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# God is other(s): anthropological pietism and the beings of metamorphosis

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REJOINDER

## God is other(s)

### Anthropological pietism and the beings of metamorphosis

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Rejoinder to Willerslev, Rane, and Christian Suhr. 2018. “Is there a place for faith in anthropology? Religion, reason, and the ethnographer’s divine revelation.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (1/2): 65–78

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A number of apparent claims that turn out to be red herrings render Rane Willerslev and Christian Suhr’s article curiously protean. But if these pseudotheses are set aside, something interesting and potentially helpful emerges. This article may be read, I suggest, as entailing an anthropological theology according to which any form of agency might mediate God or constitute divine agency.

Once identified, this rethinking of agency in relation to divinity may furthermore speak to the aims and claims of another anthropological theology—namely, Bruno Latour’s (2013a: 295–325) rethinking of religion as a “mode of existence” among the Moderns. Both of these theological projects offer models of God as a paradox, a Becoming-Being in which the antinomies of relationism and essentialism converge: God is nothing but an open-ended compositional flux eternally generated from within by local relations of mediation and is therefore also an always already transcendent essence.

But whereas Latour asserts that the beings of the mode of existence he calls “religion” may be distinguished from all others by their “saving” works of calling persons into being out of nothing-but-flux, Willerslev and Suhr’s characterization of “disruptive experiences” during anthropological fieldwork as sites of “revelation” would seem to imply that this excludes too many agents from divine agency. The ethnographic examples they adduce as in-

dices of divine intervention suggest that, among others, the kinds of beings Latour analyzes as the beings of “metamorphosis” may likewise mediate and generate divinity, not only as saving grace but also as subjectivity-disintegrating rupture. Brought together, these two approaches to anthropological theology begin to intimate, I suggest, what it might look like to bring the Moderns back into “diplomatic relations” with other collectives, cocomposing, in Latour’s terms, a new intersection or “crossing” between religion and metamorphosis able to resist the violence of iconoclasm and antifetishism.

In order to stage such a potentially productive encounter between the anthropological theologies of Willerslev and Suhr, on the one hand, and Latour, on the other, I must first offer a few analytical observations about the latter.

I understand Latour to be a relationist philosopher (see Harman 2009). For him, every kind of thing is a relational composition, and there are no a priori essences. Yet Latour’s thinking goes beyond relations and gives essences their ontological due as well. Latour (2013a: 259–81) argues that relationally constituted entities *acquire* essences owing to the mode of existence he calls “habit.” It is habit that gives things their cumulative character as they negotiate the vicissitudes of discontinuous relational becoming over time. Essence builds up over the duration of any kind of entity, making it the



distinctive, nonrepeatable thing that it is, however composed of or composing of other entities it may be. Such essences are inseparable from the relations that grow them, and vice versa.

As a Modern, I can readily grasp the nature of relationally constituted essences when I contemplate the beings of the mode of existence Latour calls “reproduction,” such as a human being whose cellular and other subcutaneous networks of composition are changing all the time yet whose subjectivity and appearance remain relatively stable until dementia or death breaks them down. What is arguably harder to apprehend, however, yet crucial to Latour’s project, is his claim that the beings of religion—including but not limited to the being some might choose to call God—are no less relationally constituted essences than the beings of other modes; they are simply composed under very different conditions by very different networks of translation and mediation.

Latour has long sought to renew religion (explicitly identified with Christianity) for the Moderns by redirecting it away from misguided efforts to compete with science in the quest to access remote beings through chains of reference and toward the delicate task of individuating and hallowing beings close at hand (including, perhaps, nonhumans; see Latour 2009, 2013b). If habit already renders essences coeval with the relations that compose them, religion, according to Latour, endows beings as habit-based essences with yet another layer of definition—with soul, saved here and now in an ever-present eschatological fulfillment. But the bearer of this salvation is no radically transcendent deity made immediately present. Salvation is always worked out locally whenever one neighbor precipitates and seals another with the ancient affirmations: “Behold! I am here with you!” “Fear not! Rejoice!” (or prelinguistic vibrations to that effect). For Latour, there is no question of a preexistent God apart from these mediating agencies and the irreducible complexity of becoming in which they participate. Like every other kind of entity, God acquires an essence only by virtue of the myriad relations that generate divinity as saving presence. All of that said, however, it might well be argued that, once framed as eternal, this process itself obviates the distinction between a transcendent and a relational divine essence. If compositional becoming is conceptualized as unbegun, and if the capacity to mediate salvific divine presence is reckoned to nonhuman agents, then perhaps there never was when God was not.

But what of the beings that allegedly do precisely the opposite, the beings of the mode of existence Latour (2013a: 181–205) calls “metamorphosis”? These transformational beings, Latour says, assail and rupture habit-based essences at random, casting fragile subjectivities into crisis, hijacking their trajectories, causing them to sicken or go mad, or even arresting their becomings altogether in death. The Moderns, Latour explains, have largely internalized and psychologized these beings, but other collectives continue to generate and often venerate them as agents whose dangerous powers may sometimes be elicited as helpful. Latour (183) laments that, in their past dealings with other collectives, the Moderns have tended to construct a crossing between metamorphosis and religion that pits the beings of these two modes against each other. Posited as messengers of the one true God, the beings of religion can only ever oppose the beings of metamorphosis as idolaters and their idols, fallen angels, or other rebellious entities.

Yet Latour himself seems to want to keep these two kinds of beings separate from one another in ways that render a posticonoclastic metamorphosis–religion crossing difficult to picture. Latour insists that, although the beings of metamorphosis may be enlisted for good, especially for healing, they remain fundamentally amoral and indiscriminate, using and diffusing others merely as leverage for their own wild leaps of transformation. In contrast, he claims, the beings of religion alone offer themselves as leverage for the assumption of others to secure personhood. How can this clearly evaluative criterion of differentiation not reproduce the old metamorphosis–religion crossing as iconoclasm, replete with its evil impulse to purge the world of evil?

Willerslev and Suhr’s contribution to anthropological theology may provide resources for thinking about this question, but only once it is determined what the article is chiefly about. At several points, the authors seem to present as their core claim the idea that anthropological insights are best achieved when “disruptive experiences” push the anthropologist to the limits of his or her reason, inducing a Kierkegaardian “leap of faith” into “a deeply insecure, paradoxical state of being,” or “existential uncertainty” (66). They furthermore seem to want to demonstrate that the primary insight thus gained is that non-Western others, who may justifiably be said to have beliefs, dwell in this same existential doubt, uncertain about the premises of their own ontologies and cosmologies and about why things are the way they are. These lines of argumentation clearly



respond to the ontological turn—understood as a transformation of the problem of “apparently irrational beliefs” (see Scott 2013)—and form part of a retreat from and contamination of the concept of ontology as allegedly implying a perfect rational order.

I contend, however, that, by the end, this article comes to be about something different and more interesting. It turns out to be about disruptive experiences that bring the anthropologist to the limits—not of reason, *per se*—but of self-willed intentional agency as a means to moral transformation as well as cognitive insight, necessitating a leap of faith in a divine agency capable of effecting these desired changes. This theme begins to come to the fore in the section on Socrates and has taken over by the conclusion: “Knowledge depends not only on the actions we take, but equally importantly, on our ability to receive” (74).

This agenda for anthropology as theology is, in other words, a transformation of Christian pietism, filtered through Kierkegaard and augmented by Amira Mittermaier’s passion-centered analysis of Sufi dream visionaries (on Kierkegaard and pietism, see Barnett 2011). Recall that, for Kierkegaard ([1849] 1989: 115), the opposite of faith is not *reason*, but sin—disobedience, the will to autonomous self-mastery apart from God. Pietism, like its many descendant holiness practices within Christianity, is all about surrendering self-will and agency and undergoing a passion of the soul—being acted upon by God, whose grace alone is sufficient for faith and regeneration. (Islam can entail this struggle as well, cf. Mittermaier 2012.) Transposed into the register of anthropology, this tradition becomes the surrender of agency—in the form of intentional self-governed ethnographic analyses—in favor of disruptive experiences through which divine intervention may bestow a higher wisdom that somehow becomes a lived practice, a moral revolution of the self and its daily engagement with others. (On Socrates as a “philosophical icon” among pietists, see Barnett 2011: 101.)

It is at this point, arguably, that Willerslev and Suhr’s project begins both to intersect with and diverge from Latour’s in thought-provoking ways. Like Latour’s beings of religion, the thing Willerslev and Suhr call God or divinity appears to be a relationally composed essence, a transcendence generated and made present by many mediators closer at hand. Remarkably, however, unlike the mediators in Latour’s mode of religion, the mediators described here bear little relation to the Christian tradition. For Willerslev and Suhr, it seems, there is no limit

to what might turn out to be divinity calling. Entities as diverse as a moose cow and calf appearing in human form as dream visitors, demonic jinn in possession of a devout Muslim, the visionary dreams of Sufi practitioners, fieldwork consultants in general, Socrates’ famous “daimon,” the operations of myth in the mind of Lévi-Strauss—indeed, hidden aspects of the self, such as the unconscious—can render the mystery of divinity present and unsettling to the self. God is Other, but also potentially all others, even self: “One’s own agency becomes indistinguishable from action on the part of the divine” (Howland 2008: 5, quoted in Willerslev and Suhr). Here we are moving toward anthropology as mysticism.

The diverse entities Willerslev and Suhr present as agents of divine revelation might, on that account alone, seem to qualify as beings of religion in Latour’s terms, save for the fact that they do not necessarily *save* in Latour’s terms. In Latour’s terms, these alleged bearers of divine presence look, in fact, like beings of metamorphosis—beings that discompose, disorient, derange, displace, and desubjectivize those who encounter them. As analyzed by Willerslev and Suhr, in other words, these entities challenge Latour’s criteria for classifying the beings of religion as separate from the beings of metamorphosis and seem to urge the conclusion that the predicates “being of religion” and “being of metamorphosis” can both be true of the same agent.

Willerslev and Suhr have, in effect, formulated a new anthropological version of Martin Luther’s doctrine of the *Deus absconditus* (the hidden and unknowable God), or the more popular notion that evil, suffering, and even destructive personal agents such as Satan constitute and serve the work of the “left hand of God.” Contrary to Latour’s accounts, the beings of religion are not always edifying to the subject; sometimes they are simultaneously the beings of metamorphosis, tearing down the subject in order to remake it again, disabusing it of its pretensions to autonomy before restoring it as a gift.

Might this recognition that the beings of religion among the Moderns can also be beings of metamorphosis aid diplomatic relations between the Moderns and other collectives? Could the anthropological pietism developed by Willerslev and Suhr help to stage a new metamorphosis–religion crossing without need of either antipagan or antibiblical polemics? Or would such a crossing likely lead to a category error, the mistaken amalgamation of distinct kinds of beings? Would something important thus be lost to the cocomposition of the pluriverse? These are not new debates in the-



ology, but their translation and transformation into anthropological discourses may yet prove revelatory.

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