3.1

THE ENTANGLEMENTS OF RELIGION AND THINGS

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I intend in this chapter to make some general points about the relationships between religion and things, using the example of Çatalhöyük, a 9,000-year-old Neolithic (New Stone Age, 10,000–4,500 BCE) site I have been excavating in central Turkey for the past twenty-five years (see Figure 3.1.1 and, for example, Hodder 2006 and www.catalhoyuk.com). One way of talking about Çatalhöyük is to say that it consists of houses tightly packed together into a town (Figure 3.1.2), and that people buried their dead beneath the floors of houses. In this perspective, houses (secular) contain burials (religion). But, in fact, there are grounds for arguing that burial was a pre-requisite for the house. In a number of instances, small burial cemeteries had houses built upon them—as if a prime function of the house was to "house" the dead. In the construction of many houses, a burial—sometimes of a child—is placed in the foundation and leveling deposits (as in the case of Building 53). So, it can be said that the house at Çatalhöyük was always already religious. Certainly many daily tasks took place in the house—from tool manufacture to food preparation and consumption—but the house was also the focus of much symbolism and ritual, including bull's heads and wall paintings showing the hunting of wild animals. Thus it is impossible to separate secular and religious at the site. Within each house there was a separation between the north and south parts of the main rooms, with the northern areas generally having cleaner floors and more burial and art, while in the south parts of main rooms there is often more evidence of hearths, ovens, and tool manufacture. But it is difficult to argue for a strict divide, since some burials (of children) have been found in the southern parts of main rooms, and there is much situational variation regarding where hearths and ovens are located; for example, in some early houses ovens occur in the north of main rooms.

It is difficult to separate secular and religious at early farming sites in the Middle East such as Çatalhöyük. Religion is brought close to daily life at these sites. Indeed, most religions are brought close through materializations; in this way, religious or spiritual forces can be manipulated and managed. And certainly at Çatalhöyük material things were continually and purposefully drawn into the processes of objectification and manipulation. For example, the houses at the site were apparently always in a continual process of collapse. Built of

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Figure 3.1.1 Excavations underway in the South Area of Çatalhöyük.
Source: Çatalhöyük Research Project and Jason Quinlan.

unfired mudbrick, the walls expanded and contracted in the changing seasonal round. There is much evidence of slumping and leaning of walls, and much evidence that the inhabitants tried to stop the decay of walls. They did this by doubling walls, making sandier bricks, and building thicker walls as well as walls with buttresses. But they also called upon the spirit world to sustain and protect the house. This was partly achieved by burying ancestors beneath floors and in foundation deposits. A specific example was found in Building 89. Heads of the ancestors were often kept and circulated for some time before being deposited into the foundation; sometimes, they were painted, the human features replastered onto the skull. In Building 89, a skull was found placed at the base of one of the posts that held up the house and its upper story.

But, of course, a limitation of most symbolic devices is that their force tends to decline over time, as was the case with Building 89. Maurice Bloch (2010) is one of many who have argued that the house at Çatalhöyük, which tended to lose its efficacy over time, had to be continually re-animated to keep it from falling and crumbling. Even the vibrant nature of matter, such as has been described by authors such as Jane Bennett (2010), declines over time; vibrancy must be continually renewed. In the case of Çatalhöyük, this is done most clearly in two ways. First, there is the harnessing of the power of wild animals. Most of the bull horn and other animal installations in the houses (see Figures 3.1.3 and 3.1.4) were taken from wild animals. (Although the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük depended very heavily on domesticated sheep for their livelihood, depictions of sheep in the site's symbolism are rare, even non-existent.) Bloch (2010) argues that the power of wild animals was harnessed to help sustain the settlement and its houses. Second, as we have already seen, the ancestors played their role too, by both helping to hold up the house posts and infusing the house with their presence and memory. Sixty-two such ancestors were buried under Building 1. Indeed, there are correlations between the number of people buried in a house and the degree of symbolic and ritual elaboration (Hodder 2016a)—both the dead and various ritual paraphernalia helped to animate the house.

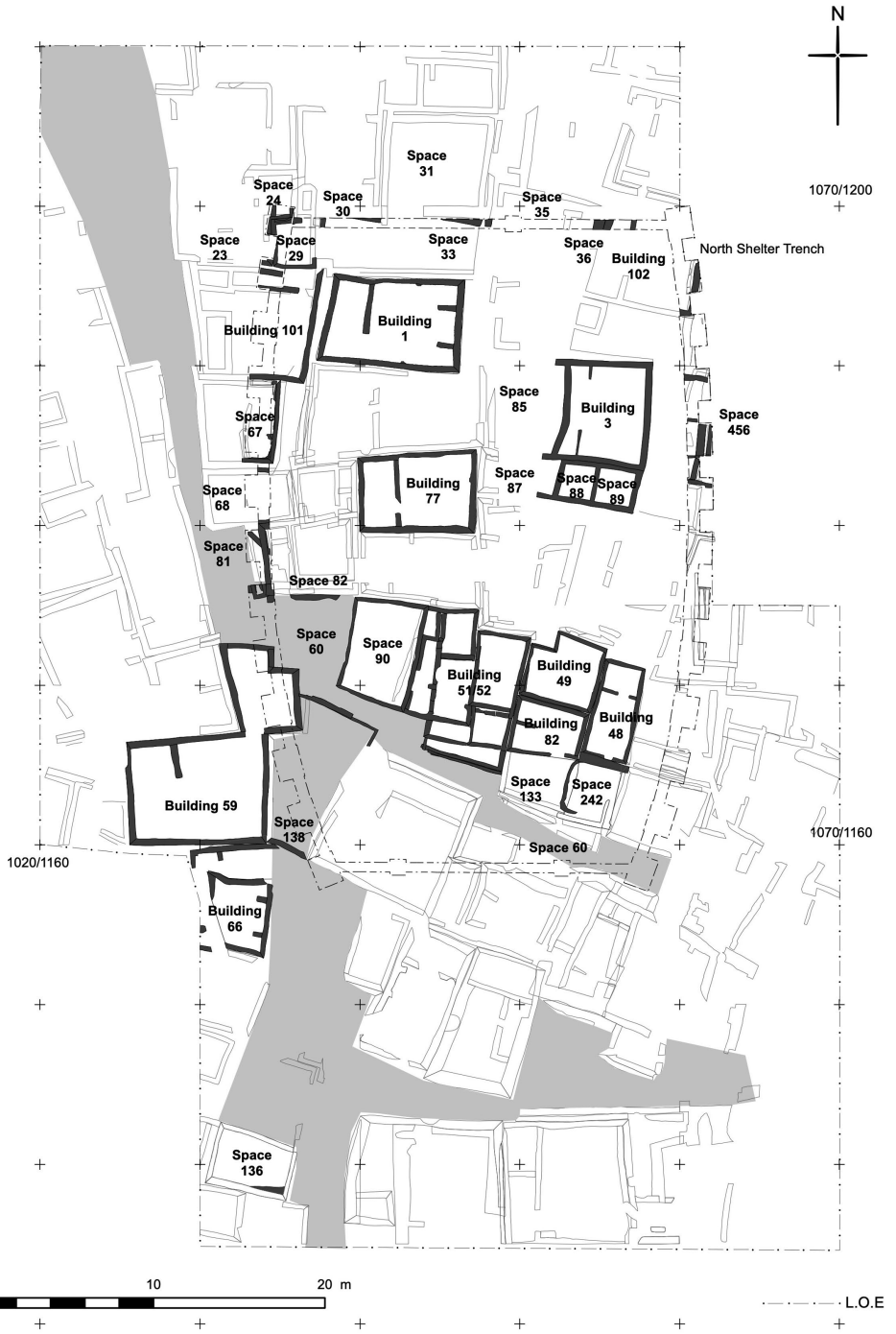


Figure 3.1.2 Houses excavated in the North Area of Çatalhöyük, indicating some of the buildings mentioned in the text: Buildings 1, 52, and 77.

Source: Çatalhöyük Research Project and Camilla Mazzucato.



Figure 3.1.3 A stack of wild bull horns placed in a niche in Building 52.
Source: Çatalhöyük Research Project and Jason Quinlan.



Figure 3.1.4 Wild bull horns set around a burial platform in Building 77.
Source: Çatalhöyük Research Project and Jason Quinlan.

Things as Waves

Houses at Çatalhöyük were built on top of each other in a continual process. A house was lived in for perhaps 50 to 100 years—after which the upper walls and roof were knocked down and the materials used to carefully fill the lower part. A solid platform was thereby created for a new house to be built on top of the old. As such, it becomes very difficult for excavators to know where an earlier house ends and a later one begins. The layout of a later building is often presaged in the layout of an earlier building, and the filling in (ending) of one building can also be seen as the start of a new building—thus the continual process of rebuilding on much the same footprint over time.

In this tradition we can see a continual process of becoming. It is as if the house is not a thing but a column of matter that is continually re-animated and given force. The sequence of houses is like a force, such as an electro-magnetic force, that flows through time and joins with other forces to create continuity and change. The sequence of houses can be seen as a wave of energy that produces the pulses of individual buildings. But since the pulses lose their energy, they need to be continually revived.

There are many forces that run through and animate a single house site at Çatalhöyük. We have already seen the religious and spiritual forces of human burials and wild animals. There are also social forces, such as the drive towards aggrandizement as houses vie with each other for dominance. There are also physical forces, such as the force of gravity that holds unfired mud bricks on top of each other on a wall, and that holds the roofs on houses. Numerous electro-chemical interactions prevent entities such as bricks from falling apart.

These heterogeneous forces run through the conduit of the house—producing and reproducing it, generating and regenerating it. Each new house, each new artifact brought into the house, each new person or skeleton, created a new pulse of onward-goingness. We can follow Alfred North Whitehead in arguing that "an actual entity is a process, and is not describable in terms of the morphology of a 'stuff'" (Whitehead in Sherburne 1981: 8). Similar concepts of things as flows and forces are found in the work of Ingold (2015) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). For the latter, the question of philosophy is not "What is it?" (the question of being) but "In which direction is it going?" and "Along with what else?" and "What can become of it?" (the question of becoming). In their discussion of nomad science, Deleuze and Guattari foreground fluids rather than solids, and becoming and heterogeneity rather than stability. They see lines or flows that interact to either increase their forces or to constrain each other.

While the flows of the house are animated by other forces—from the religious to the physical—the house itself becomes a force in its own right, with its own momentum. Once constructed, the house affords potentials (powers) that can be exploited and turned in multiple possible directions. Its weight presses down on the layers of soil beneath it, causing slumping and buckling of walls—which will draw humans to tend to its maintenance. The house affords cooking around the hearth, but the cooking produces smoke and soot that darken the interiors—which will draw humans into the labor of whitening the walls with a fine clay. The house affords burial, as we have seen—but as the burials increase, a new house must be constructed to create more space.

Entanglement and Religion

I have tried to build an image of strings or threads along which forces or flows run. These different forces intersect and are tied up with each other. In a recent definition of entanglement (Hodder 2020), I have argued that this image is a metaphor to capture the

contradictory messiness of the heterogeneous flows and counter-flows that produce, enchain, and encompass entities (humans, animals, things, ideas, social institutions). In much the same way, Barad (2007: 33) describes "intra-action" as the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies." However, I will below place particular emphasis on the contradictory nature of flows and the frictions between them that lead to change.

Why is religion a component of human-thing entanglements? I have argued (Hodder 2016b) that entanglements are unbounded—they are open systems. Their threads stretch out over space as well as through time, such that many aspects of our lives derive from the descent of actions and events that have historical, and often prehistoric, sources. (For example, cars today are indebted to the invention of the wheel in Eurasia around 4,000 BCE.) Spatially, too, a car is made of over 20,000 components that have global biographies. As such, small events in distant places and times can have long-term effects that are impossible to tease apart given the complexity and messiness of entanglements. Causal relations are in truth often unknowable; we have to accept that there is a beyond to which we have little access. Religion too is about the beyond, and, indeed, it can be defined in those terms—as well as in terms of the actions taken to influence what is beyond our immediate agency. So, for me, one of the things that religion does is to help humans gain access to the beyond, to try to control and regulate its stretchiness and uncertainty (whether the "beyond" be death or the future or the wild). Religion in this sense is like science; both involve reaching into the unknown to understand and control it.

So when at Çatalhöyük the dead and wild animals were brought into the house, attempts were being made to control and manage unknown forces. Bull horns were placed within a regulated spatial structure within the house, where they could be painted, managed, watched, honored, and cared for. And the forces such as the bull heads could also be used to animate the house, to protect it from unknown forces and harms, to protect the crops and grains and their processing and storage, to protect the herds of sheep managed from the house, as well as the platforms, beams, and benches of the house.

But if religion is part of what it means to be an entangled human as just described, why does religion have to be materialized? Why do we need to have material bull horns, material dead, material figurines, material symbols? Is it not enough to call upon the unknown forces through prayer and incantation, or though meditation and trance (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005)? More generally, why do even the most ascetic of religions seem so often to use material things as part of devotional practices? At sites such as Çatalhöyük the question may seem fruitless, since there was so little separation and specialization of different aspects of life. In these early farming societies, there was a remarkable holism—such that the house at Çatalhöyük contained the religious, the domestic, the cemetery, the industrial all in the same space. There was little differentiation overall, so it is unsurprising that the religious was engrained in the material. In many societies, the religious is made manifest in matter. Why is this?

I have previously discussed (2017) how Meyer (2012: 23) has argued that materiality is a key component of religious practice. "As practices and materials are indispensable for religion's existence in the world as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon, they need our utmost theoretical and empirical attention." Meyer provides an example from the Ewe from Ghana and Togo:

> According to Ewe cosmology, in principle all gods—trõwo or vodu—by necessity require some material vessel in order to be present and enact their power, and humans can access, and partake in, this power through certain religious acts. These acts begin with the actual carving or moulding of a figure, its subsequent animation through

> spitting alcohol and saliva, its regular maintenance through sacrifices and feeding, its worship through repeated incantations, body movements, and so on. Here, human action was indispensable for the gods to be present and act on people.
>
> *(Meyer 2012: 23)*

There are numerous examples of external powers and agencies being made present in religious practices. The Orthodox or Catholic icon itself becomes a being that is kissed, carried around, prayed to. Saints and prophets were made present in the form of circulated body parts. The body and blood of Christ are made present (in different ways) in the Catholic and Protestant churches. Why does the supernatural have to be made material to be experienced? I have argued (Hodder 2016b) this is precisely because religious practice is about "getting a hold on" the beyond, the divine. One gets a hold on the divine partly by making it human and anthropomorphic. As noted above, the practice of seeing human agency in things is found in all areas of life, but it is also used as a technology to intervene in the beyond. More generally, manipulating things allows the practitioner a sense of agency in relation to the beyond; it allows a connection to be made and interventions to occur. Material things are central to religion because they allow us to participate in the divine—as well as enable us to use religion as a technology to manage the beyond of the world in which we live. Placing religion in matter allows humans to gain some sense of being able to participate in the divine, influence outcomes, handle solutions. Matter matters, and so, by manipulating things of import, there is a real handle on that which is distant and unknown.

At a deeper level, the dependence between religion and matter is simply an example of the wider human dependence on objectification. As Heidegger argued, we can only think *of* something in the same way that we can only feel if we feel something, and only see or smell if we see or smell something. As humans we cannot get very far without things—including words, images, smells—even before we consider the human dependence on technologies. We are designed to be thingly. In the same way, we cannot have religious feeling, spiritual awakening, or divine experience without reference to something or to some experience. The divine may be abstract and distant, but it also needs to be concrete and near, to be emotional and embodied. We need the icon to kiss, the incense to smell, the bells to hear. Even the most ascetic of religions involve material practices (Buchli 2015).

Religious Entanglement and Entrapment

Human-thing entanglement always involves some degree of entrapment (Hodder 2012, 2016b). This is because of the double bind by which humans depend on things that depend on other things that depend on humans. Humans thus get drawn into the care of things and the multitude of threads in which they are produced. Put another way, things are but pulses along threads or strings of energy, or nodes within force fields. They are thus dependent on the strings with which they are entangled. Humans thus get forced to work along the radiating strings in the attempt to manage the energy flows.

In the case of religious energies at Çatalhöyük, a clear example is provided by the wild bulls that are the foci of feasts and that furnish the horns that are the main installations in the houses. Recent research has shown that throughout the eleven-hundred-year span of occupation at the Çatalhöyük settlement there is a gradual process of greater human intervention in the management of cattle (Wolfhagen et al. 2021). There is a gradual diminution in the size of the cattle as they were brought into closer relationships with humans, leading ultimately to the appearance of domestic forms. Why does this process of greater human

investment in cattle occur? Though domestic sheep outnumber cattle in the settlement, little evidence suggests they played a significant role in ritual—whereas cattle played a prominent role. It is possible that the increased management of cattle resulted from the need to provision feasts and ritual events and installations with bulls and their horns. In Building 52 of the site, thirteen horns were stacked above a bucranium in a niche in the main room (Figure 3.1.3). This was a substantial amassing of resources. Certainly, it seems possible that humans depended on cattle for religious rituals, and that over time humans were drawn into the increased management of cattle in order to provision religious events.

Entrapment of this kind is often associated with path dependency (Hodder 2012). Humans often invest in things down certain pathways, and it becomes more and more difficult to change paths as the entanglements increase in complexity. Certainly at Çatalhöyük there is good evidence that managing cattle, and especially bulls, became entangled with many aspects of life, from food production and feasting to rituals and installations. It seems possible that the killing of bulls and the providing of meat in feasts was a key part of the social fabric of the town, and the type of aggrandizement just referred to in Building 52 may have been one of the main routes to increasing social standing. The inhabitants of Çatalhöyük were very late to adopt fully domestic cattle—in comparison to other parts of Anatolia in the seventh millennium BCE. Arbuckle (2013) has suggested that the delayed adoption at Çatalhöyük may have been because cattle were so thoroughly entangled in social and ritual life in the town. This is a prime example of path dependency in relation to religious practices. It might be argued that path dependency is particularly prevalent with regard to religion because the religious deals with ultimate questions of being and becoming. The emotional involvement is thus profound and deeply embodied. Because religion deals with the ineffable beyond, it is entangled with our deepest fears and our ultimate goals. The entrapment is especially dangerous because the religious engagement with things comes to define what it means to be human, to underpin deeply held convictions, and to pit different groups against each other from the ground up. Religious forces thus transform as the entanglements with which they are entwined change, but the path dependency often results in very long-term threads that manage to persist in the face of radical change. For example, as we shall see below, there is much evidence for change during the occupation at Çatalhöyük, and yet the symbol of the bull earlier associated with installations in houses becomes used as a motif on painted pottery on the adjacent site of Çatalhöyük West during the *ensuing* Chalcolithic era, at the start of the sixth millennium BCE. Indeed, Hodder and Meskell (2011) have shown how many of the distinctive attributes of the iconography of the Neolithic of the Middle East, including the wild bull, have enormous life spans, continuing for at least three millennia. This is path dependency taken to an extreme, and it shows the ability of religious forces to re-invigorate themselves as they come into new conjunctions. The example also shows the ways in which humans get "stuck" into managing key religious components.

Religious Entanglement and Change

It is important to recognize that the various forces that become entangled with religion may not be cooperative with one another. Indeed, the different forces may often by discordant and contradictory. So it is not that the different strands are co-constitutive in some symmetrical way. Rather, the strands are semi-autonomous with different forces; there is no reason why the forces of gravity and religious zeal should always work in the same direction. They are not co-constitutive but entangled—working for and against each other. It is the frictions between these different forces that often lead to change. At Çatalhöyük the aggrandizement that was

described above with reference to Building 52 occurred toward the end of the Middle phase that lasts from 6,700 to 6,500 BCE, when there is much other evidence of large amounts of bull horns being deposited (for example in Building 77—see Figure 3.1.4), as well as more installations in houses such as leopard reliefs on walls, more burials in houses, more physical stress and disease on the body, and high fertility. There are probably many reasons for these changes, but one seems to be that during the Middle phase cooking pottery was introduced to the settlement. This had positive effects in that cooking with pottery rather than with clay balls (the previous cooking method) was more efficient and allowed the cook to undertake other tasks. The use of cooking pottery in the houses contributed to the expansion of house size and the range of activities carried out in houses. Ultimately, however, as the house became more a center of production and consumption, a contradiction emerged with regard to the focus on wild bull paraphernalia. The expansion of domestic activities changed the nature of the house so that the house became more like a productive farm, leaving less space, time, energy, and purpose for religious practices. The house came to be defined in terms of production rather than through the control of ritual and the dead. Burial in houses declined, ceasing altogether by the time of the West Mound in the early sixth millennium BCE. Ritual symbolism continued, but shifted from the house walls to pottery, which was sometimes decorated with bull heads and painted horns. So, altogether, the introduction of cooking pottery contributed to an increased focus on production in the house that contradicted the house as a ritual space, leading to change in the nature of the house.

Another type of contradiction that we see through this period concerns the role of cattle. In the Early (7,100–6,700 BCE) and Middle phases of occupation, large wild bulls played a key role in religious ritual practices. But through the Middle phase there is evidence of aggrandizement such as we have seen in Building 52. Another interpretation of the increased focus on wild bull and other wild animal installations in the Middle phase is that greater investment in wild animals was needed in order to counter any decline in symbolic and religious efficacy. But the increased dependence on wild bulls in an increasingly large settlement would have put pressure on local stocks of wild animals and would have encouraged humans to invest in the management and perhaps breeding of wild cattle. An unintended product of such management would have been a decrease in the size of wild cattle, as we see in the measurements studied by Wolfhagen et al. (2021). Management of cattle would also have come into contradiction with the farming of arable crops near the site, since both humans and cattle would be vying for the same food source. The protection of those crops would have led to further pressures on cattle management, and thus to size diminution, since smaller cattle would be more easily manageable and thus do less harm to crops. Humans also started depending on cattle for milk and on cattle dung for fuel. In all these ways the availability of large, fierce, impressive wild bulls would have declined. This may be part of the reason that the role of cattle in animating the house declined over time.

Another example of the ways in which the entanglements of religion with material things leads to friction, contradiction, and change is provided by the treatment of the dead at Çatalhöyük. As noted, throughout most of the occupation of the site, the dead were buried beneath the floors of houses. At times large numbers of people were crammed beneath the platforms in the northern parts of the main room of the house. Regardless of the symbolic intention at work here, in practical terms this would have led to disease, odor, and the slumping of floors as flesh decayed beneath them. Recent research has shown that these problems were averted by a process of delayed burial (Haddow et al. 2021). Bodies were initially dried or smoked but also carefully wrapped in cloths and skins. These tightly flexed bundles took up less space and caused fewer problems than did fully fleshed bodies. As later bundles were

added, earlier bodies were pushed aside. When the time came to tear down a house and build anew, the walls and roof were dismantled and the clay material from them densely packed to for the foundation of a new house. It seems likely that this infill platform raised the floors enough for a new phase of burial. Indeed, as burial declined in houses in the Final phase (6,300–6,000 BCE) of occupation, less emphasis was placed on filling earlier houses with soil before constructing a new house. So, in this example, humans were drawn into further labor in order to bury their dead beneath house floors. They were drawn into lengthy and complex drying or smoking of bodies in the period between death and burial. And they were drawn into labor-intensive filling of houses with large amounts of sterile soil that was carefully compacted. But, as the number of burials increased into the Middle phase of occupation, the contradictions between burying the dead and all the labor required to sustain that burial seem to have reached unacceptable levels. In the Late occupation (6,500–6,300 BCE) of the mound there is a shift to more secondary burial in which bodies are moved after primary burial. Then, in the Final phase, burial in houses declines, finally disappearing in the sixth millennium. So here religious practices change in response to frictions between the different pathways—biological bodily decay, religious burial practices, and material house building.

Conclusion

All things are forces. They act like magnetic attractors or repulsers. This is because, as argued above, human being is thingly and depends on the world. Humans need things to think with, feel with, and be with—within whatever ontological frame. But there is an asymmetry between humans and things because things are not themselves passive constructs of human beings; rather, they have their own lives and forces, which are often in contradiction with human needs and desires. It is the contradictions in the heterogeneity of forces that lead to change.

Religious things often carry the strongest of forces. What creates the aura—the electric charge—in religious things? In this chapter, I have argued that the charge, the wave, is created because religion deals with deep emotions and ultimate questions, such as death and the wild. The religious deals with the beyond, the unfathomable, the mysterious. It deals with questions of suffering and being. It promises answers to deep questions. It looks into the past and the future. And so religious objects are embedded in concerns that are highly charged and ultimate. It is not that religion produces anger, nationalism, belonging, hatred—but that these characteristics are central to its endurance. Religious things feed off ultimate questions and draw them in.

In this chapter, I have been using the 9,000-year-old site of Çatalhöyük to illustrate my argument. In the case of Çatalhöyük, as well as the earlier site of Göbekli Tepe in southeast Turkey (Schmidt 2006), religious practices act as attractors for wild dangerous animals. At both sites there are hybrid forms such as human-animal or human-bird beings, as well as horns, fangs, and claws. And at Çatalhöyük there is a particular concern with death. Questions of ultimate concern draw together different strands that reinforce and revitalize each other. All forces decline over time, and so much human ingenuity is required to re-animate. Work is needed to sustain the power of religious things. New cattle and new dead have to be found, the house has to be rebuilt. In its entanglements with the world, religion draws in other things in order to re-animate itself; it has to be continually performed and worked at—drawing humans into further entanglements.

The house at Çatalhöyük is not a thing in itself, but a pulse within a force field or flow. As an active force it attracts and repels other forces. Taking a long-term view of the Neolithic

of the Middle East (Hodder 2018), the burial of humans in or below houses began before the Neolithic period. So from early on the house acted as a religious attractor. And through the early Holocene (from 10,000 to 5,000 BCE) it is remarkable how more and more was drawn into the house. Symbolism and ritual are increasingly found, but also cooking and various forms of production were gradually brought in, as well as the storage of grain and other foodstuffs.

Religion is a powerful force because it deals with ultimate questions, but the force can only be made manifest through things. Religious things are charged, and they attract other forces to them. The result is a heterogeneous set of strands that are entwined around each other. In these bundled strands there emerge frictions and contradictions that lead to change. Religious things, by virtue of being material and biological, are tangled up with other forces that have their own trajectories, and it is this entanglement that leads to change. But religious things also have a strong tendency to path dependence. This is mainly because religion is tied up with so many other forces, many of them material and biological. But since religion deals with ultimate questions and the beyond, this path dependence also occurs because there is the possibility of a separation from daily life—so re-interpretation is always possible. But, equally, the fact that religion deals with ultimate questions leads to deep emotions, strongly held beliefs, and repetitive and thoroughly embodied practices; all this reinforces path dependence.

Thus, religious forces have a tendency to endure, however much they might be buffeted by change. But the force of all things tends to diminish through time. There is always a need for new sources of energy that can be dragooned in to sustain religious imperatives. At Çatalhöyük, wild bulls and the dead played their animation role—whether through animism, totemism, or doctrine (Descola 1994). At Göbekli Tepe, the power of religion was re-animated through magnificent and towering temples (Schmidt 2006). And in the modern world, too, a new massive mosque is seen as revitalizing religious devotion. There is an ever-present need to sustain and manage religious things. Our religious dependence on things leads inevitably to a greater entanglement with things, greater labor investment, increased expenditure and management, and so on. Religious forces are an important component in the overall process of increasing human-thing entanglement (Hodder 2020).

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