

1 Religion's Reach

They trespass, Authors to themselves in all,
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
I form'd them free, and free they must remain,
Till they enthrall themselves.

JOHN MILTON, *Paradise Lost*, book 3, lines 122–25

You have no eyes for something that took two millennia to prevail? . . . There is nothing strange about this: all long developments are difficult to see in the round.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Genealogy of Morals*, first essay, no. VIII

Beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, militant Christianity's dramatic emergence into public view, alongside politicized Islam, has had at least the virtue of upturning much conventional wisdom. It appears now that religion is no more likely to wither away than (contrary to Engel's famous prediction) is the state. Nor is the march of history necessarily a triumph of technocratic rationality or cool utilitarian calculation. The resulting intellectual unsettlement is certainly useful, although a glance through the newspaper suggests it will rapidly give rise to yet more, newly revised, sorts of conventional wisdom. But the high visibility of the more flamboyant kinds of evangelical or charismatic religion may lead us to lose sight of other, perhaps more lastingly pervasive, aspects of Christianity. This book focuses on Dutch Calvinists to explore some long-running themes that run through Protestant Christianity in the forms that were, for much of its Euro-American history, mainstream. After all, well into the twentieth century, Protestantism was a thoroughly familiar part of the moral, political, and conceptual world in much of the Euro-American West, even for the most unreligious—or non-Christian—individuals; increasingly, this is true across much of the globe. Certain of the themes I explore within Protes-

Epigraphs: John Milton, *Paradise Lost: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (1674; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 261; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (1887; reprint, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 168.

tantism, especially Calvinism, are also found in habits, practices, and ways of thinking not usually seen as religious.¹ In fact, if the new role of so-called fundamentalist religion in the contemporary public world shocks some observers, this may be due in part to the ways it challenges their basic understandings about human freedom and its realization in history that, in certain respects, are found in other more or less self-consciously religious and secular discourses.²

At the center of this book is the promulgation of Dutch Calvinism on a Southeast Asian island. The book is therefore necessarily also about colonialism and its postcolonial wake. And it speaks as well about the idea of becoming modern, with all the promises, threats, and paradoxes this involves. Immediately the reader may seek some assurance: I do not propose that we return to that well-trod narrative trail so brilliantly blazed by Max Weber (1946, 1958). In order to explain why, I begin by situating Calvinism and the mission movement within a larger frame. Often over the course of this book I treat Calvinism as expressing a general cluster of ideas, practices, and social forces. This treatment of what is, after all, not even the largest of Protestant, much less Christian, denominations today requires justification. For some time now, a host of evangelical and charismatic movements, including Pentecostalism, the prosperity gospel, and various sorts of televangelism, have been the fastest-growing and most visible kinds of Protestantism across much of the globe. These movements are hardly made up of austere followers of Calvinism; in many ways they may be seen as reactions against that austerity.

One classic justification for paying special attention to Calvinism lies in its peculiar position within the history of Euro-American capitalism or political thought. The former is most famously identified with Weber; the latter is exemplified by Michael Walzer's remark, directed especially, I imag-

1. I use the categories "religious" and "secular" here as common terms of self-description within the contexts being discussed. For a more critical discussion of the category "religion," see chapter 3.

2. Saba Mahmood (2005) asserts that liberal thinkers and activists tend to portray freedom as the exertion of agency against the confines of tradition and other obstacles, which they conceive as being wholly external to the individual. The extent to which religion is itself considered to be one of those obstacles (and not playing a more constitutive role) is a constant problem within this view of freedom. Even those liberals who argue for religious tolerance can have difficulty dealing with religious demands that seem, from the perspective of liberalism, to restrict the individual's autonomy. For a parallel critique of the "crypto-normative" claims of feminism, see Anderson 2000. As I suggest below, these very notions of freedom and its value have sources, or at least strong parallels, in certain aspects of the Protestant tradition.

ine, to secular intellectuals, that “Calvinist saintliness, after all, has scarred us all” (1974: vii). Along with these authors, I do accept the basic thesis that Calvinism played a critical historical role in the Euro-American world, especially in the period before the pietistic and evangelical revivals, if not necessarily in the specific ways they have claimed. But this is not my main concern here. Although this book is about historical phenomena, it is not, except at moments, intended as a work of historical explanation as such.

In this chapter I take an approach to the importance of Calvinism somewhat distinct from those associated with Weber and Walzer. Through a look at Calvinism, I aim to clarify certain themes that recur in various ways in a number of different Protestant contexts. These themes concern the concept of agency and approaches to its exercise, the disciplining of interior belief, the work of purification, and the semiotic ideologies these presuppose. The themes are manifested especially in recurrent practical and theological questions about language, materiality, and their implications for humans. They are certainly not the only themes to be found in Christianity, Protestantism, or even Dutch Calvinism, nor do they rule out all sorts of contrary ones. But the moral and ontological problems I examine here do come into especially sharp focus in the missionary encounters that were characteristic of many colonial contexts. For one thing, these were often situations that seemed to call for radical conversion. By this I mean conversion between religions seen as vastly different—above all, the conversion of people who seemed to lack not just scriptures and monotheistic creeds but even a proper sense of the distinction between humans and inanimate things. Encounters such as these cast into deep relief some features of Protestant Christianity that might be found in more secular practices and discourses as well.

I am interested in these religious questions in particular for the ways they illuminate some widespread ideas about modernity, especially its moral dimensions, and for its associations with certain notions of freedom. Some of these themes are doctrinal: others are more tacitly embedded within practices. At some points in the discussion that follows, I speak of Calvinism as an exemplary case that helps us see certain things more clearly. Less frequently, I also suggest that Calvinism has directly helped to produce and circulate the ideas and practices by which these themes have become ubiquitous. The actual historical effects of Calvinism and other Protestant groups on realms beyond religion are, perhaps, most evident in the colonial missions. But I do not want to make strong causal claims about the historical role of Calvinism. To say that Calvinism helps us see some familiar aspects of the idea of agency more clearly is not to say that it is

necessarily the *source* of this idea. Sometimes it is just an especially clear *vehicle* for it.

For very good reasons, anthropologists and historians have developed a scrupulously keen wariness about the perils of overgeneralization. What could invite those perils more than the effort to speak of something as vast and complex as “Protestantism” or “Christianity”? Given the tendentious and sometimes pernicious ends that such generalities can serve, the responsible procedure may be to confine oneself to the most carefully located and circumscribed claims. Yet this strategy too has its drawbacks. One is simply empirical: the circulation of church members, funds, institutional arrangements, scriptures, hymns, sermons, and practices means virtually no Christian community is purely local in nature. Another is doctrinal: most Christians surely claim at least some kind of commonality with other Christians, even if only far enough to assert that others have got it wrong and should know better. Behind this sense of at least potential commonality lies a long history of texts, doctrines, institutions, and practices in which as much is shared, circulated, or reinvented as is distinguished and differentiated. To focus entirely on the local case may lead us to miss some crucial aspects of the religion. These include the sense church members have of being part of something larger. They also include the fundamental, long-running conceptual and moral arguments, as well as the sociopolitical movements, out of which any specific church emerged. To speak only in local terms is to risk making it appear as if Christianity were created from scratch each time, or that each church exists in splendid isolation.

Before turning to the Dutch Calvinists of Sumba, then, I propose a series of contexts. I will tease out some of the themes that Calvinism shares with other kinds of Christianity, other modes of proselytization. This chapter begins by portraying Christianity as a global religion; from there I turn to Protestantism and then Calvinism. Of course this approach, directed as it is toward Calvinism, means that certain aspects of Protestantism and Christianity come to the fore while others remain in the background. Even something as widely shared as the Apostles’ Creed, which I discuss in the next chapter, can produce consequences quite different in, say, colonial Spanish America than in twentieth-century northern Europe, and such pre-scripted, as opposed to spontaneous, forms are eschewed altogether by some evangelical groups.

The perspective on Christian globalization that I take in this chapter is determined by my interest in semiotic forms and the ideologies by which they are taken to have moral implications. This provides some of the background for my turn in the next chapter to the creed form, the idea of hav-

ing mastery over one's thoughts, and the impetus to purify, which Bruno Latour (1993) claims is characteristic of modernity. I argue that the drive to purify the world of so-called hybrids, as he puts it, is best understood against the background of the religious themes I have been drawing out here.

Latour also says that purification never succeeds. Indeed, religious histories show that attempts at purification produce results that seem to be inherently unstable. In attempting to make sense of this failure, I introduce one of the central themes of this book. One source of the failure of purification is the inescapable materiality that semiotic form introduces into even the most transcendentalizing projects. With this point, in fact, my argument opens up again to find a place for those evangelical groups that eschew creeds, or faiths that favor communities and priestly authority over solitary introspection. It is not my purpose here to engage in a large-scale examination of history. But one might speculate that one factor that has entered into the production of Christianity's sheer complexity is precisely the recurrent conflict between purifying projects of transcendence and countermovements toward materialization, each provoking the other (see Klaniczay 1990).

THE CHRISTIANITY OF GLOBALIZATION

When one of the first anthropologists to focus on globalization, Ulf Hannerz, wanted to designate the interconnectedness of today's world, he turned to Alfred Kroeber's appropriation of the classical Greek word *ecumene*, in its original sense of "the entire inhabited world" (Hannerz 1996: 6–7). But we may hear echoes of something else in this word, something at once more common and more specific. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *ecumenical* this way: "(1; *Eccl.*) Belonging to or representing the whole (Christian) world, or the universal church; general, universal, catholic; specifically, applied to the general councils of the early church, and (in modern use) of the Roman Catholic Church (and hence occasionally to a general assembly of some other ecclesiastical body); also assumed as a title by the Patriarch of Constantinople; formerly sometimes applied to the Pope of Rome" (1989: 64). This is followed by attestations dating from the mid–sixteenth century—precisely that moment when the presumed universality of the Roman Catholic Church was being thrown violently into doubt—and this, from the *Daily Telegraph* in 1970: "The cause of ecumenism has received no setback. It might indeed be enhanced, if the Arch-

bishop [of Canterbury] were to receive and accept an invitation to be present in Rome at the canonisation ceremony.”

As these definitions suggest, *ecumene* does not refer simply to a positive fact, an objective matter of scale. Rather, the word suggests that, when it came to naming the global as a unity, until recently a capacity to imagine totality was often inseparable from the expansive community, and perhaps the embracing ontology, of a given universalizing religion.

Of course globalization as a matter of circulating bodies and goods, economic forces, and cultural incitements does not depend on anyone's *concept* of the global. Yet, as Arjun Appadurai (1996) has argued, globalization is realized in the movement of persons, their ideas, and their desires in ways that cannot be reduced to either political economy or diaspora. Indeed, demography alone (even combined with economics) is surely insufficient to account for the power of globalization, without the ideas and images people bring with them. If globalization means more than the objective circulation of people and money, it is not merely a matter of imagination. Ideas, like everything else, circulate insofar as they have some medium. They are materialized in specific semiotic forms. Speech styles, financial instruments, televised performances, magazines, fashions in clothing or food, and institutional forms (from revolutionary cells to the most ordinary bureaucracies): each has its own temporality and its own distinct local and causal modality. It is by virtue of possessing semiotic form that ideas enter into the world of causes and consequences and thus can be set into motion.

To the extent that religious proselytizing is a globalizing force, the semiotic forms that religions produce are crucial to understanding that force. The globalization of Protestant Christianity was facilitated by the development of certain semiotic forms and ideologies. Some of these have become inseparable from even the purportedly secular narratives of modernity.³ In the next chapter I look closely at one set of semiotic ideologies and one particular practical form, the creed. But first, in this one, I sketch out the larger context of the global spread of Christianity and its relationship to the moral narrative of modernity.

Evangelizing religions have been crucial forces in the translocal circulation of people, practices, and ideas since Buddhism spread out of South Asia

3. Clearly not *all* the forms that proselytization has taken enter those narratives. Thus, for instance, the emphasis on formal institutions, sacred sites, and collectivities characteristic of the missions of early Iberian Catholicism in the colonial Americas do not play the same role as do the more recent Protestant practices that are my central concern in this book.

in the first century B.C.E. But full-fledged Christian globalization took form within colonialism.⁴ And conversely, colonialism was shaped by Christianity. Missionaries usually aspired to both a more far-reaching and a deeper transformation of colonized peoples than did either administrators or business interests (Beidelman 1982; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Huber and Lutkehaus 1999; Cooper and Stoler 1997). Given missionaries' greater commitments of time and attention to daily life, their effectiveness too was often much greater. The particular forms taken by colonialism's long-term influence in many parts of the postcolonial world are surely marked, in some way, by missionaries' moral impetus to improve the world.⁵

That moral impetus is embodied in everyday *practices*—the stuff of Michel Foucault's "capillary power" (1980: 39). Potentially unlimited, these can include learning a creed and catechism, setting out on pilgrimages, reading and discussing scripture, praying, singing hymns, listening to sermons, attending regular church services, undergoing confession, even diary-keeping and the introspective probing of one's thoughts, desires, and motives. These practices are well suited for evangelism, since many of them can be so readily detached from particular social contexts and made available for universal circulation.

As a result, it should be no surprise that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, one-third of the world's population is Christian, and that one-third of those Christians live in former colonies. The largest number of non-German missionary sisters in the sister order of the Society of the Divine Word is Indonesian—this organization is especially active in Brazil, Botswana, Ghana, and Europe (Huber and Lutkehaus 1999: 21–22). The

4. After the early colonial missions of Iberian Catholicism, in Western Christianity the next great wave of global missionization did not arise until the promptings of the pietistic and evangelical revivals in northern Europe and America at the end of the eighteenth century (van Rooden 1996; Stanley 2001). Eastern Christianity saw a parallel movement accompanying Russia's imperial expansion.

5. That missionaries themselves often had deeply ambivalent relations not only to the colonial systems in which they were embedded but also to modernity is well known; see, for example, Clifford 1982 for a discussion of Maurice Leenhardt in Melanesia and Comaroff and Comaroff 1991 on British nonconformists in South Africa. This ambivalence could be reinforced by the relative autonomy of the mission societies that developed from the end of the eighteenth century on. A historian of Dutch religion has pointed out that the mission society itself was an institutional form—the voluntary organization—that presupposed a distinction between public and private spheres (van Rooden 1996). These societies drew their support from the private sphere at home and tended to see their potential mission field as so many individual souls that, ideally, could be approached without reference to existing national boundaries. This could put them at odds with colonial orders, however.

looming schism within the Anglican Church over the appointment of a gay bishop in the United States is to a large degree being driven by African bishops. The largest Christian missionary movement in the world today comes out of Korea (Walls 2001: 25). Even where Christians are a minority, it was often Christian schools, or those modeled on them, that educated the first generations of nationalist elites in the early and mid-twentieth century (Comaroff 1985: 129; Keyes 1996: 284). In Indonesia, for instance, where Christians are about 9 percent of an otherwise largely Muslim population, the most powerful general of the last generation and the most influential newspaper editors were Christian.⁶

Here I want to point out two aspects of religious globalization. One concerns the concept of the global, the other certain empirical characteristics of global religion. The conceptual aspect, as I have suggested, is implicit in the religious background to the now secularized word *ecumene*. Although evangelists have not always aspired to global reach, the universalizing implications of a transcendental faith are surely there for those willing to take the point. By the nineteenth century, supported by the other expansive visions that accompanied colonialism, as well as by totalizing cosmologies, evangelizing efforts often presupposed a global whole of potential converts. For example, the fundamentalist Protestant group called the Summer Institute of Linguistics draws from the Book of Revelations a claim that the millennium will not arrive until the Bible has been translated into *every language on earth*, no matter how obscure.⁷ The doctrine provides a perspective from which the world can be seen as composed of a singular collection of like entities (languages and their speakers), the set of which can be brought to completion. The Summer Institute of Linguistics is only carrying to an extreme a logic whose potential might be found in *any* religious creed that claims to be true for all humans.⁸

Certain empirical consequences of this global spread are worth bearing in mind for any anthropological approach to Christianity. The more recent

6. For the claims that Christians played a special role in twentieth-century Indonesian history precisely because of the rupture with tradition produced by their minority status, see van Klinken 2003.

7. I draw here on conversations with Courtney Handman about her preliminary fieldwork on the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Papua New Guinea.

8. It has been argued that nineteenth-century Protestant missions' ideas about the unity of humankind were strongly influenced by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment (Stanley 2001: 10). But in many cases, the very possibility of evangelization seems to depend on some sort of assumption about human unity, a point recognized at least as early as Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Stanley 2001; also MacCormack 1991: 45), if not the epistles of Saint Paul.

forms of colonial proselytization and conversion may have been instigated by the Euro-American West, but in the postcolonial world their dynamic extends well beyond their sources. Christianity has become “our” religion for a large part of the non-Western world and is not seen as foreign. For instance, Wesleyan Methodism is considered to be a core component of Fijian ethnic identity, a definitive point of contrast to Indo-Fijians and other Polynesians. Similar instances can be found across the Pacific and Southeast Asia. One result is that a significant part of proselytization today originates from non-Western sources or takes place within communities, for instance, in revivalist movements *among* Christians.⁹ It is simply not sufficient to think of Christianity as a question of contact or influence, or as the responsibility of a limited number of actors. As an ethnographer of South American Catholicism puts it, missions are “an ensemble production that is well past its first act” (Orta 2002: 712; compare Barker 1990; Robbins 2004a, 2004b).

Since churches are often linked to other churches across the globe, they are significant facilitators of global flows in their own right. As members of the Swedish Faith Movement study evangelical videotapes, they may even take up American body language and speaking styles as part of their expression of a global faith (Coleman 2000). So it is not enough for anthropologists to take note of Christianity only insofar as it forms an expression of purportedly *local* identity. Although many churches are marked by ethnonyms or toponyms (the United Church of Zambia, the Church of Lanka, the Protestant Christian Batak Church) and play crucial roles in the consolidation of local identities and factional political strife, this is hardly the only story. For example, members of the Christian Church of Sumba (Gereja Kristen Sumba) do not, in the first instance, see their Christianity as distinctively “Sumbanese” but insist they are part of a church with *global* reach. They receive money and advice from the Netherlands, send students to theological schools on Java, and teach the Heidelberg Catechism. In some respects Christianity has no locality, either sociologically (institutions and people circulate), culturally (ideas and practices circulate), or ontologically (its truth-claims are universal).¹⁰ Local religious practice is rarely entirely free from ties to spatially dispersed structures or from circulating ideas and

9. Even a century ago, the Ambonese were carrying the faith to other parts of Indonesia, and Fijians to New Guinea (Errington and Gewertz 1995: 92; see also Whiteman 1983).

10. The church historian Peter van Rooden (2002) writes, “All world religions derive their strength, it is almost a matter of definition, from their supralocal organisations, not from their rootedness in local communities.” To this spatial

persons. Correlatively, concrete practices are rarely entirely separable from some foundations in more abstract theological doctrines. Thus, the act of proselytizing a religion may end up confounding the oppositions both between the global and the local, and between the elite and the popular. Indeed, the very *lack* of locality can be a crucial part of that religion's appeal.

Despite this vigor, Christianity has, at least until recently, remained somewhat offstage for anthropologists of globalization.¹¹ For instance, the index to Ulf Hannerz's book *Transnational Connections* has no entries for *Christianity*, *missionary*, or even *religion*. Hannerz is in very good company, with, for instance, Eric Wolf and his *Europe and the People without History* (1982). And if globalization is a story about modernity, one can hardly blame them, of course. After all, it has been a commonplace since Max Weber—if not since August Comte—that secularism is one of the hallmarks of modernity. It has long been conventional to identify modernity with a mechanistic worldview, the scientific method, the rise of capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, an elaborate division of labor, nation-states, the growth of the bureaucratic organizations, mass media, and, in association with them all, inexorable secularization. Definitions of secularization vary from an emphasis on the separation of public from private spheres, with the relegation of religion to the latter, to statistical declines in participation in religious institutions (Bruce 1992). The historical trajectory remains more or less the same, however. Even Max Weber (1958) portrayed the Protestant Ethic as eventuating in an iron cage of distinctly nonsectarian construction.¹²

extensiveness we should add a temporal dimension, for in many parts of the formerly colonized world, young people are growing up in communities that have been Christian for as long as anyone can remember, even as far back as the beginning of local recorded history (in Fiji for more than 150 years; in Indonesia's Maluku and parts of the Philippines, for more than 300; to say nothing of Mexico, Brazil, and the Andes). Van Klinken (2003) argues that self-consciously local, mission-derived Christian communities in Indonesia were sociologically and culturally conservative. The individuals whose conversion set them *apart* from their communities and led them into cosmopolitan affiliations with the European bourgeoisie were the ones most likely to become significant political actors.

11. Anthropologists of Christianity abound (see Cannell 2005, 2005), but those of globalization are not always in conversation with them. This relative oversight may be due in part to certain disciplinary commitments peculiar to anthropology. The role of Christianity in globalization has certainly drawn the attention of others, ranging from Jacques Derrida in his discussion of "globalatinization" (Derrida and Vattimo 1998) to sociologists such as Peter Beyer (1994).

12. For examples of the classic argument that Protestantism was a crucial element in the development of modernity, see Troeltsch 1958 and Weber 1958. For

But the daily newspaper should make it obvious that religion has not retreated to the private sphere (see Casanova 1994). If news from the Middle East, Northern Ireland, or Sri Lanka, or, for that matter, Amsterdam and Copenhagen, does not demonstrate religion's persistence in public events, a glance at American presidential politics should confirm it. And for further confirmation we could look to the seven foreign ministers who held up the signing of a constitution for the European Union by demanding it acknowledge Europe's Christian heritage (*New York Times*, May 26, 2004, p. A12). There are those who respond that such appearances of religion in public are mere historic relics, or that they are desperate reactions against incipient modernity; when Salman Rushdie said the problem with Islam was it had never gone through the Enlightenment, he was merely honing the dull edge of conventional wisdom. Conventional wisdom, in this case, may not only be wrong, it may be dangerous too. At the very least, it requires re-examination.

THE MORAL NARRATIVE OF "MODERNITY"

One way Christian imaginaries have had an effect across the postcolonial world emerges from their coupling with certain concepts of modernity, and vice versa. The coupling is twofold. Empirically, as a result of colonial and para-colonial circulation, many people first experienced what they understood to be modernity as having a Christian face. Conceptually, there are aspects of the very idea of modernity that seem to have been shaped in a dialectical relationship to a moral understanding of progress and agency. This moral narrative has affinities with aspects of Protestantism, especially as it developed in the era of evangelical and Enlightenment challenges.

Modernity is certainly a word in danger of meaning everything and nothing. Taken as the outcome of a teleological narrative, any particular characterization of modernity faces a complex and unpredictable world brimming with counterexamples. What makes us think history should even *have* a single narrative? Yet to pluralize "modernities" invites self-contradiction (see, for example, Gaonkar 1999). Given modernity's genealogy as a totalizing category, how could such a plurality of other modernities or alternative modernities be rendered coherent? At best, modernity is a concept we should treat with cautious circumspection.

recent anthropological arguments against the identification of modernity with secularization, see Asad 2003 and van der Veer 1996.

But there is one indisputable empirical claim we *can* make about “modernity.” As an *idea*, it has a pervasive and powerful role in the popular imagination wherever we look, from the Nahuatl *moderno* in Mexico (Hill 1985) to the Anakalangesese *moderen* in Indonesia. Across the ethnographic spectrum, the idea of the modern is crucial to people’s historical self-understanding. It is part of both elite and popular discourses, imaginings, and desires. And it is hardly a neutral matter. Questions on the subject can be terribly fraught: What does it take to be modern? What are its promises and its threats? Who is included or excluded? Are we there yet? How can we get out of it? Whatever we may think of modernity as a category of empirical analysis, this at least is true: the idea of the modern has become a ubiquitous social fact.

Even if we see modernity only as a widespread form of historical imagination, it has a daunting degree of heterogeneity. For many people, it seems to mean simply unimaginable wealth (see, for example, Knauff 2002: 6; Meyer 2003: 212). For others, it promises life without labor, where pushing a button gets you everything, or life without illness. To yet others it is about better food; there are people in Sumba who insist that “modern” food is surely much softer than their own maize, tubers, and rice. And these are just the more positive visions—modernity without Auschwitz, Hiroshima, or the Gulag.

But in its more optimistic versions, the idea of modernity commonly seems to include two distinctive features: rupture from a traditional past, and progress into a better future. Thus, when Jean and John Comaroff define modernity, in the context of the colonization of southern Africa, they call it “an ideological formation in terms of which societies valorize their own practices by contrast to the specter of barbarism and other marks of negation” (1997: 32). This is surely too narrow in some respects—for one thing, modernity is as much a story people tell about *their own past* as about *others*—but it captures something important: the narrative often has a normative, even moralistic, thrust to it. For much of the twentieth century, Indonesians were admonished, from higher authorities both left and right, that they *must* become modern—that to resist would be to harm the nation itself. Wherever the world has been called “developing,” similar stories could be told. The moral subtext to such imperatives may underlie people’s responses to economic collapse in Zambia, where, James Ferguson writes, “what had been lost . . . was not simply the material comforts and satisfactions . . . but the sense of legitimate expectation that had come with them—a certain ethos of hopefulness, self-respect, and optimism” (1999: 12). Material deprivation may be an objective fact—but abjection is the

stuff of morality. History, in this narrative, involves an implicit vision of the good (see Taylor 1999: 157).

Linked to moral underpinnings, this narrative often is made up of another component too, a call for humans to *act* upon their history. Foucault, voicing Baudelaire, asserts that modernity involves an “ironic heroization of the present” and demands that one produce oneself (1992: 312). With or without the Parisian irony, the heroic sense is widespread. One important narrative about modernity relates that human agency had been misrecognized in the form of fetishes, despots, and demons onto whom it had been projected. In this story, the true character of human agency is eventually revealed and thus recaptured. Since Marx and Feuerbach, if not Voltaire, the call to self-recognition, traced across historical time, often involves realizing that agency falsely imputed to deities is in fact human. Commonly this story of error disabused is taken to lead inexorably to the secular vision of modernity, replacing gods with humans at the center of the action. J. B. Schneewind’s 1998 history of modern moral philosophy bears the title *The Invention of Autonomy*. It is a history in which self-recognition is one precondition for a new sense of independence.

But the moral character of the narrative predates Voltaire and Marx. One theme within the Protestant Reformation, for instance, was the idea of restoring agency to its proper subjects. To reveal more directly the ultimate divine agent meant liberating individuals from the domination of illegitimate clerics and their rituals, and restoring to people their own principled agency, including freedom to read (if not necessarily to interpret) scripture and form congregations.¹³ And even if the early reformers did not necessarily see themselves as radicals, they can be seen as responding to one set of possibilities (though, no doubt, only one of a number) that can be found within the very idea of proselytization, for proselytization emphasizes change, positively viewed and, usually, actively sought. As the church historian Jaroslav Pelikan puts it, “Every Christian church wants to define

13. See Troeltsch’s early claim that the “thought of freedom, of personality, of the autonomous self” derives ultimately from certain strains of Protestantism, rather than, say, the Renaissance, and had an important influence on modern ideas of political freedom and the separation of church and state later associated with secularism (1958: 36, 117; see also Troeltsch 1931: 688–89). To be sure, Troeltsch was hardly a neutral observer: as Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) argues, despite his role as a scholar of world religion, he remained a theologian who was committed to demonstrating the universality of Christianity. Nonetheless, his argument is important. Although early Protestantism was dominated by its own forms of clerical authority, it did sow the seeds for later, more radical religious movements with antiauthoritarian dimensions.

itself as *catholic* [in the inclusive rather than denominational sense], *evangelical*, and *reformed*, at least in some sense" (2003: xiii, emphasis in the original), a claim that conjoins universal scope and purposeful change.

The pattern of recurrent reform movements can take what Judith Irvine and Susan Gal have called fractal recursivity, "the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level" (2000: 38). Each reformer is capable of projecting onto the older institution vices similar to those against which the earlier dispensation had earlier defined itself. If Calvinists could portray Catholics in terms similar to those by which Catholics portrayed Jews, Muslims, and pagans, so too could rebels against Calvinist authority in their turn. The restlessness of Protestant Christianity, which today is producing new factions and denominations at an extraordinary pace, is driven by this sense of revival, restoration, and reform; however routinized the religion becomes, transformation remains a lurking possibility. This transformation is not necessarily a conversion, much less the radical conversion from non-Christianity (or even nonreligion) to Christianity. But when some evangelical groups conflate the two and portray even revivals within the church as conversion, they are perhaps picking up on a logic already immanent in the reforming character to which Pelikan refers.¹⁴ As many evangelical groups maintain, one is never converted once and for all. This strong model of conversion places transformation at the very center of authority.

Thus it should be no surprise that, according to Michael Walzer, writing of the Euro-American world in the light of early Calvinism, "progress was first imagined in terms of a Christian history and an imminent millennium" (1974: 12). The extraordinary ongoing dynamic of Christian revivalism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries means that even settled communities of Christians can be subjected to conversion all over again. In Latin America at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the centuries-old rapprochement between local deities and Spanish Catholicism is under vigorous attack by Pentecostal evangelists. Similar internal missionization is taking place in formerly Anglican parts of Melanesia and Calvinist enclaves in Indonesia. What this means is that conversion remains an issue long after the initial missionization. Therefore, in any given instance, there

14. The Pentecostal distinction between the initial stage of justification, at baptism, and a later stage of sanctification, marked by glossolalia, is one example of the extension of the logic of conversion within a single church (see Austin-Brooks 1997: 18).

is likely to be an unpredictable struggle between the taken-for-granted of established churches and the sharpened self-consciousness of zealous reformers.

One result is that the possibility of conversion can seem to promise an Archimedean point by which the very foundations of society itself can be examined and criticized. In nineteenth-century India, according to Gauri Viswanathan (1998), Christianity seemed to its converts to promise social liberation (see also Prakash 2003). Papua New Guinean evangelicals in recent decades have assaulted the perpetuation of old local traditions by Anglican fellow villagers and defended their acts in the name of the universal human right to religious expression (Errington and Gewertz 1995: 115). And writing of a historically Catholic Nicaragua in the mid-twentieth century, Roger Lancaster called its revolution a "religious revitalization movement," and observed that even Marxists took "atheism" to mean political despair—a denial of the moral thrust of history and the special role that human agency plays in it (1988: 20). If the idea of modernity includes a moral narrative about human liberation, it is a story that often draws on religious subtexts about the possibilities for, and the value of, self-consciousness.

SUBJECT AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

Viewed in the context of the moral narrative of modernity, the radical conversion from false to true religion, from no religion to religion, or even from religion to no religion dramatically expresses the general possibilities and virtues of self-transformation. As a ubiquitous source of globally circulating ideas, people, and mundane practices, religious proselytization offers conceptual and practical paradigms by which transformation can become an inhabitable, practicable possibility and a moral imperative. This transformation is both historical and social in its sweep, but also subjective and capillary in its embodiments. On the one hand, there is the reconfiguring of entire societies, altering the very course of history itself: Constantine converts Rome. Social reconfiguration, for example, was an important goal of Iberian Catholicism in the Americas. But, on the other hand, this transformation is effected by the saving of individuals: Saul struck on the road to Damascus. When asked, "Hast thou a Wife and Children?" the protagonist of Bunyan's *Pilgrims' Progress* replies, "Yes, but I am so laden with this burden, that I cannot take that pleasure in them as formerly: methinks, I am as if I had none" (1960: 17), having left them behind as he seeks his

personal salvation. Such has been the potentially antisocial demand made by many Protestant missions.

Proselytization may foster the imagining of global communities and transcendental realities, but it makes these real through concrete practices, some of which have their effect in intimate and subjective domains. The quotidian practices of the universal religions, like mass media, nationalism, and other translocal mediations, invite a host of vernacular cosmopolitanisms. What Benedict Anderson (1983) said of the everyday experiences that underwrite national “imagined communities” is surely at least as germane to religious communities, if not more so: when people gather in church each Sunday, they are invited to imagine that other Christians are doing so simultaneously around the world (see Robbins 2004a: 175). But historical agency, in the context of the predominant post-eighteenth-century forms of proselytization, often centers on the individual subject. Even when Christianity is a source of social critique, it is a critique that commonly hinges on individual capacities for action. One of the stronger expressions of this point is Kenelm Burridge’s claim that the modern individual produced by Christian conversion is defined by “the capacity to deliberately step outside custom, tradition, and given social roles, rights, and obligations, scrutinize them, formulate a moral critique, and . . . envisage a new social order governed by new moralities” (1978: 13–14). This is only one, rather celebratory and selective, formulation, but it expresses clearly how agency, morality, and objectification (the capacity to step outside and scrutinize) can function together.

Let me be clear, the point here is *not* that Protestantism introduces agency, or even individualism, into a world that formerly had lacked them.¹⁵ First, such a claim presumes an untenable view of the world before missionaries. Second, any real effects Protestant missions have had on the world may be impossible to fully disentangle from the host of other historical forces that have been their contemporaries. But Protestantism has offered influential expressions of the high moral value of agency. In many cases, such as those I discuss in this book, it ties that moral value to the preliminary task of getting people to see what beings in the world are actually agents (God and humans, not spirits or fetishes) and what kinds of agency properly belong to them. Protestantism has been an important source of practices that foster particular kinds of self-consciousness about agency

15. Nor am I saying that what is apparently secular is actually, in some definitive and essential sense, “religious” (for this debate, see Blumenberg 1983; Löwith 1949).

and the possibilities for action—for instance, what may or may not be accomplished by human agents, what by divine ones. That sense of agency works in conjunction with distinctive forms of self-understanding about the internal constitution and dispositions of human subjects. Moreover, those kinds of Protestant Christianity with which I am most concerned here have produced semiotic ideologies that take the properties of words and things as potential threats to the true understanding of agency, with serious moral consequences. In this chapter, I discuss the concept of agency, especially within Calvinism, then, in the next chapter, I turn to Calvinist semiotic ideology and an exemplary practice, the saying of creeds.

Philosophers as different as Charles S. Peirce (1934, para. 421), Charles Taylor (1985), and Donald Davidson (1980) all give special weight to actors' self-awareness in their various analyses of intentional action. For example, in many accounts, it is the actor's reflexive capacity to give a description to an action that makes an act coherent over time. This reflexive capacity seems implicit as well in the concept of a meaningful event that lies at the heart of Weberian sociology. That is, the object of a properly sociological or historical description in this tradition is brought about by purposeful people who think they know what they are doing—joining political parties, not suffering earthquakes. By these accounts, having a particular concept of agency should have consequences for how one acts.

Psychoanalysts, cognitive psychologists, and critics of ideology will immediately point out that such models of action which depend on high degrees of self-consciousness at best are marred by what they leave out. But the concept of agency that runs through the moral narrative of modernity is largely one in which self-awareness is a condition for freedom. Here I briefly propose some terms by which one can understand the relationship between action and metalevel concepts of action, which take on more ethnographic specificity in the second part of this book.

To the extent that people's actions are guided by self-awareness, they are shaped by available concepts of the kind of act being undertaken; that is, they are metapragmatic (see Silverstein 1976, 1993). Such a reflexive understanding of agency has consequences for the actions it frames. These metapragmatic concepts derive from cultural, that is, publicly circulating, categories for kinds of actions and actors. Being cultural, these reflexive categories are necessarily historical in character: they both persist and change over time. The metapragmatic category of agency helps organize relations among kinds of acts, of media, and of actors. It concerns such things as whether agency itself is a good or something to be subordinated to a higher good, such as tradition, the law, the good, or divine mandate.

The concept of agency can therefore enter into the work of purification, guiding people as they try to sort out which kinds of beings do or do not have agency. For societies differ as to whether agency tends to be understood as, say, amoral willfulness or moral liberation, whether spirits, statues, stones, songs, or texts, classes, masses, nations, or only individuals, can be agents or not. As I argue in subsequent chapters, an important part of the work of purification that links Protestantism to the idea of modernity is concerned with agency. One of the chief aims of the work of purification, as undertaken by Protestant missionaries, is to establish the proper locus of agency in the world by sorting out correct from mistaken imputations of agency. God, Christ, and humans, for instance, have agency in their respective ways—priestly words, pagan sacrifices, and ancestral spirits do not. For strict Calvinists, prayer should express thanks to or even petition God, but it should not undertake to cause direct consequences in the world (see chapter 6).¹⁶ So too the slaughtering of animals and distribution of meat must be no more than the sharing of food or, at most, the outward expression of what is actually an immaterial meaning (see chapter 8). The false imputation of agency is not mere error: it can have grave moral consequences. It is this sense of the moral danger of mislocated agency that is conveyed by the derogatory accusation of fetishism. The Calvinists' efforts to sort out proper forms of agency, allocate them to proper agents, and eliminate false agents and immoral actions constitute the central topic of part 2 of this book.

In locating certain kinds of agency in persons, and in according agency a special value, Protestantism converges with the subjective dimension of the idea of modernity as moral progress. Taken as a narrative of liberation, the idea of modernity commonly includes the emergence of some version of the human subject that is distinguished by its heightened knowledge of, and efforts to realize itself through, its capacities as a self-aware agent. By

16. The continued pertinence of the question was made evident in an essay that appeared on the editorial page of the *New York Times* as I was copyediting this book (see Raymond J. Lawrence, "Faith-Based Medicine," April 11, 2006, p. A21). The author, an Episcopal minister, applauded a scientific report stating that prayer has no healing powers. He wrote that if prayer were known to have such effects, religion "would be degraded to a kind of commercial enterprise, like Burger King, where one expects to get what one pays for." Prayers "of praise, thanksgiving and repentance" are rightly held in higher esteem than the "magical wing of religion." His words, expressing the long-standing mainstream Protestant position, closely echo those of the missionaries I quote in chapter 6. But the appearance of his essay in so prominent a position in the newspaper of record surely testifies to the vitality of that "magical wing of religion" that he opposes.

subject here, I mean historically and culturally specific, and semiotically mediated, constructions of the nature of the human and its capacities (Cascardi 1992). In contrast to more psychologically oriented perspectives, this concept, perhaps most familiar as portrayed by Foucault (e.g., 1979, 1983), focuses on forms of self-understanding immanent in public discourses, political formations, practical disciplines, and associated modes of activity.

To be sure, there are competing romantic and authoritarian views of modernity that develop quite different narratives—of modernity as alienation or as a fall from older communal harmonies, for instance. But the core features of the idea that most concern me here are those summarized by Marshall Berman (1982) and Charles Taylor (1989; see also Habermas 1987). This idea includes a special privilege accorded to the individual's agency, inwardness, and freedom and a vastly expanded vision of the possibilities for individual self-creation. We can, in fact, find versions of these ideas in other times and places. But, as Charles Taylor has argued, one thing that marks the distinctiveness of their modern version is that these possibilities are supposed to pertain to everyone, not just social elites or religious virtuosi.

At the heart of this version of the modern subject is the conjunction of personal and historical self-transformation with a vision of a self that must be abstracted from material and social entanglements. This abstraction seems critical to the idea of moral autonomy. Some version of this autonomy is a precondition for the existence of the rights-bearing, morally accountable citizen (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 32, 61). He also underwrites the political authority of the abstracted, disinterested participant in the public sphere (Warner 2002). Autonomy characterizes the view of human nature that is presupposed by liberal critics of Islam, who assume that "all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms" (Mahmood 2005: 5). Even less optimistic narratives about less liberal regimes may draw on the self-governing subject in significant ways. When, for example, Foucault took Jeremy Bentham's panopticon to exemplify a modern disciplinary order (Foucault 1979), the moral agency of the prisoner played a crucial role. For, once the prisoner has internalized the warden's invisible gaze, he has in effect made it his own and does the work himself. The panopticon certainly does not require a Protestant or even, say, Counter-Reformation subject, but Protestant ideas that link agency to introspection and interiority provide this subject with an important way of understanding itself.

PROTESTANT AGENCY

To claim that Protestant Christianity historically has been a crucial model for taking one's destiny in hand may seem paradoxical. After all, theologically it is God who is the ultimate agent. Protestant doctrines of grace also stress the role of divine agency in the individual's conversion. But however much the believer may claim God is the ultimate agent, the action occurs within the context of human practices. These vary widely, of course: verbal practice alone can range from the quiet of Quaker introspection to the passionate volume of Baptist testimony and Pentecostal speaking in tongues; bodily disciplines from fast to feast, from immobility to ecstatic dance. But almost no model of conversion relies on divine intervention alone without a significant element of human agency. Take the example of American fundamentalist Bible-believers—people who form intimate and closely monitored personal relations with the kind of Jesus who might tell them, for instance, to slow down when they are driving near a police speed trap. As the psychological anthropologist Tanya Luhmann (2004) shows, even they engage in purposeful activities of Bible reading, study groups, prayer, and internal disciplines of visualization that are meant to invite divine visitations. These believers are not just passively sitting back and waiting for something to happen.¹⁷ So too, as Michael Walzer argues, the ultimate predestinarians, the early Calvinists, were among the most strenuous in their own modes of *self*-discipline and most activist in changing the mundane world around them. And some people, like the Urapmin of highland Papua New Guinea, did not wait for the missionaries to arrive but set out to get religion on their own, and they have ended up with the sort of Pentecostal millenarianism many casual observers might consider antithetical to the assertion of human agency (Robbins 2004a).

The main protagonist in several of the influential early interpretations of modernity is Calvinism. Calvinism is associated with a strong version of the doctrine of predestination that would seem to rule out any serious role for human agency.¹⁸ But, as Weber (1958) points out, the Calvinist doctri-

17. In effect, this is the other side of the insight developed by James Faubion (2001) concerning Christians, and by Charles Hirschkind (2001) and Saba Mahmood (2005) concerning Muslims, that discipline forms an important alternative to liberal models of agency, since it involves intentionally orienting oneself toward an external agent. The discussions in these three books should also be compared to the insightful discussion of Fijian Christian "abeyance" of agency in Miyazaki 2000.

18. A pessimistic view of the power of the will goes back to Saint Augustine. Calvinism came to emphasize predestination partly as an attack on the agency asserted by the Catholic Church, which claimed for itself the power to grant merit

nal emphasis on predestination hardly resulted in passive acceptance of divine will.¹⁹ Indeed, at first neither outsiders nor the faithful took predestination to be a defining tenet of Calvinism, and the 1566 creed that was adopted across the Netherlands did not even mention it (Mack 1978: 122).²⁰ For, while maintaining that God determined everything that happens, Calvin also asserted that, since God was fundamentally beyond human comprehension, it would be presumptuous at best to make any effort to understand these mysteries (Benedict 2002: 86; Schneewind 1998: 32–35).

In practical terms, as Weber recognized, Calvin's doctrine ultimately threw humans back on their own resources. One result was that Calvinists eventually came to see themselves as being located between two extremes within Protestantism. On the one hand, the Anabaptists sought to preserve their purity in a kingdom of God kept wholly separate from this world. On the other hand, Lutherans were seen as overly conciliatory, keeping the world as they found it, seeking to change only hearts. Within this field, Calvinists saw their distinctiveness as lying in worldly actions, the reformation of religion entailing the reformation of society as well (van Til 2001: 20). This is why, according to one historian of Calvinism, "[o]ne reason the faith proved so compelling to so many was that it inspired dreams of a dramatic transformation of manners, morals, and the social order" (Benedict 2002: xvi). The dynamism this entailed was expressed by a slogan coined in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century, which has been taken as a motto by many Reformed churches today: *Ecclesia reformata, quia semper reformanda* (The Reformed Church because always reforming; see Benedict

that could counteract a lifetime of sin right up to the very moment of death. But Calvinist doctrine distinguishes between predestination, which determines ultimate salvation, and providence, which governs daily life. Weber's thesis applies more to the former than to the latter.

19. What Weber took to be typically Calvinist was in fact only one subspecies, English experimental predestinarianism (Benedict 2002). It was associated with the effort to restrict church membership to visible saints. Holding that signs of grace could be discerned in one's experience, this doctrine produced the highly developed self-discipline and anxious introspection made famous by the early New Englanders, and it took its most prominent institutional form in Congregationalism.

20. It was not until the early seventeenth century, in response to internal schisms and Catholic apologetics, that the doctrine attained sharper clarity. The core assertions of Calvinism were codified by the synod of Dort (1618–1619), summarized in the famous rubric TULIP: total depravity (original sin affects all aspects of the person's being), unconditional election (salvation derives from God's will alone; no human deeds can alter that), limited atonement (Christ died only for those who are saved), irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints (nothing can cause one to lose one's salvation).

2002: xvi). The predestinarian emphasis peaked in the early seventeenth century; by the nineteenth century, mainstream Calvinism had in practice become voluntaristic (Benedict 2002: 328; Kipp 1990: 19). In the mid-twentieth century, a historian writing from within the faith expressed a positive self-image of the Calvinist as “a reformer and a dangerous character to encounter on moral and political issues. He is a man with a mission to bring to realization the will of God in human society” (McNeill 1954: 436). Despite its well-earned reputation for social authoritarianism, Calvinism implicitly linked social change to self-transformation, and this in turn to self-consciousness. John Milton expressed the first link between self-transformation and social transformation in his eulogy of Oliver Cromwell: “A commander first over himself; the conqueror of himself, it was over himself he had learnt most to triumph. Hence he went to encounter with an external enemy as a veteran accomplished in all military duties” (quoted in Walzer 1974: 315). To understand the particular forms that this general dynamic took, and its role in the work of purification, requires a look at Calvinists’ worries about materiality and mediation—that is, their semiotic ideology and the practices with which it is involved.