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New Literary History, Volume 47, Numbers 2 & 3, Spring & Summer 2016,
pp. 331-351 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Anthropotheology: Latour Speaking Religiously

Barbara Herrnstein Smith

To talk about religion again. . . . No one appointed him, nothing marked him out, if not the certainty that once we modify, as he has done (as he thinks he has done), the common version of the sciences, everything else can start to change—first and foremost, religion.

—Latour, *Rejoicing: Or The Torments of Religious Speech*

BRUNO LATOUR IS A RELATIVELY RECENT taste in the Anglo-American academy. He has been publishing important work in the anthropology and/or sociology of science since the 1980s but, until the past five years or so, has been greeted largely with antagonism or indifference by science and humanities faculty alike. While Latour's work (or tendentiously selected passages from it) was a prime target of science warriors in the 1990s, people in the humanities have generally found his writings too remote from current concerns to seem interesting (he has had little to say, for example, about the politics of race or gender, at least explicitly) or too closely associated with the natural sciences to seem approachable. In recent years, however, invocations of ideas and approaches associated with Latour have become commonplace, along with citations of specific texts he has authored, especially those with irresistible titles.

For many readers, Latour is most closely identified with actor-network-theory (ANT), a set of radical concepts and sophisticated methods developed originally in the sociology of science. He is also well known, especially among people in the humanities, as a subtle analyst of modernity and, more generally, as a vigorous advocate of environmentalism. Less widely known are Latour's extensive writings on religion. These include, from the 1970s, a doctoral dissertation on biblical interpretation and a related study of the early twentieth-century writer, Charles Péguy; a long essay from 1996, *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux Faitiches*, later translated as "On the Cult of the Factish Gods"; an important lecture from 2002, "'Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame,' or, How Not to

Misunderstand the Science and Religion Debate”; and, also from 2002, a small but in many ways extraordinary book, *Jubiler ou Les tourments de la parole religieuse*, recently translated as *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*. Religion, or religious “being” as a specific mode of existence, figures centrally in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME)* and, along with Nature, is one of the major categories of analysis in Latour’s 2013 Gifford lectures, “Facing Gaia: A New Inquiry into Natural Religion.”¹ Indeed, the hope and effort to frame a proper and—in Latour’s important term—“diplomatic” account of religion, and especially of its relation to science, have been central motivating forces in his work for at least the past two decades and, in some respects, from the beginning.²

Virtually any reader who undertakes the serious study of Latour’s writings (as distinct from casual sampling or heresy-hunting) will find them engrossing, instructive, often exhilarating and always impressive. But “the humanities” make up a very mixed package of practices in the present Anglo-American academy, and people currently working in the fields so designated make up a very mixed multitude. The ways in which any of us take up Latour’s work, to “recompose” that package or otherwise, will depend, of course, on our particular assessments of those practices and on our aims and angles more generally. Additionally, because attempting to do things “with Latour” will, sooner or later, involve encounters with his religious writings and with their particular concerns and perspectives, the ways we take up his work are also likely to depend on what he would call our “attachments.” A detailed examination of Latour’s writings on religion is beyond the scope of this article and its occasion in this journal. What I hope to do here is suggest the interest of these writings for scholars in the humanities and also to indicate the ways in which they seem likely to create problems for such readers, including or perhaps especially for longtime admirers of his work.

I

When readers fail to understand why I have continually changed fields, and when they do not see the overall logic of my research . . . their comments amuse me, for I know of no other author who has so stubbornly pursued the same research project for 25 years, day after day, while filling up the same files in response to the same sets of questions.

—Latour, “Biography of an Inquiry”³

Alluding to his successive studies of science, art, politics, and law, Latour has described his general project as “the comparative study of the various ways in which the central institutions of our cultures produce truth” or, as he also calls those ways, “truth regimes.”⁴ The regime on which his earlier work focuses is that of the modern natural sciences. In empirical—archival and onsite—investigations conducted in the late 1970s and early ‘80s and in their theoretical elaborations as actor-network-theory, Latour has sought to demonstrate that what are commonly taken as scientific truths—facts, laws, discoveries, entities—are not, as commonly assumed, fixed, prior, and given by “nature” (itself radically reconceptualized by Latour) but, rather, the contingent products of dynamic networks of multiple, heterogeneous elements. The elements include both humans—scientists, technicians, bureaucrats, and sometimes farmers or fishermen—and nonhuman agents or actors, from sick cows and virulent microbes to pulleys and petri dishes. All these are moving in different, potentially conflicting directions, and some are stronger or weaker than others; but, in laboratories and other centers of calculation and control, some elements can be linked together to form associations that are effective in serving particular human ends. It is the pragmatically effective linking of such elements that secures what we call the truth of scientific facts (for example, the microbe theory of disease or the structure of DNA) and that sustains what we experience as the reality of the entities associated with those facts (for example, microbes or genes).⁵

This constructivist-pragmatist understanding of scientific truth and knowledge reflects an increasingly commanding tradition of research and theory that extends from Ludwik Fleck’s *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, originally published in 1935, to the writings of a number of mid-twentieth-century historians, sociologists, and philosophers of science and, from there, to ongoing work in the field now known as science and technology studies (STS).⁶ As formulated, elaborated, and promoted in writings by, among others, Latour, it has proved compelling to increasing numbers of humanities scholars, along with researchers and theorists in the social sciences, both as a set of conceptual and methodological resources for work in their own fields and also as a well-developed alternative to still-dominant positivist views. As research and teaching in the humanities continue to involve closer connections to the natural sciences, Latour’s work in this tradition can be especially important and, in regard to the earnest or aggressive scientism sometimes displayed in these developments,⁷ it can be especially instructive.

There has been no radical break between Latour’s early and recent work on science and no reversal in the direction of his thought. Since

his “coming out as a philosopher,” however, he has supplemented and, in some crucial regards, sought to supersede ANT and empirical science studies more generally with an array of speculative methods and explicitly metaphysical projects.⁸ He has also been increasingly explicit about what he evokes, especially in *Rejoicing*, as his particular task or responsibility: that is, to read aright the texts and inscriptions of the religion that, as he says, “matters” to him and to translate, transmit, and make effective its message for those he calls “Moderns.”⁹ Latour’s thirty-year-long comparative investigation of truth-regimes was pursued in good measure in the service of that task. *AIME* can be seen as the consummation of the investigation and, with the Gifford lectures, as his most valiant venture to date as missionary to the Moderns.

II

Is existence not among the perfections indispensable for respect, which the idea of belief never allows us to preserve? Thus I had to come back to the crack that runs between epistemological questions and ontological questions. The new history of the sciences has allowed me to slip in between the two.

—Latour, “On the Cult of the Factish Gods”

Contrary to routine misunderstandings of constructivist accounts of scientific facts, to be *constructed*—made, built, fabricated, put together from heterogeneous elements—is not to be *unreal*. Abstract facts, like material artifacts, are assembled and composed, but both are “real” in the sense of being, at least provisionally, stable and consequential. The same can be said of gods and other religious beings: demons and divinities, spirits and fetishes.

As Latour tells the story in “On the Cult of the Factish Gods,” Gold Coast natives, scorned by European traders and invaders, insisted that certain wooden dolls—dubbed *fétiches* by the Portuguese—were gods. The natives, Latour observes, had “constructed” something “that went beyond them.” But, he asks, is this not true as well of the facts constructed by Western scientists, for example, Louis Pasteur’s “ferment of lactic acid,” the existence of which emerges through laboratory instruments and tests?¹⁰ Moderns, with all the apparatus of scientific rationality, no less than supposedly primitive people with their wooden divinities, invest things that they themselves have made with a power that goes beyond

them. Facts and fetishes, demons and ferments: "All ask to exist," Latour writes. "None is caught in the choice . . . between construction and reality, but each requires particular forms of existence whose list of specifications must be carefully drawn up."¹¹

Fetish-gods, like scientific facts, acquire their potency—or, as it may be called, their "truth" or "reality"—within a framework of specific ideas, habits, discourses, and material apparatus; but the potency of neither can survive outside those frameworks. Whether divinities or DNA molecules (and, as Latour extends the point in *AIME*, whether cats, mats, machines, political collectives, or characters in novels), the conditions of their continued existence—he calls them "felicity conditions"—are highly specific, not always in place, and always more or less fragile. In the case of religious icons, for example, they are breakable by the acts of impassioned iconoclasts or modern "critical thinkers."¹²

The imputation of an equivalent real existence to the facts of modern science and the divinities of putatively primitive religions—or, put differently, the acknowledgment of their equivalent ontological status—is an example of what Latour calls "symmetrical anthropology." He explains its method and aim in the essay: "By taking the most respected beings of a culture—our own—as examples, we can shed light on the most despised beings of another culture."¹³ The most respected beings of our own culture are scientifically established facts and entities. The most despised beings are African fetish-gods, the demons afflicting the immigrant patients of a French ethnopsychiatrist and, not quite "of another culture," the Virgin as sighted at Lourdes. Latour's symmetrical anthropology can be seen as due scientific impartiality, as a generous exercise of the sympathetic imagination, or, perhaps, as practicing relativism with a vengeance. It can also be seen as a sophisticated elaboration of the rhetorical move known, especially in theological circles and in response to derisive iconoclasm, as *tu quoque*: "You, too! the supposedly enlightened ones: *you* do just what you scorn *us*, the supposedly benighted ones, for doing."

In describing the facts of modern science symmetrically with religious beings, Latour does not seek to demote the authority of the truth-regime of Western science. What he seeks to demote—indeed, to undo utterly—is a set of dichotomies and commonly skewed dualisms that have become central to modern Western thought: nature as divided from society, objects as divided from subjects, real as opposed to manmade or constructed, and existent as opposed to (merely) believed-in. But of course, and not incidentally, he thereby promotes the epistemic dignity of the experiences of those who fear demons or see visions of the Virgin, and the ontological dignity of those beings themselves.

In a classic constructivist treatment, our experience of the truth of scientific facts and the reality of visions of divinities would be understood in terms of more general, largely social-psychological dynamics. Thus Fleck, in *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, describes the complex processes involved in the formation and stabilization of what he calls “belief systems,” with religious doctrines and scientific paradigms, along with political and other ideologies, as examples. In Fleck’s account, the coherence and stability of all such systems are preserved through the ongoing mutual adjustment of the perceptions, prior beliefs, background assumptions, and shared material practices of the interacting members of a social group or “thought collective.” Fleck called the resulting shared sense of the truth of some fact or doctrine among the members of such a group a “harmony of illusions”—illusions not in the familiar and itself dubious sense that there was some otherwise verifiable set of objective facts that contradicted them, but insofar as that sense of truth was projected outward and regarded as an objective correspondence of idea and world.

Latour has repeatedly expressed admiration for Fleck’s work, and the affinities of their respective accounts of facts and truth are evident.¹⁴ The detailed historical-sociological narrative of the establishment of the microbe theory of disease in *The Pasteurization of France* closely parallels Fleck’s narrative, in *Genesis and Development*, of the establishment of the Wassermann test for syphilis, including the way a key pathogen is coaxed into existence in the laboratory. Crucial to Fleck’s accounts, however, is an analysis of the social-psychological dynamics involved whereas Latour rejects explanatory appeals to the psychological and, in *AIME*, banishes the term “belief.”¹⁵ Also, significantly, while both reject table-thumping empiricisms in favor of constructivist understandings of facts and truths, Latour invokes a rather obscurely defined “second empiricism” to ground *AIME*’s ontologies. These differences—as much matters of intellectual project and genre as of philosophical position—mark an important space between the tradition of science studies with which Latour’s work has been associated and his recent writings, those on religion and more generally.

III

There exists a form of original utterance that speaks of the present, of definitive presence, of completion, of the fulfillment of time . . . ; a form of speech whose sole characteristic is to constitute those it is addressed to as being close

and saved; a kind of vehicle that differs absolutely from those we've evolved elsewhere to accede to the distant in order to control information about the world.

—Latour, *Rejoicing*¹⁶

The perennially disputed relation between the truths of science and those of religion is addressed directly in Latour's essay, "'Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame,' or, How Not to Misunderstand the Science and Religion Debate." Originally a talk for a lecture series titled "Science, Religion and the Human Experience," the essay offers a set of formulations regarding that relation that Latour develops in detail in *Rejoicing* and iterates in more recent writings. The essay also involves, contra iconoclasts of all persuasions, a crucially revised interpretation of the biblical commandment prohibiting images. Rhetorically reflexive throughout, the essay is, among other things, a mock (but not mocked) sermon. Latour writes: "Religion, at least in the tradition I am going to talk from, namely the Christian one, is a way of preaching, of predicating, of enunciating truth in a certain manner—this is why I have to mimic in writing the situation of an oration given from the pulpit" (TNF 28).

Latour begins with a strong contrast between "speaking religiously," evidently as in prayer or ritual utterance, and what he calls "double-click communication," that is, the idea or ideal of an unmediated transfer of information. The truth of a double-click message, if any such existed, would be its exact correspondence to an objectively determinable state of affairs. Religious speech acts, on the other hand, "transport" not information but persons. In religious speech as in love talk, what attests to the truth of an utterance is not its correspondence to some putatively objective reality but its renewal of speakers' and hearers' confidence in the reality of something vital: a sense of closeness; a promise of futurity (TNF 29-31). Here as elsewhere in Latour's writings on religion, claims are put forth largely through analogy, allusion, and intimation—which is not untypical, of course, of theological arguments or sermons.

Clearly, Latour observes, it would be improper, what he calls a "category mistake," to judge the truth of a religious speech act using double-click communication as a measure.¹⁷ Just as it would be wrong to maintain that sentences such as "I love you" have no truth value just because they possess no informational content, it is wrong, in seeking to understand the angel Gabriel's salutation to the Virgin, to ask who Mary was, to ponder "whether or not she was really a Virgin," or to imagine that she might have been impregnated with "spermatic rays." "Paradoxically," Latour writes, "by formatting questions in the procrustean bed of information

transfer so as to get at 'exactly' what it meant, I would have *deformed* it, transmogrified it into an absurd belief, the sort of belief that weighs religion down and lets it slide toward the refuse heap of past obscurantism" (TNF 33). In *Rejoicing*, Latour describes—at length and with considerable scorn—religious scholars' efforts to explicate New Testament texts so as to make them more reasonable-sounding, more conformant to historical data or otherwise palatable to intellectual tastes corrupted, as he sees it, by Double Click (here and elsewhere personified and often associated ironically, or maybe not so ironically, with "the Evil One"). He continues in the essay: "The only way to understand stories such as that of the Annunciation is to *repeat* them, that is to utter again a Word which produces into the listener the same *effect*," one that "impregnates . . . with the same gift, the same present of renewed presence. Tonight, I am your Gabriell!" (TNF 33).

Seeking explicitly to evoke the power and effects of religious transmission, Latour turns from verbal to visual representation and comments on a set of strong images from Christian iconography. We do not, or should not, assess such images, he observes, by their fidelity to presumed true originals. Nor should we isolate or "freeze-frame" them from the flow of mediating representations that enable their truths to be realized (this being Latour's revision of the second commandment). He goes on to stress the comparably vital role of relays of inscriptions, images, and other representations in science (reports, charts, photographs, mathematical formulae, and so forth). "Truth," Latour writes, "is not to be found in correspondence—either between the word and the world in the case of science, or between the original and the copy in the case of religion—but in taking up again the task of *continuing* the flow, of elongating the cascade of mediations one step further" (TNF 46). The commonly supposed objective realities behind genes or the microbe theory of disease are like the mistakenly supposed "originals" of representations of the empty Sepulcher or of the arresting thorn-crowned face of Jesus in a trompe-l'oeil painting of the Veronica veil. In all these, what matters, what sustains the truth of the events and the reality of the figures in question, is the continuity of the practices of representation that mediate their existence.

Elaborating these points in the essay's concluding pages, Latour observes, in what operates as an important and continuing distinction, that, while the mediating chains of reference that secure the truths of science are counterparts to the flows of utterances and images that convey the truths of religion, the relays in each go "in two different directions" (TNF 46). In science, they bring what is far close (for example, through astronomical photographs, charts, and models), but religious texts and images bring us to what is near—our neighbor and our salvation.

Because Moderns have worshipped the false idol of Double Click, Latour maintains, they have misunderstood—indeed, reversed—how truth and reality are secured both in science and in religion. To correct what he calls this “comedy of errors,” he offers a set of alternative characterizations of religious belief and scientific knowledge that are central to *AIME* and repeated, with variations, in his Gifford lectures. “Belief,” he writes, “is not a quasi-knowledge question *plus* a leap of faith to reach even *further* away; knowledge is not a quasi-belief question that would be answerable by looking directly at things close at hand.” Rather, a leap of religious faith “aims at jumping, dancing towards the present and the close, to redirect attention away from indifference and habituation.” Conversely but comparably, knowledge in science “is not a direct grasp of the plain and the visible . . . but an extraordinarily daring, complex, and intricate confidence in chains of nested transformations of documents that, through many different types of proofs, lead toward new types of visions that force us to break away from the intuitions and prejudices of common sense” (TNF 45-46). The parallels and reversals in this set of comparisons are striking. Simultaneously vague and enthusiastic, they join an evocation of the most familiar and accessible experiences of religious faith to a celebration of the most heroic activities and exalted achievements of science while maintaining a sharp distinction between the two. They are nothing if not diplomatic.

IV

In seeking to frame an account of the relations between science and religion that is both generally acceptable and also corrective of what he sees as past philosophical and theological errors, Latour has taken on a task that is immense and, as suggested in *Rejoicing*, variously—certainly rhetorically and perhaps, for Latour, conceptually as well—“tormented.” Such an account must negotiate steep differences of view between Moderns, many of them invested in conventionally celebratory views of science and some of them scornfully antireligious, and Christian communicants, many of them invested in conventionally orthodox religious views and some of them resentfully anti-science. Thus, while secular-minded readers may welcome a theology that claims neither supernatural nor substantial status for its god(s) and that segregates religion from politics and morality, communicants might feel that something essential has been lost in the negotiations. Accordingly, Latour’s accounts of religion vis-à-vis science operate with a good bit of euphemism, circumlocution, studied vagueness, and, it could be said, equivocation. For example,

while Latour derides familiar theological allusions to realms “above” or “beyond” the natural or the material, the apparent heterodox force of such gestures is considerably defused by his equally strong efforts to undermine familiar understandings of “nature” and “matter.” Similarly, while he seems to suggest that religion is immanence all the way down and all the way up, too, it is not surprising that fellow faithful sense in his texts assurances of something like orthodoxy.¹⁸

To speak religiously to Moderns, Latour has tied together a theoretically sophisticated account of scientific knowledge with a rhetorically deft Christian apologetics to forge a singular quasi-symmetrical anthropo-theology. The writings that compose it are bold, inventive, and in many ways compelling. Structurally and stylistically, *Rejoicing*, *AIME*, and related essays are remarkable works of lyric philosophizing, recalling works by Kierkegaard and, in their strong personal voice, Nietzsche. Fellow theologians are likely to be most appreciative of the originality of their formulations and also most closely attuned to their distinctive idioms.¹⁹ Other readers will find them a rich resource for ongoing, reprised, or newly conceived scholarly projects. Historians and theorists of Western modernity will profitably engage with Latour’s theologically inflected takes on law, politics, and economics. Those in literary and visual studies will appreciate his suggestive accounts of the represencing effects of texts and images, religious and otherwise. And humanities scholars of all stripes will be delighted by passages of an order of wit and literateness—vernacular as well as erudite—not often encountered in the pages of theologians, not to mention social scientists. Readers and scholars in all these fields, however, are likely to be perplexed by various aspects of these writings and to find them, to various extents, intellectually or experientially alien.

V

I am not going to speak of religion in general, as if there existed some universal domain, topic, or problem called “religion” that could allow one to compare divinities, rituals, and beliefs from Papua New Guinea to Mecca, from Easter Island to Vatican City. A person of faith has only one religion, as a child has only one mother.

—Latour, “‘Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame’”²⁰

In his writings on religion, Latour has been concerned with a relatively confined set of aspects of a vast and multifaceted subject.²¹ The focus

is on religious representation and utterance, which, in *Rejoicing* and related essays, are identified largely with Christian iconography, New Testament texts, and the verbal practices of Catholic communicants. In *AIME*, the religious mode of existence is explicitly restricted to the beings of Christianity while demons, ghosts, fetish-gods, and other exotic divinities are assigned to a separate, somewhat obscurely described mode labeled “metamorphosis.” Beings of the latter kind are sustained not, as in religion-proper,²² by flows of sacred texts and images, but by a process that Latour calls “psychogenesis”—associated with shamans, exorcism, psychotropic drugs, and psychoanalysis—and explains as “the exterior production of interiorities.” Also, strikingly, no other major religious tradition is mentioned in *AIME*’s five-hundred-page-plus “Anthropology of the Moderns.” Writing as a professed Catholic, Latour could not be expected to deal with other faiths in the same manner or detail as he deals with Christianity. Nevertheless, readers are likely to miss some acknowledgment of the existence of other religious traditions and also of their variety, both as observed and as experienced.²³

Experience carries a great deal of weight in *AIME*. The inquiry’s method, “a second empiricism,” is, Latour explains, a developed or extreme version of William James’s “radical empiricism”: that is, the inclusion of nothing that is *not* in experience and the exclusion of nothing that *is*.²⁴ Moreover, the test of the truth of its accounts of Modern values is, he tells readers, the accord of those accounts with their own experience. With regard to religion, however, the appeals to experience are highly selective and readers may find them otherwise thorny.

Some of the difficulties can be seen in the following passages, in which Latour specifies the mode of existence of “religious beings”—that is, the beings of Christianity, also identified as “the beings sensitive to the Word”—and explains their categorical differences from what he calls “the beings of metamorphosis.”

Religious beings . . . are truly beings; there’s really no reason to doubt this. They come from outside, they grip us, dwell in us, talk to us, invite us; we address them, pray to them, beseech them.

By granting them their own ontological status, we can already advance quite far in our respect for experience. We shall no longer have to deny thousands of years of testimony; we shall no longer need to assert sanctimoniously that all the prophets, all the martyrs, all the exegetes, all the faithful have “deceived themselves” in “mistaking” for real beings what were “in fact nothing but” words or brain waves. . . .

It appears infinitely simpler, more economical, more elegant, too, to stick to the testimony of the saints, the mystics, the confessors, and the faithful, in order to direct our attention toward *that toward which* they direct theirs: beings come

to them and demand that they be instituted by them. But these beings have the peculiar feature of *appearing* to those whose souls they overwhelm in saving them. . . . If we are to be empirical, then, these are the ones we must follow. . . .

Like the beings of metamorphosis, religious beings belong to a genre "susceptible to being turned on and off." With one difference: if they appear—and our cities and countrysides are still dotted with sanctuaries erected to harbor the emotions these apparitions have aroused—they *disappear* even more surely. Moreover, this intermittence has provided the basis for mockery, and has been taken as proof of their lack of being . . . ; the critical spirit has not held back in this regard. But the big advantage of an inquiry into modes of existence is that it can, on the contrary, *include* this feature in the specifications: one of the characteristics of religious beings is that *neither their appearance nor their disappearance can be controlled*. (AIME 308-309)

This seems to be saying that the existence of the beings of religion—proper is (only) in the particular experiences of those who experience such beings and that the reality of their existence is secured by our agreeing—out of respect for those experiences—not to question that reality. It also seems to be saying that, in spite of evident similarities, the invisible beings proper to Christianity cannot exist in the same manner as the invisible beings of other religions because only the former conform to what Christianity teaches about such beings.²⁵ The advantage noted here ("the big advantage of an inquiry into modes of existence is that it can . . . *include* this feature in the specifications") is that the person conducting such an inquiry can specify as a singular feature of the ontology of the beings of his own religion—and, indeed, as a manifestation of their autonomous power (that is, to appear and disappear *uncontrollably*)—what might otherwise be taken as their compromised reality: that is, the nondemonstrability of their existence and the fitfulness of their presence even in the experience of the faithful.

There is, clearly, no arguing with the structure or elements of an ontological claim of this kind. Readers not party to the type of stipulative logic involved may feel there is something hocus-pocus about it or note the apparent self-affirming circularity. Latour, however, defends its rationality strenuously: "I hope the reader will do me justice on this point: not once in this inquiry have I required anyone to give up the most ordinary logic; I have only asked that, with the *same* ordinary reasoning, the same natural language, they follow *other* threads. . . . [The beings of religion] are rational through and through. Like psyches. Like fictions. Like references" (AIME 307). And, in any case, one may find it hard not to be charmed by a universe emptied of "matter" and animated by invisible beings flitting among souls, sliding among the pages of old books, in company with Heathcliff and perhaps Athena, as real as quarks and as reasonable as cats or mats.

VI

If I still dare speak, it's only because I think I can brush aside the shadow that the ways of science once cast over the ways of being produced by religion.

—Latour, *Rejoicing*²⁶

Labeled an “inquiry,” *AIME* can be seen as Latour’s final report on his thirty-year-long comparative investigation of truth-regimes. Aspects of the inquiry, however, clearly had foregone conclusions, a number of which operate as axioms or, in Latour’s term, “pre[-]positions,” that is, as proper attitudes taken or given in advance. The sharp distinction and mutual incommensurability of the modes of veridiction of science and religion appear to be axioms of this kind. As set forth in *AIME*, these features obtain across the board: all truth-regimes involve distinct modes of existence, which themselves involve distinct discursive tonalities, interpretive keys, and modes of veridiction. One of *AIME*’s central conclusions (or givens), however, is that Moderns have brought much unhappiness upon themselves, the rest of humanity, and the rest of creation through their confusion of the truth-regimes associated with science and religion *in particular* and through their failure to respect the differences between the respective interpretive keys and tonalities of each.

One may agree: there is something tone-deaf in seeking to establish the truth of the Annunciation the way one might that of a theory of biological evolution. One can also see the broad advantages of maintaining a clear distinction between the modes of veridiction associated with religions and the natural sciences: it protects visions of the Virgin from dismissal in terms of empirical facticity and evidence regarding Jupiter’s moons from dismissal in terms of scriptural or ecclesiastical authority. Indeed, a strict partition of “science” and “religion” has obvious benefits for both, as demonstrated by the recurrent efforts of advocates or defenders of each to establish one.²⁷ Nevertheless, in view of the close, extensive, and formative connections between the development of the modern Western sciences and the institutions of religion, one must question the extent to which their respective discursive tonalities or even truth-regimes can be distinguished, certainly historically and, in some regards, currently as well.²⁸ And, in view of the exceptionally heterogeneous and continuously shifting contents of the packages of ideas, practices, institutions, and communities that have been and could be assembled under each of these terms, “science” as well as “religion” (and the latter even if confined to Christianity), one must question the conceptual coherence

and practical workability of any claim about the fundamental nature of either of them or of their relationship.

When Moderns “start talking about the ‘conflict between Science and Religion,’” Latour writes, “they act as though it were a matter of opposing (or ‘reconciling,’ which is worse) two types of approach: one that would give us Matter, the ‘here below,’ the rational, the natural, and one that would offer us the spiritual, the beyond, the supernatural, the supreme values!” (*AIME* 322). The sort of opposition and/or reconciliation Latour describes here is familiar in the idea of “nonoverlapping magisteria,” as proposed by biologist Stephen Jay Gould.²⁹ In Gould’s division, authority over the realm of facts and accounts of the natural world is claimed for science while religion is granted authority over the realm of values along with instruction in moral conduct. Gould’s apportionment of the epistemic and moral universe is endorsed by many scientists, who believe they have the best of the bargain, and is also accepted by many theologians, happy to be granted clear title to a piece of the territory.³⁰ Of course, partitions like Gould’s perpetuate what Latour identifies as key problematic dualisms of Modern thought: facts and values, matter and spirit, nature and culture. But Latour has sought only to challenge the terms in which those partitions have been drawn, not their existence as such. Few contemporary theorists have been more alert to the problems of conceptual segregation than Latour or devoted as much energy to exposing the dubious divides of Western thought. To the extent, however, that *AIME* depicts “science” and “religion” as distinct and counterpoised monoliths, its revisionist ontology, even as it discards familiar dualisms or significantly redistributes their traditionally defining elements, goes some distance toward perpetuating one of the most dubious of them.

VII

I’ve got better things to do than to portray the ups and downs of the children of last century: things like altering the arrow of progress[,] . . . giving another meaning to the long history of the West, doing away with modernization.

—Latour, *Rejoicing*³¹

Latour does not claim to be a historian, but his work involves a good bit of historiography as well as important theorizing about historicity and temporality.³² *The Pasteurization of France* is, among other things, a history of the emergence of modern theories of disease; *We Have Never*

Been Modern is, of course, a thorough overturning of modernity's self-flattering autobiography; *Rejoicing* relates the successive efforts of Christian theologians to meet the successive challenges of rationalism, both classical and modern; and both *AIME* and the Gifford lectures involve significantly revised versions of major chapters of Western social, political, and intellectual history.

The fields and approaches that make up science studies, including actor-network-theory (ANT), are programmatically anti-whiggish. They reject familiar heroic-progressivist narratives of the history of science and comparable manifest destiny accounts of the history of technology. Moreover, they tell very different *kinds* of stories about both. ANT's defining method is the slow, careful tracing of the construction of contingent networks of multiple, heterogeneous, complexly interrelated elements. While ANT accounts register practical successes and failures, they do not score the ideas and artifacts whose construction they narrate as intrinsically grand or foolish, nor do they portray the human agents whose efforts they follow as blind or faithful to (the) truth.

In his role of missionary to the Moderns, Latour sets aside this commitment to symmetrical historiography. Seeking to "[alter] the arrow of progress," he flips it around to point backward. Where Latour's Moderns tell of a rise from darkness and superstition through Reason and Science, he tells of a fall from unity and faith through the embrace of those very (misunderstood) values. His tale is of a community assembled by a salvific message; of the entrance of malign forces offering knowledge and power; of the folly and fumbles of leaders; of a message obscured, a people left wandering, and a land in ruin; and of the chance, perhaps, of redemption and renewal.³³

The tale is old and familiar. To be sure, that is no reason to dismiss it. Nevertheless, the idea of the Scientific Revolution and the European Enlightenment as catastrophes for humanity is likely to be resisted by many of Latour's academic readers, including—and in spite of their shared sense of the ills of modernity—a good number of us in the humanities. It is not that such readers endorse familiar celebratory accounts. Intellectual, literary, and social historians, along with political theorists, are more likely to regard both developments, along with the Protestant Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and other chapters in standard histories of modernity, as very mixed bags with very complex and variously operating ingredients. It is, rather, that we have learned to be skeptical of myths of a Fall, whether into Technology, Commerce, Individualism, or Fragmentation, and also of moralized histories, whether triumphal or nostalgic.³⁴ Many of us are inclined to see not only the twentieth century but also the past two millennia and perhaps the en-

tire history of humanity as a long series of, precisely, “ups and downs”: of local gains and losses, dominances and defeats; of emergences and extinctions both large and small; but not of globally grand triumphs and/or great botches, in either order. And many of us find the idea of modernity, or “the secular age,” or any age, as a “parenthesis” in human history—as if an interruption or aberration—very peculiar.³⁵ “But, of course!” Latour might exclaim. “That is because you are Moderns—or worse, Postmoderns!”

It is true: many of us are, to various extents, one or the other of these or both of them. Insofar as we are, even as we appreciate and appropriate Latour’s work around the clock, we will be troubled and more or less alienated by an image of the West in which critical thought is cast as the enemy of the ways to truth, and the fools and knaves of intellectual history are named Galileo, Hume, Kant, Voltaire, Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Derrida.

VIII

Psychology is to the subject what epistemology is to the object. One must be countered as forcefully as the other in order for experience to be tracked.

—Latour, *AIME*

In spite of the homage that he pays to William James, Latour rejects the relevance of psychology to the understanding of experience, including religious experience.³⁶ The field or, rather, fields of psychology (there are, of course, many specializations and variants) have a lot to answer for in the way of simplistic accounts of, among other things, the nature, sources, and effects of religious beliefs and experiences. There are, however, quarters of these fields where the assumptions of classic epistemology are rejected as strenuously as Latour rejects them (and for many of the same reasons) and where questions of subjects, psyches, and persons are approached in ways that accord closely with his own elaborated views of them. The relevant approaches, called, variously, “nonrepresentational,” “ecological,” “embodied,” or “enactive,” also suggest ways to understand beliefs—religious, scientific, and other—that do justice to their complex phenomenological dynamics.³⁷

Latour is comparably insistent that the religious mode of existence, and religion as such (or at least Christianity), cannot be approached by the social sciences more generally:

There is a risk, obviously, that [the] requirement to treat religion rationally will be mistaken for a return to the critical spirit, that is, to the good old “good sense” of the social sciences. But it should be clear by now that we can expect nothing at all from the “social explanation” of religion, which would amount to losing the thread of the salvation-bearers by breaking it and *replacing it with another*, while seeking to prove that “behind” religion there is, for example, “society,” “carefully concealed” but “reversed” and “disguised.” Such an “explanation” would amount to losing religion. . . . There is nothing “behind” religion . . . since each mode is its own explanation, complete in its kind. (*AIME* 307)

But, of course, religion, religious experience, and the related operations of mediation that Latour describes in *AIME* in ontological terms can be and have been described otherwise, by no means always either reductively or critically. Ethnologically and historically informed accounts of religious ideas, practices, and institutions, Christian and other, along with subtle explorations of religious subjectivities, have been produced for more than a century by anthropologists, classicists, and other scholars of religion who have shown no interest in exposing anything “behind” the objects of their study or inclination to mock anything within them.

If Latour makes little use of these accounts, it is not because he is unaware of them. It is because they are irrelevant to what he has taken to be his task. For Latour, to “speak well” of religion—that is, of Christianity—is to speak of it religiously, which means in its traditional scriptural, theological, and homiletic idioms *and not otherwise*. The propriety or cordiality required here is less a matter of language than of attitude and, indeed, of attachment. The attitudes and attachments of a person of faith occupying the role of communicant or theological apologist are crucially different from those of a scholar of religion comparing practices from Papua New Guinea to Vatican City (though they may, in fact, be the same person). *Emic* and *etic*, inside and outside, the experienced and the observed: the differences between them cannot be bridged; they can only be finessed.³⁸ This, the “hard problem” of the philosophical tradition, is also the hard problem of anthropotheological diplomacy.³⁹ As simultaneously anthropologist of and missionary to the Moderns, Latour has attempted to solve or negotiate it by forging an original idiom—a way of speaking—that joins compelling evocations of religious experience to passionate theorizing in the service of a prophetic summons to worldwide conversion. There is good reason to think the mission will fail. What has been constructed along the way, however, will reward our exploration for some time to come.

NOTES

1 "On the Cult of the Factish Gods," in Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, trans. Catherine Porter and Heather MacLean (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010), 1–66; Latour, "'Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame,' or, How Not to Misunderstand the Science and Religion Debate," in *Science, Religion and the Human Experience*, ed. James D. Proctor (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 27–48 (hereafter cited as TNF); Latour, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013) (hereafter cited as AIME). The Gifford lectures can be accessed at the University of Edinburgh website, <http://www.ed.ac.uk/humanities-soc-sci/news-events/lectures/gifford-lectures/archive/series-2012-2013/bruno-latour>.

2 See Latour, "Biography of an Inquiry: On a Book about Modes of Existence," *Social Studies of Science* 43, no. 2 (2013): 287–301. He writes: "In this article, I would like to . . . recount the chaotic emergence of a systematic argument whose persistence over more than 30 years is surprising even to me" (288). The argument concerns the relation of the problematic truth of religious texts to the privileged truths of the sciences. For Latour's early work and studies in theology, see Henning Schmidgen, *Bruno Latour in Pieces: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Gloria Custance (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2015), 11–19.

3 Latour, "Biography of an Inquiry," 288.

4 Latour, *The Making of Law: An Ethnography of the Conseil d'État*, trans. Marina Brilman and Alain Pottage (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), ix.

5 The account summarized here is initially developed in Latour, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, coauthored with Steven Woolgar, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986); *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987); *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. John Law and Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988). It is further elaborated and elucidated in Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), and *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005).

6 For a good account of the tradition, see Jan Golinsky, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).

7 For examples and discussion, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Scientizing the Humanities: Shifts, Collisions, Negotiations," *Common Knowledge* 22, no. 3 (2016): 353–72.

8 See Latour, "Coming Out as a Philosopher," *Social Studies of Science* 40, no. 4 (2010): 599–608.

9 Latour's usage of the term "Moderns"—and, in connection with it, either "we" or "they"—varies widely, and the specific reference of the term in his work tends to be elusive. Most generally and neutrally, it seems to mean something like (*we*) *educated, post-Enlightenment more or less secularized Westerners*. Throughout his writings, however (most crucially and influentially in *We Have Never Been Modern*), and in tones ranging from affectionate irony to bitter sarcasm, Latour depicts the members of this group (or, in AIME's ethnographic conceit, "tribe") as fundamentally benighted, self-ignorant, and arrogant: mistaken about the constitution of their world, mistaken about their own motives and values, and given to airs regarding those they regard as unenlightened. Since specific examples of individual Moderns (historical or contemporary) in Latour's work are few and far between, readers will be inclined to supply them from their own knowledge, experience, or imagination in accord with their own sense of Western or human history and their more general intellectual and/or cultural tastes and distastes.

10 Latour, "On the Cult of the Factish Gods," 16.

- 11 Latour, "On the Cult of the Factish Gods," 45.
- 12 See Latour and Peter Wiebel, eds., *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002). The recurrent quote marks are Latour's.
- 13 Latour, "On the Cult of the Factish Gods," 45.
- 14 See, for example, "Transmettre la syphilis, partager l'objectivité," Latour's postface to the French translation of *Genesis and Development, Genèse et développement d'un fait scientifique*, trans. Nathalie Jas (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2005), and AIME 91.
- 15 What Latour would banish is not the term "belief" as such (he acknowledges its innocuous usages) but its invidious or patronizing invocation, especially in relation to religious ideas. Thus his efforts "to slip in between" what he calls "epistemological questions and ontological questions" are related to his need, in establishing the respect-worthiness of divinities, to escape the choice between a dubious claim of objective existence for such beings and an unwanted ascription of their existence to ("mere") subjective belief. See the epigraph to this section, AIME 13, and the entry on BELIEF in the online glossary, [http://modesofexistence.org/inquiry/?lang=en#b\[chapter\]=#3&b\[subheading\]=#41&a=SEARCH&c\[leading\]=TEXT&c\[slave\]=VOC&s=0&q=belief](http://modesofexistence.org/inquiry/?lang=en#b[chapter]=#3&b[subheading]=#41&a=SEARCH&c[leading]=TEXT&c[slave]=VOC&s=0&q=belief).
- 16 Latour, *Rejoicing*, 118.
- 17 Latour stresses that it is also a mistake, though of a different kind, to appeal to a putative correspondence-to-reality to explain the efficacies of the natural sciences.
- 18 See, for example, Tim Howles's rejoinder to Jan Golinski's appreciative but distanced reading of "Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame" (Golinski, "Science and Religion in Postmodern Perspective: The Case of Bruno Latour," in *Science and Religion: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Thomas Dixon, Geoffrey Cantor, and Stephen Pumfrey [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010], 50–68). Howles writes: "Religious people, Golinski thinks, 'will still want to insist on the ontological reality of the things they believe in and will not be happy to have their religion reduced to the manipulation of signs that lack any reference to the real world.' . . . However, in the light of this chapter [i.e., chap. 11 in AIME], I suggest we can put Golinski's claim to bed as unfounded. Latour does not lead us into the realm of apophatic theology and the beings of [REL] are not to be taken as merely Feuerbachian projections. There is ballast to Latour's theology." (AIME Research Group site, <http://aimegroup.wordpress.com/2014/07/08/chapter-11-welcoming-the-beings-sensitive-to-the-word/#more-145>.)
- 19 See, for example, the appreciative account of these writings by theologian Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2013). Miller's style, like Latour's, is highly allusive and, in Miller's case, also exceedingly gnomic.
- 20 Latour, "Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame," 28.
- 21 The scope of the concept "religion" and the meanings of the term are, of course, extensively contested. On the concept, see Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1993); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003). On the term, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Study*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84.
- 22 My term "religion-proper" here and below refers to the mode that Latour names "religion" and identifies, usually indirectly but always recognizably, with Christianity.
- 23 Latour's references to non-Catholics or non-Christians tend to join them together in terms that are, at best, vague: for example, "those outside" versus "those inside" the Church or, sometimes, "the indifferent" versus "the faithful."
- 24 In a note on EMPIRICISM in the online AIME, Latour writes: "Rereading James allows us to take radical empiricism as a watchword, but the phrase 'radical empiricism' takes on

a more developed sense in *AIME*. . . . *AIME*'s radicalism is even more extreme." <http://modesofexistence.org/inquiry/?lang=en#a=SEARCH&s=0&q=Empiricism>.

25 "There is a constant risk," Latour writes, "of interpolating, confusing the two, failing to respect the contrasts. To care for is not to save. To initiate the circulation of psychogenics is not at all the same thing as letting oneself be overwhelmed by angels" (*AIME* 304).

26 Latour, *Rejoicing*, 122.

27 For samples of such efforts, see Paul Kurz, ed., *Science and Religion: Are they Compatible?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003).

28 On the historical connections, see John Hedley Brook, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991); Peter J. Bowler and Iwan Rhys Morus, *Making Modern Science: A Historical Survey* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005) 341–66; Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Religion and Science* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015). For continuing connections, see David F. Noble, *A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

29 See Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999).

30 On the problems with Gould's partition, see B. H. Smith, "Science and Religion, Lives and Rocks," *New York Times*, January 25, 2010, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/25/science-and-religion-lives-and-rocks/?_r=0. On the limited success of theological attempts at reconciliation, see B. H. Smith, *Natural Reflections: Human Cognition at the Nexus of Science and Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2009), 95–120.

31 Latour, *Rejoicing*, 66.

32 See, for example, the chapter titled "The Historicity of Things: Where Were Microbes before Pasteur?" in *Pandora's Hope*, 145–73, and, with notably different concerns and emphases, Latour, "Charles Péguy: Time, Space, and *le Monde Moderne*," *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 41–62.

33 Elements of the tale recur throughout Latour's writings and lectures. For recent instances, see "Charles Péguy," 50, and "Inside the 'Planetary Boundaries': Gaia's Estate," the Gifford lectures, lecture 6, <http://www.ed.ac.uk/humanities-soc-sci/news-events/lectures/gifford-lectures/archive/series-2012-2013/bruno-latour/lecture-six>.

34 Representations of modernity as lapse, loss, and degeneration are a staple of traditional religious moralism and recur in more sophisticated forms in current so-called postsecularist thought. See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How A Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012); Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

35 For the idea of a "modern parenthesis," see Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 234.

36 See the epigraph to this section and the entry on PSYCHOLOGY in the glossary to the online *AIME*, from which the epigraph is drawn: [http://modesofexistence.org/inquiry/?lang=en#b\[chapter\]=#17&b\[subheading\]=#289&a=SET+VOC+LEADER&c\[leading\]=VOC&c\[slave\]=TEXT&i\[id\]=#vocab-421&i\[column\]=VOC&s=0&q=Psychology](http://modesofexistence.org/inquiry/?lang=en#b[chapter]=#17&b[subheading]=#289&a=SET+VOC+LEADER&c[leading]=VOC&c[slave]=TEXT&i[id]=#vocab-421&i[column]=VOC&s=0&q=Psychology).

37 For important works exemplifying these approaches, see Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Esther Thelen and Linda B. Smith, *A Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development of Cognition and Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Rafael E. Núñez and Walter J. Freeman, eds., *Reclaiming Cognition: The Primacy of Action, Intention, and Emotion* (Thorverton, UK: Imprint Academic, 1999); Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA:

MIT Press, 2004); Louise Barrett, *Beyond the Brain: How Body and Environment Shape Animal and Human Minds* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011). On their implications for current controversies in epistemology, see B. H. Smith, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 37–51, 125–52. For their relevance to the understanding of beliefs, religious and other, see B. H. Smith, *Natural Reflections*, 5–19.

38 The alternatives here, also commonly seen as the (merely) “subjective” and the (putatively) “objective,” are what Latour has sought, in his writings on religion and more generally, “to slip in between” (see note 15 above)—or, precisely, to finesse.

39 It is, for the same reasons, a hard problem for interdisciplinary studies involving both humanities and natural-science fields. For discussion, see B. H. Smith, “Scientizing the Humanities.”