true” and each distinguished by its radical alterity from the others. With this move, the ontological turn effectively outlaws from anthropological theory any reliance on a concept of representation—be that the mental representation of cognitive anthropology or the cultural representation of the anthropology of the senses.

I argue in this chapter that this takes the ontological turn an unnecessary step too far. The rationalism of cognitive anthropology and the relativism of the anthropology of the senses, I argue, might usefully—and less drastically—be mediated—or mitigated—by a focus on mimesis, and particularly mimetic performance. Mimesis has a central position in the arts more generally, and the performative arts in particular (Woodruff 2008). Accounts of mimesis trace it back to Aristotle and Plato, for whom art was seen as a representation of nature (Auerbach 2003 [1946]; Potolsky 2006).

More recent theorizations, however, emphasize the creativity of the mimetic process—the extent to which rather than simply reproducing something other than itself—copying—mimesis produces new entities. In performance, this is critical to understanding the “feedback loop” between mimetic (re) presentations of the world (performances) and the reality or nature they represent. Performance has the capacity to create presence (Schieffelin 1998), to transform subject, object, space, time, and society (Bloch 1992; Kelly and Kaplan 1990; Mitchell 2006, 2009)—in short, it is generative, rather than merely representational.

Ontology

Perhaps the most articulate statement of the ontological turn comes in Martin Holbraad’s *Truth in Motion* (2012). Developing what he calls a “recursive” anthropology of Cuban divination, he narrates the history of the discipline as revolving around shifting attitudes to the relationship between nature and culture. Evolutionism, which figured nature as a cause of cultural difference, gave way to what he calls “diffusionism,” which uncoupled nature from culture, to historicize and relativize difference. Thus were born social and cultural anthropology, which treated their principal objects—society and culture—as “sui generis fields to be understood in terms of their own” (ibid.: 23). Ironically, though, the theoretical move which enabled anthropologists to address cultural difference was a commitment to an unvariant nature underpinning the different interpretations—or representations—made by different societies and cultures. The point about people in different societies and cultures was that they saw things differently from us. In order for this to be the case, the “things” that they saw must be demonstrably the same (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 11–12):

Meaning ... arises from human beings’ ability to represent the world by bringing to bear upon it sets of arbitrarily defined (and hence conventional) symbols. Thus cultural conventions order the world by deploying symbolic structures that organize it into distinct categories by means of their otherwise arbitrary relationships to “signs.” (Holbraad 2012: 39)

Note that a singular world is represented by multiple symbols and conventions. The relativization of conventions or “truths” was made possible by treating the world as a singular natural reality that is represented by different groups in different ways. Particularization presupposed universalization, and ultimately figured culturalism as itself a form of naturalism: culture in the end is confirmed only in its relationship to nature.

The realization of this contradiction ushered in a third phase in the development of anthropological theory—constructivism, in which

both society/culture *and* nature were to be relativized. In this framework, society/culture varies according to the different ways in which it represents nature, just as it did for the diffusionists, the difference being that nature in turn now also varies according to how it is represented by those different societies/cultures. Culture is natural, and nature is cultural. The circularity of the argument is clear. Holbraad also points to a central tautology in the constructivist account, namely, that debunking or collapsing the nature–culture dichotomy is dependent on our first establishing that dichotomy as a central truth:

It is only by relying on the distinction between nature and culture—precisely the form of “classifying the world” we are supposed not to project onto others—that we are able (indeed bound) to repudiate the “ethnocentrism” of the distinction itself. (ibid.: 34)

The most consistent critique of constructivism’s “culturalism” comes from cognitive anthropology, which effectively mirrors the constructivist aversion to nature with its own aversion to culture, and a resounding “naturalism.” Also rejecting the nature–culture dichotomy, constructivists figure nature, not culture, as the encompassing “prior truth”:

Yes, human beings have a peculiarly sophisticated capacity to represent the world around them, including the capacity to represent other representations ... But this capacity is itself natural, not just in the formal sense admitted by earlier generations of anthropologists ... but rather in a fully substantive and scientifically tractable way: cultural representations are a function of human mental capacities, and these ... are just the result of natural processes (neuronal and so on) that take place in the human brain. So to treat cultural representations as a domain unto itself and then worry whether or not nature as it is in itself can be accessed through them is unduly to mystify matters, since cultural representations are themselves as natural as trees. (ibid.: 31)

What the naturalism of this cognitive anthropology and the culturalism of constructivism share—and for what Holbraad takes them principally to task—is their commitment to the notion of representation. On the constructivist hand, a theory that sees culture in its various relative forms as characterized by its propensity to represent the world to different populations in different ways. On the cognitivist hand, a theory that sees the work of cognition generating mental representations—again symbolic forms which represent external forms to social populations, but are materialized in the mind/brain. This is a more resounding naturalism than the naturalism inherent in culturalism, and even more problematic for the new ontographers.

Rejecting both forms of naturalism, the ontological turn turns on a simultaneous rejection of both forms of representation, and with it a

rejection of epistemological relativism—indeed of the very notion of epistemology itself. Rather, it favours a form of ontological relativism which replaces the multiplicity of cultural “worldviews” with a more substantive multiplicity of actual “worlds.” This might be elaborated using Holbraad’s central ethnographic example, drawn from his research among Cuban Ifá diviners, or *babalawos*, of a material substance, powder, that is simultaneously power—*aché* (Holbraad 2007). He likens this curious phenomenon of a thing that is also a concept to the classic anthropological conundrum *mana*: the excessive Oceanian concept of life-force that appeared to earlier ethnographers to be simultaneously everywhere and somewhere. This ability to refer both directly to specific things and more obliquely to nebulous ideas created problems for anthropologists eager to understand, interpret, translate *mana*. Their response was effectively to blame *mana* itself, argues Holbraad, and the people whose world it animated, treating it as a riddle to be solved using existing anthropological tools. Eager not to reproduce this in approaching *aché*, the problem is turned back on anthropology itself:

The ontological turn in anthropological analysis ... turns on the humble—though on this view logically obvious—admission that our concepts (*not* our “representations”) must, by definition, be inadequate to translate *different* ones. This, it is suggested, is the only way to take difference—*alterity*—seriously as the starting point for anthropological analysis. One must accept that when someone tells us ... that powder is power, the anthropological problem cannot be that of accounting for why he might think that about powder (explaining, interpreting, placing this statement into context), but rather that if that really is the case, then we just do not know what powder he is talking about ... The world in which powder is power is not an uncharted (and preposterous!) region of our own ... It is a different world. (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 12)

There are not, then, a multiplicity of worldviews, but a multiplicity of worlds. Through this, Holbraad develops what he calls a “recursive” anthropology that trumps both the constructivist and naturalist arguments. Rather than abstaining from truth-judgments, as does constructivism, recursive anthropology inverts them, seeing *others’* worlds as true, not “our” interpretations of them. Where naturalism privileges the truth-claims of “science,” recursive anthropology seeks to “affirm the indigenous perspective *as against* that of the anthropologist” (Holbraad 2012: 47—my emphasis). If “we” cannot understand “them,” then “we” must find new ways of thinking.

Mimesis

This rather radical conclusion—should one say “solution”?—has not gone without criticism (Killick 2014). Its invocation of radical alterity appears to advocate a form of deep relativism that leads some to question whether the new ontology is not in fact just another word for older versions of “culture” (Carrithers et al. 2010; Palecek and Risjord 2012). Indeed, taken to its logical conclusion, the new ontology generates a paradox in which the rejection of representation renders problematic the very project in which it is engaged. If, as Holbraad argues, “alterity is indeed that which cannot be represented” (2012: 247), how can anthropology’s ambition ever be more than noting the existence of the apparently irrational? His answer points to the synthetic, or inventive, nature of anthropological description. Drawing on Wagner’s (1981) identification of parallelisms between Daribi cultural invention and the invention of culture within anthropological discourse, Holbraad suggests a similar parallelism between divination and ethnography as disciplines engaged in “infinite”: “acts of definition (rather than representation) that effectively transform the world upon which they purport to comment” (2012: xxiii). Rather than describing or explaining an extant world, divination—and ethnography—bring a new world into being, through acts of inventive definition.³

In that it presents a case of the apparently irrational, and therefore what Holbraad would define as *alterity*, Angelik’s case delivers examples which parallel *aché* and divination. Like *aché*, Angelik’s statue might be seen to present a category conundrum, in that it is simultaneously inanimate and animated; a thing and an agent that like *mana* is simultaneously transcendent and immanent (see Mitchell 2002). Like divination, Angelik’s visions “infinite” spiritual entities—not only the Virgin Mary but also Angelik’s guardian angel, demons, and the devil himself. An ontographic response would be to make a parallel, or recursive, infinite that accounts for these two *alter* phenomena—statues that cry blood and visions/messages from the Virgin Mary—in our own terms. Infinite short-cuts the reliance on the notion of representation, which is problematized in ontography because it establishes a distance between itself and the world, as signifier of a signified that is perpetually deferred. Infinite is characterized by an unfolding immanence of concepts-in-the-making.

This focus on process does, like Wagner’s argument that precedes it, help us to overcome some of the conceptual rigidities inherent in earlier accounts of “cultural” alterity, but, it seems to me, does not take us quite as far as it promises. The problem is the assumption that the processes of infinite are primarily conceptual, rather than perceptual—products of cognitive activity rather than the immediacy of human experience. Infinite is a philosopher’s mode of “thinking through” that assumes that others also engage primarily in “thinking through” the problems of the cosmos. The

ontological turn's philosophical solution to the problem of alterity, then, generates its own distancing from experience. In its place, I propose a more phenomenological solution, rooted in an understanding of perceptual immanence rather than conceptual transcendence; of embodied process rather than philosophical exercise. This move allows us to bring a notion of representation back into the frame—albeit as a generative, mimetic process rather than a semiotic one. It also allows us to take account of recent developments in cognitive neuroscience, as described by both Turner and Downey (this volume), which focus on the embodied nature of the religious life.

Mimesis, I argue, connotes representational immanence, rather than deferral. This immanence is inherent in both mimetic artefacts—such as icons and statues of saints—and in, and through, performance. Moreover, both can be understood as generative rather than simply representational or imitative phenomena, and as such they bridge the gap between signifier and signified to which Holbraad objects. They are not so much copies of nature as themselves part of nature (or supernature) and therefore entities in and of themselves—with their own ontological status.

Mimesis has a particular valence within contemporary socio-cultural anthropology, most notably through its association with Michael Taussig's work on colonial and post-colonial mimesis. For Taussig, mimesis is conceived as a “space between” sameness and otherness; identity and alterity (1993: 78). His focus is contexts in which colonized societies appear to imitate the colonizer, taking on cultural forms or producing imitative representations of their former rulers. He argues that we misunderstand this process if we see it as straightforwardly imitative. Rather, it constitutes a form of creative appropriation in which the power of the colonizer is usurped as the colonized make it their own (see also Stoller 1995). This notion of mimesis as an active process has its roots in Plato, for whom “imitation is an art of *making*” (Burnyeat 1999: 299—emphasis in original): “Mimesis is the production of visual and auditory likenesses which give us that sense of actual presence” (266).

Mimesis as imitative generative appropriation—of making it your own—is also central to Bourdieu's account of the bodily processes inherent in the reproduction or transmission of *habitus*:

[T]he process of acquisition—a practical *mimesis* (or mimeticism) which implies an overall relation of identification and has nothing in common with an *imitation* ... and the process of reproduction—a practical reactivation which is opposed to both memory and knowledge—tend to take place below the level of consciousness, expression and the reflexive distance which these presuppose. The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it *enacts* the past, bringing it back to life. (Bourdieu 1990: 72)

The importance of mimesis, rather than representation, is that it allows us to understand representation as itself ontological. Or, put another way, it enables us to understand social process without assuming a deferral—of its representing something other than itself. Mimesis generates versions that are entities in their own right, and can be treated as such.

This is equally true of theories of mimesis that locate it within cognitive representations as within socio-cultural representations. If mimesis is itself part, rather than deferral, of nature, then we may with all good conscience return to such “naturalistic” theories of mimesis. Recent developments in neuroscience have begun to inform the understanding of representation, mimesis, and, ultimately, sociality across the cognitive, human, and social sciences. Webb (1995) points towards the evolutionary significance of mimesis, building from Rene Girard’s notion of mimetic desire, and using Merlin Donald’s *Origins of the Modern Mind* to emphasize the place of mimesis in human cognition and evolution. Webb argues, following Donald, that the critical moment in the development of human cognition was mimetic. Before *Homo sapiens* developed language, argues Donald, its predecessor, *erectus*, managed a cognitive transition between primate cognition based on episodic memory, that allowed it to remember experiences in sequence but with little patterning or abstraction, and mimetic cognition. The move to mimesis was significant in that it permitted purposive, intentional, and representational acts; non-linguistic, even pre-linguistic, communication (Donald 1991: 168). Mimesis incorporates a variety of bodily actions and modalities, but differs from straightforward imitation and mimicry in its creativity. Mimesis generates “novel, expressive acts” involving the “*invention* of intentional representations” (ibid.: 169, emphasis in original) which permit the organization and transmission of complex social skills such as hunting and tool-making: “Once hominids could self-generate a variety of representations, they possessed the essential cognitive support system for a larger, more complex society” (ibid.: 175).

The cognitive basis of mimetic action was an improved conscious motor control brought about by an extended representation of self and body in space—or an extended conscious proprioception—that in turn allowed a conscious modeling of the self in action, permitting the rehearsal and refinement of movement (ibid.: 190). This ability to envision our bodies in motion is what Donald calls the “kinematic imagination” (Donald 2001: 271). The “mimetic controller,” the cognitive module that permits mimesis, works by parsing event sequences from episodic memory into structured models for meaningful action:

[M]ime, play, games, skilled rehearsal, nonlinguistic gesticulation, toolmaking, other creative instrumental skills, many nonsymbolic expressive devices used in social control, and reproductive memory in general are all by-products of the mimetic system, as it continuously models the episodic world. In effect, this means that the mimetic mind

models, in action, the outputs of the episodic mind. The mimetic system is thus a seminal hominid cognitive innovation, a mode of cognition that remains dissociable from language even in modern humans, and is the logical basis of the first truly human culture. (ibid.: 193)

More recently, Jenson and Iacoboni (2011) have attempted to trace the significance of contemporary neuroscience—and particularly the discovery of the “mirror neuron”—for our understanding of mimesis, which they see as central not only to human culture in a broad sense, but more specifically to the development of the representational arts, and particularly literature. Mirror neurons were first identified in the late 1980s, when Italian researchers observed that among lab primates the same neurons fired when observing others accomplishing a task—including lab staff—as when they themselves accomplished it. Subsequent research identified a similar process among humans, albeit as part of a much more complex neural network (Carr et al. 2003; Iacoboni 2009; Jenson and Iacoboni 2011).

So, looking at somebody—or something—doing something, generates an observable neural process consistent with our having done the thing ourselves; or experienced having done it. The same can be said, indeed perhaps more strongly, for *imitating*. Richard Schechner (1988) has explored the implications of Paul Ekman’s work on the psychology of emotion for understanding performance from the perspective of performers. Ekman’s principal argument concerns the relationship between emotion and facial expression. He argues that there is a limited repertoire of “target emotions” available to humans, which are linked to a universally-recognized and universally-utilized repertoire of facial expressions. However, contrary to what one might expect—and contrary to a representational theory of bodily performance—facial expressions appear not merely to reflect emotions but to generate them (Ekman 1984). The same conclusion was drawn by Laird (1982, 1989).

Ekman demonstrated it by monitoring the emotion-specific activity of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) in two groups of trained actors. The first were asked to evoke memories using the Stanislavski-Strasberg “method” of tapping into “emotion memories” from their biographical past. The second were asked to very precisely perform the expressions associated with emotions, by obeying a set of physical instructions muscle by muscle, and unaware of which—or indeed whether—emotions were intended to be represented. What he discovered was that in the second group, the ANS response was much more marked, suggesting that rather than simply representing emotion, its performance actually generated it. Schechner draws parallels between Ekman’s method and the stagecraft of the Kathakali tradition of dance-theatre in south India, where novices are trained in the production of facial expressions which will generate the on-stage emotions necessary for successful performance (Schechner 1988: 255–7). The Kathakali practices and Ekman’s experiments demonstrate

that performance is not merely representational, but generative, and in this sense mimetic.

Statues

Statues in the Catholic world have long been more than mere representations of holy personages. As Orsi has argued, Catholic material culture consists of “media of presence” (2005: 49), which not so much signify as bring into presence the characters they depict. Since antiquity, Catholicism has been preoccupied with the issue of presence: the presence of the sacred or holy in the here-and-now (Brown 1981; Kaufman 2005; Orsi 2005; Primiano 1999). From the third and fourth centuries of the Common Era, pilgrimage centers developed around living saints, often hermit “holy men,” and at the sites of the tombs of Christian martyrs (Brown 1981, Frank 2000). Such sites were places where the religious could experience the power—or *potentia*—of the saints through a spiritual engagement with their presence—or *praesentia* (Brown 1981: 88). *Praesentia* was not limited to the pilgrimage site. Saints could also be present in the smallest relic of their lives (Geary 1986), or in their images and statues.

The precise nature of the *praesentia* inherent in depictions of the saints was a matter for theological debate. As Elsner argues, the discourse on iconoclasm in Byzantine Christianity revolved around the assumption of “real presence as contained in the image” of a saint (2012: 369). Through this discourse, a series of Church councils during the eighth century established an unprecedented philosophy or theology of images and icons that continued until the Reformation. At issue was the relationship between image and prototype in holy iconography—the relationship between signifier and signified—and precisely how the holy image generated *praesentia*. The councils clarified the distinction between worship of an image and veneration; a distinction that consolidated the position of images and statues within Catholic ritual practice, whilst at the same time answering iconoclasts’ fears that images encouraged idolatry: images should be venerated (*duleia*) whilst worship (*latreia*) is reserved for the worship of God (ibid.: 282). This distinction was lost on the theologians of the Reformation, for whom a focus on the purity of the word supplanted the “incarnational logic” (Gaudio 2002: 73) of Catholicism. For the early reformers, the materiality of the Church confirmed it as idolatrous. It “used idols in the most concrete sense. Like some vast Augean stable, the medieval Church was ankle-deep in the ‘filth’ of images” (Eire 1986: 54). The centrality of images, icons, relics, and other material culture within Catholicism was reaffirmed by the counter-reformers of the Catholic Renewal at the Council of Trent (1545–63) and afterwards. Baroque, the house style of the Renewal, reinforced this queasy maximalism and reconfirmed the position of sacred art within Catholicism.

The Council of Trent called upon sacred art to stimulate emotion and “persuade the viewer as to the immanence of the sacred in everyday lives ... At root, the Baroque is an art of transcendence: a type of poetic creation in which perception is linked to belief” (Mulcahy 2011: 133–4). This is not quite the literal presence of Byzantine iconophile accounts of sacred art, but an emotion–belief–presence nexus that nevertheless ensures a principle established at the Second Council of Nicaea (ibid.: 787) and repeated at both Trent and the Second Vatican Council (1962–5)—that “the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype and whoever venerates an image venerates the person portrayed in it” (Catholic Church 1993: art. 2132).

If this is so, then statues and images transcend simple definitions of representation, drawing together image and prototype—signifier and signified—in mimetic presence. As “media of presence” they “serve as points of encounter ... between humans and sacred figures” (Orsi 2005: 49). As points of encounter, they are relational, but they are also generative of that relationality. They do more than carry meaning: they create relationships.

Statues in Malta—as elsewhere in the Catholic world—create relationships through manifestations of power—*potentia*—that are invisible or visible (Mitchell 2009). Particular statues are said to have miraculous powers of healing or intercession—for example, the “Miraculous Crucifix” that is housed in the church of Our Lady of Jesus in Valletta, and is once a year dabbed with pieces of gauze that are then circulated to the sick. Angelik’s statue drew the attention of his wife, Catherine, who on January 17, 2006 had been painting their kitchen and popped to a local shop for materials. The statue caught her eye, and although it was rather expensive at €38, she was compelled to buy it. At the time, Angelik himself had been visiting the shrine of Our Lady of the Grotto (*Il-Madonna tal-Ghar*) at the Dominican convent in the town of Rabat. This houses a bust of Our Lady which wept blood in 1999. It was six days after Catherine had bought the statue that their eldest son noticed what he thought was red paint near its eyes. The dried liquid turned out not to be paint, but blood, which the statue continued to weep in the days that followed. Angelik was subsequently told by Our Lady that the phenomena taking place in his house were a continuation of those in the Grotto in Rabat (<http://ladysapparitions.weebly.com/the-statue-of-the-immaculate-conception.html>).

This event established a series of relationships: between Angelik’s statue and the statue in the Grotto—a relationship of imitative resemblance, or mimesis; and between the statue and Angelik himself. This latter relationship was consolidated on April 21, 2006, when Angelik had his first apparition of Our Lady. Whilst showing visitors a photograph of the statue—which by this time had been taken to the Curia for investigation—he suddenly fell to the ground and lost consciousness of his surroundings. A bright light appeared, in the middle of which was a woman, who pleaded

with him to “pray the Rosary, and get others to say the Rosary” (<http://ladyborginnadur.blogspot.co.uk/p/borg-in-nadur-borg-refers-to-group-of.html>). The visions were rooted in a further relationship between Angelik and the visionaries of Medjugorje—the town in Bosnia and Herzegovina where visions of Our Lady have been reported since 1981. Angelik is a member of the prayer group *Mir* (the Croatian for “peace”), which was established following a pilgrimage to Medjugorje in September 2005. After his first vision at home, the *Mir* meetings became the site for subsequent visions. The main emphasis at *Mir* meetings is conversion—a strong theme of the Medjugorje Virgin’s messages, and of those received by Angelik:

Jiena s-Sultana tal-Paci u tal-Familja! Konverzjoni! Konverzjoni fil-familji!
 [I am the Queen of Peace and the Family! Conversion! Conversion within families!] (second message, received on May 11, 2006, prior to a *Mir* meeting)

Zimdars-Swartz links visions in the Irish village of Melleray in 1985 to a recent pilgrimage to Medjugorje undertaken by a local group (1991: 16–19). The same link might be made between Angelik’s visions and the *Mir* pilgrimage. Both establish a relationship between the new visions and the more famous Medjugorje visions. Moreover, Angelik’s visions, which were brought about by the statue of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, also consequently established a relationship with arguably the best known visions, at Lourdes in 1858. These visions, to the young Bernadette Soubirous, consolidated the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, established as infallible dogma by Pope Pius IX in his *Ineffabilis Deus* of 1854.

Each of these relationships—between Angelik’s statue and Our Lady of the Grotto; between Angelik’s visions and those at Medjugorje and Lourdes—involves some form of mimetic process. Newer versions conform to established prototypes of statues’ appearances and behaviors, the content and a context of visions, and the depictions of Our Lady. In this sense, Angelik’s statue *qua* statue is unremarkable—a standard, mass-produced depiction of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception standing in light blue robes and white head-scarf, with her arms out to her sides and palms outstretched in a posture of welcome. It is a canonical pose derived from classical art and the Baroque of the Catholic Renewal—or Counter-Reformation. Angelik’s description of the Lady he sees during visions is similarly canonical: white veil, light blue sash, holding her hands out, and with a face so beautiful “one could not possibly draw [it]” (<http://ladyapparitions.weebly.com/description-of-the-lady.html>).

This chain of relationships resembles Sperber’s (1996) epidemiological vision of culture as made up of chains of representation that link public and private/mental representations. However, the unrepresentability of Our Lady’s face in Angelik’s vision throws into relief the discussion concerning

representation and the relationship between image and prototype. On the one hand, the vision repeats—and so imitates—established representations of Our Lady. On the other hand, it itself defies representation, and so is confirmed as not “merely” an imitation but an instantiation of the original, or prototype. The non-representability of holy prototypes is a common theme in Maltese understandings of mimetic artefacts. For example, the most important Maltese crucifix, the life-sized, seventeenth-century “Miraculous Crucifix” in Valletta, is miraculous on two counts: it performs miracles but was also created by a miracle. Having finished all but the head of the statue, its sculptor, a Sicilian Franciscan lay brother, fell into a trance. When he woke, the elaborate head had been completed—the work of angels. Such narratives confirm Catholic artifacts as “media of presence”—doing more than simply carrying meaning, they generate points of encounter and relationship between person and holy presence. As such, they are mimetic, derived from a generative process that is not merely imitative or representational, but constitutive.

The Maltese Catholic lifeworld is constituted through people’s encounters and interactions with such media of presence, which are ubiquitous. If Baroque was the house style of the Catholic Counter-Reformation/Renewal, it has remained so in contemporary Malta. Densely urbanized—some would say overdeveloped—Malta’s main urban centers developed around its harbors from the sixteenth century onwards. Early urban planning required that street corners were decorated with statues, ensuring that the saints that occupied the abundant churches are also in the streets. The churches themselves contain statues, paintings, relics. Households contain prints of paintings, smaller statues, tableaux, illustrated prayer cards. Workplaces have small shrines oriented around statuettes or prints. People themselves wear necklaces or rings with depictions of the saints. Until recently, when the national bus service was taken over by a multinational company, even buses had small shrines with statues in them.

Learning to negotiate this world of presences is learning the *habitus* of Maltese Catholicism. It operates in some ways like Bourdieu’s vision of the Kabyle House (1990: 271–83)—a model of the cosmos that is also a practical tool through which people learn how to live within the cosmos:

All the actions performed in a space constructed in this way are immediately qualified symbolically and function as so many structural exercises through which is built up practical mastery of the fundamental schemes. (Bourdieu 1972: 91)

Building on this, we might say of the Maltese context that all actions performed in encounter with its material culture are immediately qualified experientially as so many structural exercises, through which is built up a mastery of mimetic performance. The presence of the holy—*praesentia*—is consolidated through people’s engagements with these media of presence,

which themselves exert themselves upon the person. Statues and other artifacts are the objects of prayer, requests for intercession, genuflection. They are also persons with whom people engage in conversation, maintain eye contact with, and avoid turning their backs upon, as they would a living human person. They are perceived as subjects rather than objects, persons rather than things. As persons, we might argue that they too trigger the mirroring process that is central to the mimesis. If watching a person act generates a neurological mirroring, then the same might be true of looking at—and engaging with—a statue or other image that is itself considered to be a person. This might help us to understand how presence and power—*praesentia* and *potentia*—are brought together in Catholic material culture, and the depth of empathy that Maltese Catholics have for holy figures. It also marks a starting-point for our understanding of Angelik, his visions and experiences.

Angelik

Angelik was born and raised in the town of Zejtun, which is close to the dockyards area of Malta, and has a reputation for being “rough” and violent,⁴ gained in part through memories of political violence in the 1980s, but also from the town’s reputation for particularly strong rivalry—*pika*—between the supporters of different bands that play at the parish feast—or *fešta*. *Festa* is a key moment in people’s encounter with saints. Each parish has at least one saint to which an annual *fešta* is dedicated, which both celebrates and—through parading the saint’s statue round the streets—performs the saint’s patronage over the parish. Tucked away in the church for the rest of the year, the *fešta* sees the statue taken out—of its niche and of the church—so that it provides a more total, and three-dimensional, encounter. During the *fešta*, children are encouraged to imitate the postures of the patron, as embodied in its statue. It is the focus of adoration and adulation, and during the procession is carried around at shoulder-height, made to sway through the streets as though walking, and look around the territory over which it presides.

Like most Maltese children, Angelik had this informal practical religious learning supplemented by catechism lessons and Holy Communion coaching from the Maltese lay doctrinal organization, MUSEUM. Here, as well as learning doctrine, children learn the appropriate modes of bodily engagement when approaching, preparing for, and ingesting the consecrated host—the central artefact of Catholic material culture. This involves cultivating a respectful demeanor of veneration and modesty, approaching communion with eyes lowered in humility, bowing at the knees in genuflection—a performance of deference that, as with Ekman’s actors, generates a disposition of deference, or further, actually constitutes

deference itself, and through that constitutes the object of deference as subject: a presence with power. As Hérault argues, when learning Holy Communion, “[t]he children are not merely allocated a particular role but have imposed on them, through correct bodily postures, the expression of an appropriate internal attitude” (1999: 7). Through this and other modes of practical mimesis—in church, at home, and in other places where God lurks—Maltese children develop the performative bodily repertoires necessary to comport themselves through the Catholic lifeworld, but also to constitute that lifeworld.

Angelik didn’t merely incorporate these repertoires, through the mimetic process of looking and doing; encountering the holy in the material environment. He himself became a performative exemplar, shifting from learner to tutor, apprentice to master (or sorcerer), as he himself joined the MUSEUM order to become a teacher. This shift, though, is more than a demonstration of expertise. It marks the start of a different and more intensive performative relationship to presence. Being a MUSEUM teacher—or *Tal-Muzew*, as it is phrased in Maltese—has connotations of pious simplicity consistent with vocation. Full members take a vow of celibacy, and pray daily from a prayer book written by its founder, St. Gorg Preca. Preca was canonized in 2007, 100 years after he established MUSEUM, and is Malta’s first and—so far—only saint. He was a radical thinker, dedicated to improving the secular and spiritual conditions of the Maltese working classes, and particularly those working in the country’s southern dockyards (Baldacchino 2011). Committed to education, he was also a visionary, having in 1910 met a young boy in the dockyard town of Marsa, whom he subsequently realized was Jesus, appearing in order to encourage his project of expanding Catholic education. As a visionary, he provides Angelik with a model of male encounter. Visions, and particularly visions of Our Lady, tend to be associated with younger women—peasant women of the type epitomized by Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes. As a man from Zejtun, close to the dockyards and with a similar reputation, Angelik was very much part of Preca’s target ministry.

Angelik subsequently left MUSEUM, marrying his wife Catherine and moving to Birzebuggia, where they began to raise their four children and, it seems, fell on harder times.⁵ Meanwhile, they also became involved in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, via a local Cappuchin monk, Father Hayden Williams. As a form of Catholic Pentecostalism (Csordas 1997; Theuma 2002), Catholic Charismatic Renewal emphasizes direct, unmediated encounter with the Holy Spirit, spiritual healing, glossolalia, and other forms of experiential practice. It tends to be associated with forms of apocalyptic or messianic thinking which figures the present as the “End Times,” prior to a second coming (Apolito 2005), and figures the current spiritual challenge as a visceral battle against the forces of evil as literally embodied by the Devil and his many avatars. A key technology within this battle is prayer, which is seen to have a direct impact on the

balance of power between good and evil. The movement is structured around a network of relatively small-scale prayer groups who gather to pray, in particular, for conversion—of both non-Catholics and Catholics alike, who are called to move towards this stronger, more fundamental form of Catholicism.

In 2005, Father Williams was asked by the prayer group that Angelik and Catherine were a part of to organize the Medjugorje pilgrimage. As a movement that emphasizes the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is less skeptical of vision phenomena than perhaps other parts of the Catholic Church. Following the pilgrimage, the *Mir* group was established in January 2006, Catherine bought the statue of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, and Angelik's visions began. His first vision called upon him to "pray the Rosary, and get others to say the Rosary" (<http://ladyborginnadur.blogspot.co.uk/p/borg-in-nadur-borg-refers-to-group-of.html>). For the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Rosary has a particular role in altering the balance of good and evil in the cosmos. It is itself a "medium of presence" (Mitchell 2009: 212). As Downey (this volume) argues, repetitive prayer, such as reciting the Rosary, manipulates our perception of the external environment.

After this first event, Angelik had frequent visions, both at home and during the meetings of *Mir*. From *Mir* was formed *Theotokos*, the cenacle of 12—including Angelik and his wife—who meet regularly to contemplate Our Lady's messages to Angelik, and occupy center stage in the rituals centered around Angelik. In November 2006, Angelik was asked by Our Lady to the prehistoric temple site of Borg-in-Nadur, outside Birzebuggia, where she would appear to him and deliver an important message. The message was that this would be the site where she would appear to him and deliver messages; and where Maltese should gather to hear the messages, pray, and promote conversion in the spirit. To the chagrin of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, a cross was erected on the site, which now dominates the hill, transforming it into a place of pilgrimage. A rock from the hill was taken to the next *Mir* meeting, to encourage the pilgrimage, and by May 2007, Our Lady had announced she would appear regularly every Wednesday evening to deliver a new message.

The weekly event begins at around 6 p.m., when people begin to gather on the hill to recite the Rosary. Sitting on rocks, benches, or portable chairs, they spread out on a flat area below the site's main hillock, upon which a large cross and altar have been erected. At around 7 p.m., Angelik arrives, with the other members of the cenacle, and Father Hayden. They swiftly walk up the stone path and onto the hill, where they gather in a circle to join in and lead the Rosary. After several decades of the Rosary, the prayer is stopped as Angelik walks swiftly to the top of the hill, to stand in front of the cross. He is followed by the priest, who holds a Dictaphone to his mouth, and from the vantage point of those looking on, appears to be talking into it. Angelik then looks up towards the sky, and turns round

to face the onlookers, holding his arms outstretched in the shape of the crucifix or diagonally downwards with open palms—the classic posture of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. He then collapses onto a folding chair and the Rosary is resumed. The message is transcribed and read out, with an interpretation from the priest, before the crowds disperse and the event is over.

Over the months and years, these events have become more and more routinized. The messages have become progressively longer and more convoluted. Our Lady has demanded more and more iterations of the Rosary, and offered up her own prayer to supplement the regular devotion. By the end of 2007, the Wednesday gatherings were attracting up to 500 participants, who congregated up to an hour before the advertised arrival time of Angelik and his cenacle to recite the Rosary. His regular arrival and performance of ecstasy on the hill, and the recording, relaying, and interpretation of Our Lady's message were punctuated periodically by more spectacular manifestations. He has been thrown to the ground under attack by demons and the Devil, and has produced large thorns from inside his mouth. Hosts have appeared in his hands and on his tongue, Rosary beads have emerged from nowhere, and pearls have materialized. He has also experienced phenomena away from Borg-in-Nadur and the weekly pilgrimage. Early on, he was asked by Our Lady to bear the pain of Christ during the crucifixion. Again, this was routinized: every Friday, Angelik feels the pain of the five wounds on his body, sometimes also feeling the crown of thorns and scourging on his back. Marks of the stigmata have appeared on his hands. Initially he wished to keep these episodes secret, but was told by Our Lady that he should tell people, to encourage conversion. An episode of the *Xarabank* television show depicted him lying on his bed, arms stretched out in a crucifix pose, and shaking with the pain of the Passion.

The critical move in Angelik's performance, which marks it off against more "normal" performance, is that he not only acts *in relation to* holy presence—through the postural repertoires of deferential genuflection towards Catholic material culture—but himself takes on their very postures. In doing so, he takes the mimetic mirroring process a step further, which is not merely empathetic, but appropriative. As with the images and statues they emulate, these performative acts do more than represent—they constitute. Angelik does not enact the pain of the Passion, satanic attack, and so on, so much as embody them, making them his own, mimetically. Through taking on the postures of Our Lady and the crucified Christ, he experiences their presence within and through him. His performance, then, crosses a boundary, from accommodation to appropriation, which a number of Maltese informants found problematic—even blasphemous. Yet accusations of blasphemy acknowledge the power of the performance in the first place, just as iconoclasm acknowledges the power of the icon.

Conclusion

My argument is that Angelik's visions and experiences can be understood through exploring his performance. As Schieffelin argues, performances "whether ritual or dramatic, create and make present realities vivid enough to beguile, amuse or terrify. And through these presences, they alter moods, social relations, bodily dispositions and states of mind" (1998: 194). My concern is to understand not merely that this happens, but *how*: what are the processes that lead to visionary experiences of holy presence? I argue that mimesis is central: as a fundamental feature of human encounter with the world, that is also fundamentally generative. Through engagement with their environment—including the social environment of persons—people constitute their lifeworld—including their cosmos. This is accomplished through practical, bodily encounter.

As an embodied process, rooted in practice and performance, the notion of mimesis offers an alternative solution to the problem of representation. The problem is outlined by Holbraad and others of the ontological turn, who question the deferral inherent in theories that depend on a concept of representation. Such theories ultimately fail to "take seriously" others' apparently irrational beliefs, because they locate explanation somewhere other than within the beliefs themselves. The solution of the ontological turn is to infuse new worlds in which the contradictions of the apparently irrational are no longer contradictory. Understanding is sought through a recursive procedure that seeks to recast anthropological concepts in line with indigenous ones. This approach presumes that the processes inherent in belief are primarily conceptual, and that ethnography—or ontography—is akin to philosophy in its search for new definition, or inventive definition. As Hildi Mitchell and I have argued elsewhere (Mitchell and Mitchell 2008), a focus on the categories or doctrines of religion—their sense of truth—has skewed the debates about belief, such that the practices and experiences that make up religiosity are occluded by the search for conceptual integrity. A focus on performance takes us away from the search for a categorical logic, or "truth," and towards an understanding of the experiential, or existential, grounds of religiosity. As Bourdieu has argued, "practice has a logic which is not that of the logician" (1990: 86).

Raphael's famous fresco of Plato and Aristotle sees them walking, enrobed, discussing the problems of philosophy—the route to truth. Their gestures embody the difference between their two approaches. Whilst Plato points to the sky, indicating his commitment to the transcendent idealism of the Forms, Aristotle gestures towards the earth, indicating his commitment to empiricism—an assumption that perception, rather than conception, governs knowledge. Not that I am positioning myself as Aristotle, to Holbraad's Plato—far from it!—but the distinction is useful for distinguishing approaches to a "post-representational" anthropology. On the

one hand is an ontographic solution that seeks truth in ever-more cerebral infinity; on the other, is a mimetic solution that seeks understanding in the body, and, through that, in processes of cognition, performance, and the senses.

Acknowledgments

The research for this chapter was funded by the British Academy Small Grants Scheme. I gratefully acknowledge their support, and that of the University of Sussex. For their comments, I would like to thank Alex Aisher, Evan Killick and Filippo Osella, as well as the audiences at Anthropology Departmental seminars at the University of Sussex and Queen's University Belfast.