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# Religence

## Conceptualising Posthuman Religion

**Abstract:** In this article I contribute to posthuman anthropology by developing two lines of thought. I first suggest that the post-Cartesian ontology integral to posthumanism accommodates a new scientifically informed version of negative theology. I then explore how this new negative theology implies a posthuman religion. By analysing Michel Serres's reconceptualisation of religion as the opposite of negligence and engaging with efforts to build on this thought by Tim Ingold and Bruno Latour, I develop a theory of posthuman religion I call religence. With the innovation of this term, I bring posthuman religion into view and, to show how religence may be approached anthropologically, I draw on Anna Tsing's 'critical description' of the interdependence between *Tricholoma* fungi and pine trees. Religence, I conclude, is best understood not as a single pervasive and unchanging mode of relating that can eliminate negligence, but as a plurality of provisional and shifting religence–negligence complexes.

**Keywords:** Michel Serres, negative theology, negligence, posthumanism, religion

There is now a substantial body of literature devoted to theorising and promoting what is widely described as posthumanism. Posthumanism of the kind I have in mind consists in efforts to unthink the human as a fixed essential category and to rethink virtually everything – thought itself, signification, subjectivity, agency, objects, the social – in non-anthropocentric and non-hierarchical ways. Much of this scholarship locates itself in the Anthropocene, where human-induced climate emergency is compelling the heirs of the Enlightenment to exchange what Bruno Latour (1993) calls the 'Modern Constitution' – the dualist essentialism that underpins the nature–culture divide – for a thoroughly reconfigured relational non-dualism. The realisation that modern industrialisation is a geological phenomenon that threatens the Earth System is confronting post-Enlightenment humans with the limits of our overvalued intentionality and forcing us to acknowledge the agential capacities of all things. Critically engaged with the sciences and their steady erosion of human exceptionalism, more and more enclaves of posthuman studies are forming. There are now conference sessions, monographs and edited volumes framed as projects in posthuman philosophy (e.g., Ferrando 2019), posthuman ecology (e.g., Braidotti and Bignall 2019), posthuman international relations (e.g., Cudworth and Hobden 2011), posthuman geographies (e.g., Booth and Williams 2014; Gomez Luque and Jafari 2018), posthuman politics (e.g., Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017), posthuman art (e.g., Aloï and McHugh 2021) and posthuman theology (e.g., Moore 2014; Thweatt-Bates 2012). In anthropol-



ogy, notable posthuman-oriented work includes that of, among others, Mario Blaser (2016), Sophie Chao (2021), Marisol de la Cadena (2015), Tim Ingold (2017), Eduardo Kohn (2013), Bruno Latour (2017), Stuart McLean (2017), Elizabeth Povinelli (2016), Deborah Bird Rose (2011) and Anna Tsing (2015).<sup>1</sup>

This article takes up the posthuman project by pursuing two related lines of thought. First, I suggest that posthumanism accommodates a new scientifically informed version of the longstanding tradition of negative, or apophatic, theology. It tacitly permits recognition of a simultaneously transcendent and immanent divinity beyond all cognition and representation. This is so, I argue, because posthumanism depends on a post-Cartesian ontology that entails this negative theology as an affordance. Second, I propose that this new negative theology invites us to rethink religion from a posthuman perspective. To this end, I join Tim Ingold and Bruno Latour in teasing out the implications of Michel Serres's bid to define religion as the opposite of negligence. Without identifying them as such, Ingold and Latour have both developed theories of posthuman religion inspired by Serres's definition. My agenda is to compare and augment their approaches and to give posthuman religion a proper name, helping thereby to constitute it, both as a distinctive mode of performance and as a focus for anthropological attention. I propose to call posthuman religion 'religence' and I offer, as an aid to conceptualising it, Anna Tsing's (2014) 'critical description' of the interdependence between *Tricholoma* fungi and pine trees. Religence, I conclude, is best understood not as a single pervasive mode of relating that can eliminate negligence, but as a plurality of religence–negligence complexes. This conclusion, I acknowledge, provides no clear blueprint for how to maximise religence and minimise negligence, either in anthropology or elsewhere. My aims are more modest: to observe, conceptualise and participate in the evolution of religion into religence as it is occurring in the posthuman present.

## Not God, Not Not-God: The Negative Theology of Posthuman Ontology

At the risk of belabouring a well-established account of posthuman ontology, I begin by highlighting three key points about it in order to cause its implied negative theology to appear.<sup>2</sup>

First, posthuman ontology is post-Cartesian or non-dualist; it knows no ontological discontinuity between mind and body, spirit and matter. Posthuman ontology is thoroughly materialist, but it is not material monism, which is a form of Cartesian dualism (cf. Evens 2008: 301, n. 1). Unlike material monism, posthuman ontology does not subordinate an epiphenomenal – and thus illusory – realm of immaterial subjective meanings to a base of homogeneous objective matter.<sup>3</sup> A core premise of posthuman ontology is that having a physical make-up and making meaning are coeval sides to the same coin of materiality. All materiality signifies and all signs are material. To quote Karen Barad, a leading formulator of this idea: 'Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to each other; rather, *the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity*' (2007: 152, italics original).

Reality is thus a-buzz with an inconceivable plethora of ‘material discursive’ agencies (Barad 2007: 152–153). Different scholars have used different language to describe this lively – even where not, conventionally speaking, *alive* – posthuman ontology. Barad’s (2007) tag for it is ‘agential realism’, Jane Bennett (2010) talks of ‘vibrant matter’ and Latour (2014: 82) adopts ‘ontonomy’ to suggest that every being (Greek *ontos*) constitutes a provisional code of law (Greek *nomos*) amended with its shifting relational composition; to be is to impinge on others in ways that require mutual interpretation and accountability. These creative terminologies point to a growing consensus that everything communicates and exercises agency, one way or another. Things do – or perform – rather than sit in blank existence, and their performances are richly – though rarely transparently – semiotic. In light of this consensus, the modern cultural domains formerly treated as exclusive to humans become para-linguistic, pervasive and post-anthropocentric. They acquire other-than-human analogues, carried out in other-than-human discursive registers. But none of these registers – including science – is the true or exhaustive translation of any particular performance. Scientifically nuanced posthuman ontology itself is but one translation of selected performances. Other translations, such as the present attempt to conceptualise posthuman religion, may re-translate such science-oriented translations but, in so doing, they recompose the performances thus indexed and relate them to others.

Second, posthuman ontology is relational (Howard and Küpers 2022). There are no *a priori* essences, whether one or many. Everything composes and is composed of and in relations and would cease to exist without them. Everything can be heuristically reduced to any of its situationally relevant properties, but nothing can be definitively reduced to one core element alone that uniquely accounts for all its properties (cf. Latour 1999). Compositional things encounter one another in ways that recompose them *for one another*. As well as consisting in particular intra-relations and intra-actions, all things likewise enter into inter-relations and inter-actions. The literal net result of this action and reaction is a tangle of interdependence that, in the literature that seeks to convey it, prompts frequent resort to figures of ligature: ‘rhizomes’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 3–25), ‘networks’ (Latour 2013: 1–23), ‘partial connections’ (Strathern 2004), ‘lines’, ‘bundles’, ‘knots’, ‘meshwork’, ‘web’ (Ingold 2011: 61–94; 2017; cf. Morton 2010: 28–38), ‘weaving’ (de la Cadena [2015: 43–44, 101–104], quoting her Quechua interlocutor, Justo Oxa), ‘enmeshments’ and ‘crossings’ (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018: 6).

Third, this ontology of complex non-linear connectivity is not a whole (Latour 2017: 111–145; Morton 2010: 40). It is neither the eternal monadic mind of Neoplatonism nor the homogeneous matter of material monism. There is no collective of agencies, or alliance of such collectives, inclusive enough to compose it as a cosmos *for all*. It is not, therefore, the always shifting and unfinished mega-composition of all likewise shifting and unfinished compositions. It is not even a thing, in the sense of an assemblage (Latour 2005; cf. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017: 87); but neither is it nothing. At most, it is the Not-Thing, the Great Uncomposed, the incoherent ‘pluriverse’ or ‘multiverse’, *not* composed by all compositional things as they compose one another and their multiple worlds (cf. Blaser and de la Cadena 2018; Verran 2018). This ontology is not smooth and Euclidean, but rough and uneven. There are multiple

unsynchronised growth sites and dark patches where mutually opaque agencies may (or may not) suddenly ‘discover’ and recompose one another, sometimes violently or lethally (Serres 1995: 111–114; cf. Fortun 2014; Morton 2010: 29).

This summary alone already intimates why I say that posthuman ontology accommodates a new version of negative, or apophatic, theology. The term ‘apophatic’ comes from a Greek compound of the preposition *apo-*, meaning ‘off’ or ‘away from’, and the verb *phanai*, meaning ‘to speak’. To engage in apophatic theology is thus to talk about God by speaking away from God; that is, by framing one’s speech as denials rather than affirmations about God – much as I have just done with respect to posthuman ontology.

It is impossible to do justice here to the multifarious texts, thinkers and traditions that could be aggregated by the received theological category of the ‘negative way’. What enables scholars to compose the negative way as a type of theology is the thought, articulated in many ways, times and places, that whatever is ultimate is beyond human intellect to comprehend and beyond human language to describe. Hence the need to approach this unknowable ultimate by acknowledging that all things knowable, nameable, sayable, are *ipso facto* not all of it: ‘The Dao that can be named is not the eternal Dao’, and so on. At the same time, however, negative wayfarers often acknowledge that what they seek may be apprehended imperfectly by its actions. As the fourth-century Christian theologian Gregory of Nyssa put it, ‘He who is by nature invisible becomes visible in his operations’ (2000: 69).

The new negative way undeniably shares ‘partial connections’ (Strathern 2004) with other negative ways, especially with Buddhism (cf. Morton 2017b), but also retains excesses of difference, as the method of comparison via partial connections implies (cf. de la Cadena 2015). One partial connection is that all negative wayfarers trace pathways backwards from performances to inferred agencies. Another is that all refrain from equating the performatively revealed capacities of such agencies with immutable essences (cf. Latour 2014). That said, a notable site of excess is that, unlike posthuman negative wayfarers, many (though not all) other negative wayfarers appear to presuppose that what they seek is, or *has*, an immutable essence, a true and hidden nature beyond earthly access. This is the ‘One’, the original fullness (*pleroma*), of idealist monisms, such as the Neoplatonism of Plotinus (third century CE), and the God of strongly dualistic versions of monotheism that place an absolute ontological gap between a pre-existing and unchanging creator and its creation. But the site of excess that most distinguishes the new posthuman negative way from others is its development in dialogue with recent scientific accounts of the interdependence and complexity of all things.

Clearly, then, the Not-Thing of posthuman ontology has no exact analogue, not even in Buddhism. As I have suggested, it is neither an original monad to which everything must return nor a totally other transcendent being. Yet, when conceptualised as the proliferation of posthuman reality – that is, when composed *for some* as uncomposed and without intrinsic essence – it may stand in place of these essentialist Gods of spherical thinking, these ancient given wholes (cf. Latour 1993: 142; 2017: 111–145). The Not-Thing can function as a ‘virtual’ whole, a non-linear complexity without ultimate origin(s) (cf. Deleuze 1991: 104–106; Willerslev 2011).

Once so composed, moreover, the Not-Thing effects a marvellous co-incidence of opposites – not a ‘reunion of opposites’ predicated on a Primordial One that hierarchically encompasses and dissolves the Many (as in, for example, Eliade 1965: 122), but a continuous co-constitution of opposites that are more than one but less than two, neither identical (one) nor capable of autonomous existence (two) (cf. Haraway 1991: 177).

The Eternal Infinite becomes an artefact of transient finite things. Everything is transient and finite. Yet the Not-Thing is perpetually regenerated and lasts through the formation and dissolution of everything that does not last (cf. Latour 2017: 286). Imagine, as an imperfect analogue to the Not-Thing, an immense multi-species shoal of fish, but one that has always existed. Old fish die and new fish are born, but the shoal is sustained. No particular fish or set of fish is essential to its survival; it continues despite its discontinuity. There can be no question of which came first, the shoal or its fish. The shoal is not more but *less* than all its fish (cf. Latour 2017: 135; Morton 2017a: 101–120). So it is with the Not-Thing; its non-composition is change as constancy and constancy as change. There never was when it was not already Not-Thing, and without things it would be nothing (cf. Scott 2018).

Good and bad become inseparable and thoroughly relativised. Nothing is *intrinsically* good or bad or even a mix of good and bad; rather, different sets of transient relations condition what is good, bad or mixed for that set of relations.

There is no opposition between immanence and transcendence. Everything is neither identical to the Not-Thing nor unrelated to it. It is thus everywhere as the particular composition of each and every thing but nowhere as a totality. Everything indexes it without exhausting it. All agencies announce it and make it present, but all that is ever revealed is that every thing is a holy and transcendent end in itself (cf. Latour 2017: 184–219). This means that every thing is divine in its own way, and small ‘g’ gods abound – local gods composed by particular collectives who rely on their particular divine competencies.

In sum, then, the Not-Thing of posthuman ontology is not an immutable pre-existent essence, not a ‘supernatural’ God of the kind modern anthropology has tended to bracket out through ‘methodological atheism’ (Berger 1996). But it is not, on that account, not God.<sup>4</sup> It need not, necessarily, not be what one might call, and even reverence as, God (cf. Bateson 2000: 467).

### **Religion as the Opposite of Negligence: Anthropology in Dialogue with Michel Serres**

Whereas supernaturalism ends with the posthuman perspective, religion by contrast not only survives but thrives. The posthuman perspective is finding religion everywhere. The Not-Thing of posthuman ontology is inspiring new forms (and new transformations of old forms) of human religion and stimulating new ways of recognising religion beyond-the-human. By redirecting human attention away from virtual Being and towards actual beings, posthuman ontology is prompting humans to ask: What would religion look like beyond the human, or what beyond the human looks like

religion? What counts as religious or irreligious relations among other-than-humans? What other-than-human modes of relating are cognate with those modes of relating humans have called ‘religion’? To begin to address such questions, I turn now to constructive engagement with work by Tim Ingold and Bruno Latour, two influential contributors to posthuman-oriented anthropology. Each of these thinkers, in his own way, has built what amounts to a theory of posthuman religion based on the same provocation: French philosopher Michel Serres’s assertion that religion is best understood as the opposite of negligence.

In *The Natural Contract*, a now foundational posthumanist text, Serres asks: ‘While we uneasily await a second Flood, can we practice a diligent religion of the world?’ (1995: 48). To help us imagine what such a religion might look like, Serres performs the following etymological exercise:

The learned say that the word religion could have two sources or origins. According to the first, it would come from the Latin verb *religare*, to attach. Does religion bind us together, does it assure the bond of this world to another? According to the second origin, which is more probable, though not certain, and related to the first one, it would mean to assemble, gather, lift up, traverse, or reread.

But they never say what sublime word our language opposes to the religious, in order to deny it: *negligence*. Whoever has no religion should not be called an atheist or unbeliever, but negligent.

The notion of negligence makes it possible to understand our time and our weather. (Serres 1995: 47–48, italics original)

This strategy of pointing to a supposed etymological inverse – negligence – is a powerful and seemingly simple way to reframe and refresh the concept of religion. But Serres’s apophatic redefinition of religion (asserting what it is not) is more complex than it appears. It involves a curious double negation whereby Serres deftly links the semantic ranges available from two different etymological analyses of ‘religion’ to create a hybrid concept.

When Serres writes of ‘the learned’ who say that ‘the word religion could have two sources’ (1995: 47), he refers principally to the Roman orator Cicero (106–43 BCE) and the early Christian writer Lactantius (c. 250–c. 325 CE). Cicero derived the Latin adjective *religiosus* (religious) from the verb *relegere* (to retrace, pick out or choose again, reckon again, re-read). But Lactantius, arguing against Cicero, derived the Latin noun *religio* (religion) from the verb *religare* (to bind fast; cf. Smith 1962: 19–28). Today, linguists agree that *religiosus* and *religio* cannot be derived directly from either of these verbs, but that *religiosus* and *religio* both probably contain either the Proto-Indo-European root *\*leg-* (choose, gather, count, read, as in *relegere*) or the Proto-Indo-European root *\*leig-* (bind, as in *religare*). The case remains undecided (Barton and Boyarin 2016: 15–38).

Serres gestures towards the problem of the two possible root meanings but obscures it under a single opposite term: negligence. Instantly, the two possible root meanings bond in a two-sided synthesis by being passed together through the press of a common antonym. This synthesis, in turn, remakes ‘negligence’ in its own two-sided image. Unlike *religio* and *religiosus*, ‘negligence’ unambiguously comes from a compound of the negative particle *ne-/nec-* and *legere* and clearly means ‘not to choose’,

‘not to count’, ‘not to read or take account of’. As the opposite of the synthesised ‘religion’, however, it also acquires the sense of ‘not to bind’, ‘not to make connections’, as if it came equally from a compound of *ne-/nec-* and *ligare*. Finally, this newly augmented sense of ‘negligence’ reinforces the bond between the two root meanings in its alleged opposite, Serres’s synthesised ‘religion’. Thus, by means of this double negation sequence (negligence is the opposite of a two-sided religion; a two-sided negligence is the opposite of religion), Serres arrives at the hybrid notion of religion he had already described in the paragraph preceding his etymological exercise:

religion presses, spins, knots, assembles, gathers, binds, connects, lifts up, reads, or sings the elements of time. The term religion expresses exactly this trajectory, this review or prolonging whose opposite is called negligence, the negligence that incessantly loses the memory of these strange actions and words. (Serres 1995: 42)

This hybridising move enables Serres to link religion to a wealth of other semantically related concepts (cords, bonds, legal contracts, responsibility) and etymologically related words (obligation, alliance, intelligence, diligence), all in the service of his proposal that humans extend the social contract to ‘nature’. To continue to bar nature from society, he warns, is to persist in a negligence the earth can no longer bear; to universalise the social is, conversely, as much a religious as a legal or political act. Thus Serres put religion, negatively defined as not-negligence, at the heart of his vision for the social as more-than-human. In so doing, moreover, he also linked his definition of religion to the concept of symbiosis. The ‘natural contract’ he envisaged was a ‘contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favour of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect’ (1995: 38). This method of translating across religion and science is, I will suggest, key for the project of conceptualising posthuman religion.

Along with Latour, Ingold has brought Serres’s negative definition of religion to the attention of anthropologists and deployed it in ways that, I will argue, display its usefulness for rethinking religion in line with posthuman ontology and the new apophatic theology.<sup>5</sup> Citing Serres, Ingold (2013, 2017, cf. 2014) draws separately on the *relegere* (to re-read, re-reckon, re-gather) and *religare* (to bind fast) etymological traditions in two different articles but, like Serres, he allows their semantic implications to merge into hybrid understandings of both religion and negligence. His debt to Serres is most legible in his ‘theory of correspondence’ (Ingold 2017), which is at once his theory of universal becoming in the ‘meshwork’ (his version of posthuman ontology) and his theory of what religion is, for humans and non-humans alike. In this confluence of religion with the movement and growth of becoming, there is, however, a curious irony: Ingold’s theory of correspondence appears to neglect non-human negligence.

Ingold’s 2017 essay, developed from his 2014 Huxley Memorial Lecture, is entitled ‘On human correspondence’, but his theory of correspondence goes beyond the human; it describes how ‘every living being’ joins openly and attentively with others in the ongoing generativity that grows ‘the meshwork’ as ‘a boundless and ever-extending tangle’ of becoming (Ingold 2017: 10). Every assertion Ingold makes about correspondence is carefully worded in non-anthropocentric terms so as to apply universally – first to other-than-humans, whose ways of affiliating become models

for rethinking everything human (the social, kinship, economics, religion, politics) and, second, to humans, who are implicitly enjoined to correspond more like other-than-humans and to cultivate ‘correspondence thinking’ (2017: 22).

Ingold’s use of figures of ligature to describe the dynamics of relational becoming may antedate his knowledge of Serres’s negative definition of religion. In ‘On human correspondence’, however, his account of becoming *as correspondence* becomes so entwined with Serres’s etymological exercise that it becomes equally an account of posthuman religion. Compare Serres’s description of ‘religion’ (1995: 42) quoted above, which combines the semantic ranges of *religare* and *relegere*, with Ingold’s descriptions of correspondence, which make the same move. Ingold (2017: 10) asks us to imagine all living things as bundles of lines that extend in many directions at once. In order to lengthen, these lines join with one another (i.e., *religare*), forming knots of mutually transforming interpenetration that cumulatively increase the meshwork. ‘[I]n a world where things are continually coming into being through processes of growth and movement’, he writes, ‘knotting is the fundamental principle of coherence’ (2017: 10). Loose ends are always probing, carefully and attentively (i.e., *relegere*), after new knotting partners and finding them owing to a deep ‘sympathy’ or ‘inner feel for each other’ (2017: 12) that already affiliates them as runners from past knottings. ‘The knot’, according to Ingold, ‘remembers everything’ (2017: 13); it never loses the memory of previous knotting partners (cf. Serres 1995: 42). Correspondence is the dance that everything does in this ongoing sympathetic quest to tangle with others and it entails three key elements: the non-reflexive patterns of simultaneously passive and active engagement with others Ingold calls ‘habit’; the co-constitution of beings he calls ‘agencing’; and the deep generalised awareness of others he calls ‘attentionality’. This mode of relating is impelled, moreover, by ‘the necessity of the knot’, the push to carry on ‘joining with’ that is ‘born out of commitment and attention to things’ (Ingold 2017: 11–13; cf. 2013: 746). ‘Its antonym’, Ingold declares, ‘is negligence’ (2017: 12).

For Ingold, then, becoming coincides with religion. And it is thoroughly apophatic religion. The necessity of the knot that obliges lines to correspond moves everything towards something that is infinitely alluring but unattainable because it is always in the making, never made. The joining of lines in correspondence and in ‘religious sensibility’ both proceed out of ‘a longing for that which lies beyond the reach of conceptualisation: it is the impulse of a life that, in continually running ahead of itself or leading by submission, bodies forth as a question that does not already contain its answer’ (Ingold 2017: 23).

But if every living thing moves and grows by attentive correspondence and knotting, and is thus intrinsically religious, how did negligence enter the meshwork? Unexpectedly, Ingold’s theory of correspondence reproduces the problem of how evil entered a world that was originally good as a problem of how negligence entered a world that was originally religious. And by describing humans alone as negligent, he seems inadvertently to reproduce human exceptionalism, albeit negatively valued (cf. Ingold 2013: 735, 745–746). Humans introduced negligence, Ingold suggests, after the Protestant Reformation of Christianity, when the development of modern science coincided with a new conceptualisation of the human as separate from



‘nature’. Setting themselves above and beyond nature, humans began ‘to deny the necessity of the knot’ (Ingold 2017: 23) and to neglect to follow the (negative) way of correspondence.

The problem with this theory of correspondence as a posthuman account of both becoming and religion is that it is too irenic on both counts. It denies not only the necessity of the rupture, both deliberate and inadvertent, but also the necessity of the knot not made, whether because a potential knotting partner is rejected in favour of another or because it is simply undetected. And this strange negligence of negligence furthermore causes Ingold to neglect what could be a productive alliance between his theory of correspondence and the theory of posthuman ontology Latour (2010) calls ‘compositionism’. Ingold (2017: 13) deliberately rejects this potential knotting of theoretical approaches on the grounds that compositionism treats things as heterogeneous and thus capable of being and falling out of ‘sympathy’. But this may be to misread compositionism as a form of pluralism, which would be as unsympathetic as to misread Ingold’s theory of correspondence as a form of monism on the grounds that it treats things as pre-related. Both approaches, I suggest, strive to conceptualise a non-dualist ontology in which everything may be found to have partial connections despite disparate trajectories of becoming. I join with both approaches, therefore, on the grounds that doing so helps me to give other-than-human negligence its due.

A brief look at Latour’s engagement with Serres brings a key refinement to the project of theorising posthuman religion. In lieu of the universal default mode of attentive relational becoming that Ingold derives from Serres’s negative definition of religion, Latour provides resources for conceptualising posthuman religion as a diversity of mutually infringing posthuman religions, each specific to the present needs of a particular collective. This leaves room for other-than-human negligence, but even Latour may overestimate the extent to which religion can displace negligence.

In his 2013 Gifford Lectures on Gaia, Latour quotes Serres’s etymological exercise as ‘a provisional definition of the term *religion*’ (2017: 152, italics original). This definition, he contends, establishes the following:

At this stage, the word ‘religion’ does no more than designate that to which one clings, what one protects carefully, what one thus is careful not to neglect. In this sense, understandably, *there is no such thing as an irreligious collective*. (Latour 2017: 152, italics original)

To paraphrase this thought using the verb that unambiguously comes into French and English from *religare*: every collective relies on (*relier*), or binds itself to something it works diligently to uphold. This something, Latour (2017: 153) elaborates, is that by which the collective feels called into being and sustained, and to which it grants ultimate authority; it is their god.

For each collective, moreover, neglect of that on which it relies – or on which it has come to feel reliant – is experienced as an existential threat. Latour, accordingly, goes on to suggest that religion is about more than clinging to and caring for one’s own god; it is also about striving not to neglect the gods of others. Using the language of care and attention that, as in Ingold’s work, indexes the semantic range of *relegere* (to re-read, re-reckon, take account of again), he writes:

there are collectives that *neglect* many elements that *other collectives* consider extremely important and that they need to care for constantly. To introduce the religious question again is . . . to become attentive to the shock, the scandal, that the *lack of care* on the part of one collective can represent for another. In other words, to be religious is first of all to become attentive to that to which others cling. (Latour 2017: 152, italics original)

Or, in more basic Serrian terms, to be religious is to be continually re-reckoning what others are bound fast to so as not to neglect them.

As with Ingold's account of correspondence, it can appear as though Latour addresses the human register alone. Yet his political agenda to convene humans and non-humans together as 'the Earthbound' – a collective that co-composes 'Gaia' as the deity to which it clings – justifies reading his Serrian account of religion as posthuman. Because his vision for politics is explicitly posthuman, his tandem vision of religion may be read as posthuman too.

Latour defines the posthuman political unit he calls a 'territory' in ways that indicate partial connections between it and what he calls a god. Whereas a god, for Latour, is that to which a collective clings and for which it cares attentively as ultimate source and sovereign, a territory is '*something on which an entity depends for its subsistence, something that can be made explicit or visualised, something that an entity is prepared to defend*' (Latour 2017: 263, italics original). An entity here could be anything, and when Latour writes of an entity together with its territory, he is translating his own religious discourse about collectives and their gods into a political discourse. He is rendering the two discourses translatable in mutually supplementing ways. Cast in terms of religion, there are collectives that neglect that to which others cling. Cast in terms of politics, there are entities that compose their territories in ways that exclude others and sever them from that on which they depend. And concerning the latter kinds of processes, described as 'externalization', Latour writes, it is 'a precise synonym for *calculated negligence*, and consequently for irreligion' (2017: 271). Here, politics and religion intersect. Religion, according to Latour, is about taking care not to neglect that to which others cling, while politics is about recognising and accommodating different authorities (non-human as well as human) over mutually encroaching territories.

If such a mode of religious politics sounds like too much to impute to other-than-humans, Latour (2017: 154, 246) reminds us that even human collectives do not always find it easy to declare what they cling to that others should not neglect. Some claim to recognise no divinity at all. Humans and non-humans alike must therefore follow a negative way, attending carefully to the performances – the attributes – on which their neighbours appear to depend in order to discern what kinds of implied gods they serve (cf. Latour 2017: 154). This negative way requires no specifically human competencies and is always operative. It is the means by which collective-specific religions and territories come into being and transform one another continuously. The territory of an agent is, as Latour says, simply 'the series of other agents with which it has to come to terms and that it cannot get along without if they are to survive in the long run' (2017: 252).

After all then, there is much in common between Ingold's theory of correspondence and Latour's compositionist account of religious politics. Each model translates universal relational becoming into the terms of Serrian religion and thus offers a

way of rethinking religion beyond-the-human. But, whereas Ingold's version suggests a universal common religion perturbed only by human negligence, Latour's version suggests the coexistence of multiple mutually encroaching sites of religion and negligence. If Ingold seems to assume that because religion is the opposite of negligence it is also the *absence* of negligence, Latour normalises religious conflict within as well as among territories. He argues that a territory is a composite of religion and negligence. A territory, he writes, is made up 'of networks that intermingle, oppose one another, become mutually entangled, contradict one another, and that no harmony, no system, no "third party," no supreme Providence can unify in advance' (2017: 252). For every collective, therefore, the work of religion is to control and reduce negligence by '*internalizing*' (2017: 272, italics original) the dependencies of the things on which it depends. This internalisation is conducted, according to Latour, in the coincidence of self-interest and altruism and leads each collective continually to modify (re-reckon) its god and its territory. Given the vast complexity of interdependencies, it would seem that such accommodations must always be limited and incomplete. Yet even Latour – perhaps out of climate emergency urgency more than conviction – hopes for a time when religion may 'put an end to negligence' (2017: 286).

### The Religent Life of Mushrooms

As the Serrian theories of posthuman religion I have detected in the writings of Ingold and Latour demonstrate, religion is differentiating; it is becoming other, evolving into something new. This thought brings me to my main contention: that in recognition of this change, posthuman religion needs its own name – one that escapes the supernaturalist connotations often attached to 'religion' and helps bring this new thing into existence (cf. Holbraad 2009). I take the next step, therefore, and innovate on Serres's formulation 'diligent religion' (1995: 48) to generate the term 'religence'.

Religence is a word the English language should have had all along. Latin *intellegere* and *delegere* have given English, via French, the words 'intelligence' and 'diligence', but somehow *relegere* failed to produce 'religence'. I claim it now and propose this working definition: religence is any performance by any entity that repeatedly reads, registers, reckons and selects particular relational bonds in ways that, at least for a time, cultivate a stable though not imperviously bounded or unchanging world.

By coining 'religence' as an aid to making posthuman religion manifest, I do not intend, however, to undo the synthesis that Serres performed to arrive at his negative definition. It is true that the form *relegere* alone stands behind my neologism, but I want the concept of religence I am putting forward also to retain the sense of *religare*, 'to bind fast', as in Serres's synthesis. The binding and loosing of ties is, in fact, central to the concept of religence I am proposing. In order, therefore, to keep this aspect of religence in view, I also propose adopting Latin *religio* into English (for both singular and plural) and using it to refer to any limit or bond that religent beings may set upon themselves or others. If the term religence seems to emphasise the operations of diligent re-reading, then let the companion term 'religio' rebalance this by emphasising that all of this re-reading is of delicate interconnecting lines so as to channel helpful

and curb harmful influences. This is to treat ‘religio’ as if its development from PIE \*leig- (as in *religare*) were certain and to define it as something like the classic Oceanic concept of a tabu (cf. Barton and Boyarin 2016: 15–38). Like a tabu, a religio, as I am repurposing the term, is a bond, restraint or limit placed on an entity’s actions, or the state of being under such a bond.

Ingold and Latour write in general terms about processes that evoke the possibility of what I am calling religence, but neither attempts a detailed ethnography that could add specificity to what religence really looks like beyond the human. For such a resource I appeal to Anna Tsing’s pioneering posthuman work – via mycologists and ecologists – with mushrooms.

In an article anticipating some of the themes of her book, *The mushroom at the end of the world* (2015), Tsing (2014) creatively gives voice to a fungal spore of the genus *Tricholoma* as an ethnographic subject. The spore describes to human readers the symbiotic relationship between its species of fungus and the trees on which it grows:

I promised to tell you about how my kind of fungi and our companion trees eat together. You probably know that tree leaves make carbohydrates in photosynthesis stimulated by sunlight. Those carbohydrates flow through the tree’s body, from its tips to its roots, nourishing it. They also nourish us, for we are wrapped around the roots, drinking with the tree. But we aren’t parasites . . . We dissolve minerals from rock and soil, making them available for the tree’s growth. . . . We evolved together. My own clan’s favorite tree friends are pines . . . Of course, it’s not all peace and happiness. The pines give away a lot of their sugar, and we are not always easy on them. Sometimes we give it away to other plants in the forest. . . . Sometimes we kill roots with our exactions. The tree can slough us off too, or get chopped down by you, and without another companionate tree nearby, we die of starvation. (2014: 228)

This passage may be analysed, I suggest, as an ethnographic account of religence – one that, by capturing religence in practice, helps readers to imagine it and to compose it as one among many ways of composing, without ever exhausting, the multifarious performances of things.

Tsing argues for a method of ethnography beyond-the-human that she calls ‘critical description’ (2014: 223). Critical description, like classic ethnography, considers the social in all its complexity, but re-conceptualises it as multiple overlapping processes of world-making involving abiotic as well as biotic entities. ‘Critical description’, writes Tsing, ‘addresses how world-making occurs in the oxymoron of “unintended design”, as many species’ lifeways come together with or without intentionality, goodwill, enmity, or even noticing each other. . . . World-making occurs as organisms find niches within which they live with others’ (2014: 223–224).<sup>6</sup>

It is in these niches, these sites of intensive evolved mutual dependence like the one between a *Tricholoma* fungus and its pine tree, that religence transpires and contributes to world-making as a mode of performance both in and other than those that biologists compose as symbiosis. In Latourian terms, a *Tricholoma* fungus’s pine tree is its chief god, and possibly vice-versa; each serves its own necessary allies in order to be served in turn by them. It is probably no accident that Tsing’s spore talks of how fungi and trees ‘eat together’, language redolent of sacred commensality between humans and their gods and of sacrifice as giving so that one’s gods may give in return.

Two final clarifying points arise from translating Tsing's critical description of fungus–tree symbiosis into an account of religence in action.

First, negligence will always be with every collective, not only despite religence but because of it. Religence can never displace negligence, because each discipline of religence generates – whether by calculation, oversight, or both – its own correlating range of negligence. Acts of religence – such as paying homage to plants other than one's pine tree by sharing sugars with them – actively, if inadvertently, also constitute negligence of one's pine tree; indeed, religence is best understood as a diversity of overlapping religence–negligence complexes. This is because the *religio*, the obligations and limits set by any pattern of religence, will always be inadequate – undermined by violations, blind spots and impasses between agents with irreconcilable needs. No collective can read and re-read all its connections to others and maintain them to the good of all, not simply because no collective is omniscient but because omniscience would reveal multiple conflicting demands from others. To attend carefully to one set of interdependencies is to neglect others. And, as Tsing's spore acknowledges, 'it's not all peace and happiness' (2014: 228) even within tight symbiotic relations. A *Tricholoma* fungus can fail to observe the optimal *religio* on how much to extract from a root system. And it is easy to imagine how changes at wider scales of world-making may render existing *religio* counterproductive, turning religent performances into negligence.

Second, science and scientists are indispensable to the apprehension and study of religence beyond-the-human. Posthumanism depends on the sciences formerly designated 'natural' – especially those fields in which post-Cartesian approaches have emerged – because it is their practitioners who, by following their own negative way of inferring causes from effects (cf. Latour 2014), extend human senses and detect the performances of otherwise unknown agencies (e.g., Hoffmeyer 2008). For humans, scientists are the first mediators of macroscopic and microscopic performances, of material codes and forms of signification. Accordingly, as already modelled by Serres's vision for a 'natural contract' (1995: 38), whoever wishes to conceptualise something beyond the human – whether it be posthuman politics, law, economics, art, religion, or indeed science – must begin with human scientific translations of performances. Posthuman accounts of the kinds of performances formerly set apart as unique to humans will always be translations of translations; it is translation in infinite regress.

To take an account of performances that employs the scientific language of symbiosis and translate it into the language of religence is not, therefore, to project religion as a human cultural form onto natural processes. It is to recompose the performances in question in ways that reveal a partial connection linking all things not only as entities that persist by developing relations of mutual dependence but also as religent agencies. It is to actualise the performances as more than symbiosis by causing them to appear also as religence (cf. de la Cadena 2015). The act of translation does not simply describe the same performances differently; it differentiates them into more than one but less than two modes of performance (cf. Haraway 1991: 177). It does not render symbiosis and religence mutually reducible or grant ontological priority to either (cf. Bryant 2011: 40); it shows them to be relatable because they are intrinsically pre-related *and* different. If, moreover, the traditions conventionally thought of as

religion are recomposed as religence, this translation further reveals the intrinsic pre-relatedness of those traditions and the performances called symbiosis. This thought, I can only begin to intimate, explains a great deal about what has formerly been called religion – about why it can neither be purified from nor reduced to the other modern domains, and about the negligence perpetrated in its name despite being antithetical to its aims.

## Reflections on Religence in the Anthropocene

The more one engages with contemporary accounts of posthuman ontology, the more they cause all ways of relating to appear as negative ways, ways of registering irreducible and changing agencies based on their performances. This situation prevails because posthuman ontology universalises the classic epistemological problem of access, causing Kantian gaps between appearances and things-in-themselves to open up among and within all things (cf. Bryant 2011: 34–66). Nothing, that is to say, enjoys full and immediate access to anything else; everything must translate and be translated by other things. Small wonder then that apophatic theology remains a live option, even for post-theistic humans, and resembles the way in which a *Tricholoma* fungus knows its pine tree – not as an essence but as an array of performances essential to existence. The apophatic Christian theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher is best known for his assertion that religious emotions consist in ‘the feeling of an absolute dependence’ (1958 [1799]: 106). There is room for posthuman analogues to this feeling in every gap.

In the midst of this posthuman proliferation of negative ways, Serres’s negative definition of religion as the opposite of negligence comes to the fore as precisely the thought needed for imagining religion beyond-the-human. Like many anthropologists, I became aware of Serres’s negative definition through the work of Ingold and Latour. Acknowledging my debt to them, I have sought to go beyond their uses of Serres’s definition and have reconceptualised religion as religence, a move intended to acknowledge and advance the recomposition of religion as no longer a modern cultural domain exclusive to humans but a particular mode of performance in which all things engage. Allied to while differing from other performances, religence is simultaneously the careful avoidance and inevitable enactment of negligence in complex and dynamic configurations of interpenetrating relations. It is the activity of giving others their due, of sensing with awe and hesitation the presence of others, of reading and re-reading others, of testing the limits of infringement and triggering backlashes, of making and maintaining alliances, of setting and submitting to religio, of transgressing and making reparations, of eliciting and repelling, of respecting, responding to and reverencing others, even when compelled to disrupt or halt their continuity in the interest of one’s own.

This account of religence both is and is not an attempt at grand theory. It seeks to identify a constant that partially connects all things. Yet it asserts that what constitutes religence is always contingent and shifting; every pattern of religence is particular to an evolved and evolving nexus of relations. For humans, therefore, it seems there can

be only one enduring commandment: thou shalt treat thy efforts to codify what is religence and what is negligence as flawed, incomplete, composed by ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway 1988), never globally applicable, and always provisional.

A fragment of clever Latin word play composed sometime before the first century BCE and preserved by Aulus Gellius in the second century CE nicely points the simultaneous difference yet close association between *relegere* and *religiosus* in the Roman Empire: ‘*Religentem esse oportet religiosus ne fuas*’ (*Attic Nights* 4.9.2). English translations typically interpret this text as drawing a contrast between a desirable degree of religiosity and unhelpful superstition, a contrast made humorous by the partial homophony between the two key Latin words involved. J. C. Rolfe’s (1927) version, for example, construes it as: ‘Best it is to be religious, lest one superstitious be.’ Serres’s etymological exercise suggests a different rendering, however – one that, incidentally, sheds light on the concept of superstition. The use of *religens*, the present participle of *relegere*, warrants translation along the lines of: ‘One should be continuously reckoning so as not to be hampered by excessive religious scruples.’ Or, to use the language I am proposing: ‘Best to be religent so as not to get bound up by obsolete religio.’

This turns out to be a valuable aphorism in the posthuman Anthropocene. Today, everything is telling us that we are inextricably linked to innumerable other-than-human agencies in a vast mesh. And we know that the things to which these agencies cling – the things which we must not neglect – are in trouble, owing to our neglect. Most of the vast mesh is invisible to us, and the instruments needed to approach its remote entities by means of the negative way are too cumbersome for us, especially if we are not scientists. How, then, can we avoid neglecting and transgressing against the things on which others rely and on which we too rely without realising it? The seeming perils of all actions threaten to paralyse. To what religio should I – a white male anthropologist in London – bind myself? Should I disavow synthetic clothing, or is cotton farming exhausting too much land? Should I bind myself to an animal-free diet, or is almond farming killing too many bees? Should I have children? How many? What should I recommend or support when it comes to setting the religio – or the compensatory exemptions from religio – that should bind or loose others? What religio should I advocate be laid on corporations and states, or on rivers and tides and harmful parasites and viruses? How should I atone if my well-intended religio turn out to do more harm than good?

In the posthuman ontology, everything – including the concept of religion – is in flux, becoming other than what it was. The lines of the meshwork move on. So must the bonds of religio. A limit that was beneficial yesterday may be detrimental tomorrow and vice versa. Conspiring with science, therefore, religent humans – both as participants in collective patterns of religence and in their personal pursuits – need to work hard to keep up with the performances of realities that make no promises to remain constant, save as change. It is necessary, as the aphorism that comes to us from Aulus Gellius suggests, always to be regrouping and reviewing old tabus, shedding outdated ones that have turned religence into negligence, and inventing new ones conducive, if only for the present, to neglecting others less.

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## Notes

1. As used here, 'posthumanism' does not pertain to the agenda also termed 'transhumanism'. The latter describes aspirations to augment and prolong the capacities of individual consciousnesses through technology. As Braidotti (2019: 59, 170; cf. Ferrando 2018) observes, this version of posthumanism takes the Cartesian dualist premise that mind transcends matter to its logical extreme. Readers should note that the anthropologists I am citing in this article might not want to label their work posthumanist; my description of their work as 'posthuman-oriented' is my own way of relating them around issues of common concern.
2. Most of the contributors cited in this section work in traditional academic fields and are the direct heirs as well as critics of the Enlightenment and its dualist ontology. I acknowledge, however, that the works of these contributors – and the works on which they draw – are informed by other traditions and ways of composing worlds. Academic and non-academic Indigenous dialogue partners are participating in the composition of posthumanism (cf. Bignall and Rigney 2019; Blaser and de la Cadena 2018; Whyte 2013, 2017). That said, no antecedent way of composing worlds was ever already posthuman in the sense intended here.
3. Since the 1970s, some philosophers have been drawing on Spinoza to repurpose the term 'monism' for the posthumanist project. Braidotti (2013), for example, describes this posthumanist monism as 'vital materialism'.
4. The phrase 'not God, not not-God' embedded here and used in the subtitle to this section takes inspiration from Hastrup (1992: 335–336) and Willerslev (2004); it is intended to capture an in-betweenness that participates in each of two seemingly given and mutually exclusive wholes.



5. The argument here does not depend on either Latour or Ingold accepting the characterisation of their work as posthumanist-oriented. My claim is that their work is useful for my own constructive project of theorising religion along posthumanist lines.
6. Tsing's account of world-making calls to mind Jakob von Uexküll's (2010 [1934]) concept of an Umwelt. Tsing (2015: 156) has argued, however, that 'Uexküll's bubble worlds are not enough' because they confine organisms to the horizon of their senses. While clearly building on von Uexküll's work, Tsing seeks to bring greater relational complexity and a sense of deep time to her descriptions of world-making.

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## Religence: conceptualiser la religion posthumaine

**Résumé :** Dans cet article, je contribue à l'anthropologie posthumaniste en développant deux axes de réflexion. Je suggère d'abord que l'ontologie postcartésienne, qui fait partie intégrante du posthumanisme, s'adapte à une nouvelle version scientifiquement informée de la théologie apophatique ou négative. En tant que forme de non-dualisme relationnel, l'ontologie posthumaine permet de conceptualiser un dieu incomplet et inconnaissable, néanmoins sous-entendu dans les performances de toutes choses. J'explore ensuite comment cette nouvelle théologie négative implique une religion posthumaine. Je dénoue les fils étymologiques de la reconceptualisation de la religion par Michel Serres, selon laquelle la religion est l'opposé de la négligence, et suis les efforts de Tim Ingold et Bruno Latour qui visent à construire sur cette pensée. C'est à partir de cela que je développe une théorie de la religion posthumaine que j'appelle la religence. Avec l'innovation de ce terme, je mets en lumière la religion posthumaine et, afin de montrer la façon par laquelle la religence peut être abordée de manière anthropologique, je m'appuie sur la « critical description » d'Anna Tsing de l'interdépendance entre les champignons *Tricholoma* et les pins. Je conclus que la religence doit être mieux comprise non pas comme un mode relationnel unique, omniprésent et immuable, capable d'éliminer la négligence, mais comme une pluralité de religions-négligences provisoires et changeantes.

**Mots-clés :** posthumanisme, religion, théologie négative, négligence, Michel Serres