

**THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY
OF BRUNO LATOUR**



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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Short Abstract | 7 |
| Long Abstract | 8 |
| Acknowledgements | 11 |
| List of Figures | 13 |
| INTRODUCTION | 15 |
| <i>AVANT PROPOS: LATOUR AND THE VINEYARD</i> | 34 |
| 1. RATIONALITY AS ONTOLOGY | 44 |
| Introduction | 45 |
| Chapter Summary | 48 |
| 1.1 Rationality and its Relation to Ontology | 50 |
| 1.1.1 Latour’s Early Epistemology of Science | 50 |
| 1.1.2 Developing a Conceptual Framework | 67 |
| 1.1.3 Two Important Interlocutors | 76 |
| A. <i>Deleuze’s Nietzschean Ontology of Forces</i> | 76 |
| B. <i>Carl Schmitt’s Concept of the “Political”</i> | 79 |
| Summary of Section One | 90 |
| 1.2 Rationality and its Expression in the Contemporary Public Space | 91 |
| 1.2.1 The Meta-Logical Constitution of Modernity | 91 |
| 1.2.2 Modernity as a Historical Phenomenon | 101 |

| | | |
|------------|--|------------|
| 1.2.3 | The Logistical Constitution of Nonmodernity | 109 |
| | Conclusion to Chapter One | 116 |
| 2. | RELIGION AND MODERNITY | 118 |
| | Introduction | 119 |
| | Chapter Summary | 120 |
| 2.1 | An Analysis of Modernity in Terms of Political Religion . | 122 |
| 2.1.1 | The “Crossed-Out God” of Modernity | 122 |
| 2.1.2 | Voegelin’s <i>Political Religions</i> | 139 |
| | Summary of Section One | 153 |
| 2.2 | Religion, Modernity and Contemporary Western Society . | 154 |
| 2.2.1 | The Spatio-Temporal Conditioning Effect of Modernity | 154 |
| 2.2.2 | Motifs of Modernity within Contemporary Western Society | 163 |
| | A. <i>Progress and the Progressive</i> | 163 |
| | B. <i>Secularism and the Secular</i> | 167 |
| | C. <i>Globes, Globalizing Thought and Globalization</i> | 172 |
| | Conclusion to Chapter Two | 187 |
| | BRIDGE: WHY POLITICAL THEOLOGY? | 189 |
| 3. | RELIGION AS A MODE OF EXISTENCE | 195 |
| | Introduction | 196 |
| | Chapter Summary | 199 |

| | | |
|------------|--|------------|
| 3.1 | An Analysis of Latour’s Understanding of Religion . . . | 200 |
| 3.1.1 | Evidence from the <i>Inquiry</i> and Other Texts | 200 |
| | A. <i>Religion as Subsistence</i> | 203 |
| | B. <i>Religious Institutions</i> | 209 |
| | C. <i>Reconstituting Religion in the Contemporary Public Space</i> | 215 |
| 3.1.2 | Evidence from Latour’s Early Writing | 224 |
| | A. <i>Charles Péguy</i> | 227 |
| | B. <i>Rudolf Bultmann</i> | 235 |
| 3.1.3 | The Commensurability of Religion and Politics | 238 |
| | Summary of Section One | 242 |
| 3.2 | A Comparative Theological Study of Latour’s Understanding of Religion | 243 |
| 3.2.1 | “Theologemes” within Christian Theology | 243 |
| 3.2.2 | Comparable Approaches in Anglophone and Francophone Contexts | 251 |
| | Conclusion to Chapter Three | 262 |
| 4. | THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF THE ANTHROPOCENE . . . | 263 |
| | Introduction | 264 |
| | Chapter Summary | 268 |
| 4.1 | A Geopolitical Theology of the Anthropocene | 271 |
| 4.1.1 | The Gaia Hypothesis, Earth System Science and the “Good Anthropocene” Strategy | 271 |
| 4.1.2 | <i>Laudato Si’</i> as an Expression of an “Earthbound” Theology | 286 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Summary of Section One | 292 |
| 4.2 The Anthropocene as Geohistory | 293 |
| 4.2.1 The Resources of Apocalypse and the Deep History of the Earth | 293 |
| 4.2.2 The <i>Katechon</i> and the Restraining of the End of Time | 302 |
| Conclusion to Chapter Four | 310 |
| DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH | 312 |
| CONCLUSION | 317 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 321 |
| 1. Primary Texts | 321 |
| A. <i>Books</i> | 321 |
| B. <i>Catalogues</i> | 323 |
| C. <i>Articles and Chapters</i> | 323 |
| D. <i>Lectures</i> | 327 |
| E. <i>Book Reviews</i> | 329 |
| F. <i>Interviews</i> | 329 |
| G. <i>Newspaper Opinion Pieces</i> | 331 |
| 2. Secondary Texts | 331 |
| APPENDIX: INTERVIEW WITH LATOUR | 365 |
| Word Count Summary | 375 |

SHORT ABSTRACT

Although references to religion permeate the work of Bruno Latour from beginning to end, these have generally been dismissed in the critical literature as being superficial and extraneous. And yet, Latour makes strong claims that an understanding of religion is integral to his philosophical system. In this study, I offer the first full critical engagement with Latour's writing on religion and thus with Latour as a potential contributor to the discipline of theology.

I argue that a critical engagement of this sort contributes to the development of a political theology. First, it provides a conceptual framework by which modes of political thought and behaviour that are prevalent within modernity can be critiqued theologically. Latour shows how modernity is continually deploying an epistemological appeal to transcendence and thus that it has the form of a covert religion or religiosity. This has the effect of de-politicizing the contemporary public realm. Second, it provides the means for a positive re-imagining or re-conceptualization of religion as that which stays within the realm of immanence, counteracting the de-politicizing effect of modernity and providing the basis for new forms of human connectivity, responsibility and agency at the present time.

As a point of application, I propose that interaction with Latour's writing will enable the discipline of theology to engage with questions surrounding the impact of the contemporary environmental crisis. Latour shows how existing modes of human political negotiation are proving inadequate to the task of addressing this challenge precisely because they are expressions of the de-politicizing ideology of modernity. What is needed is an affective, moral and spiritual transformation. I demonstrate how Latour's political theology can make a vital contribution on this front, enabling the discipline of theology to be at the forefront of important debates about the future of global human society.

LONG ABSTRACT

The writing of Bruno Latour has rarely been addressed through the lens of religion. Where it has been, critics have generally disdained these references as constituting a superficial adjunct to what is otherwise central to his philosophical system. These concerns should not be dismissed lightly. At the heart of Latour's philosophy is an account of rationality as arising exclusively from empirical relations between actors in networks. This means he is suspicious of anything that purports to unify these relations from above, obscuring or obstructing the articulation of what is produced from the ground up. At first glance, then, it is not intuitive to see where the transcendent claims of religion would fit vis-à-vis Latour's radical commitment to immanence.

And yet, references to religion do permeate Latour's writing, from the earliest days right up to the present. He makes strong claims that these are integral to his philosophical system taken as a whole. And he laments that his intention in this regard has largely been misunderstood by his readers. My awareness of this disjunction provided the initial impetus for the study that follows. In reaction, I offer the first full critical engagement with Latour's writing on religion and thus with Latour as a potential contributor to the discipline of theology.

In broad terms, I argue that a critical engagement of this sort facilitates two major insights for theology.

First, Latour's work provides a conceptual framework by which modes of thought and behaviour that are prevalent within modernity can be critiqued theologically. Contrary to its claim to be neutral with regard to human ideology and belief, and to be emancipated from any kind of religious particularism or confessionalism, Latour shows how modernity is continually deploying an epistemological appeal to transcendence, even though this is largely concealed and non-avowed. At the heart of modernity Latour diagnoses the figure of "the crossed-out God, relegated to the side-lines" and describes its operation in terms of ontotheology. Because of this, Latour argues that modernity has the form of a covert religion or religiosity. This has the effect of de-politicizing the public realm, since the actors who occupy the political space are made subservient to a providential force that is above and beyond them, and that they can do nothing to influence or change.

But Latour offers more than merely tools for critique. For, second, his work provides the means for a positive re-imagining or re-conceptualization of religion as that which stays within the realm of immanence, moderating and alleviating the effects of the unwarranted leap into transcendence described above. By contrast with its appropriation within modernity, Latour envisages religion as being able to facilitate a space in which the empirical relations that take place between actors can be properly accounted for and represented. Religion therefore generates the ethical comportment of "care" and "attention" to one's embedded situation in the world; it demands an act of fidelity to the immanent conditions of existence; and it nurtures a sense of responsibility to one's own role in determining, at least in part, the future trajectory of history itself. Latour proposes that religion, when it is understood in these terms, can counteract the de-politicizing effect of modernity and be the basis for

new forms of human connectivity, responsibility and agency. On this basis, I argue that Latour's work can contribute to the development of a "political theology".

For these reasons, I propose that an engagement with Latour's writing on religion will enable the discipline of theology itself to be challenged, enriched and even recalibrated in new and constructive ways. In particular, it will enable the discipline to engage with greater confidence in debates about the impact of the contemporary environmental crisis. In recent texts, Latour has pointed out that this crisis is compelling human societies to open themselves up to new ways of thought and behaviour. We are becoming conscious that longstanding and established patterns of consumption need to be halted. We are becoming cognisant that our relationship with the natural world has to be re-orientated in some way. We are appreciating that fresh expressions of human organisation and co-operation will be required to devise a solution that will work for all, including future generations to whom we are bequeathing this damaging situation. Existing modes of human political negotiation are proving insufficient for this task, precisely because they are expressions of the de-politicizing ideology of modernity. What is needed is an affective, moral and spiritual transformation. I demonstrate how Latour's political theology can make a vital contribution on this front, enabling the discipline of theology to be at the forefront of these important debates.

My study is divided into four chapters. I begin with an introduction and then a brief *avant-propos*, whose purpose is to provide an orientation to the key themes of Latour's intellectual project. In chapter one, I attempt to establish a foundation for what follows by examining what Latour means when he refers to "rationality" and "the rational". For Latour, rationality is not determined by vertical correspondence with a realm of pure Being, in relation to which the meaning or truth of particular claims or statements about the world might be judged as accurate or objective. On the contrary, a rational claim about the world is one that is provisionally assembled by actors who operate in the realm of immanence and that is held in place from below. I propose two terms of my own as a kind of conceptual scaffolding to describe this: first, 'meta-logic', and second, 'logistics'. The latter is the definition of rationality that Latour seeks to re-instate. This chapter serves as a propaedeutic for what is to follow, for I will go on to show how these contrasting definitions of rationality are generated by different religious thematics.

In chapter two, I argue that Latour's understanding of rationality as meta-logic can be mapped onto modes of thought and behaviour that are prevalent within modern society and by a subtle religious thematic that is encoded within it. Since meta-logic entails making an appeal to transcendence, before immanentizing it as a standard or rule that holds true for all, modernity can therefore be understood as a form of covert religion or religiosity. It can be analysed in terms of ontotheology. To do so, I make use of the writing of German-American political theorist Eric Voegelin, which provides a conceptual framework for understanding modern societies as regimes of "political religion" undergirded by a "Gnostic" spirituality. I argue that the primary effect of modernity is to create an artificial experience of space and time. Since its basic form of rationality makes appeal to transcendence, modernity imposes upon human beings a sense of spatial dislocation from the immanent world and a sense that the future trajectory of history has already been fixed and determined. I show how this spatio-temporal conditioning effect structures important motifs of

contemporary western society: these include the ideas of progress, secularism and even globalization.

At this point, I offer a brief section that is intended to serve as a bridge to the second half of my study. This prepares the ground for my exploration of Latour's political theology, which is envisaged as a positive and constructive alternative to way in which religion functions within modernity.

In chapter three, I describe and evaluate the definition of religion that Latour proposes as an ingredient of this political theology. He calls this "religion as a mode of existence". I consider the context in which Latour proposes this term, how it relates to the idea of rationality as a logistics, and how it builds upon or refers to themes found elsewhere in contemporary Christian theology. I argue that Latour provides an account of religion not in terms of the preservation and transmission in time of fixed and static dogma, but rather in terms of its ability to take up a past event or experience by means of a differentiating repetition that is faithful to its original meaning, whilst simultaneously re-stating or re-pristinating it for use in the contemporary moment. It is on this basis that religion is envisaged as nurturing the ethical comportment of "care" and "attention" to the plural ontological situation that actually pertains in the world, which in turn is the basis for new forms of political awareness and activity. Crucial to my argument in this chapter is the examination of a wide range of published and unpublished texts from Latour's corpus, from the earliest part of his intellectual career up to the present day. By doing so, I demonstrate that Latour's understanding of religion has remained relatively consistent throughout.

In chapter four, I relate Latour's political theology to our contemporary context and, in particular, to debates currently underway in the humanities and social sciences concerning the idea of "the Anthropocene". This concept has become a key frame through which Latour has chosen to filter his ideas in recent years. For him, the Anthropocene indicates a moment in world history in which the epistemological categories of modernity are being challenged and ineluctably disrupted. This provides the occasion for new modes of thinking about our ontological situation in the world. In this context, I argue that Latour's political theology becomes a vital resource. First, it enables us to diagnose the aetiology of the environmental crisis: this can now be understood as deriving from an ideology of flight from the world that has been generated within modernity and incubated by its ersatz religious thematic. Second, it enables us to conceive a new role for religion as that which can confront human beings with the grounded, territorialized reality of our existence on Earth and the responsibility we have as actors within a flow of history that can now be understood as open to an indeterminate future. With this final chapter, then, I show the relevance of Latour's political theology by applying it to a situation of great importance facing global humanity today.

At the end of my study, I propose two areas in which further, cross-disciplinary research on Latour's writing on religion might be desirable, before providing a general conclusion to the whole.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been a great privilege to have had the opportunity to engage with the work of Bruno Latour over the last few years, particularly in relation to an aspect of his thought that has been rarely addressed in the critical literature to date. Frequently impressed by the conceptual resonance of the language he employs, at times anxious about how his ideas would likely be heard and received within the discipline of theology, but always sensing that new intellectual vistas were opening up before my eyes—these were the feelings that have accompanied me as I have proceeded with my work. The prospect of completing this study has been a source of regret, not one of relief. But I anticipate many happy days to come engaging with Latour’s writing, of which I hope (and am assured by the author himself) that there will be much more to follow.

I am grateful to my supervisor, Professor Graham Ward, for his careful and expert guidance at every stage of my doctoral studies. I particularly appreciated his patience as I returned to the project after two lengthy periods of full-time paternity leave that interrupted my progress. I have profited from the comments of Dr Terence Blake, Mr Peter Gent, Dr John Reader and Professor Michael Flower throughout. I have frequently been in contact with the *médialab* team at Sciences Po, Paris, who have been responsible for many of the digital initiatives associated with Latour’s work. A particular word of thanks is owed to Dr Christophe Leclercq, with whom I have shared many conversations over the last three years working out translations of Latour’s work into English and back into French. I have also appreciated those who have offered their time as internal and external examiners at various stages of the project, including Professor Johannes Zachhuber (twice), Dr Laura Rival, Dr Stephen Mulhall, Rev’d Dr James Hanvey, SJ and Professor John Milbank.

I am very grateful to my wife, Sarah, for her ongoing support throughout the project. This study is dedicated to our two children, Thea and William. May they too seek to work out their theologies in the midst of the plural world.

Finally, I wish to offer my thanks to Professor Bruno Latour himself. I was contacted by Latour early on in my project in response to some comments on his work I had posted on an online forum. He was delighted to hear that somebody was finally working on this aspect of his thought. We met in London in October 2014 for a lengthy interview, a transcript of which I have included as Appendix to this study. I suspect he could not have been very impressed by the nervous young researcher he encountered that day, especially when I suggested we might visit a high-street coffee shop after the interview—surely this was sacrilege for a coffee connoisseur like himself! Since then, however, we’ve conversed and exchanged ideas on numerous occasions, both online and in personal meetings. I’ve acted as translator for a number of his articles. I’m also grateful that he has provided me with access to materials that are not yet available in the public domain. His willingness to engage with me has been a source of inspiration throughout. I will end, then, by echoing the words of one

of his former doctoral students at the *École des Mines* in Paris: “*Bruno Latour, il fait des ravages*”.¹ The phrase can be translated as “one who causes disruption”. But it is used more colloquially to indicate one who is “charming or seductive” in manner—a “heartbreaker”, we might say. That student’s testimony has most certainly been my own: Latour’s work has caused disruption to the worldview I possessed when I first embarked upon this study, but it has done so in a most exhilarating and enthralling way.

¹ Tollis, Créton-Cazanave & Aublet (eds.) (2014), *L’effect Latour: ses modes d’existence dans les travaux doctoraux*, p.213.

LIST OF FIGURES

| | | |
|----------|---|-----|
| Figure 1 | Representation of the political epistemology of modernity . . . | 100 |
| Figure 2 | Representation of “the crossed-out God” of modernity . . . | 127 |
| Figure 3 | Copy of a sketch originally published in <i>Laboratory Life</i> . . . | 156 |
| Figure 4 | Representation of the motif of progress within modernity . . . | 165 |
| Figure 5 | Representation of the motif of the globe within modernity . . . | 174 |

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INTRODUCTION

To what genre or disciplinary field does the work of Bruno Latour belong? The answer to this question is not intuitive. After all, as the author himself concedes, “I have written on various topics and that makes my work hard to locate”.² Latour often describes himself as a sociologist.³ And it is true that his work has frequently been taken up and addressed within that field.⁴ But the word anthropology appears in the titles of two of his most widely-cited books,⁵ and Latour himself even claims that he was “converted to anthropology” as early as 1973, before he had published anything, whilst engaged on a research project in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire.⁶ Upon closer examination of his published corpus, other disciplinary affiliations come to light. A number of his books declare themselves to be studies on the *modus operandi* of laboratory science.⁷ There’s a long book on the subject of law.⁸ There’s a shorter, co-authored book in the field of economic anthropology.⁹ There’s even one whose title might identify it as a travel guide to the city of Paris.¹⁰ In addition, in a recent

² Latour (2010), *COAP*, p.600. See also Latour, with Paulson (2018), *CZSP*, question 16. For the method I have adopted for referencing and citation, including abbreviations of Latour’s works, see Bibliography.

³ Latour (2010), *NSS*, p.10.

⁴ For a survey of the reception of Latour’s work within the field of sociology, see Restivo (2011a), ‘Bruno Latour: The Once and Future Philosopher’.

⁵ Latour (1993, 1992), *WNM*; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*.

⁶ Latour (2014), *ATA*, p.15; see also Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.460.

⁷ For representative texts, see Latour & Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*; Latour (1987), *SA*; Latour (1993, 1984), *PF*; Latour (1993), fr. *CB*; Latour (1999), *PH*; Latour (2010), fr. *CSL*.

⁸ Latour (2010, 2002), *ML*.

⁹ Latour, with Lépinay (2009), *SPI*.

¹⁰ Latour, with Hermant (2008), *PVI*.

interview conducted in French Latour made the strong claim that his work as a whole should be considered as belonging to the genre of philosophy and that he himself is best understood as a philosopher—albeit he immediately sought to clarify what this might mean in his case: “*en fait, moi je suis un philosophe, mais je suis un philosophe qui utilise les méthodes empiriques*”.¹¹ As one commentator has noted, there are “many faces” to Bruno Latour.¹² And this presents a challenge to the critic seeking to engage with his work.

But nowhere does Latour identify as an explicitly theological writer. Given the various affiliations to which he does lay claim, this omission would seem *prima facie* to be significant. Nor can it be said that those working within the discipline of theology have yet shown interest in importing Latour’s work into their field. This point should not be overstated. There are a few articles that attempt to trace the theme of religion in his writing.¹³ There is one book-length treatment published in 2013, although this is relatively short and does not engage with the most up-to-date work Latour has published.¹⁴ Some valuable and interesting discussion has taken place on social media and on other online forums. There have even been attempts to utilise

¹¹ My trans. “actually, I am a philosopher, but I am a philosopher who makes use of empirical methods” in Latour (2008), fr. *PEM*, p.5. For related statements, see Latour (2010), *COAP*, p.600; Latour (2010, 2002), *ML*, p.x; Latour (2013), *AWCW*, p.1.

¹² Schmidgen (2015), *Bruno Latour in Pieces: An Intellectual Biography*, p.1.

¹³ See for example Holbraad (2004), ‘Response to Bruno Latour’s *Thou Shalt not Freeze-Frame*’; Heinich (2007), ‘Une sociologie très catholique? À propos de Bruno Latour’; Golinski (2010), ‘Science and Religion in Postmodern Perspective: The Case of Bruno Latour’; Skirbekk (2015), ‘Bruno Latour’s Anthropology of the Moderns: A Reply to Maniglier’; Bordeleau (2015), ‘Bruno Latour and the Miraculous Present of Enunciation’; Herrnstein Smith (2016), ‘Anthropotheology: Latour Speaking Religiously’.

¹⁴ Miller (2013), *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Orientated Theology*.

concepts found elsewhere in his work for the articulation of theological arguments,¹⁵ or as analytical tools in the study of world religions.¹⁶ But his name is entirely absent from an otherwise excellent recent study of the “return of religion” in French intellectual life.¹⁷ Nor does he receive mention in a volume exploring how “the theme of religion is continuing to colour the Continental philosophical idiom”, a volume whose breadth extends to thinkers as different as Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray and Alain Badiou.¹⁸ In general, then, it is safe to say that there has been minimal interest in tracing the theme of religion in Latour’s writing. And there has been virtually no attempt to consider him in a systematic way as contributing something original or valuable to the discipline of theology.¹⁹

And yet, upon closer examination of Latour’s work a more nuanced picture begins to emerge. To begin at the most important place, namely, his recent magnum opus entitled *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, it can be observed that Latour specifies religion as one of fifteen “modes of existence” that he believes can be justified as “rational”, devoting a whole chapter to its

¹⁵ See for example Oliver (1999), ‘The Eucharist before Nature and Culture’; Geraci (2005), ‘Signaling Static: Artistic, Religious and Scientific Truths in a Relational Ontology’; Caputo (2013), *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, pp.200–209.

¹⁶ See for example Seng-Guan (2016), ‘Religious Praxis, Modernity and Non-modernity in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’.

¹⁷ McCaffery (2009), *The Return of Religion in France: From Democratisation to Postmetaphysics*.

¹⁸ Dickinson (ed.) (2013), *The Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring ‘the Holy’ in Contemporary French Philosophy*, p.8.

¹⁹ Even in the critical literature that does engage with Latour’s writing on religion, there is general agreement on this point, for which see Golinski (2010), ‘Science and Religion’, p.51; Herrnstein Smith (2016), ‘Anthropotheology’, p.331.

description.²⁰ A year after the *Inquiry* was published Latour was invited to deliver the *Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology* at the University of Edinburgh,²¹ which were subsequently written up in French with significant additions and published under the title *Face à Gaïa: huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*.²² A deeper foray reveals that there are a number of texts, both books and articles, in which Latour addresses religion as a central concern and that these are spread in a fairly uniform distribution from the early stage of his career right up to the present day.²³ One of these, translated into English as *Rejoicing, or the Torments of Religious Speech*, identifies itself as nothing less than the author's personal spiritual manifesto.²⁴ References to religion can be found in various interviews Latour has conducted from the late 1980s onwards, although some of these are only available in French. There are newspaper articles and book reviews in which he addresses the theme. These can now be supplemented by an extended personal interview I conducted with him in October 2014 in London where the topic of religion was discussed at length. A transcript of that interview is appended to the end of this thesis and constitutes an important piece of primary source material that will be frequently cited in my study.²⁵ Finally, and most intriguingly, Latour's first piece of academic work, his doctoral thesis, incorporates religious themes, including a substantial focus

²⁰ See Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, chapter 11, 'Welcoming the Beings Sensitive to the Word', pp.296–325.

²¹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lectures 1–6.

²² Latour (2015), fr. *FG*. At the time of writing, this book has not yet been translated into English. However, I have had some involvement with the translation project, which is due to be published in late 2018.

²³ See below, pp.197 ff.

²⁴ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*.

²⁵ Appendix, pp.365–374.

on the German theologian and New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Latour claims that from the beginning his concern has been to work out what he calls “the conditions for religious truth production”, alongside those of other domains of knowledge, all of which he believes have become misrepresented in some way within the contemporary world:

Truth production in science, religion, law, politics, technology, economics, and so on is what I have been studying over the years in my program to advance toward an anthropology of modernity.²⁶

To engage with Latour on the theme of religion, then, is by no means to impose upon him a category or a framework that is alien to his stated intentions.

There is evidently a disjunction here. On the one hand, the theme of religion is prominent in Latour’s writing. And yet, on the other hand, this theme finds itself under-represented and under-appreciated in the critical literature. Where it has been addressed, Latour complains that he has been misunderstood.²⁷ My awareness of this disjunction provided the initial impetus for the study that follows. In reaction, I propose to offer the first full critical engagement with Latour’s writing on religion and thus with Latour as a potential contributor to the discipline of theology.

Before defining my research question more fully, it will be useful to ask some further questions about this situation. What is the significance of the various references to religion that can be traced in Latour’s work? If these are taken as indicating a broader interest on his part in the theme of religion, how should this interest be understood? Is he merely being responsive or pragmatic to his context,

²⁶ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.28.

²⁷ Latour (2010), *COAP*, p.600.

especially considering recent debates that have raged in France regarding the status of *laïcité* as a norm of public life? Or is it possible to say that religion plays a more fundamental role than this, perhaps even providing a structural principle for his intellectual project as a whole? Even if this is the case, to what extent can his work sustain an explicitly theological treatment? In brief, two possible responses can be offered to such questions. I will consider these now in turn. I will then argue that the second response, rather than the first, provides a foundation on which to proceed.

The first response is framed in terms of autobiography. “I am a professing Roman Catholic”, Latour announces.²⁸ References to worship and prayer abound in his writing. And he makes no secret of the crucial significance of faith as a component of his intellectual development and as a contributor to his mature philosophical worldview. Hence, the references to religion that are found in his writing might be supposed to be transcriptions of his personal religious life. Although this may designate Latour as being different from many of his colleagues in contemporary Parisian intellectual life, it is an unremarkable observation in itself. Properly speaking, it should be irrelevant to critical analysis of his writing. But it is important to note this because it seems to be a reason for the habitual chariness displayed by a number of critics towards addressing the theme of religion in his work. For example, Golinski suggests that “in off-hand remarks some of Latour’s colleagues have expressed the suspicion that his personal Catholicism constitutes a hidden agenda for his work”.²⁹ Golinski claims this has had a detrimental effect upon the reception of his work in an Anglophone context in particular:

²⁸ Latour, with Paulson (2018), *CZSP*, question 18. See also Appendix, p.365.

²⁹ Golinski (2010), ‘Science and Religion’, p.51.

The subject of Latour's religion seems to be surrounded by embarrassment in the English-speaking world, where his passing remarks about praying or attending church on Sundays could almost have been calculated to evoke Anglo-Saxon suspicions of continental Catholicism.³⁰

The implication is that the theme of religion, wherever it appears in Latour's work, can be written off as a superficial adjunct to what is otherwise central. The autobiographical explanation thus slips easily into derogation.

This first response—the autobiographical explanation for the presence of the theme of religion in Latour's writing—should not be dismissed lightly. It identifies something important. For the core agenda of Latour's intellectual project is found in its resistance to ontological reductionism. That is to say, he seeks to diagnose and challenge descriptions of the world that abridge or curtail the presence of the multitude of beings, both human and nonhuman, who actually inhabit the world, and whose activity within complex networks and assemblages determines its meaning and structure. He refers to these as “actors”.³¹ For Latour, it is only when an attempt is made to represent these complex agency-configurations that a rational account of the world can be provided. Ontological reductionism therefore occurs whenever the voices and interests of actors are deferred to a higher-level principle that purports to explain them univocally. Latour often refers to this as constituting the “premature unification” of the local by the non-local.³² Elsewhere, making use of theological language, he

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ For an introduction to Latour's understanding of the concept of “actors”, see Latour, with Callon (1981), *UBL*.

³² This phrase, or the closely-related one: “premature closure”, occurs frequently in Latour's work, see for example Latour (2005), *RS*, p.118 ff.; Latour (2004), *PN*, p.233; Latour (2015), *GGT*, p.13.

refers to it as an instance of “bad transcendence”³³ or “spurious transcendence”.³⁴ Whichever term he employs, Latour claims that ontological reductionism is the defining feature of what he calls “modernity” and that it is characteristic of all people who claim to be “modern” in their ideology and outlook.³⁵ By resisting ontological reductionism, Latour seeks to provide an account of the world that derives from careful representation of the activity of the plural beings who are operational in the realm of immanence. By means of a reading of the work of Carl Schmitt, I will describe these processes as being “political” in nature.³⁶ The construction of human society on the basis of these processes would constitute a “politics” in this sense of the word.

Hence, there is an important kernel of truth in the autobiographical explanation described above. For if it is indeed the case that a personal religious commitment is being imported into his work from the outside, whether in the form of protectionism (the granting of epistemological immunity to the transcendent claims of religion) or in the form of conformism (the accommodation of his intellectual project to a pre-constituted doctrinal or dogmatic system), then this would be an example of the “bad transcendence” noted above, which would be in contravention of Latour’s own methodology and intellectual commitments. This concern has been articulated by one of his most sympathetic readers and ardent supporters, namely, Donna Haraway, who

³³ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.462, and various places.

³⁴ Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.470.

³⁵ The concept of “modernity” will be crucial in this study. I will take care to define precisely what Latour means when he uses this term, since it does not map straightforwardly onto what contemporary intellectual historians, social scientists or historians of religion mean when they refer to the same concept.

³⁶ See below, pp.79–90.

argued at a Cerisy conference in 2013 that there exists a vexed relationship between Latour's work and "the Christian tradition, with its world-making modes of narration".³⁷ Haraway's comment implies that Latour's personal Catholic faith might be problematic for his intellectual project understood as a whole, since the claims of revealed religion must by definition have some connection with a metaphysics that his methodology has already banished and eliminated from view. Other critics have made similar observations.³⁸

Having conceded that something important is at stake, I nevertheless wish to argue that, in terms of its close engagement with Latour's texts and its assimilation of the systematic categories of his thought, this explanation is naïve and simplistic. Latour's writing on religion is not merely a covert justification for his own faith affiliation. Latour made this clear to me in the personal interview we conducted in London in 2014, when he declared that he was not interested in the "comparative" evaluation of the truth-claims of different world religions, as if one form of institutional religion might be justified as superior to another on the basis of revealed truth.³⁹ In fact, I would suggest that this autobiographical explanation actually disregards what Latour himself says about religion and how he attempts to reconfigure it relative to the category of transcendence in new and innovative ways.

In this study I wish to move beyond that explanation in such a way as to open up a new channel for engagement with Latour's work within the discipline of

³⁷ This exchange occurred at the *Colloque* held at Cerisy-la-Salle in July 2013 as reported in Bordeleau (2015), 'The Miraculous Present of Enunciation', p.157.

³⁸ See Heinich (2007), 'Une sociologie très catholique?', p.27; Skirbekk (2015), 'A Reply to Maniglier', p.45.

³⁹ Appendix, p.371.

theology. To do so, I will propose a second response to the questions raised above, one that I believe is faithful to Latour's intention in deploying this theme within his writing, but that has not yet been properly considered or well-understood within the critical literature. This second response effectively inverts the first. Rather than supposing that his references to religion are retrofitted autobiographical insertions, motivated by loyalty to the Catholic magisterium, I will argue that what primarily characterises Latour's work is its thoroughgoing scepticism about the institutions of religion as suitable vehicles for the transmission and preservation of what is truly distinct about religion. Latour's writing on religion does not begin with a metaphysical system of any sort, certainly not one that is associated with the dogmatics of a particular world religion. Instead, he proposes an understanding of religion as that which derives from the compositional activity of different actors. Rather than beginning with a pre-constituted dogmatic or doctrinal system, then, he begins with the immanent situation "on the ground". And since the agency-configurations he is interested in tracing entail complex, unpredictable and aggregate effects, it follows that his understanding of religion is closely associated with ideas of process and contingency. To clarify this, Latour often refers to a distinction between religion as "substance" and religion as "subsistence".⁴⁰ To understand religion as a subsistent phenomenon is to understand it as a mode of rationality that is held in place from below. Alternatively, he refers to the difference between a nominal and an adverbial definition of religion, which is the difference between religion as something already given (a noun form) and religion as something that is progressively composed and mediated by different actors (an adverbial form). "As you can see", he writes, "my

⁴⁰ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, see p.299.

purpose is not to talk *about* religion, but to talk to you *religiously*, at least religiously enough so that we can begin to analyze the conditions of felicity of such a speech act”.⁴¹

Adopting this second explanation for the presence of the theme of religion in Latour’s work has a number of advantages. It circumvents the dismissive or alarmist reactions reported above. It enables proper attention to be paid to the language and concepts he actually employs in his writing, avoiding the need to write off or explain away the theme wherever it occurs. But most significantly, it launches the research question I wish to pursue in this study: what are the implications of Latour’s understanding of religion for the discipline of theology?⁴² My intention is to use the former as a means of challenging, enriching and even recalibrating the latter in new and productive ways.

In broad terms, I will argue that the encounter of Latour’s writing on religion with the discipline of theology will facilitate two major insights.

First, I will argue that it provides a foundation for a fully theological critique of modes of thought and behaviour that are prevalent within modernity. Latour shows how, contrary to its claim to be neutral with regard to human ideology and belief, and to be emancipated from any kind of religious particularism or confessionality, modernity actually takes the form of a covert religion or religiosity. As a consequence, modernity causes the public realm itself to become de-politicized: the actors who

⁴¹ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.28, original emphasis.

⁴² The benefit of phrasing the question in this way is that it indicates a difference between Latour’s own terminology, which always refers to the phenomenon of “religion” (or more precisely, as I will show, to the phenomenon of “religion as a mode of existence”), and theology understood as a discipline.

occupy that space are unable to express their own voices and interests in the context of the whole, but are made subservient to a providential force that is above and beyond them, and that they can do nothing to influence or change. It follows, then, that some of the most cherished values of contemporary western society can be examined and exposed in theological terms.

But Latour's writing offers more than merely tools for critique. For second, I will show how he also proposes a positive re-imagining or re-conceptualisation of religion as that which stays within the realm of immanence, moderating and alleviating the de-politicizing effect of modernity described above. Latour envisages religion as being able to facilitate a space in which the voices and interests of all actors can be properly accounted for and represented in the context of the whole, offering up the hope of a new political imaginary. His writing therefore makes it possible to conceive of theology as a resource that is uniquely equipped to project alternative futures for human society and to unleash a form of political energy able to bring them about. There is no doubt that any attempt to synthesize the two represents a delicate and even a risky endeavour. Latour requires the theological category of transcendence to be brought into close proximity with a definition of religion framed exclusively in terms of immanence. To what extent is this viable? In recent years, there have been a number of attempts to construct what might be called "a theology without metaphysics".⁴³ All such theologies are vulnerable to the criticism that an interest in the "relational" (the immanent) is privileged over a commitment to the "apophatic" (the transcendent), the implication being that this risks diluting what is distinctive

⁴³ The phrase is borrowed from Hector (2011), *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*.

about theology itself.⁴⁴ This concern lies behind another comment about the reception of Latour's writing, once again reported by Golinski, which expresses concern that "those who hold certain theological doctrines as central to their faith will see Latour's analysis as another version of the human sciences' attempt to explain religion—and thereby to explain it away".⁴⁵ Would the importation of Latour's ideas into theology result in the deconstruction of theology itself? I will argue to the contrary. My proposal is that the encounter will be a generative and enriching one, clarifying the distinctive voice of theology in the mist of the contemporary public realm and equipping it to contribute something new to important debates facing global human society at this time.

To describe what will ensue from this encounter, I will refer to the concept of "political theology". This is a term that Latour himself has begun to use in some of his recent texts. He deploys the term in a non-conventional way, largely preferring to ignore debates about its meaning and significance that have taken place in various disciplinary areas in recent decades.⁴⁶ Latour uses the term to refer to the way in which religion can be conceived as safeguarding and nurturing a space in which the agency-configurations of plural actors can be represented in the context of a greater whole. These are precisely the processes I described above as being political in nature. Latour envisages his political theology as being an antidote to the "bad transcendences" he sees proliferating in modern society and as a force able to unleash

⁴⁴ For a description of these terms and their deployment in contemporary theological debates, especially those between Richard Kearney and Catherine Keller, see Reader (2017), *Theology and New Materialism: Spaces of Faithful Dissent*, p.21 ff.

⁴⁵ Golinski (2010), 'Science and Religion', p.59.

⁴⁶ For a general introduction to these debates, see Kirwan (2009), *Political Theology: An Introduction*.

new modes of human flourishing in the world. Therefore, the aim of my study will be to explore how Latour's writing on religion can be developed into a political theology of this kind and, having done so, to consider how this might contribute to plotting a trajectory for global humanity different to the one imposed upon it by modernity.

The structure of my study will be as follows. I will begin with a brief *avant-propos*. This will consider Latour's upbringing and early formation in the context of his family's wine business in the Burgundy region of France. The *avant-propos* sits outside the main flow of my argument and is thus descriptive, rather than evaluative, in tone. It is intended to provide an orientation to the key themes of Latour's intellectual project as a whole.

My study will then proceed in four chapters. In chapter one, I will examine one core theme of Latour's writing, which relates to his understanding of rationality and the rational. For Latour, rationality is not determined by the vertical correspondence of a statement with a realm of pure Being, in relation to which the meaning or truth of that statement might be judged as accurate or objective. On the contrary, rationality is a function of what he calls a "network topology".⁴⁷ By this phrase, and others like it, he is seeking to describe an ontology in which different actors combine and associate, each of them according to their own being and yet relative to one another, in such a way that through their agency-configurations something greater than themselves is constructed and held together in space and in time. Latour thus defines rationality as ontology. Rationality must be thought of as

⁴⁷ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.3.

“the provisional achievement of a composite assemblage”.⁴⁸ Or, to put it another way, a rational insight into any situation is warranted only insofar as the myriad constituent parts of that situation are taken into account and assimilated. In order to evaluate Latour’s thought here, I will propose two terms of my own as a kind of conceptual scaffolding. The first is the term ‘meta-logic’: this is intended to describe a mode of rationality that abridges or curtails ontology by deferring to a higher level of meaning whose connection with immanence is severed. This is the characteristic logic of modernity. The second term is ‘logistics’: this is intended to describe a mode of rationality that arises out of and is accountable to the material and historical conditions of its own production. This is the definition of rationality that Latour seeks to incorporate *contra* modernity.

It will be observed that Latour’s writing on religion is not addressed at length in this chapter. Nonetheless, the connection of rationality with ontology is a crucial one to grasp in the context of my study, for I will go on to show how both meta-logic and logistics are under-written by religious thematics. This chapter therefore serves as a propaedeutic for the arguments I will develop in subsequent chapters.

In chapter two, I will focus on the idea of rationality as meta-logic. I will argue that the structure of meta-logic can be identified in modes of thought and behaviour that are prevalent within modernity. Since meta-logic entails making an appeal to transcendence, before immanentizing it as a standard or rule that holds true for all, I will propose that modernity can be understood as a form of covert religion or religiosity. Borrowing a term from the work of German-American theorist Eric

⁴⁸ Latour (2005), *RS*, p.208.

Voegelin, I will suggest that modernity becomes a vehicle for various “political religions”, whose mode of operation is to de-politicize the contemporary public space and the complex and contingent agency-configurations that take place within it. Modernity is therefore in contravention of its own foundational claims to be secular. In order to develop my argument in this chapter, I will offer a close textual analysis of Latour’s own writing and, in particular, a concept that has been largely overlooked in studies of his work, namely, “the crossed-out God of the moderns, relegated to the side-lines”. I will then broaden out my focus to examine how this might be applied to some of the values and motifs that are espoused within contemporary western society.

At this point, I will transition to the second major insight I have argued will accrue from an encounter of Latour’s thought with theology, namely, Latour’s positive re-imagining or re-conceptualisation of religion as that which is able to foster a new form of political imaginary. To aid this transition, I will insert a brief section that is intended to serve as a bridge. I will introduce the term political theology, showing where it has begun to appear in Latour’s work and why this is significant.

In chapter three, I will provide an analysis of Latour’s political theology. To do so, it will be necessary to consider the definition of religion he proposes as an ingredient of this political theology. Latour calls this “religion as a mode of existence”. I will describe and evaluate the context in which Latour proposes this term, how it relates to the idea of rationality as logistics, and how it might build on themes found elsewhere in contemporary Christian theology. I will argue that Latour provides an account of religion not in terms of the preservation and transmission in time of fixed and static dogma, but rather in terms of its ability to take up a past event or experience by means of a differentiating repetition that is faithful to its original

meaning, whilst simultaneously re-stating or re-pristinating it for use in the contemporary moment. It is on this basis that religion is envisaged as nurturing the ethical comportment of “care” and “attention” to the plural ontological situation that actually pertains in the world, which in turn is the basis for new forms of political awareness and activity. Crucial to my argument in this chapter will be an attempt to address a wide range of published and unpublished texts from Latour’s corpus. By doing so, I intend to demonstrate that Latour’s understanding of religion has been relatively consistent from the earliest days right up to the present.

In chapter four, I will relate Latour’s political theology to our contemporary context and, in particular, to debates currently underway in the humanities and social sciences concerning the idea of “the Anthropocene”. This concept is important to Latour because it frames important questions about the exercise of human agency in the world. I will argue that Latour provides a political theology of the Anthropocene in at least two regards. First, he interprets the Anthropocene as being a direct product of the covert metaphysics of modernity. His work therefore provides a means of understanding why we are facing this crisis and why some of our proposed initiatives to tackle it are bound to fail, precisely because they duplicate the epistemology of modernity itself. But second, he also treats the Anthropocene as the occasion for humanity to enjoy a different relationship with the natural world than the one that has been inculcated within modernity. For him, the Anthropocene therefore represents the occasion for new modes of thinking about our ontological situation in the world and about the kind of history human beings desire for themselves and for future generations. Religion, now increasingly conceived by Latour in Christian terms, is envisaged not as a force that holds back this political imaginary, but as a force that unleashes it. Latour’s political theology thus compels human beings to confront the

grounded, territorialized reality of our existence on Earth and the responsibility we have as actors within a flow of history that can now be understood as open to an indeterminate future. It is for this reason that Latour's work has relevance to the discipline of theology itself.

At the end of my study, I will sum up my findings and suggest some directions for further research within the discipline of theology.

Latour's writing is complex and wide-ranging. My engagement with his texts has taken place on at least two levels. First, I have attempted to be a responsible exegete of what Latour actually says. There is no doubt that Latour's ideas about religion are dispersed across various works, both published and unpublished. With the possible exception of *The Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, these ideas are not presented in systematic fashion. In addition, Latour continues to publish new work. Larger conclusions about his understanding of religion can only be drawn when this exegetical work has been carried out in the fullest and most methodical manner possible. Second, I have attempted to interpret Latour's writing in relation to various interlocutors. He is continually referring to other writers from a wide-range of disciplinary fields. But the significance of these for his intellectual project as a whole has sometimes not been well understood, often on account of the innovative ways in which he handles them.⁴⁹ Thus, in what follows I will consider Latour's writing on religion in relation to authors as varied as Carl Schmitt (who will be the most

⁴⁹ A number of these will be addressed in forthcoming volume of which I am serving as co-editor, see Howles & Maniglier (eds.), (2019, forthcoming), *Latour's Philosophical Lineage*.

important of all these interlocutors), Marc Augé, Eric Voegelin, Michel Serres, Peter Sloterdijk, Charles Péguy, Rudolf Bultmann, James Lovelock and Pope Francis.

Before proceeding, I would like to offer a brief word about Latour's style. Deriving from his heritage in continental philosophical thought (whose roots I will trace at various points in my study), Latour's writing is characterised by a tendency to re-purpose concepts whose meaning he deems to have become habituated or unexamined in contemporary use. He employs various techniques to do this. Prominent among these is his deployment of analogical resonance and transversal application of familiar words and phrases. Terms as apparently stable as "actor", "nature", "society", "economy", "modernity" and "politics" are subtly reconfigured by Latour even as he deploys them in his writing. This presents a challenge for critical analysis of his work, particularly in an Anglophone context where such techniques are not usually anticipated. In this study, I will attempt to strike a balance. On the one hand, I will avoid uncritical repetition of Latour's style, as this would likely be confusing for the reader new to his work and would elide the critical distance I wish to maintain from it. On the other hand, it will be necessary to make use of some of these terms in what follows, as long as they have been explained and contextualised beforehand. To avoid clutter, I will not mark out these words after they have been introduced and explained for the first time. Particular care should be taken over the terms "politics" and "the political": as I will go on to show, these terms must be understood in an ontological register, since the political activity Latour has in mind is one that is associated with the representation of the being of different actors, both human and nonhuman, in the composition of a larger whole. It is this sense of the word that is in mind as I seek define and justify the "political theology" of Bruno Latour.

AVANT-PROPOS:

LATOUR AND THE VINEYARD

I am from the typical French provincial bourgeoisie, from Burgundy where my family has produced wine for generations, and my only ambition is that people would say “I read a Latour 1992” with the same pleasure as they would say “I drank a Latour 1992”! I have still a long way to go, as you can see.⁵⁰

Latour’s provenance is viticultural. He was born in 1947 in Beaune, the wine capital of Burgundy, into a family of winegrowers. The landscape of the vineyard provided the backdrop to his early life and childhood.⁵¹ It was even envisaged that Latour would later take on a role in the family business, which is located at the *Maison Louis Latour* at Aloxe-Corton in the Bourgogne district.⁵² Of course, that ambition was never realised. But it is perhaps unsurprising that images and metaphors involving wine proliferate in his writing.⁵³

But can a deeper connection between Latour and the vineyard be identified? In a speech celebrating Latour’s intellectual achievement, delivered on the occasion of his reception of the Siegfried Unseld Prize in September 2008, Peter Sloterdijk began by depicting the situation of a young man growing up in Beaune—“*es müsse in dem*

⁵⁰ Latour, with Crawford (1993), *AIBL*, p.249.

⁵¹ For biographical description of Latour’s early life and upbringing, see Harman (2009), *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, p.11 ff.; Blok & Jensen (2012), *Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, pp.5–6; Schmidgen (2015), *Bruno Latour in Pieces: An Intellectual Biography*, pp.9–11; De Vries (2016), *Bruno Latour: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, p.11 ff.

⁵² Latour, with Paulson (2018), *CZSP*, question 23.

⁵³ See for example Latour (2004), *PN*, p.84; Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.463; Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.288. See also Debaise, et al (2015), ‘Reinstituting Nature: A Latourian Workshop’, p.173.

burgundischen Epos eine Szene geben, die von der philosophischen Erleuchtung eines jungen Mannes aus Beaune handelt”—before offering the tantalizing suggestion that Latour’s contribution to philosophy could be summarised by the slogan “*in vinificatione veritas*”.⁵⁴ Sloterdijk is a personal friend of Latour’s and has collaborated with him on various projects. In what sense, then, does he understand Latour’s work as being prefigured by the scenography of the vineyard and by the operations of winegrowing?

Although his comment remains somewhat opaque, I believe Sloterdijk’s intimation was correct. For the idea of winegrowing encodes one of the primary themes of Latour’s work, namely, the relationship between the local and the universal, and the “network topology” that connects one to the other.⁵⁵ Here, I wish to develop that observation briefly. In doing so, I hope to provide a simple conceptual frame that will illuminate the more technical analysis that will follow.

It is the interplay of various factors, including human management, climate, soil, aspect, altitude, grape variety and so on that determines the distinctive appellation of a vineyard and the type of wine it will produce. The procedures and operations of winegrowing are therefore complex and multiple. But for Latour, they can be presented in a simple or even in a schematic way. The process of winegrowing can be understood as an agency-configuration and the various elements contributing to its outcome can be understood as “actors”. It is important to clarify what Latour means by this term. He defines an actor as any entity that exerts an effect on a process

⁵⁴ My trans. “there should be a scene in a Burgundian epic about the philosophical enlightenment of a young man from Beaune” in Sloterdijk (2013), ‘Latour, Ein Philosoph im Exil—oder: *Der Mann, der die Wissenschaften lieb*’, p.231.

⁵⁵ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.3.

relative to other entities.⁵⁶ Thus, in an early essay co-authored with Michel Callon, he offers the following description: “what is an ‘actor’? Any element that bends space around itself, makes other elements dependent upon itself and translates their will into a language of its own”.⁵⁷ An actor might be human or nonhuman, material or immaterial, single or composite.⁵⁸ The only thing that matters is the contribution it makes to a larger outcome. Latour’s entire intellectual project is framed in terms of actors. The early part of his career is strongly identified with the development of ‘Actor-Network Theory’ (ANT).⁵⁹ And when describing the methodology by which his work has proceeded since then, he chooses to re-purpose the Husserlian phenomenological slogan “*zurück zu den Sachen selbst*”, claiming that his chief concern at every point has been “to follow the actors themselves”.⁶⁰ What Latour is indicating here is his commitment to descriptions of the world that can be traced back to the footprints of specific actors, associating with each other and combining in particular ways in order to construct a reality that might be complicated and multi-dimensional, but that is never in excess of the input they themselves have supplied. By inference, this also means that Latour will be suspicious of descriptions that abridge or

⁵⁶ For an overview of Latour’s concept of an “actor”, including alternative terms he employs such as “object”, “actant”, “monad”, “entelechy”, “quasi-object” and “quasi-subject”, see Sayes (2013), ‘Actor–Network Theory and Methodology: Just What Does it Mean to Say that Nonhumans have Agency?’ In recent publications Latour has reflected on his use of the term, proposing instead the French phrase “*puissance d’agir*”, see Latour (2012), fr. *FEFS*, p.4; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.67 ff., which he glosses as “agency”. In what follows, the word “actor” will be preferred, since this is the most consistent usage found within his published texts.

⁵⁷ Latour & Callon (1981), *UBL*, p.286.

⁵⁸ See Barron (2003), ‘A Strong Distinction between Humans and Non-Humans is no longer required for Research Purposes: A Debate between Bruno Latour and Steve Fuller’.

⁵⁹ For Latour’s summary of his understanding of ANT from a retrospective point in his career, see Latour (2005), *RS*.

⁶⁰ Latour (2005), *RS*, p.227.

curtail the footprints of actors and replace them with a general principle or meta-narrative located at a remove from their distinctive activity.

It is because he is so interested in the role of actors that Latour defines his work as being “empirical” in nature.⁶¹ This should not be taken as equivalent to any existing philosophical theory.⁶² By empirical, Latour simply means a mode of enquiry that seeks to uncover the small-scale contributions that different actors make to a holistic or synthetic account of the world. His direction of movement is therefore always from the local to the universal, not the other way around.

Latour offers various explanations for his commitment to an empirical methodology defined in this way. Sometimes he frames it in terms of personal temperament. For example, during a recent speech delivered in Bergen upon his reception of another award, this time the Holberg Prize, he described his disinclination to “conceptuality and systematization” and his appreciation from an early age of “the *difficulties* of thinking, of gathering any piece of data, of convincing anyone of the smallest part of a proof”.⁶³ His *modus operandi* is always to say: “more details, please, I want more details!”⁶⁴ This self-portrait is confirmed by the reports of those who have worked with him in person on research projects from the 1980s up to the present day, some of which were recently published in a collected volume that

⁶¹ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, pp.308, 481.

⁶² Latour (2013), *HP*, p.3. For critical analysis of Latour’s use of the term, see Hämäläinen & Lehtonen (2016), ‘Latour’s Empirical Metaphysics’.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p.2, original emphasis.

⁶⁴ Latour (2005), *RS*, p.137.

provides a fascinating glimpse into his idiosyncratic working processes.⁶⁵ It is clear that Latour is in some way temperamentally disposed to analyse the world around him in meticulous detail and with attention to the provisionality and open-endedness of states of being that purport to be fixed and stable.

But it is equally important to consider intellectual influences. Latour's empirical mode of enquiry owes something to the work of Harold Garfinkel and the techniques of ethnomethodology: in fact, he describes ethnomethodology as equipping him with the tools "to learn from the actors without imposing on them an *a priori* definition of their world-building capacities".⁶⁶ Latour frequently borrows terminology and categories from the system of generative semiotics developed by A. J. Greimas and the Paris School of Semiotics, particularly as mediated through the work of the French semiotician Françoise Bastide, who was a key influence on his early thought.⁶⁷ Although he does not say so explicitly, it also seems likely he is indebted to a reading of Paul Feyerabend on the idea of "making-conscious" our presuppositions by close scrutiny of the "empirical" world.⁶⁸ And most importantly, much of his methodology is informed by a reading of the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde. Little-known in either a Francophone or in an Anglophone context until

⁶⁵ Tollis, Créton-Cazanave & Aublet (eds.) (2014), *L'effect Latour: ses modes d'existence dans les travaux doctoraux*. For a short, imagined, whimsical narrative in which Latour presents his empirical research methodology to a student, see Latour (2005), *RS*, 'On the Difficulty of Being an ANT: An Interlude in the Form of a Dialog', pp.141–156.

⁶⁶ Latour (1999), *ORANT*, p.20, see also Latour (2014), *HBRAT*, pp.4–5. For an introduction to ethnomethodology itself, see Garfinkel (1967), *Studies in Ethnomethodology*.

⁶⁷ For an overview of Greimas and the Paris School of Semiotics, see Perron & Collins (eds.) (1989), *Paris School Semiotics, Volumes I and II*. For the importance of Bastide, see Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.296; Appendix, p.368.

⁶⁸ Feyerabend (1999, 1963), 'How to be a Good Empiricist: A Plea for Tolerance in Matters Epistemological'.

recently, largely on the basis of Latour's re-appropriation of his work,⁶⁹ Tarde held a professorship at the *Collège de France* between 1900 and 1904 (the year of his death) and was among the most prominent critics of Durkheim's sociological method at the turn of the century.⁷⁰ Tarde disputes the Durkheimian idea of the "social fact" as a value or norm that is general over the whole of a given society and that is independent of its individual manifestations.⁷¹ By contrast, he advocates a mode of sociological investigation that would pay close attention to the plethora of actors who constitute and compose social existence: for Tarde, it is only through their agency that values and norms arise in the world. Latour credits Tarde as being the "forefather" of his own work.⁷²

Finally, in addition to these considerations of personal temperament and intellectual influences, a more quotidian and grounded context can also be posited. It was his immersion in his native Burgundian landscape, and in the processes and operations of the vineyard itself, that first inculcated in Latour this passion for tracing

⁶⁹ See Candea (2010a), 'Revisiting Tarde's House', pp.1–24.

⁷⁰ See especially Tarde (2012, 1895), *Monadology and Sociology*. Latour points out that Tarde was involved in a debate with Durkheim that was held at *L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in 1903. A scripted recension of this debate was performed at the *Colloque de Cerisy* in 2007, repeated in Cambridge in 2008, with Latour in the role of Tarde. The script is available to view at < www.bruno-latour.fr/node/434 > (accessed 06 June, 2018), as well as in Candea (ed.) (2010b), 'The Debate: Émile Durkheim and Gabriel Tarde'. For more on this debate and the critique of Durkheim by Tarde, see Karsenti (2010), 'Imitation: Returning to the Tarde-Durkheim Debate'; Toews (2010), 'Tarde and Durkheim: The Non-Sociological Ground of Sociology'.

⁷¹ Durkheim (1982, 1895), *The Rules of Sociological Method*, chapter 1, 'What is a Social Fact?', pp.50–59. For Latour's critique of the Durkheimian notion of the "social fact", see Latour (2014), fr. *FEFS*, p.3 ff.

⁷² Latour (2002), *GTES*, p.117 ff. Latour engages with the legacy of Tarde at various points in his work. See especially Latour (2005), *RS*, p.23 ff.; Latour, with Lépinay (2009), *SPI*; Latour (2010), *TIQ*; Latour (2010), fr. *LSCP*. For a critique of Latour's handling of Tarde's concept of the social, see King (2016), 'Gabriel Tarde and Contemporary Social Theory'.

the empirical movements of actors and their contribution to a synthetic whole that is larger than themselves. This landscape, with its “dense fabric of grapevines, terroirs, rhizobacteria, fermentation processes, the vintner’s art, glass industry and haulage firms, all of which is so typical for the Beaune context”, would have been a constant reminder to the young Latour of the machinery and technology needed to sustain the business of winemaking.⁷³

Notwithstanding his empirical focus, which I have defined in terms of his commitment to tracing the complex and often contingent movements of actors relative to one another, Latour never loses sight of the connection between the local and universal, nor of the possibility that large-scale projects, organisations, concepts and realities can indeed be posited as meaningful and enduring. Once again, this was a lesson learned at the site of the vineyard. For Latour describes his “happy childhood in Beaune” as also confronting him with “the most solid realism”.⁷⁴ What he observed caused him to appreciate that it was precisely through these complex agency-configurations, traceable to a great number of different actors, each of them performing according to their own irreducible being, and combining in delicate and unpredictable ways, that wine is produced. It is here that the originality of Latour’s philosophical contribution becomes apparent. On the one hand, he proposes an account of the world in terms of negotiation, flux and multiplicity—the world as “progressively composed” by its plural constituent parts, as he puts it.⁷⁵ This has enabled him to critique various systems of knowledge that have been bequeathed to

⁷³ Schmidgen (2015), *Bruno Latour in Pieces*, p.10.

⁷⁴ Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.292.

⁷⁵ This phrase occurs frequently in Latour’s work. See for example Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.53; Latour (2014), *SACZ*, pp.1–3; and other places.

him and to his generation, which he denigrates for being metaphysical in their approach to knowledge and discourse: “for about thirty years now, I have found this notion a powerful way of rephrasing basic issues of social theory, epistemology and philosophy”.⁷⁶ In this sense, Latour resides squarely within a continental critical philosophical heritage. And yet, he also contends that his empirical mode of enquiry is in no way incompatible with a commitment to “the most solid realism” and a focus on what constitutes the concrete state of the world we inhabit. I propose that it is the organic connection between these two that is the real innovation of his thought.

Latour contrasts his empirical account of the world with the one that is advocated within modernity. When Latour refers to modernity, he does not have in mind a specific culture or society. Rather, he views modernity as an ideology, or better still as an epistemological regime, that has been present in different iterations and with different degrees of intensity in various times in world history. Modernity overrides or abrogates the empirical trace of actors. It is therefore the engine of the metaphysics he is seeking to critique and overturn. Latour is particularly interested in diagnosing two categories that are prominent, and even ubiquitous, within modernity: “Nature” and “Society”.⁷⁷ Here too, winegrowing serves as a case-study. Can what takes place on the site of a vineyard be accounted for solely in terms of natural processes? Or must it be explained in terms of the agricultural labour and supervision that is supplied by humans and by human social organisation? For Latour, this binary distinction makes no sense. Wine is not produced solely by human management, but neither can we think in terms of a pristine or original state of nature existing prior to

⁷⁶ Latour (2010), *NSS*, p.2.

⁷⁷ For an explanation for the capitalization of these words, see below p.95.

its entanglement with human technologies. The vineyard is a hybrid site. Perhaps this was behind a comment he made in a recent article, where he reminisced about the countryside of his native Burgundy as being neither wholly man-made, nor wholly natural, but as that which is “so *old* and so *artificial* that it was already ancient at the time of the Roman invasion of Gaul”.⁷⁸ Latour’s point is to draw attention to the material history of what takes place on the site of a vineyard, a history that explodes the artificial categories of natural or man-made that are imposed upon it by modernity. As he puts it, to substitute “a unique, specific, varied, multiple and original reality by a simple, banal, homogenous and multipurpose term”, under the pretext that “the latter can explain the former”, is an act of simplification.⁷⁹ It is also an act of hegemony, since to reduce plurality to a monolithic epistemological category like nature or the human is simultaneously to posit the interpreter as sovereign arbitrator of what there is in the world and how it can be accessed as an item of knowledge. Hence, as Latour puts it, “with respect to the Total, there is nothing to do except genuflect before it, or worse, to dream of occupying the place of complete power oneself”.⁸⁰ This verges on theological language: in fact, this is the first hint of Latour’s diagnosis of our contemporary situation as being characterised by ontotheology and by ontotheological assumptions. Even though it claims to be robustly secular in outlook, Latour shows how the ideology of modernity functions in terms of the theological category of transcendence.

⁷⁸ Latour (2015), *FSG*, p.1, original emphasis.

⁷⁹ Latour (2005), *RS*, p.100.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.252.

In this *avant-propos* I have proposed a simple conceptual frame for the analysis that will follow in the four chapters of my study. The procedures and operations of winegrowing show in microcosm the empirical focus that Latour will bring to bear throughout his work. His analysis of religion, too, will proceed on this basis: “the big questions surrounding [...] divine power must also be subjected to experimental resolution”, he insists in *We Have Never Been Modern*.⁸¹ That statement will require a great deal of elaboration. But the context of Latour’s upbringing in the vineyard provides a reminder of the direction of travel: his account of what there is in the world will always proceed from the local to the universal, with an appreciation of the complex processes between actors that take us from the former to the latter, and never the other way around.

⁸¹ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.22.

CHAPTER ONE

RATIONALITY AS ONTOLOGY

Introduction

In his recently-published work, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, Latour summarises the research question that has determined his entire intellectual project. “All my efforts”, he writes, “have been directed at preparing us to grasp the *logos*”.⁸² What does he mean when he refers to the *logos*? For now, I propose that this word can be taken in its most general sense as describing how a statement about the world can be warranted as meaningful or true. At the heart of Latour’s work, then, is an evaluation of the constitution of rationality itself.

In this chapter I will argue that Latour advances a definition of rationality in terms of ontology. I have already prepared the ground for this in the previous section by introducing his commitment to (what he calls) an empirical mode of enquiry that addresses the contributions made by individual actors to a greater whole. Now, I wish to demonstrate how Latour applies that same principle for an analysis of the nature and function of rationality itself. For Latour, a statement about the world is rational to the extent that it remains accountable to the plural ontological scenography out of which it has arisen. When this connection is weakened or obscured, rationality itself diminishes. A number of questions immediately present themselves. How does this definition of rationality correlate to the ways in which people functionally operate in the world? Does this definition apply equally to different domains of human knowledge, such as science, law, politics and even religion? If, as Latour proposes, contemporary western society is largely characterised by its disregard for rationality defined in this way, then what is the reason for this? And what kind of prescription

⁸² Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.286.

might be offered for its reinstatement?

In order to engage with these questions I will introduce two terms. These are intended to serve as a conceptual scaffolding for the argument I will advance in this chapter. The first is ‘logistics’. This word describes the organisation and transportation of resources, to the end of achieving a desired effect or result, by means of the marshalling and deployment of different actors and processes.⁸³ Although it is not a word that Latour himself employs systematically in his work,⁸⁴ I will use it to articulate his understanding of rationality as something that is negotiated, transmitted and even composed in space and time by and through different actors. As Latour puts it, “the relations of actors define reason itself”.⁸⁵ To describe rationality as a logistics is therefore to describe it in terms of an ontology of actors and events.

The second term I wish to introduce is the composite word ‘meta-logic’. This word is intended to contrast with the word logistics. I will use it to describe a statement about the world that short-cuts or elides the logistical processes referred to above. An account of reality framed in terms of meta-logic presents itself as authoritative, and even as indisputable, by dint of its supposed correspondence with a

⁸³ The etymology of the word ‘logistics’ is often traced to the Greek ‘*λογιστικός*’, meaning “skilled or practised in calculating”, for which see Cowen (2013), ‘Logistics’. The word is well-attested in Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes Laertius, Xenophon, Plutarch and Strabo. It is likely to have developed in a Hellenistic military context to describe the flow of arms, ammunition and other goods that was required in order to enable an army’s efficient operation in the field.

⁸⁴ He employs the word briefly in Latour (2000), *OPE*, p.250; Latour, with Yaneva (2008), fr. *DMF*, p.81; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.404. I have not been able to trace any additional occurrences. Graham Harman makes the claim that for Latour “logic is a logistics” in Harman (2009), ‘A Dialogue between Graham Harman and Tristan Garcia’, p.26; however, he does not develop the insight beyond this single reference.

⁸⁵ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.156.

logic of cause-and-effect that is law-like and predictable. But this is only possible because it has first extracted itself from the contingent reality of the empirical world itself. Meta-logic thus consists in “the evocation of [...] another transcendental world” that is located above or beyond this one.⁸⁶ As a result, meta-logic can function as vehicle of subjection, oppression and hegemony, since it can be wielded as an instrument by those who wish to claim that their account of reality is superior to, or more rational than, another.

It can be seen that these two words, logistics and meta-logic, share an etymological connection with the word *logos*, which was the generic term Latour employed to describe a rational account of the world. But they capture different understandings of how that rationality might be constituted. The term logistics describes an account of the world derived from an ontology of actors and events. By contrast, the term meta-logic describes an account of the world framed by a transcendental guarantor of meaning and truth. As a common thread throughout all his work, Latour diagnoses how and why contemporary human experience of the world is largely structured according to meta-logic. But he also maps out a route by which we might return to a conception of rationality understood in logistical terms.

The objective of this chapter is to describe and evaluate Latour’s understanding of rationality by means of this conceptual scaffolding. It will be observed that his writing on religion is only tangentially addressed. This is intentional. As I will show in subsequent chapters, Latour’s intended destination is to

⁸⁶ Latour (1993, 1984), *PF*, ‘Interlude VII’, p.215.

present an account of religion as a fully “rational” phenomenon.⁸⁷ That is to say, he will propose a definition of religion in terms of logistics, rather than in terms of meta-logic. Before considering his explicit writing on religion, and before any attempt to evaluate its relevance for Christian theology, we must therefore understand how Latour defines the constitution of rationality itself. In this way, chapter one serves as a propaedeutic for the argument that is to follow in the remainder of my study.

Chapter Summary

The chapter will proceed in two sections. In the first section, I will provide a genealogical, conceptual and contextual analysis of Latour’s definition of rationality, which I will frame in terms of its association with a pluralist ontology [1.1]. In the second section, I will map Latour’s definition of rationality onto an analysis of the contemporary situation of western secular societies [1.2].

I will begin the first section by considering a research project Latour conducted in a scientific laboratory in California in the mid to late 1970s [1.1.1]. This will provide a point-of-entry to evaluate how and why he diverged from the prevailing intellectual consensus of the time in order to develop a new account of what constitutes scientific objectivity. Having provided this genealogical account, I will then define what he means in conceptual terms [1.1.2]. This will require the introduction and explanation of a number of technical terms. I will deploy this conceptual framework in order to rebut a critique of Latour’s work that has frequently surfaced in the critical literature, which centres on the charge of “antagonism”. Instead, I will introduce the alternative idea of “agonism” as a means

⁸⁷ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.68.

of describing how Latour's ontology functions. Finally, I will bring this conceptual framework into dialogue with two twentieth-century thinkers who have served as important interlocutors for him [1.1.3]. The first of these is Gilles Deleuze. The second is Carl Schmitt. Latour has engaged with both of these in his work, although the implications of that engagement are sometimes left unspecified and perhaps remain unclear even to Latour himself. I will focus in particular on Schmitt. By means of a new reading of his work, I will propose Schmitt's concept of the political as a means of clarifying what Latour means when he refers to rationality as a logistical process. This word will be important as I will use it to illustrate what Latour means when he refers to his political theology.

In the second section, I will apply Latour's understanding of rationality to the concrete situation of contemporary western society. I will refer to two terms that will be familiar to readers of Latour's work, namely, "modernity" and "nonmodernity". Latour uses these terms to describe alternative forms or structures of human existence. Linking to my previous analysis, I will argue that he intends them to reflect one or the other of the contrasting definitions of rationality considered above. I will begin with the concept of modernity, showing how this is best understood as a description of human society structured according to meta-logic [1.2.1]. I will offer detailed exegesis of a number of Latour's texts in order to justify this argument. I will then develop the implications of Latour's conceptualisation of modernity for a historical reconstruction or aetiology of contemporary western society [1.2.2]. Latour's concept of modernity provides a vehicle to analyse contemporary western society in a more nuanced fashion than the concept of "modernity" (as it has been developed elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences) has hitherto permitted. Finally, I will consider what Latour means when he refers to nonmodernity [1.2.3]. I

will argue that this must be understood as his positive description of a society whose rationality would be structured as a logistics, rather than as meta-logic. This will bring my study up to the present day, for nonmodernity is the primary theme of Latour's recent magnum opus: *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*.⁸⁸ For Latour, as I will show, religion is a phenomenon that must arise out of the pluralist ontology that is encoded by this concept of nonmodernity. I will therefore conclude by showing how this chapter will lead into the chapters that follow, which deal with Latour's writing on religion more explicitly.

1.1 Rationality and its Relation to Ontology

1.1.1 Latour's Early Epistemology of Science

How did Latour arrive at his understanding of rationality and the rational? And how did he articulate and develop this understanding over time? In this part of my study, I would like to address these questions genealogically. To do so, I will focus on an experience or encounter that took place early in Latour's career. My claim will be that this established an intellectual trajectory that he would continue to trace out in his later work.

In October 1975, having recently completed his doctoral studies at the Universities of Dijon and Tours, and embarking upon his first project as a junior career researcher, Latour arrived at the *Salk Institute for Biological Studies* in La Jolla, California. The *Salk Institute*, which is located on the outskirts of San Diego, is a scientific facility comprising a number of independent laboratory groups. At that

⁸⁸ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*.

time, these groups were working primarily in the fields of molecular and cell biology, in neuroscience and in genetics, as well as in various applications of regenerative medicine. Latour, along with some other social scientists, had been commissioned by the United States Department of Education as a Fulbright-Hays scholar to investigate the material practices of the scientists working in this environment. Latour himself was assigned to the bench area supervised by the neuroendocrinologist Roger Guillemin. At that time, Professor Guillemin and his team were engaged in analysing the chemical structure of a hormone called ‘thyrotropin-releasing factor’ (TRF). This had been identified as a research question of great importance and equivalent investigative work was taking place simultaneously in other laboratories in different parts of the world.⁸⁹ Latour’s fieldwork centred on observation and analysis of how the scientists in Guillemin’s laboratory worked upon this research question.

Why do I advocate beginning with this early moment in Latour’s career, one whose subject matter would appear to be far removed from religious thematics? The texts Latour wrote whilst at the laboratory were among his earliest published output. The research project itself was published in 1979 under the title *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, co-authored with the anthropologist Steve Woolgar (who had worked alongside Latour in Guillemin’s laboratory between 1975 and 1977).⁹⁰ The epistemology of science proposed in *Laboratory Life* was then developed in subsequent books *The Pasteurisation of France* (initially published in

⁸⁹ For a description of Guillemin’s work on TRF and its relation to work being carried out in other laboratories around the world, see Wade (1981), *The Noble Duel: Two Scientists’ Twenty-One Year Race to Win the World’s Most Coveted Research Prize*. Guillemin himself would go on to receive the ‘National Medal of Science’ in 1976 and the ‘Nobel Prize for Medicine’ in 1977 for the work he and his team carried out on this paper.

⁹⁰ Latour & Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*.

1984 in French as *Pasteur: Guerre et paix des microbes*) and *Science in Action* (written in English and published in 1987), both of which are crucial to any understanding of Latour's intellectual project, as well as in numerous shorter articles and chapters written during the 1970s and 1980s.⁹¹ These texts were the basis for Latour's subsequent involvement in the inter-disciplinary fields of 'Science and Technology Studies' (known as STS)⁹² and 'Actor-Network Theory' (known as ANT),⁹³ both of which are prominently associated with his name. Latour continues to refer back to the formative significance of the early period of his career in his recent

⁹¹ Latour (1993, 1984), *PF*; Latour (1987), *SA*. For articles written during or immediately following Latour's time in Guillemin's laboratory, see Latour & Fabbri (1977), fr. *RDS*; Latour (1980), *PRRP*. For articles published later, but directly referencing or building upon the experience, see Latour (1983), *GLR*; Latour & Bowker (1987), *BDS*; Latour & Bastide (1986), *WSFF*.

⁹² There is a large secondary literature on STS. For an introduction to the field, with a particular focus on Latour's contribution, see Golinski (1998), *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science*; Doing (2008), 'Give Me a Laboratory and I Will Raise a Discipline: The Past, Present and Future Politics of Laboratory Studies in STS'.

⁹³ There is also a large secondary literature on ANT. The best place to start would be Latour's own introduction to the field in a work entitled *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, see Latour (2005), *RS*. A concise introduction can be found in Law (1992), 'Notes on the Theory of the Actor-Network: Ordering, Strategy and Heterogeneity'. A bibliographic resource listing contributions to the field is maintained by the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University and can be found at < www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/centres/css/ant > (accessed 16 June, 2018). Although Latour's name has become widely associated with ANT, I will refer to it relatively infrequently in the study that follows. This is because Latour's later work, particularly the *Inquiry*, allows us to understand ANT as only one element of a broader intellectual project. Latour does not reject the methodology or objectives of ANT, but he does subsume them into a programme that is better represented by the *Inquiry*. In this, I am following Latour's own suggestion. See Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, chapter 1, 'Defining the Object of Inquiry', pp.27–46. It is also important to recall Latour's own critique of the state of the field in ANT, as represented by the following comment: "I will start by saying that there are four things that do not work with Actor-Network Theory: the word actor, the word network, the word theory and the hyphen. Four nails in the coffin" in Latour (1999), *ORANT*, p.15. For more on Latour's critique of ANT, see also Mol (2010), 'Actor-Network Theory: Sensitive Terms and Enduring Tensions'.

writing.⁹⁴

This chronology is often noted in the critical literature.⁹⁵ And yet, on the level of ideas, the relation between the research project Latour carried out in Guillemin's laboratory in the late 1970s and his subsequent writing is frequently missed. In what follows, I would like to propose a connection. This, then, will supply the rationale for a genealogical (as opposed merely to a biographical) analysis of this early moment in Latour's intellectual career.

I will argue that the significance of this early period was that it enabled Latour to identify and describe for the first time the relation between “matters of fact”—the authoritative statements that laboratory scientists enunciate and disseminate in professional journals and books—and the material and historical conditions of their production.⁹⁶ Latour never doubts that scientific knowledge has the right to claim apodictic certainty with regard to its statements about the world out-there. Indeed, for him, it is precisely because science accurately correlates to the world as it really is that it can provide the basis for productive developments in engineering, technology, medicine, public health, and so on. For this reason, it is wrong to accuse Latour of being an epistemological relativist (even though this is a charge that has sometimes

⁹⁴ See for example Latour, with Lévy-Leblond (2003), fr. *SSOF*, p.67 ff.; Latour, with Diring & Jeanpierre (2012), fr. *UFLF*, p.950 ff.; Latour (2012), fr. *PPE*; Latour (2013), *BOI*, pp.490–492. For a biographical description of the significance of this time for Latour's later work, see Schmidgen (2015), *Bruno Latour in Pieces*, pp.25–53.

⁹⁵ See for example Jensen & Blok (2012), *Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, chapter 2, ‘Anthropology of Science’, pp.26–51; De Vries (2016), *Bruno Latour*, chapter 2, ‘Science Studies’, pp.21–52.

⁹⁶ For his definition of “matters of fact”, see Latour (2005), *RS*, pp.87–120.

been levelled against him).⁹⁷ But, at the same time, Latour is interested in identifying the diachronic and contingent ontological conditions upon which “matters of fact” are grounded. For him, the authority of science is given from below. Elsewhere, he refers to science as a “constructed”⁹⁸ or as a “composed” system of knowledge.⁹⁹ This means he will be suspicious of accounts of scientific rationality that “divorce it from its production processes” and assume that “any allusion to its human-made basis must be understood as a *debunking* of its objectivity”.¹⁰⁰ This was the insight Latour initially made during his time in Guillemin’s laboratory. And, as his work has developed since then, he has applied it to other modes of knowledge and discourse in addition to science, including (as I will go on to show) religion.

At various points in his work, Latour describes the relation between a claim to meaning or truth advanced within a scientific laboratory and the material and historical conditions of its production by means of the phrases “ontological pluralism” or “pluralist ontology”.¹⁰¹ Both elements of these phrases are significant.

⁹⁷ See for example Galison (1998) ‘Judgment against Objectivity’; Restivo (2011a), ‘Bruno Latour: The Once and Future Philosopher’; Restivo (2011b), *Red, Black and Objective: Science, Sociology and Anarchism*. The latter contains a useful bibliographic summary of critiques of Latour as an epistemological relativist. The charge of relativism was damaging to Latour’s early career progression; it is possible that it scuppered a proposed academic appointment at Princeton University, for which see Berreby (1994), ‘And Now, Overcoming all Binary Oppositions, it’s that Damned Elusive Bruno Latour’. For Latour’s own reminiscence about this period, see Latour (1999), *ORANT*, p.16 ff.

⁹⁸ This is a common term throughout Latour’s work; see for example Latour (2005), *RS*, p.91. See also Ward (1996), *Reconfiguring Truth: Postmodernism, Science Studies and the Search for a New Model of Knowledge*; Kuukkanen (2009), ‘Demystification of Early Latour’.

⁹⁹ This is also a common term throughout Latour’s work; see for example Latour (2010), *ACM*.

¹⁰⁰ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 2, p.45, original emphasis.

¹⁰¹ These are common terms in Latour’s work. See for example Latour (2015), *DAHS*, document 1, p.8.

By “ontological” or “ontology” Latour does not have in mind a singular or monistic concept of Being. Rather, he is referring to the beings of multiple actors. Every single actor that contributes to the production of a scientific “matter of fact”, ranging from a chemical element that is introduced into a reactive process to the human scientist who initiates and controls this process, possesses a being of its own that is irreducible to that of any other actor. This means that every single actor—whatever its size, type or property, and whether it is human or nonhuman—will manifest itself as a force or impact in the world. Thus, what is in view here is “*l’ontologie des êtres*”, as Latour himself put it in a recent interview.¹⁰² And by “pluralism” or “pluralist” Latour is indicating the way in which these various actors interact with one another in the environment of a laboratory according to the irreducible being each one possesses, in such a way as to “progressively compose” an account of the world that can then be called scientific. Latour does not intend his account of pluralism to render all actors equivalent. He agrees that some actors are larger or more powerful than others and can thus exert their influence more readily on the “matter of fact” that will eventually be disseminated into the wider world. But, for him, agency is always a function of how an actor “performs” in relation to other actors.¹⁰³ The phrases “ontological pluralism” or “pluralist ontology” combine these observations. Thus, for Latour, science is rational to the extent that the “matters of fact” it produces derive from the immanent, networked relations of multiple actors. These relations carry forward a statement about reality that is universal precisely because it has first been negotiated and validated at a local level. Its authority is warranted by the being of the individual

¹⁰² My trans. “the ontology of beings” in Latour, with Diring & Jeanpierre (2012), fr. *UFLF*, p.949.

¹⁰³ Latour (2014), *HBRAT*, p.3.

actors who are assembled as its constituent parts. By contrast, where science attempts to short-cut or elide the material and historical conditions of its own transmission it becomes “deontological”, and therefore irrational, for the same reason.¹⁰⁴

Latour’s interest in the close association, or even the synonymy, of the rationality of science with ontology can be illustrated from numerous places in his writing. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, which dates from 1991, he declares that the natural sciences function according to the idea that “the world of meaning and the world of being are one and the same world”.¹⁰⁵ Some years later, in *Pandora’s Hope*, he describes the project of ‘Science and Technology Studies’ as being an attempt to clarify the ontological basis of scientific discovery.¹⁰⁶ More recently, in his *Tanner Lectures*, delivered at Yale University in March 2014, Latour provided a detailed analysis of an actual scientific event in precisely these terms. The event he selected is the detection by three American astrophysicists of optical pulsar rays by stroboscopic techniques in 1969.¹⁰⁷ Latour argues that the validity and coherence of this scientific discovery can be traced to the interactions that took place between different actors in space and time—even if this reality tends to be obscured by the technical nomenclature that is subsequently imposed upon it by the scientists themselves, where the material and historical procedures of the discovery find themselves “black

¹⁰⁴ Latour (2013), *WUCD*, p.3.

¹⁰⁵ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.108.

¹⁰⁶ Latour (1999), *PH*, p.141.

¹⁰⁷ Latour (2014), *HBRAT*, pp.4–9. Latour takes this case-study from earlier work that had been carried out by ethnomethodologists, for which see Garkinkel, Lynch & Livingston (1981), ‘The Work of a Discovering Science Construed with Materials from the Optically Discovered Pulsar’.

boxed” by the account scientists give of their own discipline.¹⁰⁸

This epistemology of science ultimately derives from the research project Latour carried out in Roger Guillemin’s laboratory in the late 1970s. It follows, then, that close analysis of that moment in his career, and the texts that were produced during that time, will provide a point-of-entry by which to grasp his understanding of rationality and its ontological constitution—not just in the domain of science, but for other modes of knowledge as well, including religion. In what follows, I will highlight two aspects of that research project that I believe have been partially or wholly neglected. The first is the methodology Latour chose to adopt in order to describe what he was observing in Guillemin’s laboratory. The second is the intellectual context in which he was working and against which (as I will argue) he was reacting. Both of these will serve to elucidate the general argument I am making, which is to trace Latour’s understanding of rationality back to that formative moment in his career.

The first thing to consider is the authorial stance, or even the persona, through which Latour approached his research project in Guillemin’s laboratory. He makes a number of references to this in *Laboratory Life*.¹⁰⁹ His strategy can be summarized as follows: he would confront the complex working procedures of Guillemin’s

¹⁰⁸ This is a technical term adopted from the field of cybernetic system dynamics to indicate a device or object whose implementation process is rendered deliberately opaque. Latour’s argument is that the technical language of science renders the processes by which scientists secure a “matter of fact” opaque and, as a result, that the material and historical conditions of the production of science are concealed. Latour uses the term “black box” throughout his work, see for example Latour (1987), *SA*, pp.2–3. For a description of his use of the term, see Miller (2013), *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology*, chapter 12, ‘Black Boxes’, pp.82–84.

¹⁰⁹ Latour & Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*, p.41 ff.

laboratory—in particular the technically-specialized “infralanguage”¹¹⁰ employed by the scientists themselves to explain their *modus operandi*—in the posture of an entirely naïve observer, equipped with no prior epistemological model to make sense of the activity he was witnessing and documenting. In self-identifying as a naïve observer in this way, Latour at times verges on the tongue-in-cheek, or perhaps even the burlesque. For example, right at the end of *Laboratory Life*, after 270 pages of painstaking analysis of the procedures he had been observing in Guillemin’s laboratory, he offers the following account of his (non-) qualification for a research project of this sort using the literary trope of prosopopoeia:

Professor Latour’s knowledge of science was non-existent; his mastery of English was very poor; and he was completely unaware of the existence of social studies of science.¹¹¹

In making this statement, Latour seems to be depreciating the status of his own work as rigorous social science, hinting at a degree of amateurism or even dilettantism in what he presents. However, this naïve persona was constructed intentionally. For by presenting himself as unencumbered by previous social scientific methodologies Latour was simultaneously announcing himself as being free to describe the rationality of science in an entirely new way. Such is revealed by a direct continuation of the citation given above, where he transposes his previous confession of ignorance to his own advantage:

[continuation from above] Apart from (or perhaps even because of) this last feature, Professor Latour was thus in the classic position

¹¹⁰ Latour (2005), *RS*, p.149.

¹¹¹ Latour & Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*, p.273.

of the ethnographer sent to a completely foreign environment.¹¹²

Latour's authorial strategy in *Laboratory Life* therefore comprises two elements. First, he presents a narrative façade that revels in its apparent naïvety, thus indicating that no inherited or residual explanatory schemata are being deployed to account for what he was observing among the scientists working in Guillemin's laboratory. Second, he describes his commitment to and immersion in a fully emic mode of investigation, which he claims stands in the most rigorous tradition of anthropological or ethnographic method. These two elements support Latour's ultimate aim in this text and others from this time, which was to provide a new and more faithful account of the nature of the scientific claims that were originating from the laboratory environment.

The authorial strategy adopted in *Laboratory Life* is repeated in almost all of Latour's subsequent texts. It provides him with a tool by which to analyse the rationality of different disciplinary domains, not just that of science. A good example is his 1993 work *Aramis, or The Love of Technology*.¹¹³ Latour describes this as a "sociotechnological" study of a large monorail transport engineering project in Paris in the 1970s and 1980s that became increasingly difficult to implement and was finally abandoned by the municipal government in 1987.¹¹⁴ In order to write about this project and its failure Latour defers his own presence as narrator, preferring a thick or emic description of the various actors who were implicated in the situation

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Latour (1996, 1993), *ALT*.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 'Preface', p.x.

under analysis. To do so, he incorporates into the book transcripts of interviews with engineers, numerous maps and technical plans of the rail-cars and tracks, and other primary documents, many of them scanned and represented in their original format. By doing so, the first-person voice is almost entirely removed. There is no sense of a transcendent authorial verdict on the reasons for the project's ultimate failure.¹¹⁵ Instead, the reader finds him or herself *in media res*, confronted by the complex reality of a large infrastructure project involving multiple actors. As Latour's thick description proceeds, the extent and variety of the actors implicated in the project becomes evident. They are listed in great detail in what one critic has called "Latourian litanies",¹¹⁶ which are catalogues of the various actors that can be identified as participating in the situation under analysis. This instills in the reader the sense that each one of these actors—whatever its size, type or property—has a voice or interest of its own that must be acknowledged and negotiated by those supervising the project and attempting to bring it to completion.¹¹⁷ In the case of the *Aramis* engineering project, these included human actors: for example, office workers in the west of the city needed a means of transport to their place of work; city councillors faced their own challenges in mediating these requirements and choosing a design that would satisfy all users; and mechanical engineers were operating within technical and cost specifications in order to fulfill the project on time. But it also included nonhuman actors, from the type of metal that would be used on the rails of

¹¹⁵ Latour often describes himself as being "agnostic" with regard to meta-explanation. See Latour (1993, 1984), *PF*, p.203.

¹¹⁶ Bogost (2012), *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like To Be a Thing*, p.38. Although Bogost initially coined the phrase, it has been taken up widely since then by commentators on Latour's work.

¹¹⁷ Latour (1996, 1993), *ALT*, p.194.

the tracks to the phone-lines that would connect the different engineers and enable them discuss how the project was to be handled. If any one of these was not to specification or could not play its allocated role in delivering the project outcome (for example, if the wheels used on the carriages were not able to support the number of journeys required), then the project itself would be compromised. The success of *Aramis* was dependent on these various actors being connected, collaborating towards the realization of an end, and then holding together over time. Were any one of them to be ignored or lose its connection with the emerging “network topology” of the whole, then the coherence of the project—its rationality as it were—would be compromised. To pick up just one of his strands of analysis, Latour shows how official project documents at the time often referred to the needs of “commuters”, here defined as a single, monolithic group.¹¹⁸ To what degree was that single term able to represent the interests of individual office workers and their particular transport requirements? How might the rationale for the *Aramis* project have been weakened by the scaling-up of these individual requirements into a single category called “commuter”? Latour’s book shows how this engineering project ultimately failed because meta-categories such as these did not adequately represent the voices or interests of the various actors they needed to include. To put it another way, the project lost connection with the multiple actors, both human and nonhuman, whose engagement was essential if it was to be successfully realized. The carefully-constructed narrative voice that permeates Latour’s book serves precisely this end, since what is required to show this is nothing but thick description of the empirical situation itself. In fact, in a later article published in French in 2008, Latour makes

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p.300.

this clear.¹¹⁹ He claims that his intention in all his texts has been to reduce the distance between “description” and “comment”, such that the latter becomes a function of the former.¹²⁰ The right to interpret the meaning of an experience or event is not given to a first-person authorial voice claiming privileged authority to synthesise multiple traces of empirical data into a coherent whole. Instead, that right is ceded to the actors themselves, whose “network topology” the narrator merely has to describe.

This was the strategy Latour employed during his time in Guillemin’s laboratory. By this means, he was able to provide an epistemology of science that was quite different from the one supplied by contemporary social scientific accounts of laboratories and their working procedures, even where these had become widely-accepted. In his sights were studies by Robert K. Merton, David Edge, David Bloor and, underlying them all, Thomas S. Kuhn.¹²¹ None of these, Latour argues, had properly assimilated “matters of fact” into the empirical context of the laboratory. They were operating under the assumption that “matters of fact” were meaningful and true, and even apodictically certain, because they corresponded with an unchanging and entirely predictable realm of nature, a law-like realm of cause-and-effect that is conceived as independent of immanent spatial and temporal processes. Elsewhere, he

¹¹⁹ Latour (2008), fr. *PEM*, p.7. For additional analysis, see Gurtwirth (2004), ‘Le cosmopolitique, le droit et les choses’; Austrin & Farnsworth (2005), ‘Hybrid Genres: Fieldwork, Detection and the Method of Bruno Latour’.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ See Latour & Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*, Chapter One, ‘From Order to Disorder’, pp.15–42 for a full literature review. For reference to Merton, see p.38; for references to Edge, see pp.25, 27, 38, 90; for references to Bloor, see pp.19, 28, 42; for references to Kuhn, see p.24. See also Kuhn (2012, 1963), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

describes this in disparaging terms as belief in “the transcendent origin of facts”.¹²² For Latour, this is the essence of meta-logic. “As a good ethnographer”, he writes, “I knew that I must always be skeptical of the abstract notion of ideas floating in the air”.¹²³ A “matter of fact” produced by a laboratory, and then disseminated in an authoritative scientific journal, was not guaranteed or held in place by correspondence with a realm of transcendence. Instead, Latour shows that “the objectivity of science is slowly erected *inside* laboratory walls” by means of the relations of different actors located in that material space over time.¹²⁴ This explains why in books such as *Laboratory Life* and *Science in Action*, as well as in smaller studies of scientific research projects,¹²⁵ Latour drills down to the most granular level of description possible, showing how actors of different kinds are assembled by the scientist into a chain or alignment, or a “line of sight”, that itself constitutes the meaning or truth of the claim being made, and that holds insofar as each part assembled in this order continues to lend its “support” to the whole by “staying in place over time”.¹²⁶ It is this “network topology” that provides the strength and stability of a “matter of fact” and its correspondence with the world out-there. Latour’s aim, then, is to demonstrate “the idiosyncratic, local, heterogeneous, contextual and multifaceted character of scientific knowledge”.¹²⁷ And the function of his adopted narrative persona in *Laboratory Life* and in other texts from that time was to open the door for a

¹²² Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.22.

¹²³ Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.290.

¹²⁴ Latour (1986), *VCDTT*, p.19, original emphasis.

¹²⁵ See for example Latour (1999), *PH*, chapter 2, ‘Circulating Reference: Sampling the Soil in the Amazon Forest’, pp.24–79.

¹²⁶ Miller (2012), *Speculative Grace*, p.89.

¹²⁷ Latour & Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*, p.152.

completely new account of scientific rationality in precisely these terms.

The second aspect of Latour's research project in Guillemin's laboratory that I would like to highlight is the intellectual context in which he was operating at that time. For in the mid to late 1970s, the field of the epistemology of science in France was dominated by a particular school of thought known as '*l'épistémologie historique*'.¹²⁸ This was represented by the work of Alexandre Koyré, Jean Cavailles, Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem and others. Central to its explanation of how science functioned was the concept of "*la rupture épistémologique*".¹²⁹ Bachelard defines this as an understanding of the progress of scientific knowledge in terms of sudden leaps and paradigm shifts, each time breaking with the previous order by means of "a total negation of that which is past".¹³⁰

Latour does not refer explicitly to '*l'épistémologie historique*' anywhere in his published writing from this period. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that it represents an important context for the ideas about the rationality of science he was developing whilst in Guillemin's laboratory. This evidence comes from a number of unpublished articles written during and just after his research project,¹³¹ and from an important interview he conducted with Michel Serres in the early 1990s,

¹²⁸ This is frequently translated into English as "history of the epistemology of the sciences" or simply as "history of science". For an overview of '*l'épistémologie historique*', see Bontems (2006), '*L'actualité de l'épistémologie historique*'.

¹²⁹ My trans. "an epistemological rupture". The phrase is associated with Bachelard in particular, although it is reflective of the broader commitments of the various writers listed above. For additional context on the phrase and what it signified in its original context, see Lecourt (2002), *L'épistémologie historique de Gaston Bachelard*, especially pp.78–82.

¹³⁰ Latour & Bowker (1987), *BDS*, p.723.

¹³¹ See especially Latour (1986), *VCDTT*; Latour & Bowker (1987), *BDS*.

subsequently published in English in 1995.¹³² To what did Latour object in the account of scientific rationality provided by these writers? It appears he believed it was guilty of immunizing the hard sciences from the social constructivist analyses that were being produced at the time and that were being applied to the human sciences, especially in the work of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault.¹³³ Or, to put it another way, Latour believed that advances that had been made in French critical theory were not being applied to science itself, with the result that science was being treated as a domain of rationality that was not “constructed” or “composed” at all. For Latour, this was a lacuna or blind-spot in French intellectual life at that time, as he made clear in an article published in the mid 1980s:

The French strengths and weaknesses are precisely complementary: the nature of society and the relationship between society and intellectual discourse have been examined at great length, but science itself [...] has not yet entered into this reworking.¹³⁴

As a reaction to this perceived lacuna or blind-spot, Latour treated his research project in Guillemin’s laboratory as an opportunity to apply social constructivist analysis to the hard sciences in a symmetrical manner to how it had previously been applied to the human sciences. In doing so, he was able to re-envision science as a materially and temporally-situated practice.

The role of Latour as innovator in this regard should not be overstated. He

¹³² Latour, with Serres (1995, 1994), *CSCT*.

¹³³ For references to Althusser, see Latour (1986), *VCDTT*, p.31; Latour & Bowker (1987), *BDS*, p.726; Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.291. For references to Foucault, see Latour (1987), *EWC*, p.83; Latour & Bowker (1987), *BDS*, pp.725–726; Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.137; Latour (1999), *PH*, pp.192, 262; Latour (2005), *RS*, pp.76, 86, 161, 212–213.

¹³⁴ Latour & Bowker (1987), *BDS*, p.727.

acknowledges that he did not stand alone in reaction against the philosophical tenets of ‘*l’épistémologie historique*’ from within the French intellectual scene. The work of the philosopher of science François Dagognet (who had studied under Canguilhem and was himself an important interpreter of Foucault’s writing) was an influence upon him at this time, in particular Dagognet’s 1973 text *Écriture et iconographie*, which analysed scientific objectivity in terms of the “figuration” of iconographic traces and their transmission through the laboratory environment by scientists.¹³⁵ Moreover, during this period and for a number of years afterwards Latour was also engaged with various authors, institutions and publishing programmes whose objectives were similar to his own: it is certain that he benefited from these and was able to integrate some of their insights into his own work.¹³⁶ Finally, he acknowledges the influence of an Anglo-American tradition of epistemology of science that was quite different from its French equivalent.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Dagognet (1973), *Écriture et iconographie*, p.7.

¹³⁶ Among others, three in particular should be mentioned: (A) the *Conservatoire Nationale des Arts et Métiers* (CNAM), and in particular Jean-Jacques Salomon, who served as Chair of the ‘Science, Technology and Society’ doctoral programme, and whose work was an early influence on Latour; (B) the *Centre de Sociologie d’Innovation* at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Mines* in Paris, and in particular its sociology graduate programme for engineers, at which Latour himself taught between 1982 and 2006; (C) the *Pandore* bulletin, for which Latour served as Editor between 1980 and 1984, which sought to translate and interpret a number of works from the ‘Strong Programme in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge’ represented by sociologists such as David Bloor, Harry Collins, Donald A. Mackenzie, John Henry, and others. The full archive of the *Pandore* bulletin is available at < www.science-societe.fr/pandore > (accessed 10 June, 2018). For further description of these engagements, see Latour & Bowker (1987), *BDS*, pp.730–739.

¹³⁷ For an overview of the contemporary Anglophone tradition in epistemology of science in and around the time of Latour’s research project in Guillemin’s laboratory, see Latour & Bowker (1987), *BDS*. In fact, it is not too much to say that during the early phase of his work Latour acted as conduit for the introduction of an Anglo-American tradition of epistemology of science into the Francophone world, particularly the work of Ludwig Fleck (who had been encountered in translation in the English-speaking world before the French) and the ‘Strong Programme in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge’. In 2005,

Nonetheless, it is useful and important to note the semi-concealed polemic directed at the concept of “*la rupture épistémologique*” in the texts emanating from this phase of Latour’s career. It situates his epistemology of science in a broader context of contemporary intellectual debate, thus facilitating an understanding of why he proposed it. And it foreshadows the argument of his mid-career text, *We Have Never Been Modern*, published in French in 1991 and in English two years later, where Latour extended these insights into an analysis of the entire ideological structure of western society.¹³⁸ It is within this expanded frame of reference that his writing on religion must be addressed.

1.1.2 Developing a Conceptual Framework

Thus far, I have described an early moment in Latour’s intellectual career, namely, the research project he carried out in a neuroendocrinology laboratory in the 1970s, as the occasion for his departure from the prevailing French intellectual consensus of the time in the epistemology of science. Latour does not understand scientific knowledge as advancing in moments of rupture from an established paradigm. Instead, he focuses on the material and historical processes of the laboratory, showing how a “matter of fact” that might appear to correspond to the transcendent realm of nature or to the immutable operation of the laws of nature is better understood as the provisional result of a complex series of networked interactions involving different actors.

Latour wrote a postface on the occasion of the (re-) publication of Fleck’s seminal 1935 work, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, in which he celebrated Fleck as inaugurating “*ce qu’on appelle aujourd’hui la sociologie ou l’histoire sociale des sciences*” (my trans. “what we call today sociology or the social history of the sciences”) in Latour (2005), fr. *TSPO*, p.1.

¹³⁸ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, pp.68–69.

Now, I wish to develop that genealogical analysis into a broader conceptual framework. My aim is to arrive at a greater understanding of the logistical mechanisms from which Latour argues that the *logos* itself must arise, which in turn a function of ontology. I will base my conceptual analysis around a number of words and phrases that have been used by Latour in different contexts and in different periods of his intellectual career. From these I will develop the following statement: for Latour, a pluralist ontology functions according to the “agonistic” relations of actors in “trials”. This statement is the conceptual foundation that lies behind the idea of rationality as logistics.

The first concept I wish to consider is that of the “trial”. Latour uses this word to describe the procedure by which two or more actors relate to each other in such a way as to progressively compose a whole that is larger than themselves. Descriptions of trials feature at various points in his work. They are particularly prominent in a short text called *Irréductions* that was published in French in 1984 and in English two years later.¹³⁹ This work has received scant consideration in the critical literature. This may be because it was published as an addendum to a longer work on Louis Pasteur and hence is easily overlooked. Or it may be on account of Latour’s whimsical description of it as a “juvenile” piece of writing.¹⁴⁰ However, I suggest this short text is crucial, as Latour himself acknowledges in his more serious moments.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Latour (1993, 1984), *PF*, pp.153–236. The text was appended to a work on Pasteur entitled ‘War and Peace of Microbes’ and was subsequently published in English as *The Pasteurization of France*.

¹⁴⁰ Latour (2010), *COAP*, p.601. See also Latour’s comment in Harman, with Latour & Erdélyi (2011), *The Prince and the Wolf: Latour and Harman at the London School of Economics*, p.48.

¹⁴¹ See for example Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.295.

In it, he defines a trial as encompassing two different but commensurate principles. The first is that of representation. What issues from a trial can never be in excess of that which has been supplied by its constituent parts. The meaning or truth of any situation can always be traced back to the performances of individual actors and does not require the postulate of a third factor that lies above or beyond what these actors themselves have contributed. But this is not to imply that such an account of the world will be static or predictable, as if its outcome could be calculated in advance simply by referring back to the actors who were its derivation. For the second principle contained in the concept of a trial is that of emergence. When actors engage with one another in trials, they combine, assemble and link in such a way as to generate something greater than the sum of their individual parts. This was an observation Latour first made in Guillemin's laboratory by noting how scientists brought different actors into contact with each other by means of bench experiments, in such a way as to produce a highly complex, multifaceted and often surprising account of how the world out-there functions.¹⁴² In his account of ontological pluralism, Latour seeks to hold together both principles, that of representation and that of emergence.

Latour introduces other terms as well. For example, he refers to the “irreducibility” and “reducibility” of actors.¹⁴³ The idea of irreducibility describes

¹⁴² The French word Latour uses for “trial” is “*épreuve*”. The semantic range of this noun in French incorporates the sense of a laboratory ‘test’ or ‘assay’ where two or more actors (such as chemical reactants) are brought into contact with each other in order to investigate what properties might emerge from their encounter.

¹⁴³ Latour (1993, 1984), *PF*, p.158, item 1.1.1. As well as the text *Irréductions*, these terms are found throughout Latour's work. See Latour (2005), *RS*, p.107 ff.; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.33 ff.; Latour, with Schaffer (2017), *WBBP*, p.3. For further description, see also Harman (2009), *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, chapter 1,

how what derives from an encounter between actors in a trial can never be in excess of the being of the actors themselves. There is an echo here of Spinoza's concept of "conatus": entities in the world are understood as manifesting an essential and intrinsic disposition or "appetitus" to preserve their own being, whatever they encounter and engage in their journey through the world.¹⁴⁴ Echoes of Spinoza have been previously noted by readers of Latour's work.¹⁴⁵ These were examined in some detail at a recent symposium in Paris attended by Latour himself.¹⁴⁶ But the idea of irreducibility must be paired with the corresponding idea of reducibility. This refers to the idea that nothing is beyond relation, that there are no hermetically-sealed domains separating actors in the world, and thus that anything can be brought to bear on anything else. It is the potential reducibility of actors to one another that enables them to function as mediators of something new that will emerge out of their encounters. "Mediator" is a term that Latour always contrasts with that of "intermediary".¹⁴⁷ An actor in the guise of intermediary functions as nothing but a placeholder, serving merely as a vehicle to transport or convey some pre-established order of things. An actor in the guise of mediator, by contrast, is more than this, intervening with some agency of its own in the context of its particular position

'Irreductions', pp.11–32; Miller (2012), *Speculative Grace*, chapter 12, 'The Principle of Irreduction', pp.37–40.

¹⁴⁴ Spinoza (2000, 1677), *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*, p.171.

¹⁴⁵ See for example Bennett (2004), 'The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter'; Williams (2010), 'Subjectivity without the Subject: Thinking Beyond the Subject with/ through Spinoza', p.23 ff.

¹⁴⁶ This took place on 19 May, 2016 at *l'Université Paris VIII, Vincennes* under the title: '*Portrait de Spinoza en co-enquêteur du projet sur les modes d'existence*'. It is available to view at < <http://spinozapharis8.com> > (accessed 24 August, 2018).

¹⁴⁷ See Callon (1991), 'Techno-Economic Networks and Irreversibility'; Sayes (2014), 'Actor-Network Theory and Methodology', pp.137–138; Latour (2005), *RS*, p.39 ff.

within a network. For an actor to serve as a mediator of something new, it must become a vehicle of “translation”. This is another technical term of great significance for Latour, borrowed from the work of Michel Serres.¹⁴⁸ Translation describes the way in which one actor is able to enrol and mobilise the contribution of another actor in the context of a trial, yet without over-determining its singular voice in so doing. The term maintains an echo of its use in a literary context: a translation is different from its source text and (it is to be hoped) creative in its own right, and yet it must be sufficiently faithful to the source text so as not to be guilty of repressing or betraying its original meaning, so as to warrant the status of being a translation in the first place. Latour claims that the idea of translation prevents his pluralist ontology from lapsing into a deterministic or a mechanistic model of agency:

The word “translation” takes on a somewhat specialized meaning in my work: it describes a relation that does not transport causality.¹⁴⁹

These concepts are all indicative of Latour’s attempt to frame an account of the world in terms of logistics. The meaning and truth of any situation is not fixed by a causality that is in excess of the contribution of the actors who are its constituent parts. But this commitment to immanence does not entail a demystification of the world: the encounter of actors in trials generates an outcome beyond that which could have been calculated by mechanistic observation of the initial situation. In *Pandora’s*

¹⁴⁸ See Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.3 ff. and various places. For a description of Serres’ use of the term, see Brown (2002), ‘Michel Serres: Science, Translation and the Logic of the Parasite’. The word “translation” was used by many of the early proponents of ANT, for which see Callon (1986), ‘Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of Scallops and the Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay’.

¹⁴⁹ Latour (2005), *RS*, p.108.

Hope, Latour calls this “the slight surprise of action” that “overtakes” the input provided by the actors themselves.¹⁵⁰

Latour’s interest in the entangled and complex nature of reality has led some to compare his ideas to those of “new materialism”.¹⁵¹ This school of thought within continental philosophy embraces the work of Rosi Braidotti, Manuel DeLanda, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Graham Harman and Levi Bryant.¹⁵² New materialists are committed to the idea of “vibrant matter”,¹⁵³ that is, to a philosophical account of “how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively, according to an ontology of matter”.¹⁵⁴ There is no doubt that there are important synergies with Latour. New materialism sets out to correct what it calls disparagingly a “Cartesian metaphysics” by “giving special attention to physical matter, which has been so neglected by dualist thought”.¹⁵⁵ But Latour goes further, expanding the list of entities that can be considered as actors so as to include not just “material” beings, but also invisible, composite, intangible or abstract ones. For Latour, the only criterion for qualification as an actor is that it should be something that can exert an

¹⁵⁰ Latour (1999), *PH*, p.267.

¹⁵¹ See for example Harman (2007), ‘The Importance of Bruno Latour for Philosophy’; Harman (2009), *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*; Dolphijn & Van Der Tuin (2012), ‘The Transversality of New Materialism’; Reader (2016), *Theology and New Materialism: Spaces of Faithful Dissent*. Graham Harman is particularly important since he has been influential on the reception of Latour’s work in an Anglophone context.

¹⁵² For recent overviews of “new materialist” thought, discussing these authors and others, see Coole & Frost (2010), ‘Introducing the New Materialisms’; Bryant (2011), ‘The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Orientated Philosophy’; Rieger & Waggoner (eds.) (2016), *Religious Experience and New Materialism: Movement Matters*, pp.13–16.

¹⁵³ Bennett (2010), *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*.

¹⁵⁴ White (2000), *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, p.3.

¹⁵⁵ Dolphijn & Van Der Tuin, (2012), ‘A New Tradition in Thought’, p.85.

effect on other actors within a network. This observation will be critical when I come to evaluate Latour's writing on religion. As I will show, Latour will define religion as a phenomenon that is mediated by actors. But because his definition incorporates actors that are not only material, but also immaterial, composite and abstract, he is able to avoid the reductive accounts of religion offered elsewhere within new materialism. This expanded sense of materialism will be the basis for the productive dialogue between Latour's work and Christian theology.

For some critics, however, Latour is vulnerable at this point. They argue that he has not been able to banish asymmetry from his conceptual system. What emerges from a trial is still a function of power relations between actors. This can be summed up by the term "antagonism". Thus, in a 1990 review Olga Amsterdamska suggested that what Latour was describing in his epistemology of science was nothing more than a "Machiavellian politics" of the laboratory in which scientists were engaged in nothing more than an "aboriginal language of war and peace" to impose their own synthetic perspectives and agendas upon the activity they were supervising.¹⁵⁶ A similar argument has emerged from within the discipline of anthropology, where various writers have criticised Latour for over-riding "the conceptual tools with which local actors achieve their own critical effects",¹⁵⁷ concluding that his work displays an "élite disdain" for the pluralist world it seeks to observe.¹⁵⁸ Kyle McGee,

¹⁵⁶ Amsterdamska (1990), 'Surely you are Joking, Monsieur Latour!', p.496. For a similar critique, see Zammito (2004), *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-Positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour*, p.187 ff.

¹⁵⁷ Jensen (2004), 'A Nonhumanist Disposition: On Performativity, Practical Ontology, and Intervention', p.256.

¹⁵⁸ Martin (2014), 'Afterword: Knot-work not Networks, or, Anti-anti-fetishism and the ANTipolitics Machine', p.99. For related critiques, see Saldanha (2003), 'Actor-Network Theory and Critical Sociology'; Whittle & Spicer (2008), 'Is Actor-Network Theory

in a study on how Latour's pluralist ontology might apply to the practice of law, argues that his work is characterised by "the Hobbesian virtues of force and fraud".¹⁵⁹ And even Graham Harman, a highly sympathetic reader, accepts the presence of antagonism within Latour's work, suggesting that he takes "a snare-drummer's delight in depicting animate and inanimate entities as locked in a Machiavellian duel to the death".¹⁶⁰ The charge of antagonism is a serious one to level at Latour, for it implies that the emergent properties of a trial are premised on the unilateral domination of one actor (or a minority group of actors) over the remainder.

And yet, these critiques betray a misunderstanding of the basic conceptual framework Latour is deploying. Antagonistic relations are certainly a feature of Latour's description of trials. But this is because the idea of a trial incorporates the right of every actor, whatever its size, type or property, to represent its own voice or interest as a component part of the whole. Antagonistic relations are therefore the correlate to a pluralist ontology properly understood, and thus to the constitution of rationality itself. In order to describe this, Latour simply states that rationality must be defined "as if there is no referee".¹⁶¹ By "referee", he is referring to a meta-logical principle that is unaccountable to the local and immanent situation, but that acts as "a

Critique?'. For a response, see Kipnis (2015), 'Agency between Humanism and Posthumanism: Latour and his Opponents'.

¹⁵⁹ McGee (2014), *Bruno Latour: The Normativity of Networks*, p.14. McGee's reference is to *Leviathan*, where Hobbes states that "Force, and Fraud, are in warre the two Cardinall vertues" (Latin: "Vis & Dolus in Bello Virtutes Cardinales sunt"), for which see Hobbes (2012, 1651, revised Latin edition 1668), *Leviathan*, p.196.

¹⁶⁰ Harman (2014), *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political*, p.14.

¹⁶¹ Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.19.

higher unifying authority” over it.¹⁶² In the absence of a referee, actors are free engage in interactions that “transform, modify, perturb” each other.¹⁶³ These may have an antagonistic flavour to them. But what ensues from these interactions is in an important sense generated by what the actors themselves have contributed. For this reason, I propose that a more suitable term for what takes place at the site of a trial would be “agonism”. I am borrowing this term from the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who uses it to describe the potentially generative aspect of certain forms of conflict between political actors within liberal democracies.¹⁶⁴ Within Latour’s philosophy, this same effect can be postulated of rationality itself: an account of the world is only as strong the representation of its constituent elements; it grows stronger by temporarily enrolling and subordinating others; it may aspire to universality, but is limited to particularity; everything is the result of vectors, assemblages and battles of force. The term agonism is therefore preferable to the term antagonism as a means of describing Latour’s account of trials.

In summary, I propose that the most appropriate conceptual framework for addressing Latour’s understanding of rationality is that it arises through a pluralist ontology, and that this in turn can be described in terms of the agonistic relations of actors in trials. In the next part, I will develop this statement further with reference to

¹⁶² Latour (2014), *WPTEC*, p.53.

¹⁶³ Latour (1999), *PH*, p.121.

¹⁶⁴ See especially Mouffe (1993), *The Return of the Political*; Mouffe (2000), *The Democratic Paradox*. Her use of this term is further described in Connolly (1995), ‘Twilight of the Idols’, p.130 ff. Mouffe’s deployment of the term contrasts with that of Italian intellectual historian Claudio Colaguori, whose work, informed by the Frankfurt School tradition of social critique, defines “agonism” as an ideology of violence that has served to legitimate imperialistic wars, environmental destruction and social inequities throughout history, for which see Colaguori (2012), *Agon Culture: Competition, Conflict and the Problem of Domination*, p.vii ff.

the intellectual context in which Latour has been operating and with which he has been in dialogue.

1.1.3 Two Important Interlocutors

Latour develops his understanding of rationality within a context and engages with a broad range of interlocutors in his work. I have already addressed some of these.¹⁶⁵ Many others will be surveyed in an edited volume to be published next year, a project with I have co-supervised as editor.¹⁶⁶ But here, I wish to consider two in more detail. I have chosen these for the following reasons: (A) they are useful in illustrating the conceptual framework set out above; and yet, (B) their importance has not been fully acknowledged or addressed in the critical literature on Latour's work.

A. Deleuze's Nietzschean Ontology of Forces

The first interlocutor I would like to address is Gilles Deleuze. Latour refers to Deleuze in various places, particularly in his early work.¹⁶⁷ The connection is occasionally noted, but has not yet been addressed in detail.¹⁶⁸

Of particular interest to Latour is Deleuze's exposition of Nietzsche, which Deleuze developed in the 1960s but which informed his work throughout.¹⁶⁹ Deleuze argues that, for Nietzsche, reality is given in the interaction of plural, immanent

¹⁶⁵ Avant-Propos, pp.38–39.

¹⁶⁶ Maniglier & Howles (eds.), (2019, forthcoming), *Latour's Philosophical Lineage*.

¹⁶⁷ See for example Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.289.

¹⁶⁸ See for example Law (2004), *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, especially chapter 2, 'Scientific Practices', pp.18–42; Law (2009), 'Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics', p.149 ff. I will address this lacuna myself in an article in the edited volume. See Howles (2019, forthcoming), 'Latour and Deleuze'.

¹⁶⁹ Deleuze (2006, 1962), *Nietzsche and Philosophy*; Deleuze (1965), *Nietzsche*.

forces: “there is no quantity of reality, all reality is already a quantity of force”.¹⁷⁰ These forces can be embodied in the form of material entities of various kinds. In addition, these forces are affirmative, in the sense that each one expresses its own being, or, as Deleuze puts it, each one says “yes” to itself.¹⁷¹ Thus, Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche is that something new can emerge at the locus of interaction between plural forces, but only because each force furiously affirms its own value, that is, its own being, in the moment of appropriation, exploitation and possession by another.

Nietzsche’s ontology of forces corresponds to my description of the agonistic relations between actors. As Deleuze puts it, “we will never find the sense of something (of a human, a biological or even a physical phenomenon) if we do not know the force which appropriates the thing, which exploits it, which takes possession of it or is expressed in it”.¹⁷² For Deleuze, the polemical thrust of Nietzsche’s work is directed at anything that would separate these plural forces from affirming themselves. This interference would take the form of a metaphysics that is divorced from the arena in which these forces operate. Moreover, it would imply that the function of rationality itself had been obstructed. The primary culprit in this regard for Deleuze is Hegel, whose dialectical method he arraigns for having confused an affirmation of ontological plurality with an abstract positivity of the real.¹⁷³ Deleuze argues that the denunciation of the tradition of western metaphysics contained in Nietzsche’s writing should be interpreted in light of his concern to

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, pp.39–40. For a useful analysis of how Deleuze understands the concept of “force”, see Surin (2011), ‘Force’, pp.23–25.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, section 5, chapter 10, ‘Affirmation and Negation’, pp.175–180.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.3.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.183.

defend a pluralist ontology and not as indications of some sort of psychological aggressivity or inverted *ressentiment* on his part.

This Deleuzian interpretation of the Nietzschean ontology of forces is an important frame through which to interpret Latour's work. "*J'ai été formé en particulier avec Nietzsche*", Latour has stated.¹⁷⁴ This influence permeates the pages of *Irréductions*, which is the text I identified above as being crucial to an understanding of Latour's ontology. A number of the maxims contained in that book refer to Nietzschean terminology or ideas directly or indirectly. A survey of the initial critical reaction to *Irréductions* demonstrates that this was immediately understood: one critic described the book as "Latour's Nietzschean theory of the political nature of all social life".¹⁷⁵ In his preface to a new edition of the text in French, released in 2001, Latour emphasised once again that context.¹⁷⁶ And the point is further reinforced by an article he published two years ago, entitled 'Life Among Conceptual Characters', in which he reminisces about his initial encounter with the work of Nietzsche whilst engaged in his *classe de terminale* at the Jesuit School in Paris (*The Gay Science* becoming a book that the eighteen year-old Latour came to know "almost by heart", as he claims).¹⁷⁷ Latour recalls finding himself "seduced" by Nietzsche's idea that "the literal meaning of a concept is nothing but the excision of one of the many figurative meanings still active in the background".¹⁷⁸ With this

¹⁷⁴ My trans. "I have been shaped especially by Nietzsche" in Latour, with During & Jeanpierre (2012), fr. *UFLF*, p.950.

¹⁷⁵ Knorr-Cetina (1985), 'Germ Warfare', p.581.

¹⁷⁶ Latour (1984), fr. *PGPM*, from the '*Préface de la nouvelle édition*' (published 2001), p.8.

¹⁷⁷ Latour (2016), *LACC*, p.465.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

comment, Latour is drawing attention to his understanding of rationality as that which can only ever provide a temporary frame or “excision” of the multiplicity of forces that reside in the background and that demand representation as parts of an emerging whole. The Nietzschean ontology of forces, as interpreted by Deleuze, thus provides a context for the conceptual framework I have mapped out above, where rationality is understood as a function of the agonistic processes that take place between actors in trials.

B. *Carl Schmitt’s Concept of the “Political”*

The second interlocutor I wish to consider is the German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt. This encounter is perhaps more unexpected. But it is certainly not a contrivance, for Latour has begun to refer to Schmitt in some of his recent work.¹⁷⁹ The engagement so far has been cautious. Latour acknowledges that Schmitt is a “reactionary”¹⁸⁰ and even a “toxic”¹⁸¹ thinker. The recommended “dosage” of his thought to be consumed should be watched “as carefully as we would do with a powerful poison”.¹⁸² Nonetheless, he agrees that Schmitt’s work is “unavoidable”.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ The first reference to Schmitt I have been able to trace in Latour’s work is found in a lecture delivered at the *Colloque de Cerisy* held in 2000, subsequently published in English as a short booklet. See Latour (2002), *WWP*, p.26 ff. After a period of silence, references to Schmitt become more frequent in Latour’s work from the end of that decade, particularly where he considers the meaning and function of the nation-state at the time of the Anthropocene. See Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 5, p.101 ff.; Latour (2014), *WPTEC*, p.60 ff.; Latour (2015), *FSG*, p.4; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.236 ff. To date, the only substantial engagement with this connection in the critical literature is Conway (2015), ‘Back Down to Earth: Reassembling Latour’s Anthropocenic Geopolitics’, pp.58–59.

¹⁸⁰ Harman, with Latour & Erdélyi (2011), *The Prince and the Wolf*, p.96.

¹⁸¹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.101.

¹⁸² Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.113.

¹⁸³ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.101.

Perhaps, then, one can “pilfer from him”.¹⁸⁴ In what follows, my objective will be (A) to trace the (admittedly rudimentary) terms Latour himself has set out for his engagement with Schmitt so far, but also (B) to develop this connection, which I will do by means of a new reading of Schmitt’s work and, in particular, by a fresh consideration of what he means by the terms “politics” and “the political”.

Throughout his intellectual career, most conspicuously in his interactions with the Austrian legal scholar Hans Kelsen,¹⁸⁵ but evident even in the habilitation thesis he submitted for examination in Strasbourg in 1916,¹⁸⁶ Schmitt argued against the neo-Kantian value-theory that had dominated German jurisprudence during his student years, with its assumption that a foundation for the law might be found that is independent of the contingent order of institutions and decision-makers.¹⁸⁷ That is to say, Schmitt consistently rejected the idea of “general norms” as a suitable basis for collective existence.¹⁸⁸ By doing so, he was posing a challenge to the liberal order of European politics. Because of its espousal of general norms, the modern liberal state

¹⁸⁴ Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.10.

¹⁸⁵ For analysis of the controversies between Schmitt and Kelsen, see Dyzenhaus (2000), *Legality and Legitimacy: Carl Schmitt, Hans Kelsen and Hermann Heller in Weimar*; Baume (2009), ‘On Political Theology: A Controversy between Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt’; Paulson (2016), ‘Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt: Growing Discord, Culminating in the “Guardian” Controversy of 1931’.

¹⁸⁶ Schmitt (1916), *Der Wert des Staates und die Bedeutung des Einzelnen*. See Sluga (2014), *Politics and the Search for the Common Good*, p.121 ff. for an argument that neo-Kantian value-theory was actually endorsed by Schmitt in his early work, as evidenced by his positive engagement with the philosophers of law Wolfgang Stammler, Paul Natortp and Hermann Cohen. This does not undermine my point, however, for Sluga agrees that Schmitt had discarded this influence by the early 1920s. See *ibid*, p.123.

¹⁸⁷ For a concise statement to this effect, see Schmitt (1968), *Gesetz und Urteil. Eine Untersuchung zum Problem der Rechtspraxis*, p.iii.

¹⁸⁸ Schmitt (2007, 1932), *The Concept of the Political*, p.6. Schmitt’s description of “general norms” refers to Kelsen’s description of the “basic norm” (*Grundnorm*) as binding over human social existence. See Kelsen (2009, 1934), *Pure Theory of Law*.

celebrated itself as representing in the broadest possible way the interests of the various subjects under its jurisdiction.¹⁸⁹ Schmitt disagreed with this celebratory narrative. Although he conceded that the modern liberal state was a highly successful form of polity in recent European history, he did not believe this was because it had facilitated a purer form of representation of its internal constituent parts (its citizens). Rather, its apparent success could be attributed to the way in which it had been able to defer competing internal interests to the arbitration of general norms. This is why, in the preface to the second edition of his book on parliamentarism, written in 1926, Schmitt argued that the structure and ideology of the modern liberal state is actually inimical to proper representation of the individual human subjects who reside within it.¹⁹⁰ For Schmitt, this was also observable in contemporary international organisations, since these sought to unify the particular interests of their constituent nation-state members to “universalist” norms.¹⁹¹ In each case, this had the effect of causing the political energy of the nation-state to be circumscribed and vitiated.

Why did Schmitt think that the modern liberal state, buttressed by its commitment to general norms, had in fact lapsed into this non-representative and de-politicizing mode of governance? Norms present themselves as “the judgment of a disinterested and neutral third party”.¹⁹² Political systems based on norms therefore become supervenient over the realm of “concrete human life”,¹⁹³ causing the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p.24.

¹⁹⁰ Schmitt (1985, 1923, second ed. 1926), *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, p.16.

¹⁹¹ See Kervégan (1999), ‘Carl Schmitt and World Unity’.

¹⁹² Schmitt (2007, 1932), *The Concept of the Political*, p.27.

¹⁹³ Schmitt (2005a, 1922), *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, p.15.

proliferating multiplicity of that realm to be reduced into what Schmitt disdainfully refers to as mere “sociology”.¹⁹⁴ In the first essay of *Political Theology*, Schmitt draws attention to norms as generating (what he calls) a “monistic metaphysics”.¹⁹⁵ A few pages later, he refers to this as having the form of a “spirituality”.¹⁹⁶ This comment is crucial. It reveals Schmitt’s belief that “systematic and methodical analogies” can be identified between the ideology of the modern liberal state and a concept of transcendence that is primordially associated with the Christian religion.¹⁹⁷ For him, the hypostatization of the legal order that takes place in the former is parallel to the hypostatization of the unity of nature in the person of the monotheistic God in the latter. This is why Schmitt diagnoses the modern liberal state, constructed on the basis of general norms, as having the form of “a secularized theological concept”.¹⁹⁸ Analysis of this structural identity is one of the tasks of what Schmitt refers to as “political theology”.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p.19.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p.22.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p.37. For more on the Schmitt’s politico-theological critique of modern liberalism, see Palaver (1996), ‘Schmitt on *Nomos* and Space’; Palaver (2007), ‘Carl Schmitt’s “Apocalyptic” Resistance against Global Civil War’

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, p.36.

¹⁹⁹ For a representative statement, see Schmitt (2008, 1970), *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, p.108. This is how Schmitt’s concept of political theology has been understood by many of his readers, including Kervégan (2005), *Hegel, Carl Schmitt: La Politique entre Spéculation et Positivité*; Agamben (2009, 2008), *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, pp.76–77; Espejo (2010), ‘On Political Theology and the Possibility of Superseding it’. An important recent interpretation of political theology in these terms is offered by Michael Northcott, who makes use of Schmitt’s ideas to argue that the contemporary political situation of western Europe has become so “suprapersonal” that it no longer has the capacity to respond to the challenges it is facing at a local level, foremost among which are the “voices” of minority human subjects whose interests are threatened by forces of globalization and climate change. See Northcott (2013), *A Political Theology of Climate Change*, pp.216–217. Later on in my

It is important to note that, for Schmitt, the espousal of general norms was not merely the preserve of the modern liberal state or of the international organisations in which such states were increasingly participating. It was also characteristic of the operation of the modern mind itself. That is to say, Schmitt's work sought to demonstrate how the system of values according to which human beings thought and acted in contemporary (European) society was determined by the assumption of norms. As a consequence, modern rationality itself had lost touch with "concrete human life". This diagnosis was made with remarkable clarity and consistency at every stage of Schmitt's intellectual career. It can be found in his very earliest writing, a study of the expressionist poet Theodor Däubler, where he opined against the ability of the present age to "reason" correctly in an age where rationality was taken as synonymous with "mere calculability", and not as something that by necessity emerged from the contingent realm of events taking place in the world.²⁰⁰ And it can be found in one his very last works, *Political Theology II*, where he railed in a similar vein at what he called "the new, purely worldly-human Science", whose epistemology was based on "the functionalism of a calculable, causal sequence of events".²⁰¹ In each case, Schmitt identifies rationality itself as being infected by the presupposition of a norm removed from the realm of "concrete human life" and hence was incapable of representing the ontology of actors and events out of which

study, I will identify a second task of political theology as Schmitt defines it, one with more positive connotations: this will be the form of political theology I will associate with Latour. See below, p.191 ff.

²⁰⁰ Schmitt (1916), *Theodor Däublers "Nordlicht". Drei Studien über die Elemente, den Geist und die Aktualität des Werkes*, p.63. See also Meier (2011, 1998), *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy, Expanded Edition*, p.3 ff.

²⁰¹ Cited from the German in Meier (2011, 1998), *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*, p.6.

the *logos* itself arises.

My proposal is that Schmitt advances his definition of politics as an antidote to this modern malaise, a malaise he believed had even infected our capacity for rational thought itself. To clarify this, I will advance a new reading of Schmitt's concept of politics and the political (notwithstanding the vast amount of attention that this theme has already received in the critical literature to date).²⁰² I will argue that Schmitt's concept of the political is based on (what I will call) an ontology of plural representation. I will then suggest that this is what has piqued Latour's interest in Schmitt's work (even if that interest remains somewhat unthematized and underdeveloped on Latour's part at the moment).

Schmitt's definition of politics begins with a situation he refers to as "the concrete situation and the extreme case".²⁰³ Schmitt defines this as any situation whose internal dynamic requires a "sovereign decision" to be taken.²⁰⁴ His interest is not in the content of that decision *per se*. Rather, he is interested in how the mere fact of a decision, because it has to do with the realm of "concrete human life", undermines and even dismantles norms that structure society. The border-line case of decisionism, and hence that which defines his concept of the political with most clarity, is the ability to make a distinction between "friend and enemy",²⁰⁵ to such an

²⁰² For a summary of the contemporary state of the literature, with useful bibliographic references, see Moyn (2016), 'Concepts of the Political in Twentieth-Century European Thought'.

²⁰³ Schmitt (2007, 1932), *The Concept of the Political*, p.27.

²⁰⁴ Schmitt (2005a, 1922), *Political Theology*, pp.13, 15.

²⁰⁵ Schmitt (2007, 1932), *The Concept of the Political*, p.26; Schmitt (1991), *Glossarium: Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947–1951*, p.199.

extent that the right even to declare war on the latter is reserved.²⁰⁶ Schmitt's intention is not to provide a warrant for jingoistic militarism.²⁰⁷ Nor does he seek to justify the right of a nation-state to act in an "occasionalist" manner towards another, as Karl Löwith supposed.²⁰⁸ His description of the enemy is not as "*inimicus*", which would be "an adversary whom one hates".²⁰⁹ Rather, his description of the enemy is as "*hostis*".²¹⁰ Schmitt describes this as a "public enemy".²¹¹ Understood in this way, the concept of the friend/ enemy distinction serves a structural function in Schmitt's work. The "*hostis*" is the other in relation to whom a stable and unified political collective can be brought into being and sustained over time, precisely because it energises the internal constituent parts of that collective to demand representation for themselves against this threat to their existence. This political activity could never be facilitated under a regime of norms, since the effect of a norm is to generate inertia and compliance to a rule that has already secured this representation in advance. For Schmitt, then, the presence of a *hostis*, even if this is only an abstract or a remote presence, is the condition of politics itself.

It is true that, at the time of writing *The Concept of the Political*, which is the text in which this definition is put forward most clearly, Schmitt identified the nation-state as the most feasible locus for the determination of the friend/ enemy distinction

²⁰⁶ Ibid, pp.27, 35, 37.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p.34 ff.

²⁰⁸ Löwith (1985, 1935), 'Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von Carl Schmitt', p.40 ff.

²⁰⁹ Schmitt (2007, 1932), *The Concept of the Political*, p.28.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

and thus as the most appropriate vehicle for the formation of a political collective.²¹² This has led some critics to assume that Schmitt's definition of the political has the nation-state as its primary frame of reference and that, as a consequence, Schmitt's work has no value for a theory of the individual subject. For example, Reinhard Mehring argues that Schmitt's work enacts at its core "an anti-individualist credo".²¹³ However, I contend this is a superficial reading. Instead, I propose that Schmitt intended his definition of the political to provide a rigorous representation of what he called "*die Einzelte*" ("the individual"),²¹⁴ and that the institutional forms he then addressed (including, but not restricted to, the nation-state) must be understood as structures embodying this quality of representation to a greater or lesser degree.²¹⁵ Schmitt's institutional theory, infused as it is with the strong motif of "order",²¹⁶ is thus always derivative of a concern to represent the plurality of the individual beings who are represented within it. Schmitt's thought here bears the imprint of the ideas of Maurice Hauriou, a French scholar of administrative law whom Schmitt greatly

²¹² Ibid, p.30.

²¹³ Mehring (2014, 2009), *Carl Schmitt: A Biography*, p.48. Mehring links this with Schmitt's reading of Schopenhauer and his philosophy of right, which critiques any methodology that attempts to justify the value of the state as starting from the individual. He also cites as supporting evidence Schmitt's personal financial situation at that time, claiming that "his experience of dependency showed him that the individual is more or less powerless against social attributions", in *ibid*, p.44.

²¹⁴ Schmitt (1916), *Der Wert des Staates und die Bedeutung des Einzelnen*, Chapter 3, 'Der Einzelne', pp.84–110.

²¹⁵ Schmitt addressed many institutional forms as potential vehicles for political representation, including the Roman Catholic church, see Schmitt (1996, 1923), *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, and the League of Nations, see Schmitt (2005b, 1926), 'Die Kernfrage des Völkerbundes'; Schmitt (2011, 1937), 'The Turn to the Discriminating Concept of War'. For a related definition of Schmitt's institutional theory, see Meierhenrich (2016), 'Fearing the Disorder of Things: The Development of Carl Schmitt's Institutional Theory, 1919–1942'.

²¹⁶ See Meierhenrich & Simons (2016), 'A Fanatic of Order in an Epoch of Confusing Turmoil: The Political, Legal, and Cultural Through of Carl Schmitt', especially pp.12–49.

admired.²¹⁷ But it also follows logically from his own definition of politics in terms of the friend/ enemy distinction. For Schmitt, the prospect of having to enact a sovereign decision against a *hostis*, however distant or unanticipated, compels an institution to represent its plural constituent parts more dynamically, precisely because “only the actual participants can correctly recognise, understand and judge the concrete situation and settle the extreme case of conflict”.²¹⁸ Schmitt’s definition of the political therefore liberates individual human subjects from the external arbitration of general norms and leaves open to them the opportunity to mediate their own collective existence (including, in the extreme case, the decision to go to war) based on the fullest possible representation of their own voices and interests. For Schmitt, the “dignity” of individual human subjects is secured, and can only be secured, politically.²¹⁹ Schmitt does envisage individual human subjects as being gathered into institutions. But only when these institutions are structured politically, that is, according to the friend/ enemy distinction, rather than by general norms, can

²¹⁷ Schmitt admired Hauriou for rejecting a “normativistic-positivistic” theory of institutions. See Schmitt (2004, 1934), *On the Three Types of Juristic Thought*, p.87. Instead, Hauriou argued that an institution must be an externalization of “*une idée directrice*” (my trans. “an animating idea”) of its collective parts. For context on this phrase, see Jeannot (2001), ‘La théorie de l’institution de Maurice Hauriou et les associations’; Neumann (2015), *Carl Schmitt als Jurist*, p.370. For more on Schmitt’s appropriation of the work of Hauriou, see Croce (2011), ‘Does Legal Institutionalism Rule out Legal Pluralism? Schmitt’s Institutional Theory and the Problem of the Concrete Order’; Croce & Salvatore (2013), *The Legal Theory of Carl Schmitt*, especially pp.94–108.

²¹⁸ Schmitt (2007, 1932), *The Concept of the Political*, p.27.

²¹⁹ I am using the word “dignity” in light of a comment Schmitt made in his early work, *Der Wert des Staates*, referenced above, where he states that “*durch die Zurückführung des Wertes des Individuums auf seine Aufgabe und deren Erfüllung ist daher nicht die Würde des Einzelnen vernichtet, sondern erst der Weg zu einer gerechtfertigten Würde gezeigt*” (my trans. “the derivation of the value of the individual from its task and from the fulfilment of that task does not destroy the dignity of the individual, but rather it opens up the possibility of a justified dignity in the first place”). See Schmitt (1916), *Der Wert des Staates*, p.108. This citation serves as a challenge to Mehring, mentioned previously, who has argued that this early text represents the crux of Schmitt’s “anti-individualist credo”, see above, p.86.

individual voices and interests be properly represented within them. Thus, I conclude that Schmitt's understanding of politics facilitates an ontology of plural representation, that is, it provides a conceptual framework by which individual units can occupy a whole that is representative of their own being.²²⁰

What is it about Schmitt's understanding of the political that seems to have piqued the interest of Latour? First of all, Latour shares Schmitt's suspicion of general norms. Just as Schmitt envisaged the hegemony of norms as a malaise infecting not just the institutions modern people inhabit, but also the very structure of their thought and behaviour, so Latour diagnoses meta-logic as a contemporary epistemological norm that defines the space modern people inhabit, and yet which prevents them from thinking and acting rationally. That is to say, both Schmitt and Latour identify the modern condition as one in which the operation of politics has been obstructed or blocked in some way by the presence of a universalizing or transcendent normativity. Second, Latour accepts Schmitt's point that, if politics is to be possible at all, then there must be an acknowledgment that acts of negotiation, recruitment and even competitive aggression will take place between actors occupying the same or contiguous space. Of course, Schmitt conceived his definition of politics only in terms of human subjects managing their collective existence within a polity. Latour extends Schmitt's analysis to a different, far broader ontological canvas, incorporating both human and nonhuman actors of different sizes, types and

²²⁰ For a related argument, see Cooney (2015), 'The Priority of Form in Carl Schmitt's Early Theological Perspective', which is an unpublished thesis recently submitted at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Boston, especially her comment that "for Schmitt, the community is *created* by the *will* of a group of people to draw the friend/ enemy distinction and for the group to be willing to fight and die to maintain its own existence", in *ibid*, p.120, original emphasis.

properties. But in each case, this is what I have attempted to describe in terms of agonism. Agonistic relations between actors are the inevitable corollary of an account of the world that is not prematurely framed according to meta-logical norms. As Latour puts it:

Schmitt's choice is terribly clear. Either you agree to tell foes from friends, and then you engage in politics, sharply defining the borderlines of wars—'wars about what the world is made of'—or you shy away from waging wars and having enemies, but then you *do away with* politics itself.²²¹

It is this positive deployment of the word political that Latour seeks to redeem in his work. This explains his claim, which he made in our personal interview in 2014, that the task of rational thought is to trace “the *political* dimension of the movements of actors in the world”.²²²

Latour's use of the term political in this sense is distinctive, even within the field of continental philosophy.²²³ It is true that he does address the subject of politics in a more conventional sense at various places in his work,²²⁴ and in a few articles he

²²¹ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.105, original emphasis.

²²² Appendix, p.366.

²²³ It is true that some recent continental philosophy has attempted to construct an anti-normative or anti-essentialist notion of politics and the political. See Sluga (2014), *Politics and the Search for the Common Good*. However, I would argue that, because it fails to see how agonistic relations between political actors might be constitutive of an ontology of representation, continental philosophy has also viewed the term politics with suspicion as that which is necessarily reductive of plurality and even democracy, preferring to identify the meaning of politics as an internal play of difference that holds in abeyance the final coming-to-be of a “people”. See for example Nancy (1991, 1983), *The Inoperative Community*; Rancière (1999, 1995), *Disagreement: Philosophy and Politics*, p.87 ff.; Bosteels (ed.) (2016, 2013), *What is a People?*, especially the essay supplied by Badiou. See Badiou (2016, 2013), ‘Twenty-Four Notes on the Uses of the Word *People*’. This is contrary to the constructive understanding of the term I have advanced above.

²²⁴ Latour (2016), *TGE*; Latour (2017), fr. *OA*; Latour (2018, forthcoming), *PTPP*.

has published commenting upon the recent Brexit vote and the election of President Trump.²²⁵ However, in the chapters that follow, I will make use of the term in this broader, ontological register as referring to “the *political* dimension of the movements of actors in the world”.²²⁶ In particular, it is this use of the term that I will employ when develop Latour’s work for what I will call a political theology.

In conclusion, then, I would like to suggest that Schmitt’s concept of the political, which I have attempted to describe in terms of an ontology of plural representation, provides a frame by which to understand Latour’s definition of rationality and its relation to the plural actors who compose or construct it through their own activity. To understand rationality as arising through the operation of politics, defined in this way, is to understand it as being closely connected with the immanent realm of actors and events, and with their ability to define the meaning and significance of their own relational activity, rather than with a universal or generalized norm. The idea of the political therefore clarifies and fills out what I have been referring to as the logistical processes that constitute Latour’s definition of rationality.

Summary of Section One

In this section, I have provided a genealogical, a conceptual and then a contextual analysis of Latour’s definition of rationality. In each case, I have argued that Latour relates his ideas to ontology. I have addressed a number of technical terms found within Latour’s own work. Finally, I suggested that these can be summed up by the

²²⁵ See for example Latour (2017), fr. *ESSE*; Latour (2017), fr. *OA*.

²²⁶ For other statements, see also Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, chapter 12, ‘Invoking the Phantoms of the Political’, pp.327–356; Latour, with Milstein et al (2018), *DESM*, p.356.

terms politics and the political, whose meaning I defined with reference to the work of Carl Schmitt. To refer to the “the *political* dimension of the movements of actors” is to refer to the fully immanent, logistical processes by which actors compose meaning and truth in the world. It is this sense of the term political that will become an ingredient of the political theology of Bruno Latour.

1.2 Rationality and its Expression in the Contemporary Public Space

1.2.1 The Meta-Logical Constitution of Modernity

In the second section of this chapter, I will consider how Latour envisages the two contrasting definitions of rationality identified above (logistics and meta-logic) as operating in the contemporary world. To do so, I will address two concepts that are well-known to readers of his work, namely, “modernity” and “nonmodernity”. I will argue that Latour uses these terms to depict the form of society that will ensue when one or the other of these modes of rationality prevails.

I will begin with the concept of modernity. This is a prominent theme in Latour’s 1991 book *We Have Never Been Modern*,²²⁷ which is probably his most celebrated and widely-read work—perhaps even, in the words of Graham Harman, “the most important philosophical text that has been published since the Second World War”.²²⁸ Although it derives from what might be called the middle phase of his career, I take this book to be the clearest and fullest statement by Latour of what modernity is and how it functions. I will therefore address it at some length in what

²²⁷ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*.

²²⁸ Harman, with Picard (2016), ‘Interview’, p.25. See also similar statements in Harman (2009), *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, p.57; Conway (2015), ‘Back Down to Earth’, p.4.

follows.

What does Latour mean when he refers to modernity in this book? The majority critical assumption has been that he has in mind “a single geopolitical entity”, such that moderns and modern people might be taken as merely a cipher for those inhabiting “Europe”, “the West” or some other territorial area.²²⁹ However, this is a reductive reading. First, it disregards Latour’s own clarification that the concept should be taken as having “elastic borders”.²³⁰ The moderns are not to be taken as a group of people defined according to nationality, ethnicity, race, history or culture, nor is modernity to be taken as something that “possesses a recordable time period and an initial geographical location”.²³¹ Second, the assumption fails to appreciate the register in which Latour is deploying the term, which is epistemological. A modern is one whose cognitive “profile”²³² is meta-logical, that is, one whose ideology or worldview is framed by a transcendent norm that is discontinuous with the material and historical conditions of the world down-below. Modernity, then, is simply the name for the form of society or social existence that derives from this ideology or worldview.

Latour argues that this understanding of modernity corresponds with ideas developed in early modern and Enlightenment political theory. In particular, he has in

²²⁹ Dalby (2003), ‘Geopolitical Identities: Arctic Ecology and Global Consumption’, p.193. See also Elam (1999), ‘Living Dangerously with Bruno Latour in a Hybrid World’.

²³⁰ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, pp.8, 14.

²³¹ Giddens (1990), *The Consequences of Modernity*, p.1.

²³² Latour (1999), *PH*, p.277.

mind works such as Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des loix*.²³³ He reads these works as attempts to provide a new form of regulation for human society. This regulation would be based on "an epistemological separation of powers": the *logos* of nature, as described by the emerging discipline of the natural sciences, would be differentiated from the world of human social, political and religious affairs.²³⁴ This separation then became the rationale by which modern society would be organised. Hence, Latour refers to these works as initiating what he calls a "constitution" for modernity.²³⁵ This constitution should be understood in the abstract as an unwritten and yet potent codification of an ideology and worldview. Latour argues that this constitution has persisted to the present day. He also argues that it has caused the perpetuation and reification of certain asymmetrical and even hegemonic power structures within human society.

In what follows I will attempt to describe some of the configurations of modernity that Latour identifies, as well as his subtle diagnosis of how they function. The first revolves around the category of nature. To illustrate it, Latour makes reference to the following maxim: "it is not men who make nature: nature has always existed and has always already been there".²³⁶ Within modernity, nature is designated as something that is independent of the contingent situation of human affairs that pertains in the world down-below. As a consequence, nature becomes the privileged repository of knowledge that is "external, unified, de-animated and therefore

²³³ For Hobbes, see Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.18 ff. For Montesquieu, see Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.10.

²³⁴ Latour (2004), *PN*, p.91.

²³⁵ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.13; see also Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.9.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, p.30.

undisputable”.²³⁷ This concept of nature aligns closely with the understanding of the world nurtured by early modern science, with its promulgation of the notion of “inert matter” that will act consistently when isolated and studied.²³⁸ Its initiator was the seventeenth-century scientist Robert Boyle, who was able to assemble in his laboratory a strictly-regulated experimental apparatus that purported to demonstrate that nature has always existed and that it can be relied upon to act in the same way every time it is examined.²³⁹ In contemporary parlance, we might refer to ‘the law of nature’ whose operation is assumed to be certain and predictable in every case, precisely because this law is supposed to be distinct from the contingent world of human affairs. In the previous section, I showed how Latour’s early research project allowed him to dispute this epistemology of science. But the argument he now develops is that this concept of nature has come to structure human society itself. If a claim to meaning or truth is associated with the realm of nature, it will accrue to itself by proxy the same values of normativity, apodictic certainty and cause-and-effect that are assumed to pertain to it. The modern worldview, buttressed by its appeal to nature, thus claims for itself the status of transcendent authority. By extension, the moderns are able to critique the worldviews of those who are not modern, since these by implication must be limited by the various biases and inflections of the culturally and ideologically-embedded human perspective.

²³⁷ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.25.

²³⁸ Latour (2007), *CWMB*. Latour’s argument here would be challenged by intellectual historians who understand early modern science as developing in continuity with the worldview that came before, rather than in rupture with it. See for example Harrison (2007), *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*.

²³⁹ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.15 ff. For further analysis of Boyle and the origins of the natural scientific method in early modern Europe in these terms, see Shapin (1998), ‘Placing the View from Nowhere: Historical and Sociological Problems in the Location of Science’.

A second configuration of modernity revolves around the category of society and human social existence. This functions in an equivalent way. To illustrate it, Latour cites the maxim: “human beings, and only human beings, are the ones who construct society and freely determine their own destiny”.²⁴⁰ Instead of the realm of nature, this time it is the social world of human beings that is endowed with the values of normativity, apodictic certainty and cause-and-effect. Latour traces this idea to the work of Thomas Hobbes who, by defining political power as vested in a sovereign who was representative of the voices of the entire citizen-body, laid the groundwork by which humans were able to perceive themselves as legislators of a fixed and universal social organisation, and thus of their own destinies.²⁴¹ Latour suggests that a similar gesture can be identified in fields as varied as sociology, psychology and ethnography, wherever the behaviour of individual human actors is subsumed by an explanatory macro narrative of this sort. The modern worldview, buttressed by its appeal to the concept of society and the social, thus avails itself of an authority that is equally as powerful as that secured by appeal to the concept of nature.

For Latour, modernity thus enacts a quasi law-like separation of the natural sciences and the human, social or political sciences, a divide to which corresponds two transcendent epistemological categories: “Nature” and “Society”.²⁴² Modernity

²⁴⁰ Ibid, p.30.

²⁴¹ Ibid, p.15 ff. Latour’s references to Boyle and Hobbes are developed in dialogue with Shapin & Schaffer (1985), *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*.

²⁴² Latour capitalizes these words in order to indicate their connection with transcendence and their artificial removal by modern people from the ontology of actors and events that pertains in the real world.

does not consist in the triumph of one of these categories over the other. Rather, the ingenuity of the modern constitution consists in the way it manages to deploy them both in the form of a mutually-reinforcing lock, “alternating its source of power by moving directly from pure natural force to pure social force, and vice versa”.²⁴³ Since they can refer their epistemology to transcendence in either direction, modern people are able to claim that their account of the world, and theirs alone, has been liberated from the taint of immanence, and so can lay claim to universal application.

Latour’s critique of modernity is therefore a critique of its exercise of power. To be modern is to self-identify as an “emancipated” person,²⁴⁴ authorized to “debunk” or “denounce” others.²⁴⁵ It is to understand oneself as being “the inhabitant of a transcendent level”, which is a vantage-point from which “to dominate the poor wretches living in the world *down-below*, who are mired in superstition and belief”.²⁴⁶ It is tempting to read Latour’s argument here through the lens of post-colonial critique.²⁴⁷ Indeed, he reports that he was first alerted to the power relations encoded in modernity during a research project he conducted in *Côte d’Ivoire* on labour relations between native Ivorians and French factory owners,²⁴⁸ as well as by

²⁴³ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.34.

²⁴⁴ See Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.9. For an analysis of Latour’s concept of emancipation, see Watkin (2016), *French Philosophy Today: New Figures of the Human*, pp.173–174.

²⁴⁵ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.43 ff.

²⁴⁶ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.421, original emphasis.

²⁴⁷ See for example Verran (2002), ‘A Postcolonial Moment in Science Studies: Alternative Firing Regimes of Environmental Scientists and Aboriginal Landowners’.

²⁴⁸ During an assignment to *Côte d’Ivoire*, between the years 1975–1977, Latour was engaged by the French governmental department ‘ORSTOM’, now known as *l’institut de recherche pour le développement*, to report on the reasons why native Ivorians were not being promoted to management positions in French-owned factories in the post-independence environment. See Latour (2012), fr. *PPE*, p.117; Latour (2013), *BOI*,

reading the work of French post-colonial theorist Marc Augé.²⁴⁹ However, Latour's analysis of the asymmetrical relations of power encoded within modernity applies more broadly than merely to the (perceived) exceptionalism of European, American or western societies vis-à-vis the developing world. His ideas are better understood in Foucauldian terms as pertaining to myriad social, cultural and institutional situations.²⁵⁰

The epistemological categories that Latour has identified are examples of meta-logic. They cause the pluralist ontology of the world down-below to be unified before its constituent parts have been represented. As a shorthand, he often refers to the “political epistemology” of modernity.²⁵¹ This encapsulates Latour's understanding of modernity as an ideology or worldview that imposes reductive categories upon the plurality of the world, which is an operation that serves the interests of a minority group of people over the remainder.

The idea of political epistemology is flexible enough to be deployed as a heuristic for analysis of other aspects of the contemporary world. For example, Latour shows how the unity of capitalist logic and the teleology of capitalist history functions as a transcendent epistemological category equivalent to those described

pp.289–290. See also Schmidgen (2012), ‘The Materiality of Things? Bruno Latour, Charles Péguy and the History of Science’, p.24.

²⁴⁹ Augé (1975), *Théorie des pouvoirs et idéologie: études de cas en Côte d'Ivoire*.

²⁵⁰ For an overview of Foucault's definition of power, with bibliographical references, see Hoffman (2015), *Foucault and Power: The Influence of Political Engagement on Theories of Power*. For an attempt to juxtapose Latourian and Foucauldian notions of power, see Pyyhtinen & Tamminen (2001), ‘We Have Never Been Only Human: Foucault and Latour on the Question of the *Anthropos*’.

²⁵¹ Latour (2015), *FF*, p.5, and many examples throughout his work.

above. He develops this analysis in the *Inquiry*, where he refers to global capitalism as “the Second Nature”.²⁵² This title is intended to indicate its functional equivalence with the concept of “Nature” as described above. The idea is as follows: for Latour, the ideology of neoliberalism has caused the operation of global capital to be elevated to the same order as that of inert matter: both are taken as fixed and obligatory realities that are entirely independent of the contingent behaviour of human beings in the world down-below. To illustrate this, he is fond of citing the quip of Frederick Jameson: “nowadays it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism”.²⁵³ Just like the concept of “Nature”, then, global capitalism has become the *de facto* metaphysical backdrop to all human activity: instead of the laws of nature, there are the laws of economics or the law of market forces whose operation is perceived to be just as immutable, just as necessary and just as fixed as the operation of gravity upon a falling object. The choices available to *homo oeconomicus* are framed by the idea that, come what may, the “iron laws” of the economy must prevail.²⁵⁴ The idea of the “*oeconomia*”²⁵⁵ as representing the fully rational and obligatory order of things has a long intellectual heritage, deriving from the Stoic idea of the *cosmos* “as that which is economized by divine providence or by

²⁵² Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.383 ff.

²⁵³ Jameson (2003), ‘Future City’, p.76. For his references to this statement, see Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 6, p.129; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.117.

²⁵⁴ Latour acknowledges examples of critique and protest against the hegemony of neoliberalism, but does not concur that these will be able to overturn the neoliberal consensus, precisely because they have not yet addressed global capitalism as an epistemological category. See Latour (2014), *AC*, pp.6–8. For a popular-level introduction to neoliberal critique and protest, see Monbiot (2016), *How Did We Get Into This Mess?: Politics, Equality, Nature*.

²⁵⁵ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.451. See also Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.4 ff.

nature herself”.²⁵⁶ It finds contemporary expression in post-Heideggerian critiques of the technologized global economy as a “supercomputer” that has become supervenient over the human beings whose interests it is supposed to serve.²⁵⁷ Latour shows how the “*oikonomia*” is another iteration of the political epistemology of modernity since it functions to depoliticize the plural world in an equivalent way to the concepts of “Nature” and “Society”.²⁵⁸

Whichever category is in view, Latour’s core point is that an artificial form of epistemological organisation is imposed upon the actors inhabiting the world down-below. A mode of rationality is specified that is not connected with the logistical mechanisms of actors and events described above. Modernity therefore causes a “purification” of the *logos* of the world.²⁵⁹ This can be depicted in the following way:

²⁵⁶ Leshem (2013), ‘*Oikonomia* in the Age of Empires’, p.37.

²⁵⁷ See Mirowski (2014), *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. For a history of this idea, see Slobodian (2018), *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*. See also the genealogical analysis of the “sovereign market” in Pabst (2010), ‘Modern Sovereignty in Question: Theology, Democracy and Capitalism’, p.583 ff. This is the theme of a short treatise co-written by Latour analysing the global economy in Tardean terms. See Latour, with Lépinay (2009), *SPI*.

²⁵⁸ My point here is echoed in McClellan (1996), ‘The Economic Consequences of Bruno Latour’, although that article does not provide sufficient exegetical warrant for how its ideas relate to Latour’s work.

²⁵⁹ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, pp.2, 40, and various places.

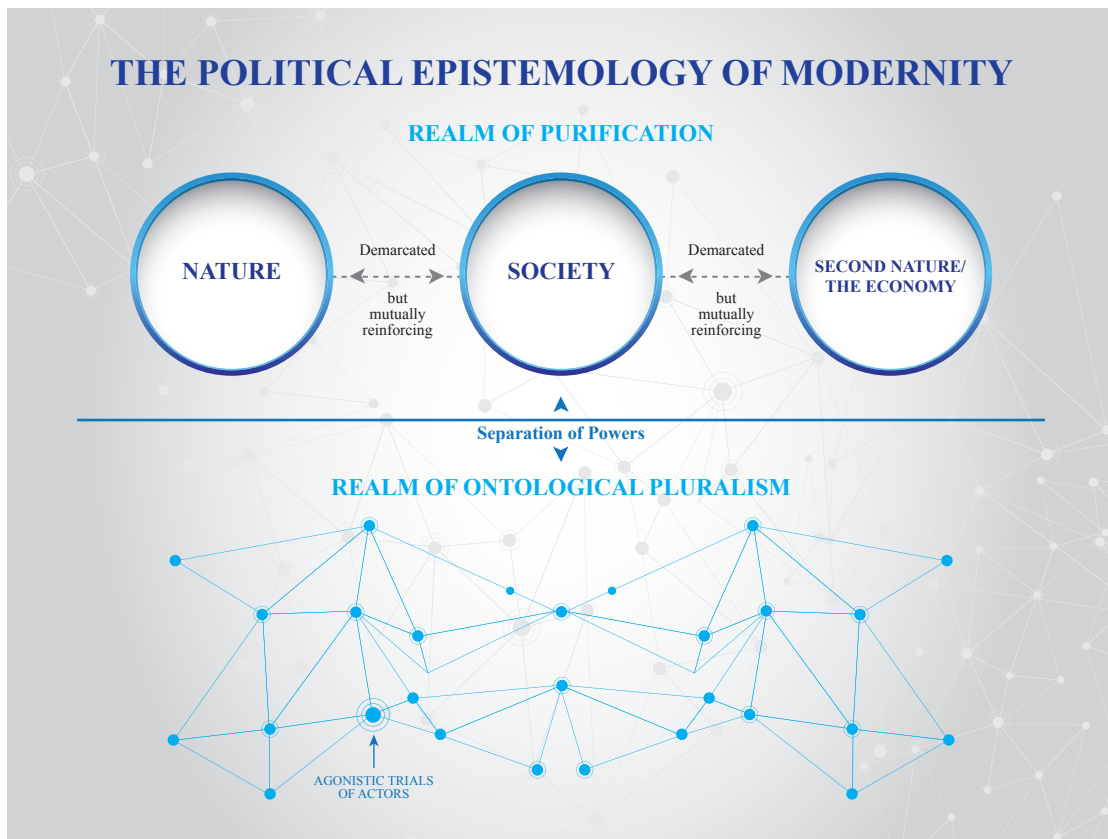


Figure 1: Representation of the political epistemology of modernity.²⁶⁰

The top half of the diagram depicts the meta-logical epistemological categories generated within modernity: the “realm of purification”. The bottom half depicts the hybrid reality that subtends these categories: the “realm of ontological pluralism”. The two halves are divided by a line. This represents the “separation of powers” enacted and enforced by the modern constitution. This structure is crucial for an understanding of Latour’s work. In the following chapter, I will go on to subject it to analysis in terms of the theological category of transcendence.

²⁶⁰ This diagram has been modified from one originally provided in Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.11, figure 1.3.

1.2.2 Modernity as a Historical Phenomenon

Latour's idea of modernity can be evaluated as a concrete historical phenomenon. By doing so, it can be compared with other accounts of modernity that have been offered by intellectual historians, social theorists and theologians.

In this part, I will advance two arguments in particular. First, I will argue that the concept of modernity as Latour understands it should not be taken as being strictly coincident with a particular historical moment or periodization; rather, it is better appreciated as a framework by which different periods of world history can be analysed in parallel. Second, I will argue that modernity understood in this way provides a corrective to Christian theologies of *lapsus*, where the modern world is understood as representing a falling-away from an original, pristine sacrality that had existed before. This will lay the groundwork for the interpretation of Latour's work that I will advance in the following chapter.

The standard reading of Latour's concept of modernity has tended to assume that its origin is found in the early modern period of European history.²⁶¹ This would seem to be warranted by Latour's own reading of Boyle and Hobbes as being emblematic of the advent of modernity: these two are heralded as "the inventors of the modern world".²⁶² However, his handling of the concept allows modernity not merely to be plotted as a single moment of rupture on a historical timeline. Rather, modernity can now be understood as describing an epistemological "front" whose prevalence has been more apparent at certain times in history than at others, and

²⁶¹ See for example Elam (1999), 'Living Dangerously with Bruno Latour in a Hybrid World'.

²⁶² Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.27.

whose distribution might be unevenly spread across different human societies at any given moment.²⁶³ This raises the possibility that the concept can be applied as a flexible diagnostic of different periods of world history addressed in parallel, wherever these display an equivalent epistemological structure.

This point can be illustrated by turning to accounts of modernity that have been developed elsewhere. Just like Latour, these identify modernity in terms of its epistemological structure. However, they offer different genealogies. This demonstrates the broad application of the conceptual framework that Latour himself has mapped out.

A first example is the work of intellectual historian Stephen Toulmin, especially his 1990 book *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*.²⁶⁴ Toulmin argues that at the end of the sixteenth century “European attitudes underwent a drastic transformation”, one that marked a transition into an entirely new worldview and ideology.²⁶⁵ This was the advent of modernity. Prior to this time, western Europe had been characterised by an epistemology that was closely connected to the material and historical world. Toulmin calls this a “general and demarcated mode of rationality that was universal across a whole society” and claims that it was embodied above all in the humanist writings of Erasmus, Rabelais, Palissy and Montaigne.²⁶⁶ He suggests that this pre-modern mode of rationality was characterised by two features. First, it was “pluralistic”, which means that it was sensitive to the

²⁶³ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, pp.120–122.

²⁶⁴ Toulmin (1990), *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.44.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.92.

distribution of meaning and truth across multiple discourses, including natural philosophy, religion, law, rhetoric, and so on.²⁶⁷ Pre-modern society treated the complexity and heterogeneity of the world, as embodied in the voices of various actors, not as a source of confusion to be ordered and overcome, but as the crucible of rationality itself. Second, this pre-modern mode of rationality was content not to stipulate any form of “meta-narrative”.²⁶⁸ Its epistemology was “local and time-bound”,²⁶⁹ interested in “thick descriptions” of the empirical world,²⁷⁰ and amenable to refinement and correction by the input of new events and experiences.

Toulmin identifies the transition into modernity as taking place between the years 1590 and 1640. At that time, “the focus of intellectual attention turned away from the humane preoccupations of the late sixteenth century, and moved in directions more rigorous, or even more dogmatic, than those the Renaissance writers pursued”.²⁷¹ This new mode of rationality was interested in formal logic and in the apodictic certainty of permanent truths. It sought a definition of nature and ethics in terms of general principles and axioms, rather than in terms of “practice”²⁷² or lived situations. For Toulmin, this transition was embodied in the contrasting intellectual projects of Montaigne and Descartes, the humanism of the former emblematically giving way to the decontextualized rationalism of the latter.²⁷³ Its trigger was the

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p.24.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, p.53.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, pp.55, 27.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, p.43.

²⁷¹ Ibid, p.23.

²⁷² Ibid, p.61.

²⁷³ Ibid, p.42.

political crisis caused by the degeneration of the European continent into wars for the definition of true religion. In the face of existential uncertainty, Toulmin argues that European society restructured itself around “shared assumptions about rationality”: disputes that had previously escalated in highly antagonistic directions, resulting in continent-wide religious wars, could now be contained and managed as “theoretical arguments that pertained to a quasi-geometrical certainty or necessity”.²⁷⁴

For both Toulmin and Latour the transition into modernity is found in the attempt to organize or regulate the contingency of the plural world.²⁷⁵ That Toulmin plausibly is able to propose an earlier historical moment in which that purification occurred suggests that Latour’s concept of modernity can be applied to different periods of world history. Whilst the date can be debated, the basis form of the transition is established.

Another account of modernity that can be considered in parallel with that of

²⁷⁴ Ibid, pp.9, 20. Toulmin even ventures a single year within this period as a candidate for the point of transition into modernity. The date he has in mind is 1610. This was the year in which king Henri IV of France, “*le bon roi Henri*”, was assassinated in Paris by Ravaillac, thus prematurely ending his attempted political programme of pluralistic religious tolerance, and paving the way for the wars of religion that would blight the continent in the thirty years that followed. After that event, Toulmin argues, it became clear that an alternative means to secure peace in Europe would be required. Henri’s political initiative gave way to a broader and much more subtle intellectual programme, namely, the promulgation of a new definition of what constituted a rational account of the world, one that would ultimately be supervised by the principles of Cartesianism. For Toulmin, the year 1610 is doubly apt because this was also the year in which a young Descartes, then a student at the Jesuit *Collège Royal Henry-Le-Grand* at La Flèche, composed his *Henriade* (although the attribution of this poem to Descartes himself must remain somewhat speculative, as Toulmin concedes), for which see *ibid*, p.55.

²⁷⁵ It should be noted that Latour himself has read Toulmin’s book and cites it approvingly in relation to his own work. See Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, pp.239–247; Latour (2015), *PREV* (audio). In an earlier interview he refers to Toulmin’s book as “*un livre un peu inconnu mais tout à fait étonnant*” (my trans. “a little-known but quite astonishing book”), in Latour, with Godmer & Smajda (2012), fr. *PPE*, p.123.

Latour is the magisterial intellectual history proposed by Stephen Gaukroger, whose projected five volumes are still uncompleted at the time of writing.²⁷⁶ For Gaukroger, the transition into modernity likewise revolves around the assumption of a mode of rationality that “assimilates all cognitive values to scientific ones”.²⁷⁷ Gaukroger is not seeking to disparage the achievement of the natural sciences in providing reliable information about the world out-there, information that was subsequently of great use to the improvement of human society via engineering, technology, medicine, and so on. Rather, he is suggesting that with the advent of modernity all other modes of enquiry that had cognitive aspirations, such as metaphysics, political economy, law, history and theology, found themselves subordinated to this unified, scientific explanation of reality.²⁷⁸ Just like Latour, then, Gaukroger identifies modernity as inhering in an act of “purification”. But his historical reconstruction of modernity is again different, since Gaukroger commences with the development of natural philosophy in thirteenth-century Europe.

Even deeper timelines can be discerned. For example, in his studies of ancient near eastern history, the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann has proposed the

²⁷⁶ Gaukroger (2006), *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210–1685, volume I*; Gaukroger (2012), *The Collapse of Mechanism and the Rise of Sensibility: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1680–1760, volume II*; Gaukroger (2016), *The Natural and the Human: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1739–1841, volume III*.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, vol.1, p.11.

²⁷⁸ Gaukroger has co-published a book showing how maps and pictorial representations of the world at this time served to reflect this unified explanation of reality. See Ait-Touati & Gaukroger (2015), *Le Monde en images: voir, représenter, savoir, de Descartes à Leibniz*.

occurrence of an epistemological shift that he calls “the Mosaic distinction”.²⁷⁹ He describes the transition from a mode of rationality that was pluralistic, integrative and coextensive with the institutional, linguistic and cultural conditions of the society in which it took shape, to a mode of rationality that was monolithic, concerned with the differentiation and qualification of different claims to truth, and thus conducive to forms of hegemony and exclusionary violence over dissenting groups. Assmann associates this shift with the insistence on the absolute truth of YHWH-istic religion. However, he argues that the advent and development of Judeo-Christian monotheism is only a paradigmatic example of earlier moments in world history.²⁸⁰ He draws attention to the religious reforms of Akhenaten, carried out in the period of the Egyptian New Kingdom, which he argues constituted a systematic attempt to erase devotion to the traditional pantheon of Egyptian deities in favour of the cult worship of one deity alone, namely, Aten.²⁸¹ The “principle of plurality” that had informed Egyptian cosmology before this time found itself replaced by a form of monotheistic worship that was stipulated and enforced by sovereign diktat:

In that stroke, man became emancipated from his symbiotic relationship with the world and developed, in partnership with the One God, who dwells outside the world yet turned towards it, into an autonomous—or rather theonomous—individual.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ See Assmann (1996), ‘The Mosaic Distinction: Israel, Egypt, and the Invention of Paganism’.

²⁸⁰ Assmann has strongly averred that his concept of the “Mosaic distinction” is not primarily intended as a comment upon or censure of Jewish monotheism. He actually proposes that both modes of rationality are juxtaposed in the Hebrew Bible itself, the former being represented by the “P” redactional material and the latter by the “D” material, and that the Judeo-Christian religion therefore “bears witness [...] to the conflicts that arose in the transition from one mode of rationality to the other” in Assmann (2010, 2005), *The Price of Monotheism*, p.9.

²⁸¹ See Assmann (2014), *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change*.

²⁸² Assmann (2010, 2005), *The Price of Monotheism*, p.42.

For Assmann, the Akhenaten religious reforms, and the mode of subjectivity they imposed upon the population, were equivalent in form to the epistemological transition that created modern man.²⁸³ “The Mosaic distinction” therefore refers to any historical moment in which an epistemological regulation of this sort is enforced upon human society: the connection between rationality and a pluralist ontology is severed, and human existence is framed instead with reference to a transcendent meta-logical principle. Latour himself has cited Assmann’s work in various places as a means of clarifying what he means by modernity.²⁸⁴

There is no doubt that Latour’s understanding of modernity corresponds in significant ways to the conceptualization of ideas that took place in early modern and Enlightenment political theory.²⁸⁵ But I have also argued that Latour’s concept of modernity can be understood in broader terms as describing an epistemological “front” whose impact has structured human social existence in different ways at different historical moments. I have illustrated this with reference to intellectual histories that identify an equivalent transitional moment, and yet ascribe it to an earlier or later historical period. Finally, this allows me to use Latour’s conceptualization of modernity to offer a corrective to certain intellectual histories

²⁸³ See *ibid*, chapter 2, “Monotheism: A Counter-Religion to What?”, pp.31–35. Peter Sloterdijk has used Assmann’s concept of “the Mosaic distinction” to develop his own account of western intellectual history, which he envisages as taking its cue from (what he calls) “the Sinai schema”. See Sloterdijk (2015, 2013), *In the Shadow of Mount Sinai: A Footnote on the Origins and Changing Forms of Total Membership*, p.25 ff. See also Sloterdijk (2009b, 2005), *God’s Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms*.

²⁸⁴ Latour (2008), fr. *STVPT*, p.11; Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.470; Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, pp.11–12; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, pp.163–165. See also Appendix, p.372.

²⁸⁵ See also the arguments made in Lilla (2007), *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West*, who traces modernity to a tradition of political philosophy that he locates in “the children of Hobbes” (in particular Locke and Hume).

deriving from within the discipline of theology itself. During the twentieth-century, the idea of modernity as a singular moment of rupture and transition was used by some Christian theologians to propose “a genealogy of *lapsus*”.²⁸⁶ These narratives understood modernity as a falling-away from an original, pristine sacrality that had existed before. French theologians of *ressourcement*, especially Henri de Lubac, drew upon Patristic sources to uncover an original purity of thought and expression that had supposedly been corrupted in the early modern period of European history by the advent of a theory of “pure nature”, a way of thinking about the created order that was underpinned by a mechanistic understanding of potential and emergence.²⁸⁷ For de Lubac, this caused the full dimensions of the ontological canvas of the world to be curtailed and diminished, especially with regard to forces that could not straightforwardly be assimilated to this mode of rationality. This in turn caused the discipline of theology to be dislocated from its proper mode of enquiry, facilitating a form of metaphysical speculation that de Lubac considered to be divorced from the material and historical conditions of real existence.

Latour’s work allows for the idea of a *lapsus*. But he does not advocate such a tight or singular reconstruction of when and where this *lapsus* occurred, as if the advent of modernity could be ascribed to a discrete or delimited moment in the history of European society. I will explore this point further in the next chapter, where I will advance a more strictly theological interpretation of modernity. This will

²⁸⁶ Ward (2016), *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I*, p.68.

²⁸⁷ De Lubac (2007, 1944), *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*; de Lubac (2010, 1946), *Surnaturel: études historiques*. For a survey of de Lubac’s theory of “pure nature” and the way he envisaged this as being transmitted into modern thought, see Flipper (2017), ‘Henri de Lubac and Political Theology’, especially pp.427–429.

not concede a simple narrative of *lapsus*. Nor will I suggest that, in order to counter or reverse the effects of modernity, some form of pre-modern Christian theology needs to be recovered or retrieved. On the contrary, I will argue that Latour's concept of modernity must be understood as a diagnostic or heuristic tool that invites us to consider the extent to which we ourselves might be partakers of the mode of rationality that is distinctively modern.²⁸⁸ The theological interpretation I will go on to develop will be framed in these terms.

1.2.3 The Logistical Constitution of Nonmodernity

There is no doubt that Latour employs the concept of modernity prominently in his work from the time of his 1991 text *We Have Never Been Modern* and right up to the present day. Recently, however, he has offered an account of the structure and development of his work in somewhat different terms:

For twenty years or so I have really been interested in the following question: if we have never been modern, then what has happened to us?²⁸⁹

Latour's analysis of modernity should therefore be understood not as an end in itself, but as a necessary preliminary to something else. He makes strong claims elsewhere

²⁸⁸ Latour makes this clear in a programmatic statement in *Face à Gaïa*, where he writes: “on m'accuse toujours de ne pas préciser les limites exactes du peuple des Modernes, dans quel pays ils vivent et à quelle époque. J'espère que l'on comprend maintenant pourquoi on ne peut donner de réponses à ces questions”. My trans. “I'm always being accused of not specifying the precise limits of the Modern people, or what country they live in, and in what period. I hope it will now be clear why these questions cannot be answered” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.208.

²⁸⁹ Latour (2011), *RES*, p.304.

that this has been his intention all along.²⁹⁰

Latour's critique of modernity does not culminate in a call to revert to a pre-modern state of affairs, but rather to embrace a situation he calls "nonmodernity".²⁹¹ Nonmodernity is characterised by an entirely different set of "co-ordinates" regarding the constitution of rationality.²⁹² Its *logos* would never exceed the ontology of the world it describes and the political activities of the actors who inhabit it. Modernity and nonmodernity therefore name the difference between rationality as meta-logic and rationality as logistics. Their juxtaposition produces what might be called a chiaroscuro effect: the form of one is illuminated by contrast with the other, as well as the gradations of transition between them. And just as was the case with modernity, nonmodernity also functions as a heuristic: we are invited not to engage in a precise historical reconstruction, but rather to be self-reflexive about the extent to which we and the society of which we are a part might be partakers and vehicles of that mode of rationality.

Nonmodernity comes into view where the internal contradictions of modernity begin to be discerned. For although it is true to say that the political epistemology of modernity structures and frames the ideology and worldview of contemporary western society in general, Latour also proposes the thesis that "we

²⁹⁰ See for example Latour (2012), fr. *UFLF*, p.950; Latour (2013), *BOI*, pp.287–287; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.10.

²⁹¹ There is some evidence that Latour employed the term "amodern" in work that preceded *We Have Never Been Modern*. See for example Latour (1990), *PNSA*. This term can be taken as being synonymous with the term "nonmodern". Latour has preferred the latter term from that time and hence it will be employed here.

²⁹² Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.xxvi.

have never truly been modern”.²⁹³ The epistemological categories of modernity give way under close examination of the ontological situation that pertains in reality. The assumption that *our* values are universal and obligatory can no longer be sustained as our understanding of the hybrid world, with its proliferation of actors, each of them contributing a footprint of their own to the emerging totality, increases. Latour marshals a great deal of anthropological and ethnographical research in support of this observation.²⁹⁴ But he also suggests that this is obvious at the level of everyday lived experience. A frequent trope within his work describes the act of opening and reading a newspaper: we immediately note that the issues and debates of contemporary society, whether they pertain to education, economics, science, technology, health, sport, culture, or any other domain of shared human life, derive from a complex and hybrid reality that cannot be reduced into discrete categories of meaning.²⁹⁵ More concretely, Latour also proposes that a world-historical event is drawing attention to the internal contradictions inherent in modernity, thus preparing the ground for an analysis of human existence in a new way. The event he has in

²⁹³ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, chapter 2.14, ‘We Have Never Been Modern’, pp.46–48.

²⁹⁴ Latour frequently cites the work of Andrew Pickering, Edwin Hutchins, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo Kohn and Philippe Descola as showing how the epistemology of contemporary western society is a “purification” of a plural reality that has been intuited more accurately by other groups of people and in other historical periods. See Pickering (1995), *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*; Hutchins (1995), *Cognition in the Wild*; Viveiros de Castro (2009), *Métaphysiques cannibales: lignes d’anthropologie post-structurale*; Kohn (2013), *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*; Descola (2013, 2005), *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Latour explains the importance of these writers to him in Latour (1995), *CES*. Descola, who proposes a series of typologies in which human societies function (naturalism, animism, totemism and analogism), has been an especially important influence. See Latour (2007), *RMAA*; Latour (2009), *PTB*; Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.466; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.42 ff.; Latour (2016), *OOT*, p.6 ff. For studies of Descola’s work in relation to Latour, see Charbonnier (2015), *La fin d’un grand partage: nature et société, de Durkheim à Descola*; Kelly (2014), ‘The Ontological Turn in French Philosophical Anthropology’.

²⁹⁵ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, chapter 1.1, ‘The Proliferation of Hybrids’, pp.1–3. See also Latour (2004), *WCRS*, p.236; Latour (2007), *IDS*, p.6.

mind is the global environmental crisis. I will address this in more detail in my final chapter.²⁹⁶ Paradoxical as it might seem, Latour suggests that the contemporary environmental crisis represents a reason to be optimistic about the future, since (as I will go on to show) it is a moment in history that is compelling human beings to re-evaluate the epistemological categories with which they have been operating up to now. It therefore represents an opportunity “to repair the modernist experience at a very fundamental level”.²⁹⁷

Latour’s analysis of nonmodernity is primarily developed in the *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. In that work, he considers how rationality might be defined without recourse to meta-logic. Once the epistemological categories supplied by modernity have been deconstructed, how might it be possible to “grasp the *logos*”?²⁹⁸ Latour’s argument is that rationality can be understood as supplied by nothing other than the immanent, local and contingent movements of actors in relation to one another. To engage with a nonmodern account of the world is to ask “what rationality beings leave in their wake when we follow their particular trajectory through the numerous networks in which we are able to detect them?”²⁹⁹ Within modernity, then, rationality is understood as deriving from the ontological concept of “being-as-Being”: its *logos* is referred to a realm of Being that is disaggregated from and

²⁹⁶ See below, p.264 ff.

²⁹⁷ Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.462.

²⁹⁸ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.286.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p.16.

transcendent over the world itself.³⁰⁰ But, for Latour, rationality is better understood as deriving from the ontological concept of “being-as-other”: its *logos* is a function of the networked relations of actors. Nonmodernity is the name Latour proposes for this alternative conceptualization of rationality and the rational.

Latour explores articulations of this nonmodern rationality as they occur in different domains of human knowledge. This explains the range of genres associated with his books, a range which at first glance leaves many readers feeling disorientated.³⁰¹ Latour is interested in so many genres of writing because he seeks to subject domains of human knowledge to a subtle reconfiguration. Liberated from the political epistemology of modernity and the meta-logical categories in which they had been previously “corseted”,³⁰² he proposes that the rationality of law, politics, science, technology and religion, to name but a few of domains, might be determined instead by ontological considerations. These can now be conceived as “modes of existence”.³⁰³ Latour borrows this term from the work of French philosopher Étienne Souriau, whose 1943 text *The Different Modes of Existence*, recently translated by myself and published for the first time in English in 2016, explores the underpinning of different domains of human knowledge in terms of ontology.³⁰⁴ Souriau presents

³⁰⁰ Ibid, p.162 ff. For additional descriptions of these two concepts, see also *ibid*, pp.34, 254, 423–425; Latour (2013), *WUCD*, pp.4–5; Latour, with Miranda (2015), *DAHS*, document 1, p.7.

³⁰¹ See above, p.15 ff.

³⁰² Latour (2013), *WUCD*, p.3.

³⁰³ See Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.146; Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.287.

³⁰⁴ Souriau (2016, 1942), *The Different Modes of Existence, followed by ‘On the Work of Art to be Made’*. Latour co-authored with Isabelle Stengers a very long introductory essay to preface the re-publication of this book in French, which is included in my English translation under the title ‘The Sphinx of the Work’. See , for which see *ibid*, pp.11–90. Latour engages with Souriau elsewhere in his work. See Latour (2005), *RS*, p.241, fn.

two ideas that he understands to be compatible and mutually-reinforcing. First, rationality itself arises by means of a process of “instauration”.³⁰⁵ This word describes how meaning is constructed and held-in-place from below by means of a network of entities whose activity is entirely responsible for what is known as fixed and stable in the world. Although the word is proximate to terms such as “invention” and “creation”, Souriau disavows the idea that a vantage-point or elevated situation could be attained from which this network might be organised or surveyed from above. As an early commentator on Souriau’s work points out, the inescapable echo of divine power manifest in the word “creation” is carried over to the Cartesian idea of a “knowing mind” facing a “known object”, an active human consciousness addressing a passive, mute and inert world out-there.³⁰⁶ This becomes the model of cognition bequeathed to modernity itself. Souriau intends the word “instauration” to bypass this echo entirely. But second, and crucially as far as Latour is concerned, having identified the operation of rationality as consisting of a movement from below, Souriau goes on to describe how different domains of human knowledge can nevertheless exist in the world, each of them fully rational in their own right, and recognisable to us as the discourses of law, politics, technology, art, and so on. Souriau refers to these as “modes of existence” to indicate that the form of rationality they manifest is a function of a movement into being. And yet, as “regimes of truth”,

337; Latour (2011), *RES*; Latour, with Damour, Euvé & Sarthou-Lajus (2015), fr. *CMC*, p.70. For critical discussion of Latour in relation to Souriau, see Lacos (2011), ‘Les voies de l’instauration: Souriau chez les contemporaines’; Noske (2015), ‘Towards an Existential Pluralism: Reading through the Philosophy of Étienne Souriau’.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, p.128. See also Souriau (1939), *L’instauration philosophique*. For discussion of Latour’s use of this word, see Appendix, p.370.

³⁰⁶ De Vitrey Maubrey (1985), ‘Étienne Souriau’s Cosmic Vision and the Coming-Into-Its-Own of the Platonic Other’, p.219. For Latour’s comment on this dichotomy, see Latour (2015), *PNDK*.

they are neither arbitrary nor relative.³⁰⁷ By referring to “modes of existence” in his own work, Latour is drawing upon all of these ideas. Aided by Souriau, he seeks to reconcile his commitment to a pluralist ontology, with its emphasis on the responsibility of different actors to forge a representation of the world according to their own irreducible being, with the idea that universal domains of knowledge do exist, each of which is constituted by a particular pathway forged by these actors as they engage in trials with one another. “Each mode has its own way of producing truth”, asserts Latour.³⁰⁸ But what determines a mode as rational in the first place is that it has arisen by means of the logistical processes described above.

Using Souriau’s terminology, Latour identifies religion as one of these “modes of existence”. This sets the scene for his understanding of what religion is and his analysis of how it should function in our contemporary context. For Latour, religion is to be treated as a non-overlapping magisterium, alongside other modes of meaning and truth whose contribution is different but equally warranted. Religion will not provide the same insight into the world as that which is given by the domains of law, politics, technology, art, and so on. But it will provide a contribution that is necessary for a rational perspective on the whole. As Latour puts it, “the correct understanding of rational discourse is not to treat everything in the same dispassionate tone, but to learn how to detect the different tones adjusted to the different situations so as to be able to sing all of them in the right tune”.³⁰⁹ It is precisely this specification of religion that Latour believes has been confused within

³⁰⁷ Latour, with Tresch (2013), *ATANT*, p.303.

³⁰⁸ Latour (2010, 2002), *ML*, p.ix.

³⁰⁹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 2, p.36.

modernity. His intellectual project therefore consists in an attempt to disclose where our categories of thought need to reconnect with the ontological scenography out of which rationality itself arises. Religion will need to be dis-amalgamated from political epistemology, such that its own movement into being can be properly discerned. How this differs from the understanding of religion espoused within the contemporary institutions of religion, and what sort of dialogue this opens up with the discipline of theology itself, will be among the concerns of the following chapters.

Conclusion to Chapter One

In this chapter I have sought to establish a terminological and a conceptual foundation for what is to follow. I have argued that the core agenda of Latour's work is a concern to shift attention away from the categories of meta-logic, and instead towards a mode of rationality that derives from an ontology of actors and events. I proposed to call this activity by the name "politics". This will be the sense of the term I will incorporate into my own advocacy of a "political theology". I then related this to the concepts of modernity and nonmodernity, which I argued are large-scale, societal expressions of the modes of rationality described above.

All this provides a foundation for my engagement with Latour's writing on religion. In the next chapter, I will argue that Latour conceives of the idea of meta-logic in terms of the theological idea of transcendence. As a result, I will develop a critique of modernity itself as a form of religion or religiosity, notwithstanding its claim to be neutral with regard to human ideology and belief, and to be emancipated from any kind of religious particularism or confessionalism. In chapters three and four, I will consider the form of religion that Latour envisages as pertaining within nonmodernity. In each case, I will refer back to the idea of the political as defined

above: Latour's writing about religion, whether critical (chapter two) or prescriptive (chapters three and four), is always framed by the extent to which it is representative of "the *political* dimension of the movements of actors in the world".

CHAPTER TWO

RELIGION AND MODERNITY

Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that Latour defines modernity in terms of its political epistemology. That is to say, he understands modernity as functioning according to meta-logical principles that are unaccountable to the situation of plurality pertaining in the world down below. Modernity is therefore a de-politicizing force because it unifies the being of actors into a whole before these actors have had a chance to represent their own voices and interests as constituent parts of an emerging whole. In this chapter, I wish to examine points of connection between this situation and Latour's writing on religion, in order to consider how the latter might provide a frame by which the former can be understood.

Insofar as the theme of religion has been acknowledged at all, critics have accused Latour of importing a personal religious commitment into his work from the outside, whether in the form of protectionism (the granting of epistemological immunity to the transcendent claims of revealed religion) or in the form of conformism (the accommodation of his intellectual project to a pre-constituted doctrinal or dogmatic system).³¹⁰ However, my approach is quite different. Rather than this deflationary reading, I will argue that Latour deploys the theme of religion carefully and intentionally throughout his work as a way framing his understanding of modernity. But how do these two parts of Latour's work relate to one another? What does Latour mean when he suggests that the political epistemology of modernity is "*profondément religieuse*" in form?³¹¹ He proposes a structural equivalence between meta-logic and a

³¹⁰ See above, p.22.

³¹¹ My trans. "thoroughly religious" in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.215.

certain conceptualization of the idea of transcendence that is religious in form. For Latour, the account of the world that is inculcated within modernity is undergirded by an unwarranted appeal to transcendence. When this is revealed, it is possible to develop a critique of contemporary society, including assumptions and values that modern, secular people often take for granted, as having the form of a covert religion or religiosity.

My objective in this chapter, then, is to describe and evaluate the connection between modernity and Latour's writing on religion. By doing so, I will be focusing on Latour's conceptualization of religion as a negative and neutralizing force in the world. This is an original and productive part of Latour's writing. I believe it is one that deserves greater attention. However, it does not represent his final word on the subject. It is important to bear in mind the turn that will take place in the final two chapters of my study, where I will describe Latour's understanding of the constructive role religion has to play within human society. This chapter thus serves a twofold purpose. It considers religion as a diagnostic tool by which the political epistemology of modernity can be analysed and deconstructed. But it also serves as a foil for the positive description of religion that is to follow in chapters three and four, which will be illuminated by contrast with what has come before.

Chapter Summary

The chapter will proceed in two sections. In the first section, I will describe and evaluate Latour's claim that modernity has the form of a covert religion or religiosity [2.1]. In the second section, I will develop this idea into a critique of certain aspects of contemporary society, proposing that the abstraction of its globalizing approaches, but

also the irruption of burgeoning, nationalist isolationisms and ethnocentrisms that threaten the triumph of globalization itself, can ultimately be traced to this source [2.2].

I will begin my first section by considering what Latour means by his intriguing phrase “the crossed-out God of the moderns, relegated to the side-lines” [2.1.1]. This will require some retrieval and collation of material from different parts of his published work. I will argue that this phrase is the key to understanding how the category of transcendence is leveraged within modernity, which is by means of what I will call theistic transference. I will then stand back a little in order to consider the context in which Latour has developed this idea [2.1.2]. I will distance Latour from some writers within the continental philosophical tradition with whom he is frequently associated, since these necessarily foreclose the religious dimension that Latour has identified as being of such importance. Instead, I will bring his work into dialogue with that of the German-American political theorist Eric Voegelin and, in particular, Voegelin’s concept of “political religion”. I discussed the relevance of Voegelin’s work with Latour in our interview of 2014.³¹² Its importance to him has been confirmed since then in a number of recent publications. I will argue that Voegelin’s concept of political religion provides a tool by which to understand Latour’s ideas. It thus informs and expands his earlier references to “the crossed-out God of the moderns”.

In the second section, I will bring Latour’s analysis to bear more particularly on the situation of contemporary western society. In particular, I will relate it to ideas of space and time. I will argue that contemporary existence inhabits material space and historical time in a way that is artificial and dislocated from reality. This is a function of

³¹² Appendix, pp.372–373.

the leap into transcendence that is at the heart of the political epistemology of modernity. First, I will describe this effect in Latour's own terms [2.2.1]. An important influence here is the work of French philosopher Michel Serres, who was at one point Latour's teacher, the two of them collaborating on a number of occasions throughout the 1990s. Second, I will show how Latour's analysis relates to a number of motifs that are current within contemporary western society and that can be said to encapsulate some of its core values [2.2.2]. I will examine ideas such as "progress", "the secular" and "globalization". Latour's work shows how motifs like these can actually be understood as eschatological, insofar as they import into the present the notion of an end-time that is already known and that will certainly come to pass. The effect of these motifs is to cause the world to be further de-politicized, for it becomes impossible to conceive of the present moment as the crucible of any kind of emergence or change.

2.1 An Analysis of Modernity in Terms of Political Religion

2.1.1 The "Crossed-out God" of Modernity

In order to evaluate the relation between religion and modernity in Latour's work it is necessary to begin with a single phrase: "the crossed-out God of the Moderns".³¹³ Latour employs this phrase prominently in *We Have Never Been Modern*, which is a text dating from 1991, published in English translation two years later.³¹⁴ Strangely enough, it does not occur in any of his published work after that.³¹⁵ However, I believe it is

³¹³ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.13.

³¹⁴ The most important references are found in *ibid*, pp.32–35, 39, 127–128, 138–139, 142.

³¹⁵ This is contrary to the claim made in Blok & Jensen (2012), *Bruno Latour: Hybrid Thoughts in a Hybrid World*, p.71. As if to prove the point, they offer no footnote to substantiate their claim.

crucial to begin with this phrase, not least because it encodes a number of ideas that have been developed by Latour in later works, even if the phrase itself drops out. Latour himself made this point forcefully in our personal interview, conducted in 2014, when he suggested that “this idea has actually been very important to me and provides a point of reference for all my thinking about human existence in the crucible of modernity”.³¹⁶

What, then, does Latour mean when he refers to “the crossed-out God” in that text? Briefly stated, the phrase describes the way in which the political epistemology of modernity deploys the idea of God as a kind of “lock” or “guarantee” upon the account of reality it advances.³¹⁷ It is useful to understand Latour’s argument here in terms of ontotheology. Merold Westphal offers a definition of ontotheology as “epistemological transcendence”, where rational knowledge itself is understood as having been compromised or obscured by appeal to a transcendent being.³¹⁸ This is precisely what Latour identifies as taking place in the postulate of “the crossed-out God”. For him, “the crossed-out God” is a transcendent entity whose being is posited by modern people as a means of regulating what counts as intelligible human experience. It does this by ontologically grounding and theologically legitimating what is given in the world and, by extension, how human beings can meaningfully encounter it. Latour’s terminology is reminiscent of Jean-Luc Marion, who also writes ‘God’ as crossed-out in the form

³¹⁶ Appendix, p.368.

³¹⁷ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.34.

³¹⁸ Westphal (2004), *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul*, p.10 ff.

“Gød”.³¹⁹ Marion in turn is adopting a procedure first offered by Martin Heidegger.³²⁰ In a short text dating from 1955, which he submitted as an open letter to a Festschrift dedicated to Ernst Jünger, and published the following year as a pamphlet under the title ‘*Zur Seinsfrage*’, Heidegger proposed a reflection on the neglected ground of contemporary metaphysics by writing “*das Sein*” as “**Being**”,³²¹ the word being superimposed by a crossing-through that indicates both the presence and the absence of the concept signified.³²² Although Latour does not invoke Heidegger explicitly, and does not mention Marion anywhere,³²³ it is likely that he is making reference to this device when he refers to “the crossed-out God” in his own work. By means of this phrase, Latour is indicating that the political epistemology of modernity can be analysed as an ontotheology. For him, this ontotheology is so embedded and so ubiquitous that it functions as the *de facto* operating principle of modernity, and yet at the same time it is so concealed that it is barely acknowledged as such by those who consider themselves to be modern.

³¹⁹ Marion (2012, 1982), *God Without Being*. See also Marion (2007, 1996), *On the Ego and on God: Further Cartesian Questions*, especially chapter 9, ‘Outline of a History of Definitions of God in the Cartesian Epoch’, pp.161–192.

³²⁰ For a summary of Marion’s relationship to Heidegger’s thought, see Hemming (1995), ‘Reading Heidegger: Is God Without Being? Jean-Luc Marion’s Reading of Martin Heidegger in *God Without Being*’.

³²¹ Heidegger (1998, 1955), ‘On the Question of Being’, p.310.

³²² See Derrida (2016, 2013), *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, p.21 (seminar of 30 November, 1964) and p.224 (seminar of 29 March, 1965). For further analysis of Heidegger’s typology, see Sheehan (1990), ‘Nihilism, Facticity and the Economized Lethe: A Reflection on Heidegger’s *Zur Seinsfrage*’, pp.30–31; Thomson (2006), ‘Ontotheology? Understanding Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of Metaphysics’.

³²³ Although Latour shared a platform with Marion at a recent conference held at *l’Institut Catholique de Paris* in April 2018. See Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*.

To appreciate this argument it will be useful to recap how Latour defines modernity and how he envisages it as functioning. In the previous chapter I described modernity as an epistemological regime that filters its account of reality through the categories of “Nature”, “Society” and “the Second Nature”. These categories are reductive purifications of a complex, hybrid reality that is prior to and in excess of them. And yet, at the same time they are understood as being “external, unified, de-animated and undisputable”, and thus as possessing a reality that is entirely independent of human influence.³²⁴ This enables modern people to claim that their rationality, and hence their values as well, are universal and obligatory. But when these epistemological categories are challenged or come under threat, such that their constructed nature is exposed by leakage of the hybrid reality that lies underneath, modern people have one final card to play: they make appeal to “the crossed-out God”. This device therefore serves to underwrite the entire “constitution” of modernity itself, especially at points of tension where it risks lapsing into incoherence or internal self-contradiction.

What service does “the crossed-out God” provide in this situation? Latour’s argument here is subtle. “The crossed-out God” is envisaged as inhabiting a realm of transcendence that is external, unified, de-animated and thus indisputable. This entity therefore becomes an emblem or paradigm of that which is non-constructed by humans. Latour offers various formulations to convey this function. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, he suggests that what is essential to “the crossed-out God” is the quality of aseity ascribed to it—or, to put it in more familiar terms, that its existence is understood as having nothing to do with “the handiwork of man”.³²⁵ Elsewhere, he describes this

³²⁴ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.25.

³²⁵ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.22.

entity as “the *acheiropoietic* God”.³²⁶ *Acheiropoietia* are religious icons that are said to have come into existence “without being made by human hands”: the phrase therefore points to the action of a divine being that lies wholly outside the realm of the human world and its processes, but who is able to interrupt them at will.³²⁷ Located in the realm of absolute transcendence in this way, “the crossed-out God” cannot be dismissed as a construction or fabrication of human beings, precisely because it is envisaged as being ontologically distinct from the realm of immanence in which human agency is implicated. By associating their “constitution” with this entity by proxy, modern people secure for themselves the same values of externality, unification, de-animation and indisputability that are supposed to belong to its being. This can be represented as follows:

³²⁶ See Latour, with Weibel (eds.) (2002), *IBIW*, p.22; Latour (2010), *MCFG*, p.78; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.298; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.168.

³²⁷ Kidwell (2016), *The Theology of Craft and the Craft of Work: From Tabernacle to Eucharist*, p.65.

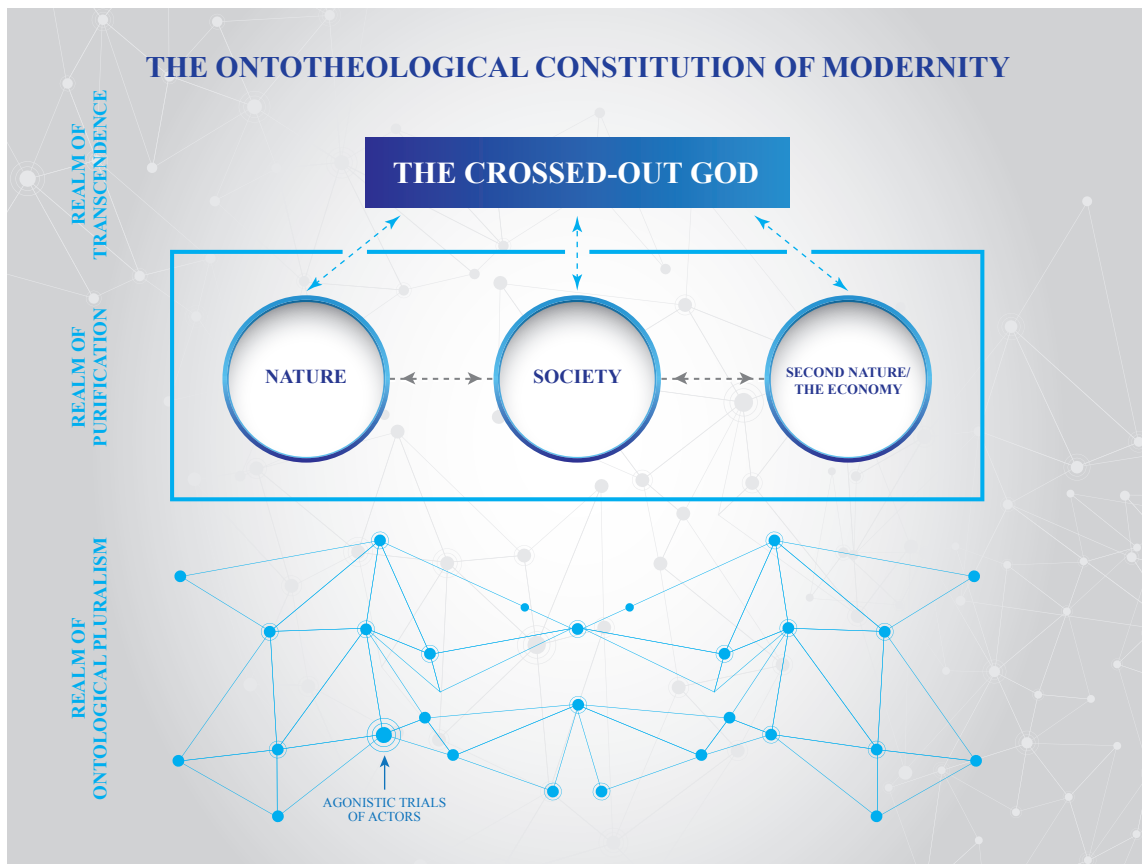


Figure 2: Representation of “the crossed-out God” of modernity.

This diagram is an expansion of figure 1, which depicted the basic structure of the political epistemology of modernity.³²⁸ Now, it can be seen that “the crossed-out God” functions as an additional “lock” or “guarantee” upon that epistemology. The apodictic certitude that modern people claim for the categories of “Nature”, “Society” and “the Second Nature” is externally warranted by the being of “the crossed-out God”, even though this entity is an artifice conveyable only to themselves. It is as if modernity can call upon “the crossed-out God” to fight its corner when challenged. This explains why in a recent lecture Latour made the apparently whimsical comment that modernity must

³²⁸ See above, p.100.

be understood as proceeding under the banner of “*Gott mit uns*”.³²⁹ It seems that he was referring here to a phrase commonly used in early modern Prussian military heraldry, and later by the *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War, declaring confidence that God would ensure victory for their side. It is as if modern people march under a similar heraldic banner, even when they claim to have left behind such a primitive association with a partisan deity in the name of secular progress.

However, to fully appreciate how Latour understands this entity as functioning it is useful to consider the phrase he employs in its entirety. This is “the crossed-out God of the moderns, relegated to the side-lines”. The extended phrase sheds light on how Latour believes this idea has come to underwrite the political epistemology of modernity in such a powerful and enduring way. For Latour, modern people not only deploy the idea of “the crossed-out God”, but they also conceal that deployment. On the one hand, the idea is the foundation and rationale of modernity itself. On the other hand, the idea is non-explicit and disavowed; this entity is “crossed-out” and “relegated to the side-lines”. In the *Inquiry*, a much later work, Latour refers to “the constructed, non-constructed God” of modernity, which is a phrase that forcibly juxtaposes these ideas³³⁰ This double movement explains why “the crossed-out God” has been of such use.³³¹ It allows modern people to align themselves with a transcendent being that is situated above the contingency and flux of this world, and to co-opt that being as an external warrant for their own claims to authoritative knowledge, whilst simultaneously pursuing their agenda in the world as if that being did not exist and as if they were

³²⁹ Latour (2015), *FF*, pp.9, 10.

³³⁰ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.176.

³³¹ In what follows, I will use the short form “the crossed-out God” for convenience so as to avoid repeating the full phrase. However, the full phrase should be kept in mind.

entirely free from its determination. What Latour is diagnosing here is a manipulative play of transcendence and immanence. When modern people advance a claim to meaning or truth, they remove themselves from the arena of politics, which operates within the space and time of this world, so as to import or “immanentize” back into the world a claim that has been secured by proxy with the realm of transcendence.³³² For Latour, this constitutes a religious gesture in the negative sense that it imposes upon the world a mode of dogmatic or apodictic certitude that has been secured from above and that is not open to confirmation or amendment by the plural actors who inhabit the world down below. It is this down-up-down movement, ultimately counter-signed by the being of “the crossed-out God”, that has enabled modern people to impose their authority upon the world in a covert, and yet highly effective, fashion:

His [“the crossed-out God’s”] transcendence distances him infinitely, so that he disturbs neither the free play of nature nor that of society, but the right is nevertheless reserved to appeal to that transcendence in case of conflict between the laws of Nature and those of Society.³³³

This phrase—“the crossed-out God, relegated to the side-lines”—thus describes Latour’s understanding of modernity as that which is underwritten by ontotheology. This functions in spite of modernity’s own claim to be a secularizing force that is able to counteract and arbitrate the disabling conflicts of competing religious claims. Thus, modern people manifest a schizophrenic character: they can be “atheists whilst remaining religious [...] and as such they can invade the material world and freely re-

³³² See below, p.145.

³³³ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.22.

create the social world without experiencing the feeling of being an orphaned demiurge abandoned by all”.³³⁴

The phrase itself does not recur in Latour’s subsequent texts. But the idea is developed elsewhere. Of particular importance here are his *Gifford Lectures*, delivered in 2013, and *Face à Gaïa*, published in 2015, as well as some talks and presentations that are associated with those larger works.³³⁵ I wish to suggest that these texts clarify and extend what Latour means when he refers to “the crossed-out God” in at least two ways.

First, in these texts Latour explains why appeal to “the crossed-out God” constitutes an illegitimate and internally-contradictory manoeuvre. To do so, he relates this idea to his broader understanding of rationality as consisting in “the *political* dimension of the movements of actors in the world”. Appeal to “the crossed-out God” necessarily attenuates these movements. The agonistic processes of association, negotiation and translation that take place between actors in trials are abridged and curtailed when they are referred upwards to a transcendent being in whom their resolution has already been provided. “It is precisely these conditions that are *not even going to be looked for*”, Latour writes, “as long as we believe that the world has *already* been unified once and for all [...] by God”.³³⁶ The “crossed-out God” is the instrument for the premature unification of beings in Being.³³⁷ Appeal to this entity is

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ See Latour (2010), *ACM*; Latour (2013), *GL*, lectures 1–6; Latour (2014), *WPTEC*; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*.

³³⁶ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 4, p.83, original emphasis.

³³⁷ Ibid, lecture 2, pp.32, 42, 44.

therefore a de-politicizing act. It follows, then, that Latour's work will seek to diagnose and critique this act, even when it is written into the ideology of human society in a way that is concealed and non-explicit.

Although this is made clear in recent texts, I would suggest that the idea is already implicit in Latour's earlier work, even in the rather idiosyncratic phrase he introduced in *We Have Never Been Modern*. Unfortunately, this has been obscured by the published English translation. The French that lies behind the phrase "the crossed-out God, relegated to the side-lines" is simply "*le Dieu barré, hors jeu*".³³⁸ The second part of this phrase, "*hors jeu*", is commonly employed in the context of sporting competition to designate the situation of being called 'offside'. This is the nuance that Latour originally intended.³³⁹ Modern people make appeal to "the crossed-out God" for their own ends. But their appeal is illegitimate, just as a player called offside is in contravention of the rules of the game and should not be allowed to influence what takes place on the field of play. The original phrase, as it appeared in that 1991 text, therefore provides a clue to what Latour later elaborated more fully. This demonstrates how consistent Latour's thought has been throughout his career and contradicts the oft-stated accusation that the theme of religion has been smuggled in to some of his more recent work in contravention of the trajectory of the whole.

The recent texts I mentioned above are interesting for a second reason also. In them, Latour considers how "the crossed-out God" functions across different fields of discourse and knowledge, even ones whose methodologies and modes of analysis

³³⁸ Latour (1991), fr. *NJM*, p.23 ff.

³³⁹ I have discussed this in personal correspondence with Latour, who confirmed my interpretation. It has not been advanced in any of the critical literature of which I am aware.

would seem to be robustly empirical, and thus immune to the charge that they might be functioning according to a covert form of religion or religiosity. Latour shows how the social sciences, economic science and even the natural sciences are structured around (what I will call) acts of theistic transference. Within modernity, attributes that are associated with classical theistic doctrine of God, envisaged as a transcendent being situated outside space and time, are transferred back into the world, becoming a hermeneutical grid through which different forms of positivistic enquiry are filtered. For example, Latour shows how, whilst they gather quantitative and qualitative data using different measurement techniques, the social sciences are liable to subsume this collected data under a meta-categories of analysis. He criticises numerous accounts of the social world that he deems to be premised on this kind of transference, including those of Hobbes, Durkheim, Weber and Bourdieu.³⁴⁰ In the field of economic science, Latour notes the baseline assumption that something called “the laws of the market” or “market forces” are regulative and thus function as a kind of sovereign adjudicator of the complex motives that characterise the behaviour of *homo æconomicus*.³⁴¹ For Latour, the postulate of fixed and universal “laws” that are providential over the free and contingent decisions we make is ultimately one that is borrowed from ontotheology. And in what is perhaps his most controversial application of all, Latour even applies this argument to the natural sciences, wherever these are premised on an understanding of matter as subject to the operation of “the laws of nature”. Of course, Latour is not seeking to relativize the epistemological validity of the natural sciences.

³⁴⁰ For Hobbes, see Latour, with Callon (1981), *UBL*, pp.278–281; for Durkheim, see Latour (2005), *RS*, p.73; for Weber, see *ibid*, pp.93, 208; for Bourdieu, see Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, pp.5–6; Latour, et al (2012), *WASP*, p.591.

³⁴¹ Latour, with Lépinay (2009), *SPI*.

He is merely observing how the concept of nature as that which regulates the physical world in a law-like fashion can serve as a “discussion-closing trope” for the complex and contingent interactions of different actors, human and nonhuman, that take place in space and time.³⁴² The natural sciences begin with the idea of a “whole” that is supervenient over the movements of its constituent “parts” and in doing so are constrained in their ability to provide a properly empirical account of the world.³⁴³ Here, Latour is developing Whitehead’s idea of “a doctrine of matter”, initially articulated in his Tanner Lectures of 1919, and then revised and published the following year as *The Concept of Nature*.³⁴⁴ For Whitehead, positivistic science conceives of nature as nothing more than “the fortunes of matter in its adventure through space”, a conceptualization that Whitehead deemed to be an abstraction.³⁴⁵ The unexamined idea of nature as a transcendent arbiter of reality was what Latour had attempted to debunk in his early-career work in Guillemin’s laboratory. Whitehead’s work continues to be important to Latour, especially via the recent, influential reading of Isabelle Stengers.³⁴⁶ But Latour adds an observation of his own: the “doctrine of matter” critiqued by Whitehead is made possible by an act of theistic transference, since the idea of the regularity and stability of matter is ultimately derived from the

³⁴² Latour (2007), *CWMB*, p.138.

³⁴³ Latour, et al (2012), *WASP*.

³⁴⁴ Whitehead (2015, 1919), *The Concept of Nature*, chapter 1, paragraph 21.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. The term “abstraction” is used by Whitehead to refer to any account of the world, scientific or otherwise, that addresses matter as a generality divorced from its empirical manifestation; for Whitehead, to be a philosopher is to be a “critic of abstractions”. See Whitehead (2011a, 1926), *Science in the Making*, p.59.

³⁴⁶ Stengers (1994), *L’effect Whitehead*; Stengers (2011, 2002), *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*. For Latour’s use of Stengers’ text, see Latour (2005), *WGE*; Latour (2007), *CWMB*, p.139; Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.297; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.93.

being of “the crossed-out God”, in particular from the attributes of immutability, unity, simplicity, aseity and, above all, transcendence that are ascribed to that entity by theology. Latour alerts us to the intrusion of religious thematics into the natural scientific method:

*La nature véhicule depuis plusieurs siècles tout un barda [...] de théologie dont elle n’a jamais pu se défaire.*³⁴⁷

Latour’s argument is that the pursuit of knowledge within the natural sciences, as well as within the social sciences and economic science, is in danger of taint by epistemological categories whose aetiology can ultimately be traced to classical theistic doctrine.

This argument becomes even more interesting when these acts of theistic transference are diagnosed as taking place within the domain of religion itself. For Latour proposes that the idea of “the crossed-out God” can structurally underwrite religion and the institutions of religion too, in the same way it does other fields of discourse and knowledge. Latour laid the groundwork for this observation in a number of articles published after 2000.³⁴⁸ However, these were not widely circulated, a fact that explains the relative confusion that greeted the second of his *Gifford Lectures*, delivered in 2013, where he made these ideas more explicit.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ My trans. “nature has been conveying for several centuries a whole bundle [...] of theology of which it has never been able to shed itself” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.95.

³⁴⁸ Latour (2001), *TNLV*; Latour (2005), *TNFF*; Latour (2009), *WNHS*.

³⁴⁹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 2, ‘A Shift in Agency, with Apologies to David Hume’, pp.29–52. Criticisms of this second lecture were made in a session of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) annual conference in Baltimore, which took place on 23 November, 2013 under the title ‘Querying Natural Religion: Immanence, Gaia and the Parliament of Lively Things’ (no. A23-203), featuring oral contributions from Jane

For Latour, theistic transference takes place in the domain of religion whenever religious faith or praxis is defined according to meta-logic. The rationality of religion, its meaning and truth for human beings, is attributed to its correspondence with a fixed and stable informational content that is situated outside and above the agency-configurations taking place within the space and time of this world. Latour often describes this vertical correspondence in terms of “belief”. This word is negatively charged wherever it appears in his work: “I don’t believe in belief as a category”.³⁵⁰ He notes how discussion of religion in a public context is frequently deflected into questions about belief: “what exactly do you believe?”, “do you believe in God or not?”, “surely you don’t believe in the resurrection as a historical event?”, and so on.³⁵¹ Such questions demonstrate the extent to which religion, within the context of modernity, has become assimilated to a model of rationality as meta-logic. Religious faith or praxis finds itself validated (or not) according to its verisimilitude with a putative substance or essence of religion, whose locus is the idea of a transcendent God.

At this point, Latour’s account of religion is open to critique. In whose name does he speak when he defines religion as “belief”? Does he do justice to the way in which religious believers actually understand the constitution and status of their own beliefs? Does he take account of work that has sought to trace the material and historical contexts in which different religious beliefs are established and maintained by

Bennett, Timothy Morton and William Connolly, among others. The recording is available at < www.aarweb.org/programs-services/a23-203 > (accessed 04 July, 2018). See also Fischer (2014), ‘The Lightness of Existence and the Origami of ‘French’ Anthropology: Latour, Descola, Viveiros de Castro, Meillassoux, and their so-called Ontological Turn’, p.349.

³⁵⁰ Latour, with Paulson (2018), *CZSP*, question 19.

³⁵¹ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.38.

individuals and within communities?³⁵² Latour would affirm the value of accounts of the practices of belief. As I will show in the following chapter, Latour prefers a definition of religion as that which is composed and held in place from below, that is, by the movements of actors in relation to one another. Thus, the material and historical context of religious belief is of great interest to Latour. He understands modernity, by contrast, as assimilating religion with belief in a fixed and unalterable information content that exists independently of this ontological arena.

Latour applies this idea to two contemporary approaches or attitudes to religion. Both of these can be understood as core expressions of modernity on account of the way they assimilate religion to a model of “belief”.

The first approach or attitude to religion that can be tested is that of polemical atheism, whose agenda is revealed by the comment of Christopher Hitchens that religion is “nothing but a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge”, a demand that can now be met more adequately by the positivistic sciences.³⁵³ Polemical atheism denounces religion because it cannot attain to the level of apodictic certitude implied by science. This critique was actually predicted by Whitehead at the beginning of the previous century, who anticipated that religion would be perceived as “being in decay” in the western world to the extent that it found itself pitted against the “dialectical acuteness” of the natural scientific method.³⁵⁴ The second approach or attitude to religion that can be tested seems to be the polar opposite of this,

³⁵² See Ward (2014), *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't*; Ward (2016), *How The Light Gets In*.

³⁵³ Hitchens (2007), *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, p.64.

³⁵⁴ Whitehead (2011b, 1926), *Religion in the Making*, p.129.

namely, a Christian fundamentalist attitude that reads Scripture as providing a literal account of human history. Here, the claim is that religious revelation provides an alternative and superior source of the same sort of knowledge that is supplied by the positivistic sciences. What ensues is a territorial conflict between science and religion: “the battle consists of an attempt to extend science over religion’s territory through an offensive apologetics, or to protect religion’s territory from science through a defensive apologetics”.³⁵⁵ However, Latour deems this conflict misplaced, “as instructive as a boxing match in a pitch-black tunnel”.³⁵⁶ It is fuelled by a presupposition that religious meaning or truth is determined by its correspondence with a stable and fixed informational content that is independent of its mediation by actors within the space and time of this world. If this presupposition is granted, religion can either be dismissed as inadequate to meet that criterion (polemical atheism) or it can be elevated as the sole means of attaining it (biblical literalism). However, neither approach is adequate:

Paradoxically, by formatting questions [about religion] 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.³⁵⁷

My argument is that Latour’s work can be applied in a very practical way to analyse different assumptions about religious belief. Polemical and firmly-entrenched positions can be shown as essentially modern in form, since they assimilate the rationality of religion to the model of “belief”, which is itself a meta-logical category.

³⁵⁵ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.24.

³⁵⁶ Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.464. For an equivalent comment, see Latour (2013), *CS*, p.66.

³⁵⁷ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.33, original emphasis.

Another application of Latour's concept of "the crossed-out God" is in the area of natural theology, where "natural theology" is understood as the attempt to use cognitive faculties that are innately available to human beings in order to investigate religious or theological matters. Latour ventured some comments on this in his 2013 *Gifford Lectures*. Right at the beginning of those lectures, he drew attention to the terms of Lord Gifford's original bequest of 1885, which was "to promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology [*sic*] in the widest sense of the term, in other words, the knowledge of God".³⁵⁸ Latour was not naïve about the various lecturers before him who had, in the words of Rowan Williams, himself a lecturer that same year, "periodically kicked over the traces and protested at this framework".³⁵⁹ And yet, for him, the revisionist gestures of those previous lecturers did not get to the heart of the matter, since they all assumed that knowledge of God could be secured in some way through the deployment of natural human faculties. Latour proposes an even more radical deconstruction of the terms of this framework by arguing that the very concept of nature itself is already inflected towards transcendence in a way that precludes genuine theological enquiry. In the second of his lectures, Latour demonstrates this via an exposition of the arguments of the character Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.³⁶⁰ As an experimental theist, Cleanthes makes use of natural arguments *a posteriori* in order to prove the existence of God to his sceptical interlocutors. Latour shows how, even as he advances these arguments, Cleanthes is assuming a concept of nature as that which is "external, unified, de-animated and

³⁵⁸ The text of Lord Gifford's bequest is available at < www.giffordlectures.org > (accessed 20 June, 2018).

³⁵⁹ Williams (2014), *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, p.2.

³⁶⁰ Hume (2007, 1779), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

undisputable”.³⁶¹ Cleanthes’ arguments are therefore underwritten by “the crossed-out God” and will not lead to an understanding of religion other than the one that has already been mandated within the ideology of modernity:

On the surface of the smoothed, impregnable walls of ‘nature’ around which he has been turning in desperation, [Cleanthes] can do nothing more than paint the vain graffiti: *God has already been here.*³⁶²

Latour’s work thus represents a challenge to natural theology, inviting it to consider how it deploys an epistemological category that precludes proper pursuit of its own field of enquiry.³⁶³

The idea of “the crossed-out God” provides a useful point-of-entry to understand how Latour deploys the theme of religion in his work. He identifies this ontotheological concept as being at the heart of modernity, enabling the manipulative play of transcendence and immanence that characterises its worldview and operations. It is for this reason that Latour diagnoses modernity as being structured according to a religious thematic.

2.1.2 Voegelin’s *Political Religions*

Having begun with a consideration of that single phrase, I will now attempt to situate Latour’s ideas about “the crossed-out God” in a broader intellectual context.

³⁶¹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.25.

³⁶² Ibid, lecture 2, p.40.

³⁶³ Latour has developed these thoughts about natural theology in discussion format. See Latour (2013), *CS*.

Caution must be taken here. For many critics, Latour's work is always best addressed in the context of continental philosophy.³⁶⁴ As a recent survey by Christopher Watkin has shown, the burden of this writing has largely been to construct a "post-theological" ethics and politics that would be entirely free from the vestigial ontotheological assumptions that have haunted previous attempts at political theory and that have rendered them liable to re-colonisation by the theological.³⁶⁵ Watkin argues that this programme has developed in different phases within this tradition. The first phase, beginning in the nineteenth-century, reacted against Enlightenment thought, which was understood as having done nothing more than replace the concept of "God" with the supposed atheistic placeholder of "Man" or "Reason". In doing so, the Enlightenment was understood as having become parasitical upon the very concept it sought to overturn (Watkin cites Comte, Feuerbach and Marx as representatives of this first phase and uses the term "imitative atheism" to describe their mode of thought).³⁶⁶ A second phase arose in reaction to the first. Watkin cites Nietzsche, Heidegger and Blanchot as representatives of this phase, and suggests that it culminated in the work of Derrida. What characterised these thinkers, he claims, was their more rigorous commitment to immanence and their desire to provide an entirely non-metaphysical account of the world that would allow no possibility of parasitism upon theology whatsoever. This second phase, Watkin claims, was more consistently atheistic than what had come before. But it was still vulnerable to the charge that, in order to

³⁶⁴ This is the context assumed in Miller (2013), *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Orientated Theology*; Watkin (2017), *French Philosophy Today: New Figures of the Human in Badiou, Meillassoux, Malabou, Serres and Latour*; Norton (2014), 'The Spectral Dilemma and the Instauration of the Divine: Latour *contra* Meillassoux'.

³⁶⁵ Watkin (2011), *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux*.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.168.

renounce, negate or dialectize the transcendent, it still had to posit a category of transcendence in the first place. Hence Watkin uses the term “residual atheism” to describe it:

[...] in seeking to wipe away the theological supra-sensory, this residual atheism struggled to articulate itself in terms other than as the negative residue of theology’s plenitude or a renunciation, along with theology, of truth and goodness.³⁶⁷

Finally, Watkin suggests that a new phase of continental philosophical thought has arisen in recent years. In reaction to what came before, this has sought to go further still, replacing both “imitative atheism” and “residual atheism” with a very pure form of atheistic thought and proposing that this can and must form the basis of human political society.³⁶⁸ Watkin argues that the “atheology” of Jean-Luc Nancy, the “atheism” of Alain Badiou and the “speculative philosophy” of Quentin Meillassoux are all examples of this third phase of atheistic thought. Each one attempts to construct a politics that has eliminated the shadow of transcendent being entirely: in the case of Nancy, by the call or appeal (“*appel*”) of singular plural being; in the case of Badiou, by a politics of “the event”; and in the case of Meillassoux, by the pursuit of a new phase of “universal justice” in the midst of the reality of the “hyper-chaos” of the world.³⁶⁹ Watkin himself has some reservations about the extent to which these thinkers

³⁶⁷ Ibid, p.6.

³⁶⁸ Ibid, p.168.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, especially chapter 5, ‘The Politics of the Post-Theological I: Justifying the Political’, pp.168–205. See also Lambert (2016), *Return Statements: The Return of Religion in Contemporary Thought*, who argues that Badiou seeks to develop “a post-secular form of conviction which is not religious in principle” in *ibid*, pp.162–163.

manage to achieve the atheistic purity they claim for themselves.³⁷⁰ But he is correct as to the general trajectory of the programme. For this reason, it is clear that Latour's work, which posits "the crossed-out God" as a functioning category right at the heart of modernity, does not sit well within this context.

Hence, I wish to bypass that context and address Latour's work against an entirely different backdrop. This is supplied by the work of German-American political theorist Eric Voegelin and, in particular, by his concept of "political religion".

Although it supplies the title of one of his early books, *Die politischen Religionen*, published in Vienna in 1938 in the immediate aftermath of the Nazi annexation of Austria,³⁷¹ the concept of political religion has often been relegated to the status of footnote in studies of Voegelin's work. There are two reasons for this. First, it is assumed that Voegelin related the term to a particular historical moment, namely, the rise of totalitarian regimes in western Europe in the 1930s, and that it was not intended for broader application. However, this fails to account for the appearance of the term in works from other moments of Voegelin's career and therefore misses its general significance.³⁷² It also fails to account for what Voegelin himself says, for whilst he concedes that he did develop the concept with specific reference to the situation of

³⁷⁰ Ibid, p.13. See also Helsel (2013), 'A (W)holy Human Subject?: Saintliness and Antiphilosophy in the Work of Alain Badiou'.

³⁷¹ Voegelin (2000, 1938), *The Political Religions*.

³⁷² For a survey of its use by Voegelin and its reception history in later Voegelin scholarship, see Gontier (2011), 'Totalitarisme, religions politiques et modernité chez Eric Voegelin'. For a history of the use of the term before Voegelin, see Gontier (2013), 'From *Political Theology* to *Political Religion*: Eric Voegelin and Carl Schmitt', p.25, fn.2.

German politics in the 1930s,³⁷³ he also suggests that this historical period must be considered as a kind of avatar for trends that would soon become widespread in “western civilisation” as a whole.³⁷⁴ The second reason why the concept of political religion has been under-appreciated in the critical literature is that there was one occasion on which Voegelin himself questioned its explanatory value. Voegelin did this, however, not because he was embarrassed about the concept itself, but because he felt that the word “religion”, as it appeared within this phrase, was liable to misunderstanding.³⁷⁵ Thankfully, his original intention has been re-evaluated and clarified in recent scholarship.³⁷⁶ This prompts me to reconsider the idea here in relation to Latour’s work. My proposal is that Voegelin’s concept of political religion provides a fruitful point of comparison with Latour’s ideas about the underlying religious structure and teleology of modernity.

For Voegelin, all human culture, language and experience is patterned in the form of an “ordering-towards” transcendence.³⁷⁷ For most human societies in history, this has taken the form of an ordering-towards the being of a transcendent God: thus,

³⁷³ Voegelin (2000, 1938), *The Political Religions*, p.64.

³⁷⁴ Voegelin (2000, 1952), *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, p.241. In a later work, Voegelin applies the concept to ideological regimes as different as “progressivism, positivism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and communism”, in Voegelin (2004, 1960), ‘Ersatz Religion: The Gnostic Mass Movements of our Time’, p.61.

³⁷⁵ Later in his career, Voegelin suggested that the phrase was “too vague” and that it was in danger of confusing his readership because it might bring to mind a narrow definition of religion in terms of “dogma or doctrine”, in Voegelin (1984), *Autobiographical Reflections, Revised Edition with Commentary*, p.78.

³⁷⁶ This re-evaluation is well represented by the essays in Hughes, McKnight & Price (eds.) (2001), *Politics, Order and History: Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin*. Of particular interest is the contribution by Peter Optiz, which argues that the structural outline of Voegelin’s entire political theory is found in this early book. See Optiz (2001), ‘Voegelin’s *Political Religions* in the Contemporary Political Order’, p.48 ff.

³⁷⁷ Voegelin (2000, 1938), *The Political Religions*, p.41.

Voegelin speaks of “the normative trend of the divinization of the worldly order of dominion”.³⁷⁸ But the metaphysical specification itself is less important than the basic fact of man’s orientation towards transcendence: this explains why his analysis ranges from the mystery cults of the Greek world to the *corpus mysticum* of Christianity.³⁷⁹ The key point is that, for Voegelin, the essential profile of human society is hierarchical, with its internal relations of power—whether social, cultural or economic—emanating from a transcendent source and cascading downwards.

The core argument of Voegelin’s 1938 book, *Political Religions*, is that in recent centuries this ordering-towards transcendence has found itself re-conditioned in an “inner-worldly” direction.³⁸⁰ As a consequence, the internal patterning of human societies now takes the form of hierarchical emanation from a non-transcendent being. For Voegelin, it is but a short step for a particular individual, political party or credo to usurp this authority for themselves, such that political society comes to take the form of an ordering-towards a human regime or ideology. “There is no longer any sacral permeation from the highest source”, he writes, and in its place the immanent political order “[...] has itself become an original sacral substance”.³⁸¹ This transposition is the essence of what Voegelin calls political religion. He claims that this explains the structure of the political regimes of Communism and Nazism, which must be understood as forms of ersatz religion on account of the way in which “the being of the

³⁷⁸ Ibid, p.44.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, pp.44–45. For a survey of Voegelin’s work on the “ordering-towards” transcendence, see Hughes (2003), *Transcendence and History: The Search for Ultimacy from Ancient Societies to Postmodernity*, especially chapters 2 and 3.

³⁸⁰ Ibid, p.59 ff.

³⁸¹ Ibid, p.59.

world-transcendent God is given as the ultimate condition and origin of their existences”.³⁸² But it informs other, more benign aspects of contemporary existence as well. Voegelin defines political religion as any regime of human power that manipulates the category of transcendence as a means of justifying its own authority in the world. Two implications follow. First, such political regimes are best analysed by “taking into account the religious forces inherent in them and the symbols through which these are expressed”.³⁸³ Second, such regimes must be understood as being dangerously detached from the realm of concrete human life and oblivious to the representation of the plural actors that interact within this space. Voegelin even refers to these regimes as enacting a kind of purification upon political society and the activity of politics itself.

Over the last four years, Latour has begun to engage substantially with Voegelin’s work. He commonly cites the phrase “the immanentization of transcendence”, which Voegelin initially coined in relation to his thinking about political religions.³⁸⁴ Latour first mentioned the phrase in an (unpublished) lecture he delivered at the University of Groningen in March 2014.³⁸⁵ He then raised it again during the interview I conducted with him in London in October 2014.³⁸⁶ The phrase

³⁸² Ibid, pp.28–29.

³⁸³ Ibid, p.70.

³⁸⁴ As well as various references in *The Political Religions*, see also Voegelin (2000, 1965), ‘In Search of the Ground’, p.13. He sometimes employs equivalent phrases: “the immanentization of the eschaton” or “the fallacious immanentisation of the Christian eschaton”, in Voegelin (2000, 1952), *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, p.121. For a detailed study, see Riedl (2012), ‘Modernity as the Immanentization of the Eschaton: A Critical Re-Evaluation of Eric Voegelin’s Gnosis-Thesis’.

³⁸⁵ Latour (2014), *BB* (audio), time-stamp 17m: 35s.

³⁸⁶ Appendix, p.372, where Latour mentions Voegelin as “an author I’m reading very carefully at the moment”.

re-appears in various places after that, including in a lecture delivered in July 2015 at the University of Cologne.³⁸⁷ And it receives its most sustained attention to date in his recent text *Face à Gaïa*.³⁸⁸ Latour is interested in the idea of “the immanentization of transcendence” because the phrase captures the structural equivalence between modernity and a certain theological idea of transcendence that he has been attempting to articulate from the time of *We Have Never Been Modern*. According to Latour’s reading, Voegelin diagnosed contemporary human political society not as that which has liberated man from determination by a hierarchical idea of transcendence, but rather as that which deploys transcendence as an instrument of its own sovereignty. Moreover, it does this whilst proudly declaring its commitment to “*la sécularisation*” and “*la matérialisation*”.³⁸⁹ It is Voegelin’s critique and inversion of the Enlightenment narrative of man’s progressive emancipation from religious transcendence that Latour assimilates into his own analysis of modernity:

*Voegelin ne nous dit pas, comme dans le grand récit habituel, qu’on serait passé de l’Obscurantisme aux Lumières; de l’attente des biens illusoires du Ciel à la saisie des réalités terrestres d’en bas; bref d’une vie inspirée par la religion à une vie séculière. [...] D’après lui, les modernes ne sont pas sécularisés—et c’est l’objet d’une vaste dispute—mais à l’inverse immanentisés.*³⁹⁰

³⁸⁷ Latour (2015), *PREV*.

³⁸⁸ Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.259 ff.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.212.

³⁹⁰ My trans. “Voegelin does not say, as the usual grand narrative does, that we have passed from obscurantism to Enlightenment, from the expectation of the illusory goods of Heaven to the grasp of earthly realities; in short, from a life inspired by religion to a secular life. [...] According to him, the moderns have not been secularized—and this is the matter of a great dispute—but, conversely, immanentized” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.212. Latour’s mention of a “great dispute” refers to the critical reaction to Voegelin’s ideas articulated by Hans Blumenberg in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, published in 1976 and translated into English in 1983. For background on this controversy, see Styfhals (2012), ‘Gnosis, Modernity and Divine Incarnation: The Voegelin-Blumenberg Debate’.

Voegelin's analysis of the phenomenon of political religions is seized upon by Latour for at least three reasons.

First, Latour concurs with Voegelin's suggestion that the roots of political religion inhere in a historical shift in the definition of what constitutes rationality and the rational. Voegelin identified a very specific moment in which he thought this shift had taken place: the advent of the natural scientific method in the seventeenth-century. For Voegelin, as the scientific method became increasingly assimilated into western European culture at this time it brought about a shift in the "ordering-towards" of human existence: the mode of rationality it claimed to provide became "the sole generally obligatory basis of man's attitude towards the world".³⁹¹ Voegelin's argument, however, is that this did not eliminate the category of transcendence at all, for the natural scientific method itself became vulnerable to annexation by those declaring themselves to be its gate-keepers, its guardians and its exclusive interpreters. The consequence was that human regimes were now able to hitch their own political sovereignty to the rationality of positivistic science, deriving from it "an inner-worldly, immanent principle of authority" that was of use to themselves in establishing their own power.³⁹² By proposing this argument, Voegelin was inverting the conventional narrative of the secularization thesis, which proposes that religion has found itself increasingly marginalised in the wake of the spread of positivistic science. On the contrary, in common with other twentieth-century thinkers such as Oswald Spengler, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, Étienne Gilson, Ernst Cassirer, Jacob Talmon, Crane Brinton, Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy and Jacob Taubes, Voegelin was arguing that positivistic

³⁹¹ Voegelin (2000, 1938), *The Political Religions*, p.60.

³⁹² *Ibid*, pp.28–29.

science has not served to liberate human society from a theologically-determined ground of reasoning.³⁹³

The second aspect of Voegelin's concept of political religions that is of interest to Latour is his diagnosis of the power relations such regimes impose upon human society. For Voegelin, a regime of political religion does not represent the voices or interests of the human subjects that inhabit its realm. It does not facilitate any kind of meaningful political activity. Instead, it regulates its subjects as "members of a different, lower order".³⁹⁴ The logic is easy to trace: since a regime of political religion claims to represent "the only true reality, from which a stream of reality is allowed to flow back to the people",³⁹⁵ then it follows that its subjects will be invited to do nothing more than "blend into a suprapersonal *realissimum*".³⁹⁶ The requirement leveraged upon individual human subjects within such a regime is "to sink down into the impersonal nothingness of their instrumentality".³⁹⁷ The experience of subjugation and dehumanization under the propaganda machine of National Socialism in the 1930s

³⁹³ These are all listed by Hans Kelsen as representatives of a school of thought that understands positivistic science as a form of "secular religion" or as a "secular eschatology". See Kelsen (2013), *Secular Religion: A Polemic Against the Misinterpretation of Modern Social Philosophy, Science and Politics as 'New Religions'*, p.21; Kelsen (2004), *Hans Kelsen's Reply to Eric Voegelin's 'The New Science of Politics': A Contribution to the Critique of Ideology*. Voegelin's diagnosis of positivistic science as undergirding regimes of political religion brought him into conflict with Kelsen, his former teacher, on various occasions, since Kelsen understood himself to be the primary target of Voegelin's critique. For a detailed survey of the fraught and painful correspondence between the two on this point, see Thommason (2014), 'Debating Modernity as Secular Religion: Hans Kelsen's Futile Exchange with Eric Voegelin'.

³⁹⁴ Voegelin (2000, 1938), *The Political Religions*, p.29.

³⁹⁵ Ibid, p.30.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, p.29, original emphasis.

³⁹⁷ Ibid, p.30.

provided Voegelin with a salient example of this in operation.³⁹⁸ But his diagnosis extends to any kind of governmental or ideological regime functioning essentially by means of theocratic rule over its *demos*.

Third, Latour takes up and develops Voegelin's suggestion that political religions are ultimately eschatological in form. By "eschatological", Voegelin is referring to the way in which such regimes appropriate the motif of the irruptive and restorative agency of God at the end of history, a motif that is associated with the Christian theological concept of the eschaton. This idea runs as a theme throughout Voegelin's work. It is present in a minor key in his 1938 book on *Political Religions*. But it is most fully developed in a short article entitled 'Ersatz Religion: The Gnostic Mass Movements of our Time', originally written in German in 1960, but translated into English by the author and appended to a volume of essays published the following year as *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*.³⁹⁹ In that book, as the title suggests, Voegelin interprets regimes of political religion as embodiments of a Gnostic theology.⁴⁰⁰ His account of Gnosticism is as follows: (A) the "Gnostic spirit" begins with a spirit of general dissatisfaction and discontent with man's contemporary situation in the world; (B) this is attributed to a faulty "order of being", such that the problems facing human society are ascribed to the idea that "the world is poorly organised"; (C) it is assumed that salvation from this faulty "order of being" is possible and that it can be achieved in the here-and-now (for Voegelin, this is directly opposed to what he perceives to be the

³⁹⁸ Ibid, p.64.

³⁹⁹ Voegelin (2004, 1960), 'Ersatz Religion: The Gnostic Mass Movements of our Time'.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, p.61. On Gnosticism and its modern affinities, see also Jonas (1974), 'The Gnostic Syndrome: Typology of its Thought, Imagination and Mood'; McKnight (1995), 'Eric Voegelin and the Changing Perspective on the Gnostic Features of Modernity'; Gillespie (2008), *The Theological Origins of Modernity*.

orthodox Christian understanding of eschatology, which affirms that “the world throughout history will remain as it is and that man’s salvational fulfilment will be brought about through grace in death”); and finally, in light of the above, (D) the Gnostic or Gnostic regime finds an opening to come forward as “prophet” of the “formula” by which this salvation can be mediated to all.⁴⁰¹ What, then, is the eschatological appropriation that Gnosticism enacts, according to Voegelin? In the midst of the contingent situation of human existence in a plural world, Gnosticism presents itself as possessor of a certain knowledge of how things ought to be, a knowledge that is structurally analogous to the knowledge of God that is to be revealed at the end of time within Christian theology. This postulate of certain knowledge is brought back into the time of the present and leveraged as justification for the authority of the Gnostic epistemological regime in the world. In doing so, the Gnostic or Gnostic regime is able to evade the requirement to engage politically in the realm of concrete human life.

In his final work, the unfinished fifth volume of his *Order and History* series, Voegelin differentiates between late antique Gnosticism, as historical evidence enables us to reconstruct its system of ideas, and (what he calls) “modern Gnostic thinkers”. Whereas the former employed eschatology in order to encourage adherents “to abolish *reality* altogether and escape into the *Beyond*”, the latter wields eschatology in order “to force the order of the *Beyond* into *reality*”.⁴⁰² The hinge figure for this transition was the twelfth-century monk Joachim of Fiore, who is identified by Voegelin as “the one

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, pp.64-65 for all quotations.

⁴⁰² Voegelin (2000, 1985), *Order and History, Volume V: In Search of Order*, p.51, original emphasis and capitalisation.

who initiates the age of modern Gnosticism”.⁴⁰³ It is modern Gnosticism that is of primary interest to Voegelin, because it encapsulates the idea of deploying an eschatological motif for political ends. Borrowing a phrase from the novels of Robert Musil and Heimito von Doderer, both of whom were influences on his thought, Voegelin suggests that modern Gnosticism imposes a “second reality” upon the world, one that does not represent the voices or interests of the subjects under its jurisdiction.⁴⁰⁴ It does this by claiming a perspective over the world that orthodox theology restricts to the divinity who occupies the space of transcendence and that will only be revealed at the time of the eschaton. The idea that rationality might arise in and through the progressive flow of history is denied. On the contrary, modern Gnosticism claims that a fully rational account of the world is already available and that all that is required is for human subjects to fall in line behind those who are its self-appointed, sovereign mediators. As Voegelin writes:

All Gnostic movements are involved in the project of abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action.⁴⁰⁵

Voegelin’s ideas are further clarified via a correspondence he conducted with German historian and theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, which he was pursuing at the very time he was formulating his understanding of modern Gnosticism.⁴⁰⁶ In his early work, Pannenberg had identified and criticised the mode of “Scripture-positivism” (“*Schrift-*

⁴⁰³ Voegelin (2000, 1952), *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, p.110 ff. See also Riedl (2012), ‘Modernity as the Immanentization of the Eschaton’, pp.83–92.

⁴⁰⁴ Voegelin (2002, 1966), *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, p.389.

⁴⁰⁵ Voegelin (2000, 1938), *The Political Religions*, p.75.

⁴⁰⁶ See various letters in Voegelin (2007), *Selected Correspondence, 1950–1984*.

positivismus”) that he saw as being characteristic of modern theology, by which he meant the idea that the revelation of Scripture communicates its truth in timeless propositional statements divorced from the flow of history.⁴⁰⁷ In *Jesus—God and Man*, Pannenberg explicitly identified this as a “Gnostic” gesture.⁴⁰⁸ Voegelin immediately noticed this terminology. In a letter of 1975, he suggested that his younger colleague had helped him to realise that “the number of [Gnostic] factors in modern thinking is larger than I assumed when this problem began to interest me”.⁴⁰⁹ Pannenberg in turn cites Voegelin as inspiration for his understanding of Christian theology as that which “proves its stability through a history whose future is always open”, in contrast to the “Gnostic” mode of certitude which he claimed caused history to be closed down as a site of production of meaning and truth.⁴¹⁰ The epistolary communication seems to have been productive on both sides.

In a number of places in his work, Latour has referred to modernity as being “Gnostic” in form.⁴¹¹ This is inspired by his reading of Voegelin. For Latour, just as for Voegelin, the modern world is regulated by the idea that a fixed and universal end-state has already been discerned, and that this has a deleterious impact upon the political

⁴⁰⁷ Pannenberg (1970, 1963), ‘The Crisis of the Scripture Principle’, p.3 ff.

⁴⁰⁸ Pannenberg (2002, 1977), *Jesus—God and Man*, p.83.

⁴⁰⁹ Letter from Voegelin to Pannenberg dated January 9, 1975 in Voegelin (2007), *Selected Correspondence, 1950–1984*, p.791. Voegelin was responding to a long critique sent by Pannenberg at the end of the previous year, which is available for inspection in the Hoover Institute Archives at Stanford University, Box 28, Folder 8. For a list of these archives, see < www.sites01.lsu.edu/faculty/voegelin/wp-content/uploads/sites/80/2015/09/Eric-Voegelin-Papers > (accessed 18 June, 2018).

⁴¹⁰ Pannenberg (1971, 1962), ‘What is Truth?’, p.9.

⁴¹¹ See Latour (2014), *GGT*, p.15; Latour (2014), *BB* (audio); Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, lecture 6, ‘Comment (ne pas) en finir avec la fin des temps?’, pp.239–283; Latour (2018), *DESM*, p.558; Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, pp.14–15.

activity of human society in the present moment. It legitimises the power of a minority group of humans who claim to have privileged access to a superior epistemological vantage-point to others and who leverage that vantage-point as a means of regulating what can be accessed and investigated as meaningful and true in the world: “*le moderne croit pouvoir saisir dans l’ici-bas la promesse certaine de la présence réalisée de l’au-delà*”.⁴¹² This reduces the possibility of any real political activity taking place. When Latour refers to modernity as a form of Gnosticism, then, he is drawing attention to an eschatological motif, initially formulated by Voegelin, that he believes is relevant to contemporary human society just as much as it was to the situation of German politics in the 1930s.

Summary of Section One

In the first section of this chapter I have attempted to describe and justify my claim that Latour’s concept of modernity is best understood through the lens of religion. I began by examining Latour’s references to “the crossed-out God”. I then attempted to develop what Latour means by that phrase with reference to Voegelin and his concept of political religions. Finally, I noted the motif of eschatology. For Latour, a crucial feature of modernity is that it leverages in the present a sense of closure and stability that properly belongs to a non-specified future. It is this act of epistemological importation that closes down the possibility of any real political activity in the present moment. In the second part of my chapter I will develop this observation by considering in more detail the experience of space and time within modernity. This will

⁴¹² My trans. “the modern person believes it possible to grasp here-and-now the certain promise of presence that is realized in the world-beyond” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.212.

allow me to analyse and critique a number of motifs that are current within contemporary western society, all of which encode this spatio-temporal dislocation.

2.2 Religion, Modernity and Contemporary Western Society

2.2.1 The Spatio-Temporal Conditioning Effect of Modernity

The argument I wish to advance now is that modernity imposes (what I will call) a spatio-temporal conditioning effect upon its inhabitants. To be modern is to find oneself inhabiting material space and historical time in a way that is artificial and dislocated from reality. This effect can be discerned as operational within the institutions of contemporary western society. That Latour is interested in exploring ideas of space and time, and their relation to lived experience, has been noted before in the critical literature.⁴¹³ However, I wish to develop the discussion in a new direction by proposing that Latour's understanding of the spatio-temporal constitution of modernity has to do with his understanding of transcendence and hence that the idea is most productively addressed with reference to his writing on religion.

Latour's interest in the concepts of space and time derives from the earliest part of his career, that is, from the research project he carried out in Roger Guillemin's laboratory in the 1970s. The epistemology of science he developed at that time can be represented in terms of the "materiality" and "historicity" of a scientific fact.⁴¹⁴ It narrates the way in which different actors functioning within the environment of a

⁴¹³ See for example Nowotny (1994), *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*, p.79 ff.; Pickering (1995), *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science*, p.3 ff.; Schmidgen (2012), 'The Materiality of Things? Bruno Latour, Charles Péguy and the History of Science'.

⁴¹⁴ Latour & Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*, p.71.

scientific laboratory move in relation to one another, such that through their interactions in space and time a reality larger than themselves is gradually constructed. Latour illustrates this by means of close analysis of the work being carried out by Guillemin's team on the hormone TRF, which was the research question they were pursuing at the time.⁴¹⁵ In the bench area of the laboratory, two or more chemical agents are brought into reaction with each other. This is a site in which actors engage in a trial with one another. It makes use of a particular experimental apparatus. The outcome of this trial, which might take the form of a reading or data-point, is then transitioned to a different part of the laboratory. The scientists who occupy this new space are seated on desks: they interpret the reading in the context of other experimental trials and write it up in the form of (what Latour calls) "a literary inscription".⁴¹⁶ The reading, which was initially generated by a trial between actors in another part of the room entirely, has been translated from a material to an abstract form in the course of its movement through space and time. From there, its "journey" continues beyond the four walls of the laboratory.⁴¹⁷ It is incorporated into a journal article or book. This in turn becomes widely distributed and reviewed, all of which constitute new trials that put it to the test. Or it may contribute to the development of a new pharmaceutical product: this in turn brings to bear a series of new trials, since the discovery first made in the laboratory is now being tested in real-life applications. Latour presents an epistemology of science in terms of the composition of a "matter of fact" in spatial and temporal movements. As they pursue a journey through space and time, scientific discoveries bear the imprint of all the trials they have engaged with along the way; their stability is guaranteed as long

⁴¹⁵ See above, p.51.

⁴¹⁶ Latour & Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*, p.45 ff.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*

as they can continue to “call upon the support of all the actors they have enlisted to their cause”.⁴¹⁸

In *Laboratory Life*, Latour provides a visual map of these movements as he identified them as taking place within Guillemin’s laboratory:

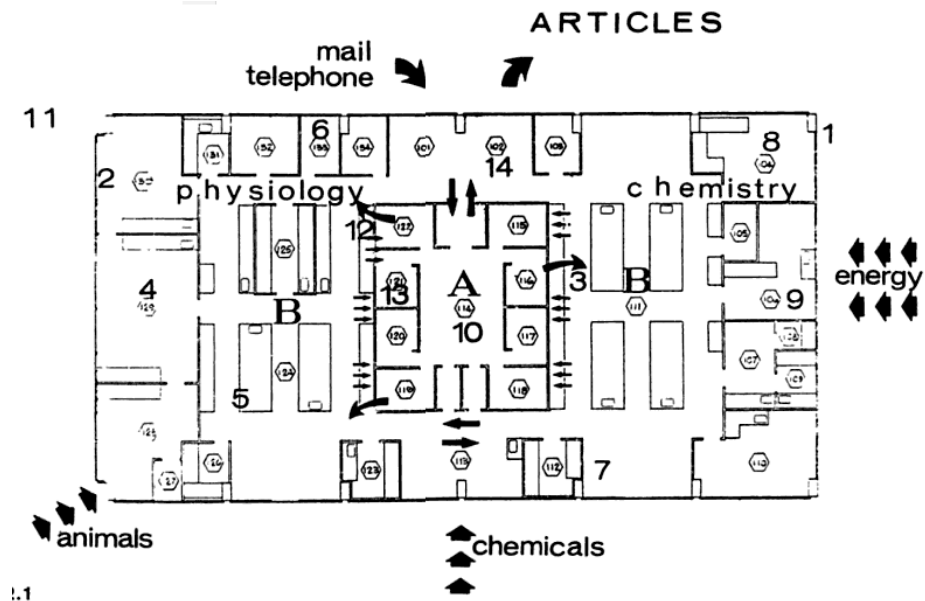


Figure 3: Copy of a sketch originally published in *Laboratory Life*.⁴¹⁹

The flow of arrows into and around the laboratory space over time index what Latour calls “the movement of facticity” that he claims is characteristic of all scientific discovery.⁴²⁰

For Latour, space and time are “the cradle of being” out of which rationality

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, p.39

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, p.46. The numerals denote photographs in the book that supplement the diagram.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, p.97.

itself emerges.⁴²¹ Modernity, by contrast, can be understood as an epistemological regime that simplifies, abrogates or conceals these spatio-temporal movements by means of its appeal to an abstract realm of transcendence that lies outside space and time. For example, if a scientific fact is assumed to inhere in “the realm of nature”, then it is presented as if it has “come out of nowhere”, and as if it has no “historicity”⁴²² or “historical reference”.⁴²³ Modernity functions by removing the spatio-temporal constitution of any claim to meaning or truth, such that “it rids itself of all determinants of place and time, and of all reference to its producers and the production process”.⁴²⁴ This is what I will call the spatio-temporal conditioning effect of modernity.

In a number of texts from the middle-phase of his career, Latour uses the term “freeze-framing” to describe this effect.⁴²⁵ He borrows the term from photography, where it refers to the capture of a materially and historically dynamic real-world situation in a single, still image. A photographic capture will provide only a partial representation of the event in progress. Moreover, what it depicts will necessarily be determined by the position of the one taking the photograph, that is, by angle of view, depth of field, compositional framing, and so on.⁴²⁶ As Latour deploys the term, freeze-framing is thus understood as an artificial delimitation of the spatial and temporal flow

⁴²¹ Latour (1993, 1984), *PF*, p.82.

⁴²² Latour & Woolgar, (1986, 1979), *LL*, p.106.

⁴²³ Latour (2014), *ATA*, p.13.

⁴²⁴ Latour & Woolgar, (1986, 1979), *LL*, p.176.

⁴²⁵ See Latour (2005), *TNFF*; Latour (2005), *WSMC*, pp.35, 48. For its use in a recent text, see Latour (2014), *HBRAT*, p.35 ff.

⁴²⁶ For a historical study of the function of the observer in photography and visual culture, and its relation to the operation of social power, see Crary (1990), *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*.

it seeks to represent. This idea is illustrated in a little-known but very interesting book published by Latour in French in 1998 entitled *Paris: Ville Invisible*.⁴²⁷ This book takes the form of a photographic essay. It opens with the author on the roof-top of the *Samaritaine* building at the *rue de la Monnaie* in Paris, which has a central location in the city and offers a wide view built environmental spread out in all directions below.⁴²⁸ To aid tourists, a ceramic board has been installed pointing out the major landmarks that can be seen from this spot, including their radial distances from the point where the viewer is standing. Of course, the panorama is now out-of-date because the cityscape has changed greatly in the years since the board was installed. Latour uses this a metaphor for the totalizing epistemological categories of modernity. While the roof-top location certainly gives the sense that “*c’est un panorama qui nous permet, comme on dit, d’embrasser la ville d’un seul coup d’œil*”⁴²⁹, the complex life of the city below exceeds the capacity of one viewer, situated in one place and at one moment of time, to capture and contain it in a meaningful way.⁴²⁹ An authentic portrayal would require the viewer to come down from the roof and to immerse him or herself in the flows and movements of actors at street-level, which is the complex, immanent life of the city.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁷ Latour, with Hermant (2009, 1998), fr. *PVI*. This short book is almost never addressed within the critical literature. It is briefly described in Schmidgen (2012), *Bruno Latour in Pieces*, p.122 ff.; De Vries (2016), *Bruno Latour: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, pp.5–11. This book has not yet been published in English, although a partial translation is available at < www.bruno-latour.fr/virtual/EN/index > (accessed 23 February, 2018).

⁴²⁸ Ibid, pp.8–9, *séquence première: cheminer, plan 1*.

⁴²⁹ My trans. “it is a panorama that enables us, as they say, to capture the city *in a single glance*” in *ibid*, p.8, original emphasis.

⁴³⁰ The depiction of reality by a series of parallel images is a constant theme of interest for Latour. See Latour, with Weibel (eds.), (2002), *IBIW*; Latour (2005), *TSFF*; Latour, with Lowe (2011), *MAOF*. It is beyond doubt that Deleuze’s two books on cinematic images are important precursors in this regard. See Deleuze (1986, 1983), *Cinema I: The Movement-Image* and Deleuze (1989, 1985), *Cinema II: The Time-Image*. However, neither title has been referenced by Latour anywhere in his published corpus to date.

Another important early text in which Latour explores his ideas about space and time is a lecture he delivered at a conference in Neuchâtel, Switzerland in 1996.⁴³¹ In it, Latour proposes a thought-experiment. He invites us to consider two travellers undertaking a journey from one location to another.⁴³² The first traveller is faced with rough terrain (the example Latour selects is a jungle). She has to hack her way through tangled foliage, negotiating at every step with external forces (vegetation, sunlight, temperature, water supply, and so on), each of which offers resistance to her progress.⁴³³ The second traveller, by contrast, undertakes the same journey via TGV, speeding through the landscape in a sealed carriage. Space and time are experienced differently by these two travellers. Latour points out that this difference corresponds to the extent of their immersion in the material world and to the nature of their contact with other actors, both human and nonhuman, who may serve to interrupt or hinder their progress. As he puts it, the difference of experience between the two travellers “comes from *the number of others* one has to take into account, and from the *nature* of those that are encountered”.⁴³⁴ The experience of modernity corresponds to the experience of the second traveller: modernity causes its inhabitants to be removed from the space of trials between actors and, in doing so, provides human subjects with an artificial experience of the world as it really is.

⁴³¹ Latour (1997), *TT*. The lecture has not yet been published, although a transcript is available.

⁴³² *Ibid*, pp.173–175. The resonance with Einstein’s thought-experiment, the so-called “twin paradox”, is intentional. See Latour (1988), *RAER*.

⁴³³ *Ibid*, p.175.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid*, original emphasis.

These texts provide a foundation for Latour's broader philosophical observations about space and time. The core argument he proposes is as follows:

Space and time cannot be thought of as existing independently as an unshakeable frame of reference *inside which* events and places occur.⁴³⁵

If space and time do not exist independently of an ontology of actors and events, then it must be the case that they are “a *consequence* of the ways in which bodies relate to one another”.⁴³⁶ Since Latour defines modernity as an epistemological regime that is supervenient over this ontology, it follows that human subjects inhabiting modernity will experience a spatio-temporal conditioning effect upon their lived experience.

The influence of Leibniz is evident here, insofar as space and time are understood as expressing some relation between entities (or monads) in the world.⁴³⁷ More importantly, however, I believe that Latour's philosophical observations about space and time are indebted to the work of Michel Serres.⁴³⁸ Serres builds upon his own

⁴³⁵ Latour (1987), *SA*, p.228, original emphasis.

⁴³⁶ Latour (1997), *TT*, p.174, original emphasis.

⁴³⁷ See especially Latour, et al (2012), *WASP*, where Latour provides a contemporary philosophical re-statement of Leibniz's “monadology”.

⁴³⁸ There is a complex intellectual (and personal) relationship between these two that is beyond the scope of my argument here. For one commentator, Serres is nothing less than the “inventor of Bruno Latour”, cited in Bingham & Thrift (2000), ‘Some New Instructions for Travellers: The Geography of Bruno Latour and Michel Serres’, p.284. See also Wesling (1997), ‘Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, and the Edges of Historical Periods’. Latour himself is more ambivalent. See comments in Appendix, pp.369–370. There are many references to Serres in Latour's writing. Two in particular are significant. First, there is an early essay which explains why Latour values his work. See Latour (1988), *EWC*. Second, there is an extended interview Latour conducted with Serres in the mid-1990s, which highlights points of agreement and disagreement between them. See Latour, with Serres (1995, 1994), *CSCT*. For an autobiographical description of Latour's exposure to Serres' work, see Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.293 ff.

reading of Leibniz,⁴³⁹ as well as on contemporary research in the fields of thermodynamics and complexity theory,⁴⁴⁰ to provide an analysis of space and time as “non-laminar”.⁴⁴¹ According to Serres, space and time must be understood as being subject to the contingent flows and turbulences generated by the movements of actors in the world. This means that space and time “cannot be thought of as a parameter adding something to a system *from the outside*”.⁴⁴² Serres critiques post-Enlightenment modes of thought that treat space and time as an external “grid” within which reality itself is fixed and circumscribed.⁴⁴³ In his *Hermès* series of books, published during the 1970s, he depicts how different loci of human experience have found themselves plotted on precisely such a spatio-temporal grid:

The Euclidean house, the street and its network, the open and closed garden, the church or the enclosed spaces of the sacred, the school and its spatial varieties containing fixed points, and the complex ensemble of flow-charts, those of language, of the factory, of the family, of the political party, and so on.⁴⁴⁴

⁴³⁹ Serres wrote his major doctoral thesis on Leibniz under the supervision of Jean Hyppolite at the *École Normale Supérieure*, Rue d’Ulm. It was published as Serres (1968), *Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques*. Serres refers to this in his interview with Latour. See Latour, with Serres (1995, 1994), *CSCT*, p.57 (Serres speaking).

⁴⁴⁰ Serres (1997, 1982), *Genesis*; Serres (2001, 1977), *The Birth of Physics*. See also Webb (2006), ‘Michel Serres on Lucretius: Atomism, Science, and Ethics’; Webb (2013), ‘Michel Serres: From the History of Mathematics to Critical History’; Assad (2013), ‘Ulyssean Trajectories: A (New) Look at Michel Serres’ Topology of Time’.

⁴⁴¹ Latour, with Serres (1995, 1994), *CSCT*, p.59 (Serres speaking).

⁴⁴² Prigogine & Stengers (2017, 1984), *Order out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature*, p.10. For an excellent study of this theme in Serres’ work, particularly with relation to time, see Assad (1999), *Reading with Michel Serres: An Encounter with Time*.

⁴⁴³ Latour, with Serres (1995, 1994), *CSCT*, p.60 (Serres speaking). See also Latour, with November & Camacho-Hübner (2008), *ERT*, p.590.

⁴⁴⁴ Serres (1983), ‘Language and Space: From Oedipus to Zola’, pp.44–45.

Here and elsewhere in his work, Serres is drawing attention to how many of the representative institutions of contemporary society, whether social, cultural, political, educational or religious, perpetuate an experience of space and time in this way. The “self-organising” potential of a multiplicity becomes “over-codified” by a grid that is external to itself.⁴⁴⁵ Serres attributes this “over-codification” to the residual theological idea of transcendence, since it equates to a spatio-temporal framework that is imposed from above upon the immanent world. “This thesis has always seemed to me to be quasi-religious in form”, as Serres puts it.⁴⁴⁶

Serres’ work provides a lens through which to understand Latour’s ideas. Both diagnose contemporary western societies as experiencing space and time in an artificial and dislocated way. For both, this can be traced to a religious thematic. And as a corrective, both seek to articulate a spatio-temporal framework that is aligned to and representative of an ontology of actors and events in the world:

Both Serres and Latour have sought to replace space and time with all the figures that have been stripped away by an idea of abstract division, by concentrating instead on movement, on process, on the constant hum of the world as different elements of it are brought into relation with one another, often in new styles and unconsidered combinations.⁴⁴⁷

Taking his cue from Serres, Latour interrogates assumptions about space and time that are fixed within modernity. In the final part of this chapter, I will show how this

⁴⁴⁵ Clayton (2013), ‘Time Folded and Crumpled: Time, History, Self-Organisation and the Methodology of Michel Serres’, p.42.

⁴⁴⁶ Latour, with Serres (1995, 1994), *CSCT*, p.48 (Serres speaking).

⁴⁴⁷ Bingham & Thrift (2000), ‘Some New Instructions for Travellers: The Geography of Bruno Latour and Michel Serres’, p.291.

provides the basis for his concrete analysis of the ideology of contemporary western society.

2.2.2 Motifs of Modernity within Contemporary Western Society

In some of his most recent work Latour has used these ideas about space and time to develop a deconstructive reading of certain motifs that are prevalent within contemporary discourse. These include the motifs of “progress” and “the progressive”, the motifs of “secularism” and “the secular”, and the motifs of “globalization” and “the global”. Latour claims that these motifs effectively function as slogans: they express the self-perception of contemporary western society and convey some of its most cherished values. His argument, however, is that they actually perpetuate the spatio-temporal conditioning effect he has identified above. Thus, motifs that are often embraced enthusiastically and uncritically within contemporary western society can be revealed as encoding a covert form of religion or religiosity that undermines their own status and intended function.

A. Progress and the Progressive

The first motif I wish to address is that of “progress”. Latour points out the importance of this motif within the self-consciousness of contemporary western society.⁴⁴⁸ It is related to perceived advances in science, technology, culture or material wealth, and is often represented by slogans proclaiming “the onward march” or “the frontier spirit” of human knowledge in its quest for increasing mastery over the world it inhabits.

⁴⁴⁸ Latour (2007), *IDS*, p.5

For Latour, however, the idea of progress is not neutral. The assumption that history will move forward in a certain direction implies an understanding of time that is linear and predictable. This in turn is premised on postulating a moment of rupture that has previously taken place in human history. This is the emancipation narrative of modernity. By positing the transcendent epistemological categories of “Nature”, “Society”, “the Second Nature” and so on, themselves undergirded by the meta-category of “the crossed-out God”, modernity perceives itself as having broken with a pre-enlightened past. Once, the story of humanity was framed in relation to a plural, contingent world that was by no means under the mastery of humans. But now, the history of modern people is conceived as proceeding on a different trajectory. The “laws of nature”, the “laws of social existence” and the “law of market forces” have been revealed. Modern people proceed on the basis that the future will entail nothing more than the progressive disclosure of reality according to these laws. Of course, the journey may be uneven. But the ultimate destination is known. Thus, as well as positing its own trajectory of progress in relation to a pre-enlightened past, modernity also functions in relation to a future state of affairs or end-state that is conceived to have been brought into the time of the present. This facilitates the idea that the progressive flow of human history has been in some way raised above the impact of events in the world that might lead to an unpredictable or contingent end. Echoing the terminology of Fukuyama and others, then, “the end of history” is proclaimed within modernity.⁴⁴⁹ But for Latour this phrase has problematic connotations. It refers to an artificial experience of time. A flow of history that was once tied to a contingent ontology of

⁴⁴⁹ Fukuyama (2006, 1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*.

actors and events has now become formatted by categories that fix its progression in a controlled and predictable order. Thus, modernity is characterised by:

*[...] ce thème étrange que l'histoire serait déjà finie, qu'il existerait une rupture totale et radicale qui aurait définitivement brûlé nos vaisseaux derrière nous.*⁴⁵⁰

Representing these ideas visually, the conceptualization of history within modernity can be depicted as follows:

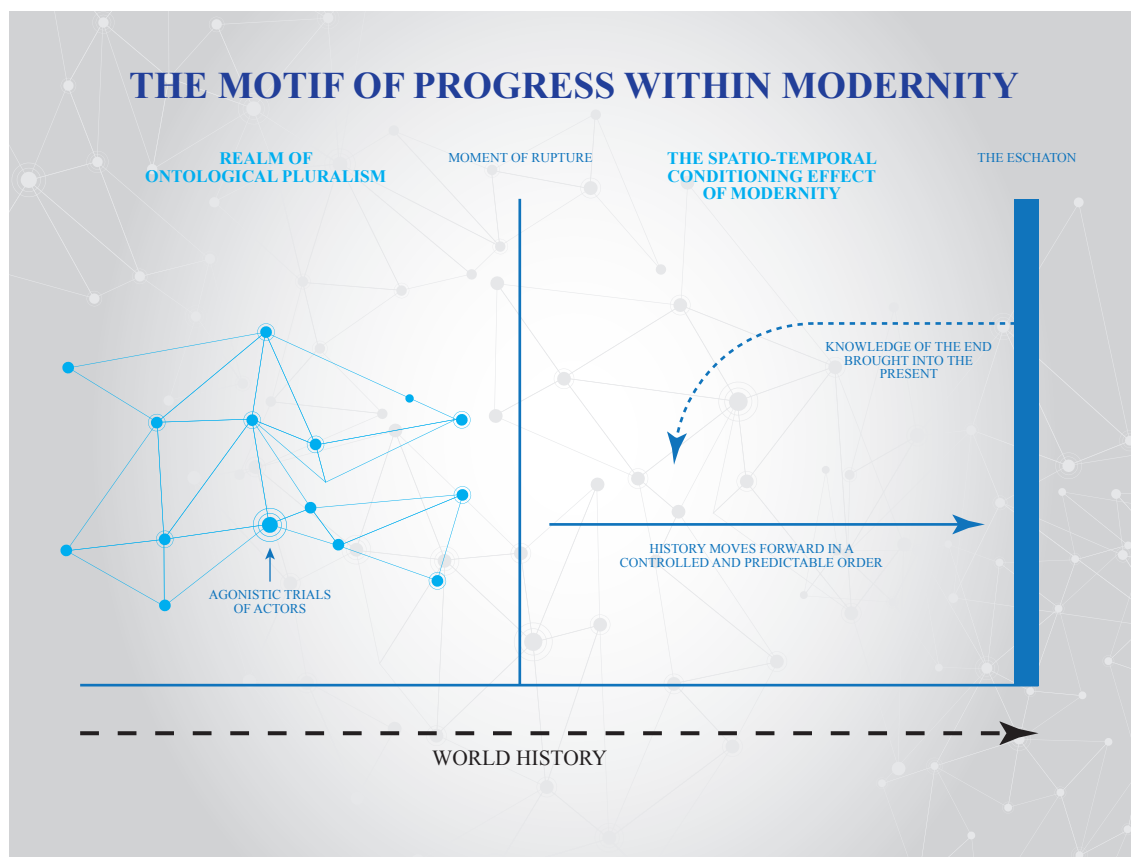


Figure 4: Representation of the motif of progress within modernity.

⁴⁵⁰ My trans. “[...] this strange idea that history should be already finished, that a total and radical rupture should have taken place that definitively burnt bridges with what was behind us” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.220.

The progressive identity of modernity is therefore held in place by means of two assertions about historical time. The first of these looks backwards. To be modern is to have broken with a pre-enlightened past whose rationality was associated with the contingent and unpredictable conditions of the immanent world. The second looks forwards. To be modern is to function in accordance with laws about the world that are fixed, external and immutable. But this is to assume a mode of rationality that is transcendent over the immanent world, which Latour takes as being analogous to the knowledge of God that is to be revealed at the end of time itself, that is, in the eschaton. In between these two historical buttresses, modernity is held in a spatio-temporal grid where the “slight surprise of action” associated with the logistical movements of actors in the present moment is replaced by a trajectory that, in its essential form, has already been set.⁴⁵¹ History can be conceived as moving forward in a controlled and predictable order. It is this celebratory narrative of progress that Latour exposes as a myth.

Latour’s deconstructive reading of the idea of progress and its relation to historical time is best understood in relation to his writing on religion. Looking backwards, the historical rupture that lies behind the emancipation narrative of modernity is equivalent in form to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Both posit an interruption within history that establishes an entirely new historical timeline for those that follow in its wake. And looking forwards, the confidence modern people are able to place in the future trajectory of history is a function of the Gnostic appropriation of an eschatological motif. Thus, for Latour, the progressive identity of contemporary western society has the form of a religious ideology that promises to its adherents a

⁴⁵¹ Latour (1999), *PH*, p.267.

proleptic assurance about their own place in the flow of history and its ultimate triumph in the eschaton.

B. *Secularism and the Secular*

The second motif I wish to address, which once again Latour takes to be integral to the self-perception of contemporary western society, is that of “secularism” and “the secular”.⁴⁵² The definition and scope of these terms, and their relation to what might be called “the post-secular”, are highly contested, and it is not my intention to engage with recent scholarship on them in detail.⁴⁵³ As a point-of-entry, however, I will borrow a definition provided by Graham Ward. For Ward, the distinctive feature of secularism is that it proposes itself as being neutral with regard to human ideology and belief systems. It can do this on account of its claim to be emancipated from any kind of religious particularism or confessionalism. As a consequence, secularism proposes itself as a structure within which all human ideologies are able to flourish equally. Thus, Ward offers the following definition:

Secularism as a norm, as the natural default position prior to individual life choices, as the eternal condition upon which constructive choices can be made.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵² I am indebted to a paper written by Michael Barnes Norton entitled ‘The Politics of Agnosticism: Latour and the Post-Secular’, which was presented at the *Seventh Annual Telos Conference*, held on February 15–17, 2013, in New York City, and sent to me as personal correspondence. This paper has not yet been published.

⁴⁵³ For an introductory survey of some of the uses of these terms in recent philosophy, theology and sociology, see articles in Zuckerman & Shook (eds.), (2017), *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, Part One, ‘Identifying the Secular, Secularity, Secularization, and Secularism’, pp.21–124.

⁴⁵⁴ Ward (2014), ‘The Myth of Secularism’, p.179. Ward links this definition with Roland Barthes’ concept of “the naturalism of secularism”, in *ibid*, p.166.

Fundamental to secularism, then, is its claim to provide a neutral or non-aligned space within which human existence can be creatively and independently pursued on its own terms. Ward himself challenges this claim, proposing that secularism must be understood as itself having the form of an ideology and social habitus.⁴⁵⁵ Similar challenges have been posed elsewhere within the disciplines of theology, philosophy, sociology and the study of religions.⁴⁵⁶ The work of Talal Asad is prominent in this debate. Asad has sought to expose the multi-layered history of secularism in an attempt to deconstruct its claim to be offering a neutral or “nonpartisan” rationality.⁴⁵⁷ A 2008 collected volume that was inspired by Asad’s work argued that there are various “secularisms” in the world, each one inflected by its particular national, regional and religious context, and that this undermines the claim of secularism itself to be a neutral or “nonpartisan” space.⁴⁵⁸ This argument has been applied to a sociological study into religious minorities in the Middle East, which showed how modern secular governance in this region has actually served to aggravate and amplify existing forms of Islamic hierarchy, bringing minority relations in Egypt to a new historical impasse.⁴⁵⁹

Latour’s work can certainly be situated in this field of critical reflection on the concepts of secularism and the secular. However, the implications of his work are in fact more radical still. The critique that is developed in this scholarship is premised on the idea that secularism retains the shadow of a religious heritage. That is to say, the

⁴⁵⁵ See Ward (2004), *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice*, p.9.

⁴⁵⁶ For a survey of this scholarship, see Dressler & Mandair (2011), ‘Introduction: Modernity, Religion-Making, and the Postsecular’.

⁴⁵⁷ See Asad (2003), *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, p.67, and elsewhere.

⁴⁵⁸ Jakobsen & Pellegrini (eds.) (2008), *Secularisms*.

⁴⁵⁹ Mahmood (2016), *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*.

putative neutrality of secularism is understood to be compromised at points where secularism has failed to dissociate or dis-amalgamate itself from a particular religion or religious heritage. This leaves open the possibility that a more secular form of secularism might arise in the future, when this residue of religion might finally be sloughed off. By contrast, Latour's analysis suggests that religious ideology is not merely vestigial within secularism. Rather, it is integrated and even co-opted into its very structure and definition. This enables him to make the apparently paradoxical claim that contemporary western society is characterised above all by "secular fundamentalisms".⁴⁶⁰ This is not a naïve observation about some kind of regressive or recursive adherence to a particular religious creed or tradition. It follows directly from the argument I have advanced in this chapter. For Latour, secularism is itself convoked and held in place by a covert appeal to the category of transcendence, an appeal which is always religious in form:

*En ce sens, il n'y a pas de collectif durablement sécularisé, mais seulement des collectifs qui ont modifié le nom et les propriétés de cette autorité suprême au nom duquel ils s'assemblent.*⁴⁶¹

Latour's critique of the concept of the secular has allowed him to draw controversial connections between the contemporary (European) secular state and non-state actors

⁴⁶⁰ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.94. The term "secular fundamentalism" itself has a heritage within various fields of critical studies. For a survey, see Stjernfelt (2009), 'Secularism is Fundamentalism! The Background to a Problematic Claim'. Reader also uses the term to describe the essentialism and determinism of the contemporary secular worldview, which constitutes "a significant threat and challenge to certain forms of religious belief and practice". See Reader (2017), *Theology and New Materialism: Spaces of Faithful Dissent*, p.10. Occasionally, Latour refers to "secular absolutism" or "secular absolutisms" to indicate the same phenomenon.

⁴⁶¹ My trans. "in this sense, there is no such thing as a durably *secularized* collective, but only collectives that have modified the name and the properties of the supreme authority in whose name they gather" in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.161, original emphasis.

engaged in acts of violent religious extremism. For example, in a newspaper opinion piece written in response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks that took place in Paris in January 2015, published in *Le Monde*, he argued that the ideology of those Jihad-inspired criminals was ultimately the same (albeit in violently-mutated form) as the one espoused and promoted by the secular ideology they were seeking to destroy:

It comes from those who believe they possess a knowledge that is so absolute that they have the right to impose it without having to take into account the necessary brakes of law, of politics, of morality, of culture or of simple good sense. It comes when certain people in the name of the utopia of a paradise on earth assume to themselves the right to impose hell on those who hesitate or don't obey fast enough.⁴⁶²

For Latour, Jihadist ideology has the form of a political religion. On account of its claim to be the exclusive interpreter of reality, disregarding the voices of other actors, it asserts itself as the *de facto* possessor of a transcendent mode of knowledge, “*la connaissance assurée*”.⁴⁶³ Here is the eschatological motif I described above, namely, the idea of a final state of knowledge that is brought into the time of the present. Immunized against all doubt by this eschatological importation, the Jihadists are able to claim for themselves justification for their terrible acts of violence. But Latour's startling claim is that an identical motif is employed within the secular society that is the target of Jihadist violence. Both appeal to the theological concept of transcendence as warrant of their actions, in one case citing “*fi sabilillah*” (“the cause of Allah”), in the other citing the being of “the crossed-out God”. Thus, with regard to the Jihadists, Latour can propose that “behind their archaic appearance they must be understood

⁴⁶² Latour (2015), *TLOI*, p.2. For a similar argument from an earlier context, and thus without reference to contemporary events in Paris, see Latour (2002), *WWP*.

⁴⁶³ My trans. “certain knowledge” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.211.

above all as fanatical modernizers”.⁴⁶⁴ And correspondingly, with regard to western secularists, he can propose that “like the most extremist zealots of Jerusalem and Ramallah” they are in fact “political fundamentalists”.⁴⁶⁵ Of course, Latour is not seeking to render these two groups morally equivalent. His concern is to identify an uncomfortable synergy between the ideological structure that lies behind both, even if this issues in radically different forms of worldview and behavior. Both claim to be in possession of a totalizing knowledge of reality, a claim which by definition implies a claim about the flow of historical time itself:

*Ils sont définitivement immunisés contre le doute, puisque qu'ils seront passés de l'autre côté de l'incertitude concernant le temps et sa direction: les fins ne sont plus ce qu'on attend, mais ce qu'on possède.*⁴⁶⁶

Latour's deconstructive reading of the concept of the secular has arisen in the context of recent debates in France concerning the function of “*laïcité*” and the mode of management the French state is entitled to pursue in its guise as supposedly neutral arbitrator of the boundaries of religion in public life. These centre on Article I of the French constitution and interpretation of ‘*la loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l'État*’.⁴⁶⁷ Controversy over interpretation of this Article was triggered by the publication of Stasi Commission report in 2003 and has been accelerated in recent years by publicity surrounding bans enacted by various French

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid, p.2. See also Latour (2015), *BB* (audio).

⁴⁶⁵ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.35.

⁴⁶⁶ My trans. “they are definitively immunized against doubt, since they will have passed to the other side of uncertainty concerning time and its direction. The ends are no longer what you expect, but what you possess” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.207, original emphasis.

⁴⁶⁷ For context, see Liogier (2009), ‘*Laïcité on the Edge in France: Between Theory of Church-State Separation and the Praxis of State-Church Confusion*’, especially p.27 ff.

communes on the wearing of religious clothing in public places. Latour's analysis suggests that the secular French state, or indeed any state apparatus, cannot propose itself as being a neutral arbitrator of religious expression, since secularism is itself already inflected as a religious ideology. Indeed, this is true even in a legal sense, since to enshrine "*laïcité*" in legislation and to enforce it as law upon a population is simultaneously to enact a hegemonic gesture that is characteristic of political religions.⁴⁶⁸ Latour has been described as a conservative political thinker.⁴⁶⁹ But this is a misreading. On the contrary, his work provides a radical and even an unsettling critique of the contemporary political situation and the secular ideology he perceives as undergirding it.⁴⁷⁰

C. *Globes, Globalizing Thought and Globalization*

The third and final motif I would like to address is that of the "globe". Latour's critique of this motif as it is deployed within contemporary western society is more complicated and abstract than the previous two. His references to globes are dispersed. It is sometimes difficult to perceive what he means when he refers to something as being "global" in nature. But this motif is significant. In a recent interview he has suggested: "I have always been interested in the figure of the globe as a sort of wrong way of

⁴⁶⁸ See also Ward (2014), 'The Myth of Secularism', p.179. Ward goes on to critique "*laïcité*" as a "state-sponsored mythology" that is continually revealing points of "leakage" or "contamination" by a religious discourse it claims to have superseded. See *ibid*, pp.163, 174.

⁴⁶⁹ See Tsouvalis (2016), 'Latour's Object-Orientated Politics for a Post-Political Age'; Chandler (2016), 'Post-Political Ontologies and the Problems of Anti-Anthropocentrism: A Reply to Tsouvalis'. These articles are typical of interpretations of Latour's work as seeking to defend the authority of the existing secular state.

⁴⁷⁰ In recent years, this has become more evident given his involvement in public debates and even in ministerial meetings in France, notably his participation in the *Rencontres Internationales de la Gestion Publique* (RIGP) forum in 2016, for which see < economie.gouv.fr/igpde-seminaires-conferences/rigp-2016 > (accessed 01 March, 2018).

approaching the question of nature”.⁴⁷¹ In fact, Latour explores the figure of the globe as a way of addressing modernist universalisms and their impact upon lived experience.

A globe is a spherical model of the planet Earth. In a contemporary context, the idea is also associated with views of the Earth from space, a vantage-point from which the planet can be seen as a geometric sphere. Latour has in mind the NASA ‘blue marble’ photograph of the Earth captured by the crew of the *Apollo 17* spacecraft in December 1972, at a distance of about 45,000 kilometres. This image has since become iconic as an index for human understanding our own planetary situation, since it discloses in a holistic way the fragile environment human beings are required to inhabit.⁴⁷² But the ‘blue marble’ photograph, and others like it, also communicate a sense of spatial dislocation: these images draw attention to the fact that human beings now have the ability to elevate themselves above the Earth and to look down upon it from above. The very idea of the Earth as a globe presupposes a field-of-vision that is cosmologically eccentric. It is that second connotation that is of interest to Latour. He argues that, metaphorically, this is equivalent to the space occupied by the political epistemology of modernity, which likewise claims to be able to view the world down-below as a unified whole, its constituent parts captured, contained and framed at a single glance. By conjunction of these two images, Latour refers to the “globalizing thought” of modernity.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷¹ Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.2.

⁴⁷² See Helmreich (2011), ‘From Spaceship Earth to Google Ocean: Planetary Icons, Indexes, and Infrastructures’; Grevsmühl (2014), *La terre vue d’en haut: l’invention de l’environnement global*; Bonneuil & Fressoz (2016, 2015), *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, pp.61–64.

⁴⁷³ This is my translation of cognate terms that appear frequently in Latour’s work such as “*la pensée globale*” and “*penser global*”. See Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.131.

Latour's understanding of the figure of the globe can be represented in visual form as follows:

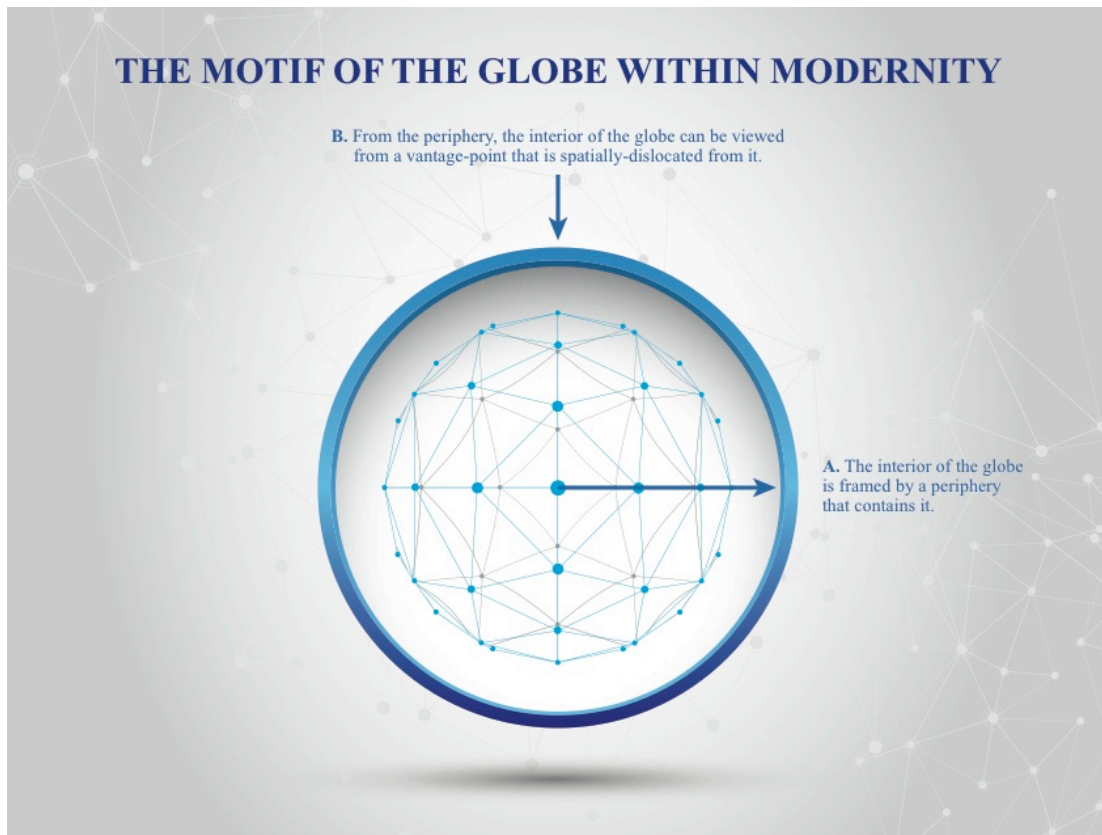


Figure 5: Representation of the motif of the globe within modernity.

The political epistemology of modernity can be understood as occupying position (B). It claims to offer an authoritative perspective on the whole of reality. But this authority is premised on a spatial dislocation of the “knowing subject” from the ontological scenography of the world that is “to be known”.⁴⁷⁴ Latour has available to him in French a convenient idiom by which to describe this effect: “*le point de vue de*

⁴⁷⁴ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.77.

Sirius".⁴⁷⁵ Literally, this idiom refers to the view that would be given "from the star Sirius", that is, from a distant point in the universe, looking down on the planet Earth at a vantage-point that is remote from it. It corresponds to the English phrase "a view from nowhere".⁴⁷⁶ This was the phrase used by Thomas Nagel to describe his expected norm of scientific objectivity: for Nagel, the laboratory should be conceived as an environment where human "interference" is abstracted from the system observed, in such a way as to let "nature speak for itself".⁴⁷⁷ For Latour, however, the idea of a "view from nowhere" is implausible.⁴⁷⁸ A rational claim about the world can never be divorced from the material space in which it has been logistically composed. These conditions cannot be transcended by means of an external vantage-point. And yet the transcendence of the periphery is precisely what is advocated within the ideology of modernity:

*La figure du "Globe" autorise à sauter prématurément à un niveau supérieur en confondant les figures de la connexion avec celle de la totalité.*⁴⁷⁹

Latour's discourse advances further into metaphor when he discusses globes not in terms of a movement between centre and periphery, but in terms of "loops" that

⁴⁷⁵ Latour, with Hermant (2009, 1998), fr. *PVI*, 'second sequence, plan 30'; Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 3, p.54; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, pp.37, 55, 70, 222; Latour, with Miranda (2016), *DAHS*, document 2, p.5.

⁴⁷⁶ Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.6.

⁴⁷⁷ Nagel (1986), *The View from Nowhere*, p.95.

⁴⁷⁸ For critique of Nagel's thesis in related terms, see Daston (1992), 'Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective'; Shapin (1998), 'Placing the View from Nowhere: Historical and Sociological Problems in the Location of Science'.

⁴⁷⁹ My trans. "the figure of the "Globe" authorizes a premature leap to a superior level *by conflating figures of connection with those of totality*" in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.139, original emphasis.

encircle.⁴⁸⁰ He points out that the volume of an enclosed sphere can be represented geometrically by means of overlapping loops. He also draws a parallel with the historical achievement of mapping the Earth, which was not achieved by satellite technology, but by circumnavigations of the globe carried out by many different ships and by the progressive accrual of knowledge and consensus over time as these returned from their voyages. The concept of a loop can provide an alternative to the spatial dislocation implied in the idea of a globe viewed as a totality from above.

Latour's exploration of the motif of the globe is highly figurative. But he does not intend his language to lose its literal connection with the planet Earth itself. This is a point I will explore in more detail in my final chapter, which will address the contemporary environmental crisis as an occasion and context for Latour's thought. Why is this so? For Latour, the contemporary environmental crisis represents a potential turning-point in human history. This is because it promises to disrupt the political epistemology of modernity and the spatial categories on which it is based. Human beings must appreciate anew that their existence is nested and installed in the midst of an interlocking and interdependent ecology. It is precisely this awareness that has become obscured within modernity. Modern people have become alienated from their planetary situation.⁴⁸¹ But the environmental crisis represents an opportunity for a

⁴⁸⁰ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 4, p.94.

⁴⁸¹ Writing in response to the publication of a similar image of the planet Earth from above (in her case, this was a grainy photographic image returned by the *Sputnik* satellite in October 1957, some years prior to the 'blue marble' photograph delivered by the *Apollo 17* spacecraft), Hannah Arendt also described a sense of "man's alienation from an Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky", in Arendt (2013, 1958), *The Human Condition*, p.2. Latour does not refer to Arendt anywhere in his work. However, in personal correspondence he has acknowledged her influence, particularly the 'Prologue' to *The Human Condition*. For further consideration of this concept of alienation, see also Olwig (2011), 'The Earth is Not a Globe: Landscape versus the 'Globalist' Agenda'.

new mode of “global knowledge”,⁴⁸² and even a new mode of “geopolitics”,⁴⁸³ which will be determined by a sense of our “earthbound” existence and by the necessity of collaborating in new ways with other actors that occupy the same territory as us.⁴⁸⁴ The “globalizing thought” of modernity, with its unwarranted leap into transcendence, might be replaced by a new mode of thought that is closely associated with the immanent, habitable space of the Earth itself. This point will require a great deal more exposition and elucidation in what follows. But it is important to note that, notwithstanding its high degree of abstraction, Latour’s exploration of the figure of the globe is intended to retain this literal frame of reference.

A crucial context for Latour’s ideas is the work of German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. Sloterdijk displays a similar concern for the spatial dislocations that characterise modern thought. He characterises his work as a development of the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, particularly as found in Division One of *Being and Time*, where space is defined not as the *a priori* framework in which objects are fixed and permanently situated, but rather as the existential aspect of *Dasein*. Thus, Heidegger writes:

[...] space is not in the subject, nor is the world in space. Space is rather ‘in’ the world insofar as space has been disclosed by that Being-in-the-world which is constitutive for *Dasein*.⁴⁸⁵

Sloterdijk takes up Heidegger’s spatial analysis, but modifies it in a more concrete,

⁴⁸² Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 4, p.95.

⁴⁸³ Latour (2015), *FF*, p.11; Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.9.

⁴⁸⁴ See Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 5, p.117 and various places throughout.

⁴⁸⁵ Heidegger (1978, 1923), *Being and Time*, p.146.

even in a more anthropological direction, so as to focus on the physical environments that human beings inhabit and in which their meaning-making activity is grounded. What ensues is “a poetics of natality”,⁴⁸⁶ or an analysis of space as a “gynaecological” construct.⁴⁸⁷ Sloterdijk seeks to reinstate the meaningfulness of human existence in correlation with the material environment human beings actually occupy.

Sloterdijk develops his analysis with reference to the figure of a “sphere”. Hence, he refers to his “spherology” project. An early prototype is found in his 1995 book *Im selben Boot — Versuch über die Hyperpolitik*, which proposes a historical survey of different forms of social organization in terms of spheres that have lost their connection with a “centre that grounds them”.⁴⁸⁸ The spherology project itself is then developed in a consecutive series of books entitled *Bubbles*, *Globes* and *Foams*, which together he calls *The Spheres Trilogy*,⁴⁸⁹ as well as in a number of smaller works intended to supplement these.⁴⁹⁰ The premise of Sloterdijk’s spherology project is that human beings are “creatures who inhabit and administer a sphere”.⁴⁹¹ To construct a sphere, it is necessary for humans to work “from within” or “from the ground up”, creating an architecture of meaning for themselves that has been generated by

⁴⁸⁶ Couture (2015), *Sloterdijk: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, p.57.

⁴⁸⁷ Thrift (2015), ‘Peter Sloterdijk and the Philosopher’s Stone’, p.140.

⁴⁸⁸ Sloterdijk (1995), *Im selben Boot — Versuch über die Hyperpolitik*. This book is not yet translated into English. For a survey of its contents, see Couture (2015), *Sloterdijk*, p.59.

⁴⁸⁹ Sloterdijk (2011, 1998), *Bubbles: The Spheres Trilogy Volume I, Microspherology*; Sloterdijk (2014, 1999), *Globes: The Spheres Trilogy Volume II, Macrospherology*; Sloterdijk (2016, 2004), *Foams: The Spheres Trilogy Volume III, Plural Spherology*. For an introduction to the project, see Funcke (2005), ‘Against Gravity: Bettina Funcke Talks with Peter Sloterdijk’.

⁴⁹⁰ See especially Sloterdijk (2013, 2005), *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*.

⁴⁹¹ Sloterdijk (2014, 1999), *Globes*, p.47.

interactions with other beings, yet without taking a leap beyond the immanent space in which these interactions necessarily take place. This is an alternative way of conceiving the construction of a sphere. Rather than viewing it as an enclosed volume that might be contemplated from its periphery, Sloterdijk argues that “we must think instead of a fixed luminous centre from which points on the periphery receive their share of light and their relative co-ordinates”.⁴⁹² Elsewhere, he shifts the image to that of “foam”: this enables him to describe a social aggregation of internally-constructed spheres co-existing in a flexible and yet stable mode of being-together or “*Mitsein*”, just as foam consists of cells that tessellate and interconnect with one another whilst maintaining their own territorial integrity.⁴⁹³ The task of spherology, then, is to conceive of the whole in terms of the constituent parts that occupy its interior, and that produce and define its boundaries by means of their own loops of activity. Spherology seeks “to re-localise the global”.⁴⁹⁴ And yet, for Sloterdijk, this is precisely the task that has been waylaid and hampered by classical western metaphysics, with its concern to identify a ground of being that lies outside these local processes and this immanent social architecture. In a style that is both abstract and wide-ranging, Sloterdijk attempts to trace the history of this metaphysics, beginning with what he calls the “orb speculation”

⁴⁹² Ibid, p.69.

⁴⁹³ Sloterdijk (2013, 2003), *Foams*, p.333. See also Sloterdijk (2013, 2005), *In the World Interior of Capital*, p.65.

⁴⁹⁴ Couture (2015), *Sloterdijk*, p.57.

of classical philosophy,⁴⁹⁵ and continuing right up to the assumptions that underlie contemporary geopolitics and international relations.⁴⁹⁶

Latour has frequently expressed his admiration for Sloterdijk's work and has shared a public platform with him on various occasions.⁴⁹⁷ In 2009 he wrote a long essay examining synergies between Sloterdijk's spherology and his own interest in the figure of the globe.⁴⁹⁸ Given their personal friendship and intellectual exchange, the order of influence between them is hard to discern. But it is important to note at least two points of connection, since these serve to elucidate what Latour intends by his use of the concept.

First, Latour credits Sloterdijk for identifying the asymmetrical power relations that have been encoded in the figure of the sphere/ globe within the western metaphysical tradition. For Sloterdijk, the attempt of western metaphysics to produce "a theory of the whole" has been premised on the idea of the spatial dislocation of the thinker from a position "within" to a position "without".⁴⁹⁹ The one who occupies this peripheral boundary has the power to define and contain what takes place within the space he or she views. Sloterdijk calls this "the tyranny of knowledge over concretely-interpreted life".⁵⁰⁰ The forms of knowledge that are generated from within, by the actors who occupy the space of the interior, are treated with suspicion and even

⁴⁹⁵ Sloterdijk (2014, 1999), *Globes*, p.18.

⁴⁹⁶ Sloterdijk (2009a, 2002), *Terror from the Air*. See also Connor (2010), *The Matter of the Air: Science and the Art of the Ethereal*, chapter 8, 'A Grave in the Air', pp.230–286.

⁴⁹⁷ Latour, with Godmer & Smajda (2012), fr. *PPE*, p.132.

⁴⁹⁸ Latour (2008), *ACP*.

⁴⁹⁹ Sloterdijk (2014, 1999), *Globes*, p.441.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.79.

denounced. To define reality from the periphery is to prevent it being defined from the ground up, that is, by the political activity of those who occupy that space. Sloterdijk therefore provides a key to understanding Latour's diagnosis of the hegemony of the political epistemology of modernity, which he likewise describes as shutting down the space of politics itself by means of its transcendent epistemological categories.⁵⁰¹

Second, Latour credits Sloterdijk for identifying the religious aetiology of this idea. In a lengthy section of the second volume of his *Spheres Trilogy*, entitled 'Deus sive Sphaerae, or The Exploding Universal One', Sloterdijk proposes that Christian theology was the originator of this movement of spatial dislocation from the interior to the periphery.⁵⁰² Within Christian metaphysics, the being of God was situated outside or beyond the "cosmological-immanent orb" of human existence.⁵⁰³ As a consequence, "the world down-below became the epitome of that which encompassed it by an outermost boundary".⁵⁰⁴ For Sloterdijk, this has been the impetus for theological tropes situated on a vertical axis, all of which are familiar, but many of which he suggests have been unexamined in these terms, such as the idea of the ascent of the soul to God or the idea of hell as being situated in a realm below or underneath.⁵⁰⁵ But he also argues that, as an inevitable corollary, modes of theological enquiry that sought to take

⁵⁰¹ Both Sloterdijk and Latour are also influenced by the work of Michel Serres and, in particular, his little-known (and as yet untranslated) work *Atlas*, which prefigures their analysis of the asymmetrical power relations encoded within the western metaphysical tradition, for which see Serres (1997), *Atlas*. This explains references to "Atlas' malediction" that have occurred in some of Latour's recent work, which would remain somewhat obscure without this context. See Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.19; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.131.

⁵⁰² Sloterdijk, (2014, 1999), *Globes*, pp.441–542.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid*, p.444.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.443.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.456.

seriously the residual footprint of God within this world were denigrated and moved to the edge of theological orthodoxy:

Anyone thinking to seek God *within* the world orb could discover indirect signs of His works—vestiges, relics, hints and hieroglyphs—[...] but as long as the speaker remained in immanence, however close they might feel they were to the object of their quest, they had to constantly comprehend anew that the true God exceeds everything which can be sensually, spatially and symbolically grasped.⁵⁰⁶

This is precisely the hint Latour takes up when he argues that modernity is undergirded by the presence of “the crossed-out God”. This entity can now be understood as occupying a space that is peripheral to the interior of the lived world. Those who associate themselves with its being declare themselves able to view the world down-below as a unified whole, thereby appropriating for themselves the cosmic-eccentric position of God himself: “*ceux qui regardent la Terre comme un Globe se prennent toujours pour un Dieu*”.⁵⁰⁷ But in doing so, the actors and events inhabiting that interior space are robbed of their own voices to define the reality of which they are constituent parts. I noted earlier that “the crossed-out God” is not named explicitly in Latour’s most recent writing. But the idea itself remains the crucial structural underpinning of his thought. It can be further illuminated by means of Latour’s understanding of space: “the crossed-out God” now becomes “*le Dieu-qui-voit-tout-et-qui-englobe-tout*”, so as to

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, p.460, original emphasis, but I have slightly amended the tenses in the second part of the quotation in order to reflect the original more closely.

⁵⁰⁷ My trans. “those who view the Earth as a Globe take themselves always as a kind of God” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.146, original capitalization.

indicate its function as that which fixes and controls the logistics of the immanent world from a position that is transcendent over it.⁵⁰⁸

Finally, Latour uses these ideas as basis for reflection on the contemporary phenomenon of “globalization”. He begins by considering approaches to globalization, especially within the discipline of sociology, that explain it in terms of “disembedding mechanisms”.⁵⁰⁹ Disembedding describes to the way in which the value of goods and services is rendered increasingly abstracted and transferable across borders within a globalized economy, their origin becoming more obscure at the same time as their currency becomes more widespread. Thus, Giddens describes globalization as that which “*lifts out* objects of exchange from their local contexts of interaction, [so that they can be] restructured across indefinite spans of time-space”.⁵¹⁰ To celebrate globalization in terms of disembedding is to celebrate a logic of commerce and exchange that is in excess of idiosyncratic markers of local identities and modes of production.

Far from celebrating the phenomenon of globalization in these terms, Latour understands these disembedding mechanisms as instantiations of the spatial dislocation enacted within modernity itself. In this, he is following an author whose inspiration upon his work (as well as personal friendship) I noted in the previous chapter, namely, Marc Augé.⁵¹¹ In a book published as early as 1992, Augé argued that the desired effect

⁵⁰⁸ My trans. “the God-who-sees-all-and-encompasses-all” in *ibid*, p.53.

⁵⁰⁹ See Eriksen (2014), *Globalization: The Key Concepts, Second Edition*, chapter 1, ‘Disembedding’, pp.19–38.

⁵¹⁰ Giddens (1990), *The Consequences of Modernity*, p.21, original emphasis.

⁵¹¹ See above, p.97.

of the disembedding mechanisms of globalization is to shift goods and services out of their original context, in such a way that their value can be regulated, standardized and homogenized.⁵¹² By doing so, however, the complex matrix of human relations that had previously determined this value is elided. Historically-rooted sites and networks imbued with particularity and memory are eliminated. Inspired by Augé's work, Latour has developed his own critique of globalization in a series of articles published in the general media, as well as in a short book in French entitled *Où atterrir—comment s'orienter en politique* (whose translation is forthcoming at the time of writing).⁵¹³ His argument is that the disembedding effect of globalization is analogous to, or is a consequence of, the political epistemology of modernity. In both cases, the ontology of actors and events that pertains in the real world is shut down by an external, transcendent logic that operates at a spatial remove from it.

Latour applies this analysis to different socio-economic groups within contemporary western society. In each case, he argues that the effect of globalization has been to alienate human individuals and groups from the material conditions of their own existence.

First, Latour relates this idea to socio-economic groups that have generally profited from the globalized economy. He calls these “the 1% of global elites”.⁵¹⁴ The

⁵¹² Augé (1992), *Non-lieux: à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*.

⁵¹³ See Latour (2016), *TBU*; Latour (2016), *TGE*; Latour (2017), fr. *OA*; Latour (2017), fr. *ESSE* (this short paper, written by Latour in March 2017 and sent to me in private correspondence, was intended as a contribution to the campaign of environmentalist Yannick Jadot for the 2017 French presidential election; at the time of writing, it is unclear in what form Latour will eventually publish it). For an academic paper published some years earlier containing a prototype of this line of critique, see Latour (2009), fr. *MMH*.

⁵¹⁴ Latour (2017), fr. *ESSE*, p.7; Latour (2017), fr. *LSR*.

wealth generated by global networks of capital flow has enabled these groups to abstract themselves from the complex supply and production chains that facilitate their patterns of consumption. They no longer are in touch with, or feel responsible for, the interwoven loops of agency that sustain their material lifestyles. This in turn makes it possible to evade ethical questions about trade justice and consumer behaviour that are inextricably bound up with this lifestyle. Such groups are able to disembed themselves from the reality of the supply chain and repress awareness of those who are deprived of agency within it. Latour articulates this critique in spatial terms: “the 1% of global elites” are characterised by:

[...] *la plus étrange façon d’être et de ne pas être de ce monde. [...] Ils sont à la fois partout et nulle part, absents et présents, envahissants et d’une négligence ahurissante.*⁵¹⁵

Second, Latour applies a related critique to those who do not perceive that they have profited from the globalized economy and therefore do not feel part of “the 1% of global elites”. Latour calls these “the excluded remainder”.⁵¹⁶ These groups experience a sense of disenfranchisement and disempowerment in the face of globalizing forces. In response, they attempt to counteract the logic of globalization by defining themselves on the basis of territorial belonging. This might entail the literal or symbolic erection of borders. In its most pernicious form it might be expressed in anti-immigration sentiment, or in the rise of nationalist or populist movements.⁵¹⁷ This sounds quite

⁵¹⁵ My trans. “[...] the strangest way of being and not being of this world. [...] They are at once everywhere and nowhere, absent and present, invasive and stupefyingly negligent” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.210.

⁵¹⁶ Latour (2017), fr. *ESSE*, p.3.

⁵¹⁷ See Latour (2017), fr. *OU*, p.25 ff. For a study of the contemporary political trend of “populism” in precisely these terms, see Müller (2016), *What Is Populism?*

different from the groundless utopia constructed by “the 1% of global elites”. But Latour actually identifies a similar logic at play. For acts of retrenchment can be understood in terms of disembedding also. The defensive occupation of a territory is just as much an act of abstraction from the processes that would constitute a robust political society. Latour identifies this logic of global retrenchment as defining a number of recent social movements, including the 2016 Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of President Trump in the United States.⁵¹⁸

Latour’s critique of globalization is therefore in terms of a spatial ontology. Its effect is to cause the alienation of different socio-economic groups from the shared space of existence. The ideological and teleological structure that undergirds this alienation is essentially religious, because it is generated by proxy with a realm of transcendence and with attributes credited to the being of God within the Christian metaphysical tradition. The idea of globalization as an unstoppable force or destiny over human society has become so powerful that it is becoming harder for human beings to envisage an alternative scenario of existence, nor the forms of political organisation that might be required to bring it about. As Graham Ward has argued, “globalization, like secularization, is proving to be an ideology—that is, a myth masquerading as natural law, even as divine providence”.⁵¹⁹ Latour’s critique of globalization thus stands alongside other recent evaluations of it as a quasi-religious phenomenon.⁵²⁰

⁵¹⁸ Latour (2017), fr. *ESSE*; Latour (2017), fr. *OA*.

⁵¹⁹ Ward (2008), ‘Religion after Democracy’, p.203.

⁵²⁰ A crucial series of texts in this regard is the trilogy of books by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for which see Hardt & Negri (2000), *Empire*; (2004), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*; (2009), *Commonwealth*. See also McCarragher

By exploring these various motifs—progress, secularism and globalization—Latour provides an analysis of contemporary western society in spatio-temporal categories. Its understanding of the flow of historical time is framed by a past and by a future: modern people believe themselves to have been emancipated from a pre-enlightened past and to be progressing towards an end that is to all extents and purposes already known. What ensues, however, is an experience of temporal aridity in the present moment. And the domain of politics, which would be the crucible out of which an alternative future for human society might be conceived and constructed, has been made obscure and difficult to access by various acts of territorial disembedding and territorial retrenchment, many of them prompted by the phenomenon of globalization itself.

Conclusion to Chapter Two

In this chapter I have argued that the political epistemology of modernity is undergirded by an (unwarranted) appeal to transcendence. This is what qualifies modernity as being essentially religious in form. This has led to analysis of contemporary western society in relation to its conceptualization of space and time. For Latour, modernity imposes a spatio-temporal framework upon human subjects that renders it difficult for them to envisage a future other than the one that seems to be already determined. History will progress. Events will continue to transpire. Society may appear to be changing in

(2005), 'The Enchantments of Capitalism: Notes towards a Theological History of Capitalism'. For an overview of related literature, see Smith (2008), 'Secularity, Globalization, and the Re-enchantment of the World'.

certain important respects. But, as one critic has noted, modernity functions to all extents and purposes as a “drama-free” zone.⁵²¹

This sets up the argument I will go on to develop in the remainder of my study. Latour has identified a form of religion that de-politicizes the public sphere. But this is not his last word on the subject. For Latour also identifies a form of religion that can serve as a complement to and facilitator of political activity within human society, and hence as a force empowering alternative conceptualizations of the future than those prescribed within modernity. This is what I will now examine under the heading of political theology.

⁵²¹ Bordeleau (2016), ‘Bruno Latour and the Miraculous Present of Enunciation’, p.160.

BRIDGE

WHY POLITICAL THEOLOGY?

This brief section is intended to serve as a bridge to the second half of my study. In the previous chapter, I argued that Latour diagnoses a certain religious thematic as undergirding the political epistemology of modernity. But his analysis doesn't stop there. He is also interested to consider whether an alternative definition of religion might be available. The task of describing religion in these terms and identifying its function within the contemporary public space is what I will call the political theology of Bruno Latour.

The rationale for my use of this term needs some context and justification. Latour has begun to refer to “political theology” in some of his recent writing. He begins the first of his *Gifford Lectures*, for example, by declaring that “the ideas I will pursue in this series could certainly receive the label of *political theology*”.⁵²² But then, in almost the same breath, he goes on to qualify this statement by suggesting that the political theology he has in mind will be “a strange and an unusual one, to be sure”.⁵²³ This is because both constituent elements of the phrase, “political” and “theology”, might not mean what we assume they do! A similar qualification is offered in other texts.⁵²⁴ Thus, it seems that there is an idiosyncratic and perhaps even an eccentric dimension to Latour's use of the term. He invests the idea of political

⁵²² Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.9, original emphasis.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁴ See Latour (2014), *GGT*; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.96; Latour (2015), fr. *LGC*; Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.14.

theology with significance. But he chooses not to define his understanding of the term relative to a previous writer or critical heritage.

What, then, does it mean to refer to Latour's political theology? In order to shed some light on this question, I will again bring his work into dialogue with that of Carl Schmitt. At first glance this seems as good a place as any at which to begin. After all, Schmitt claimed to have introduced the term itself into contemporary critical discourse,⁵²⁵ and his name has remained prominently associated with it since that time.⁵²⁶ And Latour refers his own use of the term in this direction.⁵²⁷

First and foremost, when Schmitt uses the term political theology he is referring to his attempt to describe how theological concepts have been transferred into the social, political and juridical realm. This is what he calls his "sociology of juristic concepts".⁵²⁸ What is in view here is a hypothesis about the emergence and use of concepts over time. It is based on the assumption that the political order of any given human society will be analogous in certain key respects to its conceptualization of the world. "The metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has

⁵²⁵ Schmitt (2008, 1970), *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of any Political Theology*, p.35. See also the claim Schmitt made in a letter to a student that "the coining of the term political theology in fact comes from me", cited in Meier (2011, 1998), *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*, p.202, fn.48. Of course, the term itself has a long heritage, although Schmitt did not take it from ancient or early Christian sources, but from Mikhail Bakunin, who used it in polemic against Giuseppe Mazzini. See Meier (1995), 'Was ist Politische Theologie? Einführende Bemerkungen zu einem umstrittenen Begriff', p.10 ff.

⁵²⁶ For a survey of the literature, see Vatter (2016), 'The Political Theology of Carl Schmitt', pp.245–246.

⁵²⁷ Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.259, fn.38.

⁵²⁸ Schmitt (2005a, 1922), *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, p.37.

the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as the form of its political organization”.⁵²⁹ Schmitt took care not to propose a direct correlation between his understanding of political theology as a “sociology of concepts” and the agency or intentionality of a particular human individual or regime in history.⁵³⁰ In his view, this would be an exercise in psychology. It would be reductive of a “sociology of concepts”. And yet, there is no doubt that Schmitt did deploy his hypothesis as a means of critiquing the political situation of his day. Thus, in various texts he attempts to show how contemporary institutions (in particular the nation-state) have been put under stress by non-political forces whose power is legitimized by religion. Schmitt’s understanding of political theology as a tool for the critique of modern institutions has been noted and described elsewhere.⁵³¹ It clearly corresponds to aspects of Latour’s work on modernity as described in the previous chapter.

But an alternative approach to Schmitt’s understanding of political theology can also be considered. For although Schmitt does refer to political theology as a tool for the critique of modern institutions, he also envisages it as resource that can direct how the political order might be arranged in a different way. This, then, is a positive and constructive understanding of the project of political theology. It is based in turn on a re-imagining of the phenomenon of religion itself. Here, religion is conceived not as a negative and neutralizing force, but rather as something that is able to contribute towards the realization of an alternative form of human society. It should immediately

⁵²⁹ Ibid, p.64.

⁵³⁰ Schmitt attributed this approach primarily to Max Weber. See *ibid*, p.44.

⁵³¹ See for example Kervégan (2005), *Hegel, Carl Schmitt: la politique entre spéculation et positivité* and Agamben (2009, 2008), *The Signature of All Things: On Method*.

be noted that Schmitt does not have in mind a moralistic or dogmatic definition of religion. To conceive of religion in either of those ways would be to constitute it as a “general norm”. And, as I have argued previously, this would be antithetical to the political processes Schmitt has previously defined.⁵³² Rather, what Schmitt has in mind is the recovery or re-conceptualization of a different mode of religion entirely, one that would be generative of what he calls “political unity and its presence or representation in the world”.⁵³³ That is to say, Schmitt envisages a mode of religion that would legitimize political, rather than non-political, forces in the world.

Schmitt’s idea can be illustrated with reference to a short essay he wrote in 1950 entitled ‘Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History’.⁵³⁴ This essay was written in response to a book by the German philosopher Karl Löwith, published the previous year, that had significant influence on debates about modernity and secularization in post-war Germany.⁵³⁵ Schmitt is clear that he agrees with the main proposals of Löwith’s book. He agrees with Löwith’s definition of modernity as “a mode of secularized Judaism and Christianity” on account of its deployment of eschatological motifs borrowed from religion.⁵³⁶ He agrees with Löwith’s claim that, in spite of its “positivist belief in progress”, modernity functions with a “philosophy of history” that has already determined the end towards which human society is moving

⁵³² See above, pp.79–90.

⁵³³ Schmitt (2008, 1970), *Political Theology II*, p.72.

⁵³⁴ Schmitt (2009, 1950), ‘Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History’.

⁵³⁵ Löwith (2011, 1949), *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Löwith had actually written a pseudonymous scathing critique of Schmitt’s work in the 1930s, for which see Löwith (1985, 1935), ‘Der okkasionelle Dezionismus von Carl Schmitt’. Schmitt makes no reference to that earlier critique in his 1950 essay.

⁵³⁶ Schmitt (2009, 1950), ‘Three Possibilities’, p.168.

and that this generates a form of “eschatological paralysis” that disables the activity of politics in the present moment.⁵³⁷ But Schmitt then asks a question: “can eschatological faith and historical consciousness coexist?”⁵³⁸ And, *contra* Löwith, he answers this question in the affirmative. “There is the possibility of a bridge”, he writes.⁵³⁹ This is the crucial moment. For Schmitt, what is required for the contemporary political order is not the elimination of religion from the public space. Rather, what is required is the re-imagining (or recovery) of “a properly Christian conception of history”.⁵⁴⁰ To explain this, Schmitt introduces a figure from Christian theology that he claims is emblematic of what he has in mind: the *katechon*. I will explore this idea further in my final chapter. But the crucial point to grasp is that, for Schmitt, the “political unity” of human society cannot be conceived apart from religion or, to put it more precisely, apart from the assimilation and creative integration of certain themes from Christian theology.

Although questions about Schmitt’s personal religious background, the status of his religious beliefs during the different phases of his working life, and how the theme of religion functions within his intellectual project as a whole have been frequently addressed,⁵⁴¹ fewer critics have explored his understanding of religion as a

⁵³⁷ Ibid, p.169.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁴¹ For a useful survey, see Mehring (2016), ‘A “Catholic Layman of German Nationality and Citizenship”? Carl Schmitt and the Religiosity of Life’.

constructive force in relation to the political order.⁵⁴² And yet, I would like to redeem it here as a useful schema by which to approach Latour's work. In fact, Latour himself has clearly signposted this understanding. In his *Gifford Lectures*, delivered in 2013, he introduced the terms "Religion One" and "Religion Two".⁵⁴³ As Latour goes on to explain, the first of these, "Religion One", describes a mode of religion that negates and neutralises the political order of human society. This was what I examined in the previous chapter. But the second term is quite different. For by contrast, "Religion Two" describes a mode of religion that Latour claims can support and even guarantee the political order of human society. Just as was the case with Schmitt, then, Latour aims to re-imagine (or recover) religion as that which is compatible with the "political". It is this mode of religion, and its operation within the contemporary public space, that I believe constitutes the political theology of Bruno Latour. In the remainder of my study I will aim to elucidate what Latour claims about this mode of religion, how it might (or might not) relate to themes currently being explored within contemporary Christian theology, and to what extent Latour believes it might be realizable in the contemporary world.

⁵⁴² For approaches to Schmitt's work that adopt a similar approach, see McCormick (1998), 'Political Theory and Political Theology: The Second Wave of Carl Schmitt in English'; Meier (2011, 1998), *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt*. I am grateful to a presentation by Hjalmar Falk entitled 'The Modern Epimetheus: Carl Schmitt's Marian Katechontism', delivered at 'The Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities' (TORCH) on 19 June, 2017, and to subsequent personal discussions with him, for clarifying my own reading of Schmitt in these terms.

⁵⁴³ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 2, p.33, original capitalization.

CHAPTER THREE

RELIGION AS A MODE OF EXISTENCE

Introduction

The understanding of religion that Latour seeks to re-imagine or recover in his work is called “religion as a mode of existence”. In this chapter, I will describe and evaluate the context in which Latour proposes this term, what he means by it, and how it might relate to themes found elsewhere in Christian theology. This will contribute in turn to my larger objective, which is to consider how and why Latour’s understanding of religion might be compatible with the concept of politics, as defined and explored above, and thus how his work might be productive of a political theology.

Latour introduces the term “religion as a mode of existence” in one of his most recent books, *The Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, published in French in 2012 and in English the following year.⁵⁴⁴ He proposes it as a way of differentiating his understanding of religion from the one he believes is appropriated within modernity, which I explored in the previous chapter. It has two characteristic features. First, it is associated with the idea of “subsistence”.⁵⁴⁵ This is contrasted with the idea of “substance” or a “metaphysics of substance”.⁵⁴⁶ For Latour, the *logos* of religion is generated by logistical processes that take place within this world (subsistence), rather than by correspondence with a transcendent reality that is situated above or beyond it (substance). Second, precisely because it refuses to advert to a metaphysics of substance, Latour proposes that religion is closely associated with political activity

⁵⁴⁴ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, see p.297 and throughout. In what follows, I will refer to this text simply as “the *Inquiry*”.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.299.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.102.

and indeed serves as a crucible for it. A religious subject is one who is alert to the way in which plural voices and interests are represented in the context of a greater whole, and who is wary of any action that might cause this compositional process to be interrupted or prematurely unified by dint of a categorical appeal to transcendence. On this basis Latour makes a strong claim for the place of religion within human political society.

Latour's elaborates this understanding of religion prominently in the *Inquiry*. But his depiction of religion in these terms has been consistent throughout his intellectual career and can be traced back to his very earliest writing. In fact, the presentation of "religion as a mode of existence" offered in the *Inquiry* cannot be properly understood apart from a survey of Latour's entire corpus. Thus, in the chapter that follows I will adduce evidence from a wide variety of Latour's books and articles. But in addition, evidence from other texts can be considered as well: these include book reviews,⁵⁴⁷ lectures that have been transcribed but not yet published,⁵⁴⁸ personal interviews,⁵⁴⁹ and newspaper editorials published in *Le Monde* (hence with significant impact and reach in his native France), some of which I have translated into English myself in collaboration with Latour.⁵⁵⁰ I will also refer at length to an unpublished text that I believe provides a crucial frame through which

⁵⁴⁷ A good example is Latour's review in French of Durkheim's 1912 book *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. See Latour (2014), fr. *FEFT*.

⁵⁴⁸ See especially Latour (2008), *ACP*; (2008), fr. *STVPT*; Latour (2014), *BB* (audio); Latour, with Williams (2014), *RE* (audio); Latour (2015), *PREV* (audio); Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*.

⁵⁴⁹ See especially Latour, with Serres (1995, 1994), *CSCT*; Latour, with Franke (2011), *AWW*; Latour, with Miranda (2015, 2016), *DIHS*, documents 1 & 2; Latour, with Damour, Euvé & Sarthou-Lajus (2015), fr. *CMC*.

⁵⁵⁰ See especially Latour (2014), fr. *CTC*; Latour (2015), *TLOI*.

Latour's writing on religion must be addressed, namely, his doctoral thesis (his "*thèse de troisième cycle*"), submitted and defended at the University of Tours in 1975, entitled *Exégèse et ontologie: une analyse des textes de resurrection*.⁵⁵¹ I have had the privilege of receiving a personal copy of this text from Latour himself, scanned from his own library holdings. Using this wide array of material, I will attempt to provide a more holistic approach to Latour's writing on religion than has been possible before.

Latour's understanding of religion differs in important respects from Catholic doctrine. Moreover, it presents a number of challenges to Christian theology in general, particularly on account of the way it re-envisages the theological idea of transcendence. The extent to which "religion as a mode of existence" corresponds to doctrines held by any institution of religion is also a question that will have to be faced. I will address these points in the second part of my chapter. However, it is important to note that Latour's intentions with regard to religion are positive and constructive. He seeks to demonstrate where contemporary institutions of religion have become mistaken about the values, practices or doctrines they themselves have inherited and are supposed to be curating. And he seeks to defend and promulgate an understanding of religion that, rather than being relegated to the sphere of private spirituality in the mode of "quietism",⁵⁵² or deployed polemically in competition

⁵⁵¹ Latour (1975), fr. *EO*; my trans. "Exegesis and ontology: an analysis of the resurrection accounts".

⁵⁵² Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.20.

against other domains of knowledge in the mode of “fideism” or “fundamentalism”,⁵⁵³ can be appreciated for its distinctive *logos*.

Chapter Summary

The chapter will proceed in two sections. In the first section, I will describe and evaluate what Latour means when he refers to “religion as a mode of existence”, drawing upon evidence from a number of different texts [3.1]. In the second section, I will consider his ideas in relation to Christian theology specifically [3.2].

My first section will present a broad-ranging survey of Latour’s published and unpublished texts. I will begin with works from the middle and late phases of his career, particularly the *Inquiry* [3.1.1]. I will consider what Latour means when he defines religion in terms of subsistence, how this fits within his intellectual project in general, and on what grounds he proposes this definition. I will then examine work from the early phase of his career, in particular making use of his unpublished thesis dating from the 1970s, which I will argue provides a crucial context for his later ideas [3.1.2]. In particular, I will argue for the importance of two authors who are rarely addressed in relation to Latour, let alone in relation to one another, namely, the French poet, essayist and editor Charles Péguy, and the German biblical scholar Rudolf Bultmann. Both of these feature prominently in Latour’s thesis. Finally, I will show how and why Latour claims that his understanding of religion is commensurate with the domain of politics itself and hence in what sense he is proposing a political theology [3.1.3].

⁵⁵³ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.300.

In my second section, briefer than the first, I will consider Latour's ideas in relation to his own Catholic heritage and in relation to themes currently being explored within contemporary Christian theology in general. I will argue that intrinsic to his work is an attempt to unsettle and dislocate received theological categories in order to recapture or re-pristiniate what he deems to be their proper significance. He does this by means of (what I will call) "theologemes" [3.2.1]. And yet, his ideas do find echo elsewhere. I will therefore conclude by suggesting some points of comparison that will be instructive as a means of clarifying Latour's ideas and as a way of indicating potential areas of dialogue and cross-fertilization within the discipline of theology [3.2.2].

3.1 An Analysis of Latour's Understanding of Religion

3.1.1 Evidence from the *Inquiry* and Other Texts

Latour introduces the term "religion as a mode of existence" in his 2012 book *Enquête sur les modes d'existence: une anthropologie des Modernes*, translated into English the following year as *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. In this work, Latour devotes a whole chapter to its description and exposition.⁵⁵⁴ It is therefore appropriate to begin with this text as a core statement of his ideas.

Before proceeding, I wish to clarify what the *Inquiry* is and how it is intended to function. Latour envisages the *Inquiry* as the culmination of his intellectual

⁵⁵⁴ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, chapter 11, 'Welcoming the Beings Sensitive to the Word', pp.296–325.

project.⁵⁵⁵ The book is clearly difficult to approach for those who are new to his work.⁵⁵⁶ And all the more so when it is understood that the book is only part of a larger project apparatus. This larger apparatus incorporates not only (A) the printed text itself, called the *Inquiry*, but also (B) a fully interactive digital platform, open to interventions from approved “co-investigators” who are invited to alter or add to the content of the printed text;⁵⁵⁷ (C) a series of face-to-face meetings and seminars that took place between 2013 and 2017, many of them chaired by Latour himself, intended to fulfil the same purpose, some of which I attended; and finally (D) a curated exhibition entitled ‘Reset Modernity’, which was held in the *Zentrum für Kunst und Medien* (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany between April–August 2016, entailing further amendments to the project and culminating in the publication of a multi-contributor catalogue of the same name.⁵⁵⁸ The project apparatus as a whole is known as “AIME”, which is the acronym of the title of the book. Latour’s stated intention is to synthesize all these interactions into an updated edition of the original printed text, which can now be understood merely as a “provisional report” (although at the time of writing no date has yet been set on which this will take place).⁵⁵⁹ The AIME project has received attention in its own right as an innovation within the field

⁵⁵⁵ See Latour (2013), *BOI*; Latour (2013), *COAP*.

⁵⁵⁶ This is reflected in the fact that, at the time of writing, there are very few introductory critical engagements with it. In English, the most useful place to start is Edward (2016), ‘From Actor Network Theory to Modes of Existence: Latour’s Ontologies’. A more comprehensive treatment is Weber (2016), ‘Metaphysics of the Common World: Whitehead, Latour, and the Modes of Existence’. In French, Maniglier (2012), ‘Un tournant métaphysique?’ is a useful and substantial introductory engagement.

⁵⁵⁷ See < www.modesofexistence.org >. For policies and terms of engagement with the site, see < www.modesofexistence.org/methodology > (both accessed 02 June, 2018).

⁵⁵⁸ Latour, with Leclercq (eds.) (2016), *RM*.

⁵⁵⁹ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, ‘User’s Manual for the Ongoing Collective Inquiry’, p.xix.

of “digital humanities”.⁵⁶⁰ There has also been a great deal of social media engagement with it, sometimes involving clarifications and amendments offered by Latour himself. I have been involved in many of these activities, both informally and in the guise of an approved “co-investigator”. Given this complex project apparatus, it is important to clarify how I intend to take up this variegated material in what follows. First, when I refer to the *Inquiry* it must be assumed that project component (A) is in view unless stated otherwise—namely, the book written by Latour himself. Thus, the contributions of “co-investigators” will be left to one side. This has the benefit of restricting the authorial voice under consideration to that of Latour’s only, avoiding the need to untangle the matrix of contributions that have ensued from project components (B), (C) and (D), a labour that would have required something akin to an entirely original set of academic referencing tools for citation. However, at the same time it should be acknowledged that this methodological decision risks diluting the heuristic embedded in the AIME project itself, for Latour takes great pains to stress that his original proposal is provisional and open to modification as a result of these multi-platform interactions. Second, when I refer to the *Inquiry* I will largely avoid using its specialized technical vocabulary. I believe this will contribute to the overall clarity of my argument since it will require me to explain concepts

⁵⁶⁰ For analysis of the generation, construction and ongoing management of the AIME project, see Ricci, De Mourat, Leclercq & Latour (2015), ‘Clues. Anomalies. Understanding: Detecting Underlying Assumptions and Expected Practices in the Digital Humanities through the AIME Project’. For a critique, see Lousley & Posthumus, ‘Canadian Forum on Bruno Latour’s *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*’; Brown (2016), ‘Taking AIME at Face Value: An ANT-like Crawl through the Digital Project’; Blake (2016), ‘De-Briefing the AIME Project: A Participant Perspective’. Blake argues that the heuristic function of the AIME project is undermined by excessive moderation, leading to the engulfment of the contributions it solicits. He concludes that the project is ultimately closed to the possibility of Popperian “tests” that might end up disconfirming or profoundly modifying the paradigm’s basic thesis. See *ibid*, p.472.

which are frequently assumed or taken for granted within the AIME community. In addition, I believe that this non-technical approach will facilitate the transference of Latour's ideas into the domain of theology where this technical vocabulary has little or no critical pre-history.

In the *Inquiry*, Latour defines "religion as a mode of existence" in terms of subsistence. In what follows, I wish to develop this basic observation by posing three questions. First, what does Latour mean when he refers to subsistence and how does this relate to ideas he has developed elsewhere in his work? Second, to what extent does he believe this is reflected within the contemporary institutions of religion? And third, how and with what effect might it be possible to reconstitute religion in terms of subsistence? My primary focus in addressing these questions will be the *Inquiry*. But I will also introduce ideas from other texts deriving from the middle and late stages of Latour's career.

A. Religion as Subsistence

First, what does Latour mean when he refers to religion in terms of subsistence? The core idea is that the rationality or *logos* of religion is generated and held in place over time from below, that is, by the movements of actors in the world in relation to one another and their composition in a network topology. Latour is not making a soft claim about different cultural or social representations of religion. Rather, what is in view is the idea that there is no essence of religion that is prior to or detachable from the material and historical conditions of its own production.

This draws upon ideas I have already developed in my study. In my first chapter, I showed how modernity identifies rational discourse as corresponding to a realm of substantial Being that is disaggregated from and transcendent over the

ontological conditions of the world. In my second chapter, I showed how this has become the basis for the legitimization of various non-political forces, each of them underwritten by the ontotheological concept of “the crossed-out God”. By contrast, Latour argues that the rationality or *logos* of religion is given subsistently, that is, “in and through other beings”.⁵⁶¹ This is why he refers to it as a “mode of existence”, drawing upon Souriau’s deployment of this same phrase to describe how religious meaning and truth can be held-in-place from below. To conceive of religion in terms of subsistence is to conceive its *logos* as deriving from the spatially and temporally situated movements of beings in the world, rather than by correspondence with a timeless and fixed domain of substantial Being that exists independently of them.⁵⁶²

To understand religion in these terms is to propose its derivation from material entities that are not habitually or conventionally understood as being religious. For Latour, nothing can be designated “sacred” or “profane” on the basis of an innate quality that pertains to its essential being.⁵⁶³ Rather, he considers how different entities, perhaps even unexpected ones, function as conveyors of religious meaning and truth solely on the basis of their interactions with other entities, that is, in their role as actors. In the *Inquiry*, Latour refers simply to “the beings of

⁵⁶¹ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.163.

⁵⁶² The difference between religion as subsistence and religion as substance is encapsulated in the Latin epigraph with which Latour rather enigmatically prefaces the *Inquiry*. This reads as “*si scires donum dei*”, which is translation of part of John 4:10 (“if you knew the gift of God”). These words are found in the context of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well. Latour chooses this episode, I believe, because it contrasts two registers of meaning: the woman understands the request for something to drink literally, in terms of the water provided by the well, but what Christ is offering to her is participation in a flow or cycle of “living water”. See Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.5.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid*, p.146.

religion”.⁵⁶⁴ He employs this generic term to avoid pre-judging the sort of entity that might be considered a potential mediator of religion. Elsewhere in his work he refers to “angels”.⁵⁶⁵ This terminology is important because it is drawing upon a conceptual heritage within continental philosophy, especially the work of Michel Serres, where the word has been employed as a trope to explore the role of “unexpected message-bearers” serving as vehicles for the transmission of religious meaning and truth.⁵⁶⁶ Latour first uses the word in a catalogue entry for an exhibition that was held in 2000 at the Whipple Museum of the History of Science in Cambridge.⁵⁶⁷ In that article, he argues that material and technological objects that are generally considered neutral with regard to religious values can become “angelic” mediators of religious meaning and truth in particular contexts.⁵⁶⁸ Latour then explores these implications further in a 2001 article entitled ‘On a Crucial Difference between Instruments and Angels’, where he describes how different material objects, understood as actors, can produce a compositional order that is religious in form.⁵⁶⁹ When this is appreciated, it is possible to democratise the sort of entities that can qualify as emissaries of religious

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid, p.297 ff.

⁵⁶⁵ Latour uses this term in a number of essays from the middle and late phases of his career. See Latour (1990), fr. *QAMM*; Latour (2005), *TNFF*; Latour (2011), *AWW*; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.313 ff.

⁵⁶⁶ Serres (1995, 1993), *Angels: A Modern Myth*, p.293. The word is also found in the work of Michel de Certeau where a related definition is advanced. See Certeau (1984), ‘Le parler angélique’. For more on the idea of “angels” as message-bearers for the rationality of science, see Schaffer (2011), ‘Newtonian Angels’.

⁵⁶⁷ Latour (2000), *TFNI*. This text has not been published is only available on postal order as a bound catalogue from ‘The Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology’.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid, no pagination given.

⁵⁶⁹ Latour (2001), *OCDIA*.

meaning and truth. Any entity in the world can become an “angel”, depending upon its function as a mediator within a network.

It is clear that this understanding of religion entails a reconceptualization of the idea of transcendence. For Latour, the rationality or *logos* of religion is not determined by its correspondence with a transcendent reality that is “external, unified, de-animated and undisputable”.⁵⁷⁰ Rather, religious meaning and truth is conveyed when the agonistic encounter of actors in trials results in the carrying forward or passing along of an effect or value that is religious in form. In the *Inquiry*, Latour calls these the “small transcendences” of religion.⁵⁷¹ He retains the idea of transcendence, then, but relocates it to the domain of material space and historical time: “small transcendences” refer to the way in which religious discourse is transmitted across the hiatus that exists between one moment and the next by the mediatory work of the “beings of religion”. This reconceptualization of the idea of transcendence is a crucial component of Latour’s intellectual project, as he makes clear:

If I had to sum up my life obsession, I would say that it is only by refusing to shift to one transcendence—structure—that one may detect the small transcendences leading from one event to the next in line across the yawning gap of existence. One transcendence is vertical, the other is horizontal. But it is a transcendence all the same.⁵⁷²

Notwithstanding his rejection of the metaphysics of classical theism, which is structured with reference to a transcendent being, Latour does not perceive himself to

⁵⁷⁰ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.25.

⁵⁷¹ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.162.

⁵⁷² Latour (2013), *HP*, p.4. For a related statement, see also Latour (2013), *CS*, p.74.

be relativizing religion. He readily speaks of religion as being a “regime of absolute truth”.⁵⁷³ He refers to “*l’objectivité de la religion*”.⁵⁷⁴ “That truth is in question in [...] matters of religion”, he writes, “has never been an issue for me”.⁵⁷⁵ But the *logos* of religion is not given by appeal to vertical transcendence. It is a function of the logistical movements of actors operating strictly within the realm of immanence. Latour therefore provides an account of religion as a performative phenomenon whose essence arises through a compositional order, rather than by correspondence with a transcendent reality that is situated above or beyond the world.

Latour’s delicate configuration of religion as subsistence has been controversial. For example, the social anthropologist Martin Holbraad has argued that, by flattening vertical transcendence, Latour ends up negating what is distinctive to religion:

In his work, even terms such as *God* and *man* become nothing more than ontological transformations of one another, related on a monistic plane by what French philosophers like to call ‘difference’.⁵⁷⁶

For Holbraad, the idea of subsistence is likely to be alien to religious believers themselves and thus represents “an ethnographically blunt position”.⁵⁷⁷ A similar criticism has been advanced by Jan Golinski, who suggests that Latour’s account of religion will not resonate at all with religious believers since “these will want to

⁵⁷³ Latour, with Tresch (2013), *ATANT*, p.303.

⁵⁷⁴ My trans. “the objectivity of religion” in Latour (2012), fr. *UFLF*, p.949.

⁵⁷⁵ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.28.

⁵⁷⁶ Holbraad (2004), ‘Response to Bruno Latour’s *Thou Shall not Freeze-Frame*’, p.352, original emphasis.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.354.

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”.⁵⁷⁸ But this is to misunderstand the object of Latour’s critique. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Latour rejects the idea of vertical transcendence that is encoded within the political epistemology of modernity. For him, it is this that obstructs the possibility of meaningful discourse about a divine Other: “within modernity, [God] Himself is denied the right to exert agency by means of an actor-network and therefore cannot be conceived as an object of veridiction”.⁵⁷⁹ When religion is liberated from vertical transcendence, it becomes possible to conceive of it in rational terms. And likewise, religion becomes thoroughly enchanted when the appeal to vertical transcendence is replaced with a sense of awe and wonder at the “small transcendences” by which it is carried forward or passed along by beings who occupy the realm of immanence.

Latour therefore deploys the concept of subsistence to provide what he claims is a more accurate representation of what religion is and how it functions. Hence, he concludes his chapter in the *Inquiry* with the following appeal: “with this, might we learn at last to speak well? Even about religion, without taking the name of God in vain?”⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁸ Golinski (2010), ‘Science and Religion’, p.60.

⁵⁷⁹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 6, p.131.

⁵⁸⁰ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.325.

B. *Religious Institutions*

But to what degree is this understanding espoused within the contemporary institutions of religion? This is the second question I would like to address. Latour's response is unsurprising: under the aegis of modernity, he claims, the true footprint of religion has become obscured. He even suggests that there has been "*une disparition du phénomène même*".⁵⁸¹ This is not an observation about trends in religious belief and activity, but an expression of his understanding that religion has become difficult or even impossible to access within the contemporary institutions of religion on account of the strong overlay of the epistemological categories of modernity. The term "institution" has a technical meaning within the *Inquiry*. Because it has to fix or specify the meaning of the discourse it claims to represent, an institution has an uneasy relationship with the operations of subsistence. For Latour, this explains the disconnect that is often reported between institutions and the public they are supposed to represent.⁵⁸² And, for him, this applies equally to the institutions

⁵⁸¹ My trans. "a disappearance of the phenomenon itself" in Latour (2008), fr. *PEM*, p.6.

⁵⁸² Latour provides a number of case-studies in his work. For example, he shows how scientific institutions such as laboratories can mistake the subsistent procedures that underlie their own discourse, attempting to secure their authority by promoting instead a vague notion of "the transcendental origin of facts", in Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.22. See also Latour (2004), *PN*; Latour (1996), *OI*; Latour (1996), *PDI*; Latour (2003), *PC*; Latour (2004), *WCRS*; Latour (2015), *FF*; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, chapter 3, 'A Perilous Change of Correspondence', pp.69–96. The same can be true of other institutions, for example legal institutions. See Latour (2010), *ML*. Latour points out that when the logistical procedures that actually undergird its discourses are revealed, the trust of the general public in the authority of the institution is severely challenged. In his *Gifford Lectures* he gives the example of the 'Climategate' scandal that took place in the UK in November 2009. When the Email server of the Climatic Research Unit (CRU) at the University of East Anglia was hacked, publicly exposing thousands of communications between the scientists working at the unit, the exchange of data that was revealed by the hack caused some climate denial lobbyists to claim that the scientific modelling of global climate change that was produced by the CRU was an act of manipulation, since behind it lay evidence of disputes and controversial interactions between various stakeholders occupying the same laboratory space. Latour's point, of

of religion. The specific example he has in mind is the Roman Catholic church, since this institution was the matrix for his own upbringing and religious education. In the *Inquiry*, he notes that the Catholic church has had an uneasy relationship with religion as a subsistent phenomenon: it has frequently deferred to a metaphysics of substance, taking its own mode of discourse to be one that is unmediated by material and historical procedures, “an undistorted transport, an immobile motor, an uncreated substance, a foundation”, guaranteed by the authority of transcendent revelation or by the dogmatic assertion of the unchanging tradition of the magisterium.⁵⁸³ It is thus no surprise that public trust in this institution has diminished:

The *logos* [that is specific to religion] cannot rely on *any substance* to ensure continuity in being. It too is a mode of existence, that is, a particular form of alteration of being. And that is why it is so far removed from “the religious phenomenon” or from the institution of religion, alas, as it has belatedly consented to define itself.⁵⁸⁴

For Latour, this institutional disconnect can be traced in history. This is the theme of a long essay he published in 1996 entitled *Petite réflexion sur le culte moderne des dieux faitiches*, which was later expanded into a short book, and subsequently translated into English (with the incorporation of additional material) under the title

course, is that the revelation of the logistical procedures underlying the work of the CRU only caused such a scandal because of a misunderstanding of what constitutes the rationality of science: “the science of climate change is actually generated *inside* the networks of practising scientists”, he argued, “as they exchange thousands of emails and swap data interpretations about computer models, satellite surveys and ice core samples” in Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.15 ff., original emphasis. For a related case-study, see Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, ‘Introduction: Trusting Institutions Again’, pp.1–23. Here, then, is an example of an institution failing to communicate the *logos* of its own mode of discourse, creating a disconnect between the institution and the general public.

⁵⁸³ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.300.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.306, original emphasis.

On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods.⁵⁸⁵ In that text, Latour offers a fictitious re-imagining of the encounter between Portuguese slave traders and natives of the West African Gold Coast in the fifteenth century. He treats that historical event as emblematic of the encounter between modernity (represented by the European colonialists) and those who have not yet been modernized (represented by the Gold Coast natives), and of the institutional disconnect that ensued. How, then, does he narrate this encounter? Upon observing their rituals and practices, the Europeans quickly scorned the local religion of the Gold Coast natives because it insisted that certain wooden dolls—dubbed “*fêti*ches” by the Portuguese, from “*feito*”, which is the past participle of the verb “to do, to make”—were gods.⁵⁸⁶ These natives, so the Europeans supposed, were confusing that which was socially and culturally constructed with true religion, whose essence the Europeans declared must pertain to a realm untainted with the superstition and hybridity embodied in such “artificial, fabricated, factitious and, finally, enchanted items”.⁵⁸⁷ Culture-wide acts of violent iconoclasm ensued. When the word was later imported into French in the mid-eighteenth century in the form “*fétichisme*”, it had accrued additional links with the noun “*fée*” (“fairy”) and the noun-phrase “*objet-fée*” (“fairy-object”), as if to reinforce this connection with the artificial and the non-real.⁵⁸⁸ As Latour makes clear, however, there is significant irony in this situation: the Catholicism to which the Portuguese themselves adhered was in significant ways equivalent to the fetishistic religion of the Gold Coast natives they were denouncing. Accordingly, he

⁵⁸⁵ Latour (1996), fr. *PRCM*; Latour (2009), fr. *SCDF*; Latour (2010), *MCFG*.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p.3

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid*.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.4.

imagines the natives asking the same question of their European visitors: “what, then, is the difference between our idols and your icons, for example, the statues you have brought with you in your ships and the rosaries that you wear hanging from your belts?”⁵⁸⁹ And so a much more complicated picture arises:

Even without the help of this imaginary dialogue, we can see perfectly well that what we have here is not a contrast between idolatrous Gold Coast Blacks and image-free Portuguese visitors. For we see one group of people covered with amulets scoffing at another group of people covered with amulets. We do not have iconophiles on one side and iconoclasts on the other; rather, we have *iconodules* on both sides.⁵⁹⁰

Latour takes the title of the 2010 book in which he presents this historical reconstruction, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, from a 1760 book on primitive religion written by the French academician Charles de Brosses.⁵⁹¹ This is significant. De Brosses’ work was controversial at the time for suggesting the possibility that ancient near eastern forms of fetishistic worship remained as vestiges in biblical religion.⁵⁹² This was deemed to be incompatible with the received understanding of Christianity as a monotheistic religion. But for Latour, this point of common ancestry discloses something significant. The Catholic faith must acknowledge that it is beholden to the material and historical circumstances of its

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid, p.5, original emphasis.

⁵⁹¹ De Brosses (1760), *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou parallèle de l’ancienne religion de l’Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie*; see also Morris & Leonard (eds.) (2017), *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles de Brosses and the Afterlives of an Idea*, which contains the first English translation of De Brosses’ work. It was via De Brosses that the Gallicized term “*fétiche*” was introduced into the French language from the Portuguese.

⁵⁹² For analysis of de Brosses’ stadial theory of the development of religious consciousness from primitive religion, see Gaukroger (2016), *The Natural and the Human: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1739–1841, volume III*, pp.336–339.

own transmission. In fact, Latour argues that both traditions—the fetishistic, autochthonous practices of the Gold Coast natives and the (so-called) developed Catholicism of the Europeans—maintain at root a delicate appreciation of religion as something that is “constructed”, and yet is still able to “represent a reality beyond that which human hands have made”.⁵⁹³ This distinction was even available in Catholic thought via the theological concept of “*dulia*”.⁵⁹⁴

For Latour, the historical reconstruction provided in *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* is paradigmatic of other occasions in world history when institutional religion has failed to recognize the subsistent quality of its own mode of discourse. In a 1998 article entitled ‘How to be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion’ he explores an equivalent moment that took place in the early Renaissance.⁵⁹⁵ In a 2001 lecture, he does the same in relation to the Chinese rites controversy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵⁹⁶ In 2002, he curated a public exhibition at the *Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie* (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany on this theme, which resulted in the publication of a catalogue with entries by different writers, commissioned and edited by Latour himself, many of which explore such moments of “iconoclasm”.⁵⁹⁷ In the *Inquiry*, he refers to these

⁵⁹³ Latour (2010), *MCFG*, p.8.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid, p.5. The theological concept of *dulia* describes a form of adoration suitable to be directed towards an icon because it points to or facilitates worship of the true God. The neologism *iconodules*, which Latour used in the quotation above, therefore indicates an appropriate form of worship of God through icons.

⁵⁹⁵ Latour (1998), *HIASR*.

⁵⁹⁶ Latour (2001), *TNLV*, pp.223–224.

⁵⁹⁷ The exhibition was entitled *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*. For the catalogue see Latour, with Weibel (eds.) (2002), *IBIW*, especially the introduction written by Latour himself, pp.14–37.

as “category mistakes”.⁵⁹⁸ This term is borrowed from the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin, where it is used to describe the performative conditions by which the truth (or falsity) of a particular speech utterance is determined.⁵⁹⁹

It is on account of the category mistake perpetuated by institutional religion that Latour’s writings on this theme are frequently structured in the mode of complaint. This is evident in a very important, albeit frequently neglected, work published in French in 2002 under the title *Jubiler, ou les tourments de la parole religieuse*,⁶⁰⁰ and translated into English ten years later under the title *Rejoicing, or the Torments of Religious Speech*.⁶⁰¹ This text has the form of a spiritual autobiography. It can be considered as a sort of extended prototype for the chapter on “religion as a mode of existence” presented in the *Inquiry*. In it, Latour reports that he finds himself in “torment” at the prospect of communicating the meaning of religion by means of the dogmatic pronouncements of the institutional church. Religious faith has become “impossible to enunciate”.⁶⁰² There is “no diction anymore for these things, no tone, no tonality, no regime of speech or utterance”.⁶⁰³ He hints obliquely at experiences of religious crisis in his own life where this dislocation has become acute for him personally.⁶⁰⁴ His writing is more candid and

⁵⁹⁸ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.230.

⁵⁹⁹ Austin (1975, 1962), *How To Do Things with Words*, p.14 ff.

⁶⁰⁰ Latour (2002), fr. *JTPR*.

⁶⁰¹ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*.

⁶⁰² *Ibid*, p.1.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid*.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.10 ff. Latour embellished on this in our personal interview, when he referred to his experience as a young adult participating in a local church in Dijon, and to decisions he and his family took regarding the baptism of their children. See Appendix, p.367.

winsome here, I would suggest, than anywhere else within his corpus. And it begs the question: if “religion as a mode of existence” is not straightforwardly discernible from within the contemporary institutions of religion, then where can its footprint be traced? Latour’s answer in the *Inquiry* is that “the investigator [will have to] look for the religious outside the institutions of religion”.⁶⁰⁵

C. *Reconstituting Religion in the Contemporary Public Space*

Latour outlines the methodology by which he will seek to clarify or reconstitute religious discourse in an article published in French in 2008 entitled ‘Pour une ethnologie des Modernes’.⁶⁰⁶ For the reasons explored above, he does not in the first instance look to the contemporary institutions of religion. Instead, he examines a different situation entirely. The situation he has in mind is the form of spoken exchange that takes place between romantic lovers. For the sake of convenience I will call this “amatory speech”.⁶⁰⁷ Latour argues that this form of exchange demonstrates the effect or value that is properly understood as being carried forward

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid, p.300.

⁶⁰⁶ Latour (2008), fr. *PEM*, especially p.4.

⁶⁰⁷ Alternative terms that Latour employs include “love talk” in Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.233; “lovers’ dialogue” in Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.46; “interactions [...] among intimates, between friends” in Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.301. Latour acknowledges that non-verbal gestures of various kinds are equally important within a love relationship and hence that “such injunctions are in no way limited to the medium of speech: smiles, sighs, silences, hugs, gestures, gaze, postures, everything can relay the argument” in Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.29. In what follows, it will be assumed that non-verbal gestures such as these are included within the category of “amatory speech”.

or passed along by religious discourse. Amatory speech thus provides what Latour calls “*un échantillon représentatif*” of “religion as a mode of existence”.⁶⁰⁸

By offering amatory speech as a case-study Latour is not intending to reduce or collapse religion to something else. Rather, he is seeking to clarify that which is unique to it by reference to a form of human exchange that he believes encodes its proper mode of operation, thus bypassing the obscurities that have been imposed upon it by the institutions of religion. Although he does not explicitly avow this, it should also be noted that Latour is here inserting himself into a stream of twentieth-century continental thought that might be characterised as reflecting on the philosophical implications of love, whilst nevertheless engaging in a subterranean conversation with a theological (Christian) tradition.⁶⁰⁹ The work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Alain Badiou is representative of this.⁶¹⁰

Latour describes what he means by amatory speech in a number of texts, each time using slightly different terminology. But he usually has recourse to a short vignette that he repeats with a degree of consistency. In this vignette, he depicts a conversation between a man and a woman who have agreed to share their lives together in a love relationship. At a certain point in time, the woman asks her partner: “do you love me?”⁶¹¹ This represents what Latour has previously called a

⁶⁰⁸ My trans. “a representative cross-section” in Latour (2008), fr. *PEM*, p.4. Elsewhere, Latour refers to it in more prosaic terms as a “template” of religion, in Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.31, or as a “scale model” of religion, in Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.118.

⁶⁰⁹ For a survey of this tradition, see Lancelin & Lemonnier (2008), *Les philosophes et l'amour: aimer de Socrate à Simone de Beauvoir*.

⁶¹⁰ See Nancy (2013, 2010), *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*; Badiou, with Truong (2012, 2009), *In Praise of Love*.

⁶¹¹ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.25.

“trial”, that is, a moment of encounter between two actors in space and time that has the potential to carry forward (or not) a shared value. In this case, what is at stake is the continuation of their love relationship. Amatory speech thus embodies a moment in which a “small transcendence” must be traversed, such that what previously existed might be renewed so as to enable it to continue into the future.

Latour explores a failed and a successful response to the woman’s initial question: “do you love me?”. The failed response would entail the man saying something like the following: “yes, but you already know that, I told you so last year”.⁶¹² What would this response signify? For Latour it would be as if, in responding to an invitation to affirm the status of his relationship, the man deemed it sufficient to point to a previous declaration of love, “imagining that he had recorded this memorable sentence on a tape recorder and that, as his only answer, he was just happy to press the *replay* button to produce the indisputable proof that he truly loves”.⁶¹³ Of course, a response like this would be jarring for the woman to hear. And no doubt most would agree that words such as these would be lacking in sensitivity and decorum. But Latour also describes this response as exemplifying the “infelicity condition” of amatory speech. Borrowing this term again from the work of J. L. Austin, his implication is that the man’s response would have failed to serve as a vehicle for the transmission of what was most valuable in the love relationship. Why is this so? It is because by framing his response in this way the man would have shown himself to be evading the task of re-instituting his former declaration of love, preferring to defer to some other evidence or proof that did not require him to take

⁶¹² Ibid.

⁶¹³ Ibid, original emphasis.

responsibility for it in the present moment.⁶¹⁴ As Latour puts it, “the man refers to a past event that he takes to be the complete encapsulation of their love in itself and that he supposes represents without any further modification or alteration an appropriate answer to her question”.⁶¹⁵ The man would have avoided, as it were, the burden on himself to carry forward or pass along the essence of the relationship in a meaningful way. To use the technical vocabulary of the *Inquiry*, the man’s words would have caused the subsistent trajectory of relations between him and his partner to be circumvented by appeal to something that lay beyond themselves.

But Latour’s vignette also envisages the possibility of a second, and this time successful, response to the woman’s original question: “do you love me?” How would this be achieved? For Latour, what will count is not so much the actual content of what the man says, but whether his words might serve as vehicles for the re-activation in the present moment of the declaration of love that was formerly offered. It is by this means that the love relationship would be carried forward in time. Latour describes this situation quite carefully:

It isn’t the sentence itself that the woman will closely follow, or the resemblance or dissimilitude between the two instances, but the *tone*, the manner, the way in which he, her lover, will revive that old, worn-out theme. With admirable precision, exact to the second, she will detect if the old refrain has captured the new

⁶¹⁴ In the *Inquiry*, Latour refers to this as “double-click” communication, which refers to the way in which computer users can click twice on a screen icon in order to access instantly an information repository on the item in question (for example, a dictionary application embedded into an article allowing the user to access definitions of words). Latour is not seeking to make a moral judgment on this action. But he is drawing attention to the impression this might give to the technology-user that he or she has “free, indisputable, and immediate access to pure, *untransformed* information”, which would be antithetical to the logistical approach to knowledge to which he is committed, for which see Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.93, original emphasis.

⁶¹⁵ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.25.

meaning she was waiting for, if it has renewed in an instant the love that her lover feels for her, or if the weariness and boredom of a liaison long over show through the worn-out vocables.⁶¹⁶

Were the man able to achieve such a response, the “felicity condition” of amatory speech would have been met.⁶¹⁷ The outcome would be that the love relationship could continue, at least until the next moment of negotiation or crisis between the partners arose, in which case it would become incumbent upon one of them to take responsibility again for the renewal of their original declaration of love.

What amatory speech models for Latour, then, is a situation in which a value that is distinctive to this situation (in this case, the quality of love that is shared between the man and the woman) is carried forward or passed along by means of the subsistent performances of the actors themselves. In this case, the man and the woman are the actors. And so their own words will determine whether or not their love relationship continues. This task is their responsibility: it cannot be deferred to a ground that lies outside themselves. As Latour puts it:

Their love is either a substance whose attributes serve no purpose, or [the man and the woman] are responsible for bringing out its attributes and then, yes, effectively, their love *stands underneath*—which is precisely what the word ‘sub-stance’ means—all the shows of tenderness and affection.⁶¹⁸

Latour introduces the term “*reprise*” as a way of describing this operation. He prefers to use the word in French, since it retains some subtleties in the original language

⁶¹⁶ Ibid, p.26, original emphasis.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid, p.27.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid, p.125, original emphasis.

that are lost when it is brought over into English as a loanword.⁶¹⁹ In French, just as in English, the word *reprise* has the basic lexical definition of “repetition”: for example, the word would be used to describe the re-transmission of a television programme (which in English might be described as a “repeat”). This idea is easily grasped in the case of amatory speech: if the relationship between the two partners is to be sustained, then the man’s response must in some way repeat the original declaration of love that he made previously to his partner. But the semantic range of the French word is broader than what is implied by the English word “repetition” alone. For *reprise* also carries the sense of organic regrowth (for example, new shoots appearing on vegetation in spring) or physiological recovery (for example, the healing of a broken limb), both of which indicate a taking-up again that is related to what came before, but not identical to it. The French word *reprise* therefore encodes the idea that what came before is renewed in a recognizable and secure way, but also that this does not merely consist in a repetition of the same. Amatory speech models precisely this tension. The exchange of words between the lovers plays out every time “the question of fidelity or treason, faithful or falsified invention, impious reworking or astounding rediscovery”.⁶²⁰ The delicacy of the man’s response to his partner’s question shows how the maintenance of their relationship will not be determined by mere repetition of an original declaration, “a substance preserved intact over time, like a gold coin forgotten under a mattress that you might come across happily years later”,⁶²¹ as Latour puts it with reference to the Lukan parable of

⁶¹⁹ In what follows, I will mark the word in italics to indicate that I am referring to the French word “*reprise*” and not to the English borrowing.

⁶²⁰ Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.288.

⁶²¹ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.126.

the talents. Rather, the relationship will be maintained by an act of *reprise*: the man's response to his partner's question must renew in some way the original declaration of their love, but in doing so it must also translate its meaning in a way that is consistent with what came before. This expanded sense is reinforced by the words that Latour occasionally uses as a substitute for *reprise*, which are derivations from the French verbs “*tordre*” (“twist, wring, contort”) or “*détourner*” (“divert, reroute, distort, turn away”).⁶²² For Latour, it is only when *reprise* is achieved that the relationship between the man and the woman can be maintained in existence.

Latour's use of the word *reprise* brings to mind Kierkegaard's idea of “repetition”. For Kierkegaard, “repetition” is the act of relating to the past in such a way as to inform the vital, existential immediacy of the present and the future, what Constantius calls “the blissful security of the moment”.⁶²³ This is to be contrasted with mere “recollection”, which is the act of fixing the past by means of melancholic and aesthetic memory, never allowing it to move forward into the present in new and enervating ways.⁶²⁴ Kierkegaard's language was taken up by Carl Schmitt in his critique of political liberalism. In his *Political Theology*, and in other texts, Schmitt describes the effect of “general norms” in terms of the Kierkegaardian idea of “recollection”: they impoverish the contemporary space of politics precisely because they prevent the present moment from being one in which something new or representative can emerge in the life of a human community.⁶²⁵

⁶²² Latour (2002), fr. *JTPR*, throughout.

⁶²³ Kierkegaard (1983, 1843), *Repetition*, p.132.

⁶²⁴ Ibid, p.137.

⁶²⁵ Schmitt (2005, 1922), *Political Theology*, p.15.

Having established the logistical effect of *reprise* by means of this case-study, Latour then identifies the same effect as the felicity condition that properly characterises religious discourse. “Religion *is* reprise par excellence”, he programmatically states.⁶²⁶ This is the crucial turn in his description of “religion as a mode of existence”. For Latour, religion is that which carries forward or passes along a particular value or effect in time. But it does this not by deferring to a fixed information content that stands over and above the world (that is, meta-logic). Rather, it does this by means of *reprise*, which as I have shown is the responsibility of the actors who are engaged immanently in the situation under consideration (that is, a logistics). *Reprise* is a differentiating repetition of an original event or experience. In the case of religious discourse, the original event or experience might be a sacred text, a revelation, a shared tradition, or something else. Religion therefore always has reference to a past. But it does not relate to its past in such a way as to negate the agency of the actors relating to it in the present moment. As Latour puts it, “religion goes all archaic or becomes contemporary again according to whether you distance yourself from, or come closer to, the source, which always produces new narratives strictly identical (and yet completely foreign) to the old ones”.⁶²⁷

Latour’s understanding of religion in terms of *reprise* can be illustrated with reference to the original cover design for the French publication of the book, *Jubiler, ou les tourments de la parole religieuse*. At the request of Latour himself that first edition was published without a conventional title page: instead, the text of the book itself began on the cover, continuing to the pages in the centre, and concluding on the

⁶²⁶ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.306, original emphasis.

⁶²⁷ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.97.

rear. Latour was likely making reference here to Derrida's famous statement that "*il n'y a pas de hors texte*".⁶²⁸ Derrida's phrase calls to mind the "frontispiece" that might be inserted right at the beginning of a book as a means of illustrating or explaining the text that is contained within, guiding the reader by pointing to one of its salient moments or by showing the reader something to which the author (or perhaps the publisher) wants to mark as an interpretative key for deciphering the meaning of the whole. In French, this insert is known as "*un hors-texte*" (with a hyphen). The *hors-texte* is physically bound to the book. But, for Derrida, its relationship to the meaning of the text is more problematic, since it is emblematic of the presence of a "transcendental signified" that stands authoritatively outside or above the text itself. Derrida was an early influence on Latour's thought and his original choice of cover for *Jubiler* must be seen in light of this influence.⁶²⁹ For Latour, the meaning and truth of religion cannot be secured by means of a "transcendental signified": its rationality is a function of a subsistent flow of relations between actors situated within the immanent sphere of this world. The innovative cover design of *Jubiler* was intended to represent this. Much to Latour's disappointment, later editions, including the English translation of 2012, do not replicate this innovation and thereby squander an important clue to the interpretative key Latour had initially provided.

The operation of subsistence, called *reprise*, implies that the theological idea of transcendence must be subject to some reconfiguration. "Religion is not about

⁶²⁸ Derrida (1998, 1967), *Of Grammatology*, p.158, translated as "there is nothing outside the text".

⁶²⁹ See Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.289; Latour (2016), *LACC*, p.466.

transcendence, a Spirit from above”, Latour writes.⁶³⁰ Instead, his account envisages religion as that which is able to negotiate a hiatus of being, translating a previous event or experience into the present moment in such a way as to represent its original sense in the fullest possible way. Thus, “religion is all about immanence, to which is added the renewal, the rendering present again of this immanence”.⁶³¹ This does not entail the flattening or disenchantment of the phenomenon. For Latour, that religion is able to negotiate these “small transcendences” is wondrous. Indeed, for Latour, it is the operation of *reprise* that affords religion a distinctive role in the contemporary public space.

In this section, using material from the *Inquiry*, as well as from a number of other texts from the middle and later stages of his career, I have attempted to clarify Latour’s understanding of religion. To this analysis I now wish to add some observations from the beginning of his career.

3.1.2 [Evidence from Latour’s Early Writing](#)

In June 1975, Latour defended his *thèse de troisième cycle* at the University of Tours. I wish to argue that this document, unpublished and never before considered in the critical literature, is able to shed crucial light on the concept of *reprise*, and as such that it provides a way of gaining greater clarity on what Latour proposes is distinctive about “religion as a mode of existence”.

⁶³⁰ Latour (2001), *TNLV*, p.219.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

The thesis, entitled *Exégèse et ontologie: une analyse des textes de resurrection*, consists of an introduction and five chapters.⁶³² These chapters provide an analysis of five different texts. It soon becomes clear that Latour has in mind a broad definition of what constitutes “*un texte*”: he goes on to address, in turn, the poetry of Saint-John Perse, the two *Clio* dialogues of Charles Péguy, both of which were published posthumously, the 1972 film ‘Red Psalm’ by Hungarian Director Miklós Jancsó, the Gospel according to Saint Mark and its critical appropriation through the work of Rudolf Bultmann, and finally the experience of what he calls “*la crise amoureuse*”, that is, “the romantic crisis”.⁶³³ Thus, when he refers to a “text” Latour is referring in broad terms to the documented transmission of an original experience or event, in whatever medium that should occur.

Latour analyses each of these texts in terms of *reprise*. That is to say, he considers to what degree each one enacts a differentiating repetition upon its founding event or experience, in order to communicate its meaning or truth to the contemporary reader as faithfully and as accurately as possible. He notes that each text sets out to impede what he calls a “linear” or a “longitudinal” reading.⁶³⁴ This would be a reading that sought to represent the meaning or truth of an original event or experience by means of mimetic verisimilitude. How do they achieve this

⁶³² Latour (1975), fr. *EO*. For explanation of the sourcing of this document, see above, pp.197–198. The pagination given refers to the original page-set of the thesis. The document is available for inspection for the examiners if required with permission; however, Latour has requested discretion as to its further dissemination.

⁶³³ These reflect, in turn, the five chapters of the thesis: chapter 1, pp.1–62 (“Divination du poème de St John Perse”); chapter 2, pp.63–83 (“Les deux machineries de l’histoire: *Clio* de Charles Péguy”); chapter 3, pp.84–100 (“Ré/In/surrection: *Psaume Rouge* de Miklós Jancsó”); chapter 4, pp.101–149 (“Relevailles de l’Evangile dit de Marc”); chapter 5, pp.150–170 (“Exégèse de la crise amoureuse”).

⁶³⁴ Latour (1975), fr. *EO*, p.1.

disruptive effect? As Latour explains, each text operates “transversally” to its founding event or experience.⁶³⁵ In other words, encoded within the internal structures and movements of each text are gestures of differentiating repetition. For Latour, these gestures constitute the real interest and value of each text, whatever its actual content or genre happens to be: “*le choix de tel ou tel élément n’a guère d’importance comparé à la torsion qu’il subit dans le mouvement d’accumulation du texte, torsion qui est seule significative*”.⁶³⁶ The literary gestures that are enacted within these texts then spill over in the form of an invitation to the contemporary reader to engage in the same act of differentiating repetition. The reader thus becomes a supplementary mediator of the meaning of the original event or experience, even as he or she reads the text in which it is documented: “*le lecteur lui-même [...] signe de son propre paraphe l’ensemble de cette réécriture*”.⁶³⁷

In what follows, I wish to address two of the authors that Latour celebrates in this thesis: Charles Péguy and Rudolf Bultmann. These are frequently mentioned elsewhere in his writing. They seem to be crucial building-blocks of his understanding of *reprise*. As such, they will clarify his understanding of how religion functions. In the context of his thesis, the significance of these two can be properly deciphered and understood.

⁶³⁵ Ibid, p.9.

⁶³⁶ My trans. “the choice of such and such an element has hardly any importance compared with the twisting it is subjected to in the text’s movement of accumulation, a twisting that alone is significant” in *ibid*, p.3

⁶³⁷ My trans. “the reader himself [...] signs with his own initials the entirety of this re-writing” in *ibid*, p.7.

A. Charles Péguy

Latour has consistently, if somewhat cryptically, claimed that the work of French poet, essayist and editor Charles Péguy is of crucial importance to him. Péguy was evidently a literary presence in his early life and upbringing.⁶³⁸ As he told me in our interview, “every September, even though this was a vital moment in the winemaking calendar, when there was much work to be done, my parents would take me on a pilgrimage to Orléans for events associated with the celebration of his life and work”.⁶³⁹ Short references to Péguy occur in a number of his texts.⁶⁴⁰ He engages with his work directly in two important articles, where he describes the impact of reading Péguy as a young man.⁶⁴¹ But the reason for that impact is sometimes left unclear. This can now be clarified with reference to the 1975 thesis. This document shows that of primary interest to Latour was Péguy’s understanding of the retrieval of history in the form of “*mémoire*”. The *Clio* dialogues were key to this.⁶⁴² Latour was able to use Péguy as the model for his understanding of *reprise* and thus for his conceptualization of “religion as a mode of existence”.

⁶³⁸ Latour (2013), *BOI*, pp.289–290.

⁶³⁹ Appendix, p.365.

⁶⁴⁰ Latour (1988), *EWC*, p.92; Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.290; Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*, p.5.

⁶⁴¹ Latour (2014), fr. *PPSR*; Latour, with Howles (2015), *CP*.

⁶⁴² Péguy (1992, post., written 1912), *Véronique: dialogue de l’histoire et de l’âme charnelle*; Péguy (1992, post., written 1912–1913), *Clio: dialogue de l’histoire et de l’âme païenne*. The *Clio* dialogues are addressed in the second chapter of Latour’s thesis. See Latour (1975), fr. *EO*, chapter 2, pp.63–83 (‘Les deux machineries de l’histoire: *Clio* de Charles Péguy’). It should be noted that this chapter formed the basis for the first public lecture Latour ever delivered, which took place at the *Colloque du Centenaire* conference held in Orléans in September 1973 under the title: ‘Les raisons profondes du style répétitif de Péguy’ (my trans. “the profound reasons for the repetitive style of Péguy”). A version of this lecture was recently re-published in French as Latour (2014), fr. *PPSR*, which is the first occasion on which it has appeared in published form.

Latour first of all notes the common complaint raised against Péguy, namely, that his style is “repetitive”—notoriously so. “*Péguy répète sans cesse les mots, les phrases, les arguments et même le sujet de ses œuvres*”.⁶⁴³ For many readers this represents an obstacle to comprehension or enjoyment. And yet, for Latour, quite the opposite is the case.⁶⁴⁴ For him, Péguy’s repetitive style is the kernel of his intended mode of communication.

What was it, then, that prompted Péguy to make use of repetition as a stylistic device? In a recent monograph, Glenn Roe has shed valuable light on this question by situating Péguy’s work in its contemporary intellectual context.⁶⁴⁵ Roe argues that Péguy brandished repetition as a weapon against the newly-consecrated discipline of the “historical sciences” which was coming to prominence in the French university system of the Third Republic.⁶⁴⁶ This had its origins in the historiographies espoused

To date, however, there has been little or no comment on this lecture in the secondary literature, either in French or in English. In *The Pasteurization of France*, Latour refers to *Clio* as “probably the most profound study on the articulations of the various historical and religious times” in Latour (1988), *PF*, p.258. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, he describes it as “a stunning meditation on the brewing of history” in Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.68. In a 2008 lecture on religion in French, he simply states: “*Clio, il faut toujours relire Clio*”, my trans. “*Clio, we must always return to Clio*” in Latour (2008), fr. *STVPT*, p.12. For my interpretation of Péguy’s *Clio* dialogues and Latour’s use of them, I am indebted to a presentation given by Professor John Milbank at the *Maison Française* in Oxford on 31 October, 2014, which was subsequently sent to me in private correspondence by the author. A revised version of this presentation has recently been published as Milbank (2017), ‘*There’s Always One Day Which Isn’t The Same As The Day Before: Christianity and History in the Writings of Charles Péguy*’.

⁶⁴³ My trans. “Péguy ceaselessly repeats the words, the phrases, the arguments and even the subject-matter of his work” in Latour (1975), fr. *EO*, p.64.

⁶⁴⁴ Latour, with Howles (2015), *CP*, p.43.

⁶⁴⁵ Roe (2014), *The Passion of Charles Péguy: Literature, Modernity, and the Crisis of Historicism*. For an account of Péguy’s confrontation with this mode of historiography whilst at the *École normale supérieure*, see Rioux & Viallaneix, ‘Belle Époque: *Clio* normalienne’, pp.293–306.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.17.

by Taine and Renan earlier in the nineteenth-century; it was then developed by disciples of Renan such as Gustave Lanson, Gabriel Monod, Ernest Lavisse, Charles Siegnobos and Charles-Victor Langlois, all of whom were dismissed by Péguy under the collective title of “*le parti intellectuel*”;⁶⁴⁷ finally, it was encoded into the educational system of the Third Republic by the secular reforms of the 1880s carried out by Jules Ferry, which had the promotion of the “historical sciences” as one of their core aims.⁶⁴⁸ Roe offers a convincing argument from texts such as *Zangwill*, *L’argent suite* and *Note sur M. Bergson*—all of which bear the stamp of the influence of Bergson and his theory of time as “*durée*”—as well as from fragments of his unpublished thesis, that Péguy understood these new historical sciences as representing a barrier to the correct retrieval of the meaning and truth of history, since they served to impose upon history an interpretative grid that was detached from its actual spatio-temporal unfolding.⁶⁴⁹ Péguy was reacting to a contemporary intellectual development that “sought to foreclose the constant and ever-renewing movement of life and of living, exchanging the *se faisant* for the *tout fait*, direction for extension, and *becoming* for *the become*”.⁶⁵⁰ Péguy had no qualms about describing this as a quintessentially “modern” attitude and his opponents as being

⁶⁴⁷ For his understanding and definition of “*le parti intellectuel*”, see Péguy (1988, 1907), *De la situation faite au parti intellectuel dans le monde moderne devant les accidents de la gloire temporelle*.

⁶⁴⁸ See especially Roe (2014), *The Passion of Charles Péguy*, chapter 1, ‘The Metaphysics of Modern Historicism’, pp.16–50.

⁶⁴⁹ Péguy (1988, 1904), *Zangwill*; Péguy (1992, 1913), *L’argent suite*; Péguy (1992, 1914), *Note sur M. Bergson et la philosophie bergsonienne*. For more on Péguy’s unpublished thesis, including its relation to Péguy’s critique of “*le parti intellectuel*”, see Stengers (2014), ‘La thèse que Péguy n’a jamais écrite’.

⁶⁵⁰ Roe (2014), *The Passion of Charles Péguy*, p.44, original emphasis.

heralds of and evangelists for “*le monde moderne*”.⁶⁵¹ Indeed, such was the detachment of these moderns from the real events of unfolding history, and yet such was their claim to have achieved mastery over the meaning of history and its application to the present day, that Péguy condemned them as adopting the vantage-point of God himself over history:

*L'historien moderne est devenu un Dieu; il s'est fait, demi-inconsciemment, demi-complaisamment, lui-même un Dieu; [...] il s'est fait Dieu, tout simplement, Dieu éternel, Dieu absolu, Dieu tout puissant, tout juste et omniscient.*⁶⁵²

The secular doctrine which “*le parti intellectuel*” wanted to normalize within the Third Republic, which the Jules Ferry educational reforms sought to enshrine institutionally, was therefore contradicted by the transcendent position these writers themselves were adopting in regard to the contingent and unpredictable flow of history itself. As Péguy points out, the putative secular and scientific mode of historiography practised by “*le parti intellectuel*” actually disclosed a relation to transcendence that was in excess of the immanent situation of the historian himself:

*Ma proposition est exactement la suivante, que les méthodes scientifiques modernes, importées, transportées telles que dans le domaine de l'histoire, demandent, si on les entend exactement, et dans toute leur extrême rigueur, des qualités qui ne sont point les qualités de l'homme.*⁶⁵³

⁶⁵¹ Latour, with Howles (2015), *CP*, p.41.

⁶⁵² My trans. “the modern historian has become a God; he has made himself, half-unconsciously, half-indulgently, into a God; [...] he has made himself quite simply into God, eternal God, absolute God, God Almighty, just and all-knowing” in Péguy (1988, 1904), *Zangwill*, p.1401.

⁶⁵³ My trans. “my proposition is exactly the following: modern scientific methods, imported, transported as such into the domain of history, require, if one understands them exactly, and in all of their extreme rigour, qualities that are not those of a man” in *ibid*, p.1405.

Latour does not engage overtly with the matter of Péguy's historical context in his 1975 thesis. But he does offer an equivalent diagnosis to the one advanced by Roe. He acknowledges that Péguy's repetitive style can prove testing for the contemporary reader. Perhaps it even renders it "illisible".⁶⁵⁴ And yet, for Latour, this should not be understood as an oversight or mistake on the part of the author. On the contrary, Péguy's style is the vehicle by which he advances an account of the world different to the one offered by "*le parti intellectuel*" of his own day: "*la répétition est la machine de guerre inventée par Péguy contre la ritournelle et le rabâchage*".⁶⁵⁵ By adopting repetition as a stylistic device Péguy was demonstrating or enacting the mode of engagement with history he sought to promote instead of them. The *Clio* dialogues are particularly important in this regard. In these texts, Péguy argues that the meaning or truth of history can only be conveyed when the historian embeds him or herself in it by means of an act of differentiating repetition. Péguy calls this mode of historiography: "*entrer dans*".⁶⁵⁶ Alternatively, he refers to the difference between "*histoire*" and "*mémoire*", that is, "history" and "memory",⁶⁵⁷ the former corresponding to mere repetition of a past event or experience, the latter corresponding to a creative (and for that reason entirely faithful) retrieval of the past by means of *reprise*:

⁶⁵⁴ My trans. "unreadable", in Latour (1975), fr. *EO*, p.65.

⁶⁵⁵ My trans. "repetition is the engine of war invented by Péguy to combat refrain and the saying of the same", in *ibid*, p.65. The French words "*ritournelle*" and "*rabâchage*", translated here as "refrain" and "saying of the same", occur frequently in Latour's later writing and are always intended to contrast with his concept of *reprise*.

⁶⁵⁶ Péguy (1992, post., written 1912–1913), *Clio: dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne*, p.1007.

⁶⁵⁷ See also Rioux (1987), 'Histoire et mémoire: remarques sur *L'Argent* et *L'Argent suite*'; Bédarida (2002), 'Histoire et mémoire chez Péguy'.

*L'histoire est essentiellement longitudinale, la mémoire est essentiellement verticale. L'histoire consiste essentiellement à passer au long de l'événement. La mémoire consiste essentiellement, étant dedans l'événement, avant tout à n'en pas sortir, à y rester, et à le remonter en dedans.*⁶⁵⁸

This difference between “*histoire*” and “*mémoire*” is further illustrated by what is perhaps the best-known of Péguy’s numerous analogies. History as “*histoire*” is likened to a railway track that runs along the coastline in a straight line at a certain distance from it. By analogy, the modern historian seeks to transmit his or her account of the past without reference to the complex configurations of life that crowd in at either side. For Péguy, this corresponds to the historiographical assumptions made by “*le parti intellectuel*”. History as “*mémoire*”, however, is likened to the space of the coast itself, with its various populations, towns, and estuaries of rivers and streams. To move through this landscape would entail interaction with multiple beings and immersion in complex forms of collective memory. To report on one’s journey through it would entail reference to the plural life forms encountered along the way. This corresponds to Péguy’s preferred mode of historiography, which in turn he sought to embody and represent in his own writing by means of the stylistic device of repetition.⁶⁵⁹

In a recent, retrospective article, published in French on the occasion of the centenary of Péguy’s death, then translated by myself the following year and

⁶⁵⁸ My trans. “history is essentially longitudinal, memory is essentially vertical. History essentially consists in *passing alongside* the event. Memory, being already within the event, essentially consists of not getting out of it, of staying in it, and of recovering it from within” in Péguy (1992, post., written 1912–1913), *Clio: dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne*, p.1177, original emphasis.

⁶⁵⁹ Péguy’s ideas are reflected in the later work of Maurice Halbwachs on the idea of “collective memory”. See Halbwachs (1992, 1952), *On Collective Memory*.

published with additional interpretations, Latour offers some observations on the relation between this understanding of history and Péguy's religion.⁶⁶⁰ Underlying his contest with "*le parti intellectuel*" and their interpretation of history, Latour suggests that Péguy was engaged in a greater struggle, namely, a struggle against a mode of epistemology deploying the religious thematic of transcendence. For Latour, Péguy identified "*le parti intellectuel*" as operating by means of a covert form of religion or religiosity: by dint of their quest to attain apodictic certainty about history and its trajectory, they situated themselves as authoritative interpreters of what had "really" happened in the past, and thus as custodians of how the future direction of human society would surely proceed. For Latour, Péguy was nothing less than a crusader against "this new form of religiosity, the worst kind of religion, one in which the permanent miracle of continuity glosses over the permanent miracle of discontinuity".⁶⁶¹ And, for Latour, it was in his own understanding and practice of religion that Péguy, or "Saint Péguy" as he now calls him, found resources for an alternative mode of epistemology, one in which knowledge of the past would relate to the present and to the future in a different way.⁶⁶² In particular, Latour points to Péguy's appropriation of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. For Péguy, the idea of the divinity entering history indicated the sanctification of space and time itself. The meaning and truth of Christianity did not inhere in the fixing of the present by a transcendent reality situated outside or above the ontological processes of the world. Rather, Christianity understands the present as a moment rich in potential: by being responsible to its own history, alternative futures can be

⁶⁶⁰ Latour, with Howles (2015), *CP*.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.52.

⁶⁶² Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.289; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.306.

conceived whose coming-to-be would be associated with the voices and interests of a multiplicity of actors. For Péguy, Christianity envisages history as the crucible of real agency. Thus, Latour concludes:

Hidden in the folds of the dogma of the Incarnation, Péguy finds a crucial concept, the most important in all history (*Clio dixit*), namely, that the eternal is begotten in time, that God is *dependent on* human beings (in an entirely different manner from what was envisaged by Voltaire or Feuerbach).⁶⁶³

Latour's engagement with Péguy in his thesis clarifies his later conceptualization of "religion as a mode of existence". Péguy offered a vision of the present as being open for new forms of creative emergence towards a future that is yet-to-be-decided. Crucial to this is the idea that the actors who occupy the space and time of the present are ultimately responsible for relating to their own past faithfully. This is the operation of *reprise*. Péguy identified this as a fundamentally religious gesture, relating it in particular to resources offered (but rarely appreciated) within Christian theology. It is these same resources that Latour utilizes for his conceptualization of "religion as a mode of existence". Thus, for Latour, the key contribution of Péguy was his recognition that "the question of the present, of presence, is one that has been elaborated, instituted, worked over, and ritualized by Christianity for two thousand years beforehand".⁶⁶⁴

Latour's analysis of Péguy, found in his earliest writing, now appears to be highly prescient. For in recent years a number of critics have sought to re-address the question of Péguy's religious conversion and its relation to creedal Catholic faith.

⁶⁶³ Latour, with Howles (2015), *CP*, pp.53–54, original emphasis. See also Schmidgen (2013), 'The Materiality of Things?', p.10 ff.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.53

Rather than being understood as an awkward addendum to his life and work, Péguy's religion is now being appreciated more and more as the interpretative key to his intellectual project in general.⁶⁶⁵ This aligns with the reading of Péguy that Latour had advanced as early as the 1970s.

B. *Rudolf Bultmann*

As well as Péguy, Latour's *thèse de troisième cycle* also addresses the work of Rudolf Bultmann.⁶⁶⁶ Latour's interest in Bultmann should not come as a surprise. As I have already mentioned, his research was supervised by André Malet, the first translator of Bultmann's work into French.⁶⁶⁷ Latour admits that he came into contact with Bultmann's work through the influence of Malet.⁶⁶⁸

Latour's interpretation of Bultmann is idiosyncratic: he reads him "through the lens of Péguy".⁶⁶⁹ Latour took pains to explain this to me during our personal interview in 2014. "What I realized", he commented, "was that the deconstructivist tendencies of the former (Bultmann) could be synchronised with the constructivist

⁶⁶⁵ See for example Gil (2011), *Péguy au pied de la lettre: La question du littéralisme dans l'oeuvre de Péguy*; Riquier (2011), 'Charles Péguy: métaphysiques de l'évènement'. This critical turn has been less evident in English language writing on Péguy, although see Newey (2012), *Children of God: The Child as Source of Theological Anthropology*, especially chapter 7 ('*La Théologie Détendue: Péguy's Liturgical Child*'), pp.133–160 and chapter 8 ('*L'Éternel dans le Temporel: The Child as Icon of Hope*'), pp.161–186.

⁶⁶⁶ Latour (1975), fr. *EO*, chapter 4, pp.101–149.

⁶⁶⁷ See especially Malet (1968), *Bultmann et la mort de Dieu: présentation, choix de textes, biographie, bibliographie*; Malet (1971), *Mythos et logos: introduction à la pensée de Rudolf Bultmann*, the latter incorporating a 'Preface' contributed by Bultmann himself that pays tribute to Malet for his work as translator and interpreter of his thought.

⁶⁶⁸ Appendix, p.366.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

tendencies of the latter (Péguy) in order to create something entirely new”.⁶⁷⁰ Thus, Latour proposes the dialectical inversion of Bultmann by Péguy. This is the “method” he subsequently adopts for his own description of religion in later works.⁶⁷¹

Latour understands Bultmann’s project of demythologization as an attempt to strip back the mythological accretions that had accrued to the original kerygma in order to discover how it might have been preserved precisely through these accretions. Thus, as he explained retrospectively:

My understanding of Bultmann was that it was *only* in the long chain of continuous inventions that the *truth conditions* of the Gospel resided.⁶⁷²

Latour’s reading once again seems prescient. In a recent, comprehensive study of Bultmann’s theological project, David Congdon, himself building on a suggestion made originally by Eberhard Jüngel,⁶⁷³ corrects commonly-held misunderstandings of the concept of “myth” in Bultmann’s work, demonstrating that the goal of Bultmann’s demythologizing interpretation was to uncover the *truth* of myth mediated through ancient texts.⁶⁷⁴ Once again, this aligns with the reading of Bultmann that Latour had advanced as early as the 1970s.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid, p.366.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Latour (2010), *COAP*, p.600, original emphasis.

⁶⁷³ Jüngel (1985), ‘Glauben und Verstehen’, lecture originally delivered in October 1984 in Heidelberg entitled ‘Glauben und Verstehen: Zum Theologiebegriff Rudolf Bultmanns’.

⁶⁷⁴ Congdon (2015), *The Mission of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann’s Dialectical Theology*.

Latour then brings Bultmann into dialogue with Péguy. For him, it is Péguy's understanding of history that provides the interpretative key to unlock what Bultmann was attempting to achieve in his reading of the Gospels. Whereas for Bultmann, demythologizing the New Testament kerygma constituted the evangelical task, for Latour, inspired by Péguy, it is precisely the other way round: the true evangelical task is situated in the carrying forward or passing along of the original Christ-event by means of the subsistent operation of *reprise*, where what happened in the past is brought into the present in a way that is both faithful to what came before and a creative re-statement of it. Latour claims that this Péguy-inspired inversion of Bultmann was an epiphany for him:

I realized that religious beliefs can never be detached from the complex trajectory of interpretation, rewriting, invention, *reprise*, fabrication, canon formation and institutional incorporations that allow statements to gain a meaning.⁶⁷⁵

By bringing Bultmann into relation with Péguy, Latour thus suggests that he was able to “take the poison” out of his work, transforming an exegetical project that was subject to negative perception by the Catholic constituency of his own upbringing into a vehicle for a new understanding of religion as that which is obtained through the progressive mediations of *reprise*.

There is no doubt that Péguy and Bultmann represent a strange choice for a comparative study. And yet, for Latour, this is a useful way of examining the subsistent operation of “religion as a mode of existence”, whose *logos* is generated by logistical processes that take place within the world, rather than by

⁶⁷⁵ Latour (2016), *LACC*, p.466, original emphasis.

correspondence with a transcendent reality that is situated above or beyond it. In fact, it is probably their work to which he is referring when, in an interview conducted in 1993, he suggested that “to understand my ideas you have to understand first that I was trained in philosophy and in biblical exegesis”.⁶⁷⁶ The biblical exegesis was supplied by Bultmann, but the structure that made sense of it was provided by Péguy.

3.1.3 The Commensurability of Religion and Politics

Latour’s understanding of “religion as a mode of existence”, which I have examined with reference to both his early and his late writing, can now be related to his ideas about ontology and his attempt to describe how human society might be constituted by political processes that are representative of the plural beings that populate the world. For Latour, the unique function of religion is to make human beings conscious of reality in terms of a progressively unfolding ontology of actors and events, constantly in flux, and open to the assimilation of new situations that might cause a re-alignment of what was previously thought to be true. The religious subject is therefore one who functions in alignment with the political processes that constitute reality. The term “political theology” is intended to convey the commensurability of these two modes of discourse. It is a vision of religion operating in the midst of the contemporary public space, generating human subjects who are sensitive to the footprint of their own agency, being cognisant of their responsibilities as constituent parts of a larger, emerging whole, and hence who are able to play their part as fully political actors in the world.

⁶⁷⁶ Latour, with Crawford (1993), *IBL*, p.250.

For Latour, this means that the religious subject is characterised especially by a hermeneutic of suspicion in relation to modernity. He conveys this by repetition of the word: “hesitation”. The word features prominently in the *Inquiry*.⁶⁷⁷ It is used in the title of a 2001 article entitled ‘*Thou Shalt Not Take the Lord’s Name in Vain: Being a Sort of Sermon on the Hesitations of Religious Speech*’.⁶⁷⁸ And Latour also uses it in a 2005 essay where he proposes that “religion is not about authority and strength, but about exploration, hesitation and even weakness”.⁶⁷⁹ The word is intended to convey a particular ethical comportment: when faced with the epistemological categories of modernity, all of which offer a transcendent perspective on the whole, the reaction of the religious believer is to pause or halt so as to allow the movement of being itself to be expressed. Religion is not the assertion of a substantial reality that exists independently of the world. It is the exercise of “care, scruple, cautiousness and attention” to the immanent and contingent processes through which reality is progressively composed.⁶⁸⁰

In our 2014 interview, Latour highlighted the importance to him of Michel Serres’ book *Le Contrat Naturel*, published in 1990 and translated into English two years later.⁶⁸¹ In that work, Serres develops his own understanding of religion. Referring to the etymology of the word, which he traces to the Latin terms “*relegare*” (“to go through again, to reprise”), “*religare*” (“to attach”) and “*religiens*” (“the quality of showing care or being careful”), Serres defines religion

⁶⁷⁷ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.310, and various references.

⁶⁷⁸ Latour (2001), *TNLV*.

⁶⁷⁹ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.27.

⁶⁸⁰ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.144.

⁶⁸¹ Appendix, p.369. See Serres (1995, 1990), *The Natural Contract*.

as that which nurtures the qualities of “care” and “attention” in the human subject with respect to his or her embedded situation in the world and with respect to the compositional order of things in which he or she is required to participate.⁶⁸² Where religion is misrepresented or finds itself in eclipse, these qualities of “care” and “attention” become correspondingly dimmed:

The sublime word our language opposes to the religious, in order to deny it, is “*negligens*”. Whoever has no religion should not be called an atheist or unbeliever, but negligent.⁶⁸³

Latour takes his cue from Serres.⁶⁸⁴ He rejects supernaturalist theologies that “send us far away” and systems of religious belief that deal in “knowledge of things absent and distant, invisible and beyond”.⁶⁸⁵ To expect religion to deliver such access is a category mistake. For religion is that which “ratchets us down and helps us squish our toes in the mud”, drawing attention to the myriad links and assemblages that constitute the reality of the world as it really is, and nurturing a sense of responsibility to acknowledge the ongoing, constitutive role we have to play in the flow of these networks over time.⁶⁸⁶ Religion is not that which takes us away from the plural world, but rather it “sensitizes” us to it. That is its essential moral quality.⁶⁸⁷ It is because Latour inverts the mode of cognition often associated with

⁶⁸² Serres (1995, 1990), *The Natural Contract*, p.47. For the contested etymology of the word “religion”, see also Smith (2008), ‘Religion, Religions, Religious’.

⁶⁸³ Ibid, p.48, original emphasis. For more on Serres’ use of the concept of “*negligens*”, see Boisvert (2003), ‘What is Religion?’, p.219 ff.

⁶⁸⁴ See for example Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 6, p.126.

⁶⁸⁵ Latour (2001), *TNLV*, p.231.

⁶⁸⁶ Miller (2013), *Speculative Grace*, p.131.

⁶⁸⁷ Latour, with Hache (2010), *MMES*.

religion that he is able to associate it with the activity of politics, which are the processes that constitute this immanent ontology of actors and events.

In a lecture delivered in 2008 to *l'Institut Catholique de Paris* Latour draws these threads together by describing the mechanism by which religion is able to generate these qualities of “care” and “attention”.⁶⁸⁸ Intrinsic to religion is an act of fidelity to an original event or experience. But this fidelity does not consist in simply re-stating the original event or experience as the locus of a univocal truth. On the contrary, it consists in acts of *reprise*. The word “hesitation” therefore describes the halt or pause that is experienced by the religious subject at the moment when responsibility for *reprise* is faced. This is not paralysis of action, as if to imply that religious faith cannot attain to any fixed or stable point. For this reason, the French word “*hésitation*” should not be translated as “doubt” or “uncertainty”, even though it is often rendered this way in *Rejoicing*.⁶⁸⁹ Rather, the religious disposition is one that is attentive to the processes of creative re-statement that are associated with *reprise*, since this is the mechanism by which it relates to its own past. For this reason, the religious subject is hesitant to assert him or herself in the mode of dogmatic certitude. For Latour, the history of religion bears witness to this quality:

[...] *l'histoire du salut n'est pas le déroulement majestueux d'une cause indiscutable, mais au contraire, l'hésitation,*

⁶⁸⁸ Latour (2008), fr. *SVPT*. Although this lecture is not yet translated into English and is virtually unknown to a wider audience, it represents an important statement of Latour's understanding of religion.

⁶⁸⁹ See for example Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, p.28.

*constamment reprise dans la crainte et le tremblement, de n'avoir pas compris le message.*⁶⁹⁰

It is on this basis that Latour suggests that religion has a unique role to play in the contemporary public space. Religion is the incubator of human subjects who have become attuned to the logistical processes that define collective existence. It thus provides a foundation to address the complex political, cultural and economic challenges that face global society:

*Autrement dit, être religieux, c'est d'abord se rendre attentif à ce à quoi d'autres tiennent. C'est donc, pour partie, apprendre à se comporter en diplomate.*⁶⁹¹

Latour's political theology operates in the mode of "diplomacy", rendering human beings sensitive to the complex ontologies of the world and conscious of the footprint of their own agency vis-à-vis others. It is for this reason that Latour proposes religion as a complement to the operation of politics and to the construction of a fully political human society.

Summary of Section One

In the first part of this chapter, I have described and analysed Latour's understanding of "religion as a mode of existence". For Latour, the *logos* of religion does not consist in the immediate certainty of univocal truth, but in the *reprise* of a founding event or experience in space and time. Religion is concerned with the immanent

⁶⁹⁰ My trans. "salvation-history does not consist in the majestic unfolding of an indisputable causation but, on the contrary, in hesitation that one has not understood the message, constantly reprised in fear and trembling" in Latour (2008), fr. *SVPT*, p.11.

⁶⁹¹ My trans. "in other words, to be religious is first of all to become attentive to that to which others hold dear. It is thus, in part, to learn to behave as a diplomat" in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.201.

conditions of existence. By its very nature it addresses us with questions about our responsibility vis-à-vis the plural world around us. For this reason, Latour makes strong claims for the role it has to play in the contemporary public space.

Latour is suspicious of the contemporary institutions of religion as vehicles or curators of this *logos*. By their very nature, the formal structures and dogmatic pronouncements of these militate against the delicate operations of subsistence. And yet, it would be naïve to suggest that his ideas about “religion as a mode of existence” are unrelated to institutional religion. “You will forgive me, I hope, if I concentrate on the religion I know best, for there is no question that the various traditions elaborated around Christianity are at root concerned about a radical change in the make-up of daily existence”.⁶⁹² In the next section, then, I will turn to consider how Latour’s writing on religion is inflected by language and concepts found within a tradition of Christian theology.

3.2 A Comparative Theological Study of Latour’s Understanding of Religion

3.2.1 Theologemes within Christian Theology

There is no doubt that Latour’s writing on religion emerges in dialogue with his own Catholic tradition, bearing its imprint in many places. And yet, Latour also claims that, under the aegis of modernity, this tradition has become infected by a category mistake and has lapsed from the value of which it should have been the custodian.

⁶⁹² Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.462.

“*La religion est toujours en grand danger d’impiété*”, as he puts it.⁶⁹³ Intrinsic to his work, then, is an attempt to unsettle and dislocate his theological inheritance in an attempt to recapture or re-pristiniate what he deems to be its proper significance. This prompts the question I will address in the remainder of this chapter: what is the nature of the relationship, avowed or non-avowed, between Latour’s writing on religion and Christian theology itself?

As a means of exploring this question, I will make use of the term “theologeme”. This term is borrowed from a recent, co-authored book engaging with Christian theology in relation to contemporary philosophy.⁶⁹⁴ Emboldened by “new materialism” and other schools of continental thought that emphasize immanence as the locus of philosophical speculation, its authors attempt to re-articulate themes within Christian theology without having recourse to a metaphysical “centre of value” that fixes and reifies them.⁶⁹⁵ A theologeme thus refers to a unit of systematic or dogmatic Christian theology that has been de-territorialized (such that it is no longer guaranteed by a meta-logical principle extracted from the immanent ontology of actors and events) and then re-assembled (so that it is justified instead in terms of a network topology of human and nonhuman actors). These theologemes can then be used as building-blocks for the construction of a systematic theology that is both related to its Christian inheritance, but also inflected and modified in new ways.

⁶⁹³ My trans. “religion is continually at risk of impiety” in Latour (2008), fr. *STVPT*, p.11. For related statements, see Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.33; Latour (2001), *TNLV*, p.219.

⁶⁹⁴ Baker, James & Reader (2015), *A Philosophy of Christian Materialism: Entangled Fidelities and the Public Good*, p.3, and throughout.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.14.

Latour's relation to his own Catholic tradition is best understood in terms of theologemes. This means that the question of his orthodoxy in doctrinal or creedal terms can be bypassed as one that is not directly relevant for an understanding of his work (at least until the time when he chooses to clarify or describe his personal belief system in more detail).

I wish to focus on three theologemes that appear in Latour's work. The first is related to the Christian doctrine of creation. Latour rejects the idea of creation *ex nihilo*. Within the terms of his intellectual system, the postulate of a sovereign Creator operating outside the realm of agency-configurations that take place between actors in the world is unsustainable. Instead, he reinterprets the doctrine in terms of "creativity", which he defines as "the innovative power of innovation of all entities".⁶⁹⁶ Latour offers "an understanding of the world as creativity all the way down".⁶⁹⁷ With this, the locus of agency implied by the theological idea of creation is shifted: creativity is understood as being the exclusive property of actors themselves.

Latour suggests that this shift can be discerned in the evolution of our everyday language and concepts. For example, he explores our understanding of the word "design". In its normal usage, this word is understood to indicate a superficial or aesthetic veneer that is imposed upon matter, or as a symbolic addition to an object's intrinsic materiality. This definition can no longer be sustained in light of advances in science, technology, medicine and other disciplines. We are coming to appreciate with greater clarity the activity that lies beneath forms and structures we

⁶⁹⁶ Latour (2013), *CS*, p.65.

⁶⁹⁷ Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.470.

had previously assumed to be fixed, solid and substantial: “our understanding of design has been spreading continuously; it has been now extended from the details of daily objects to cities, landscapes, nations, cultures, bodies, genes and even [...] to nature itself”.⁶⁹⁸ From the human genome to the constitution of the urban environment, we are coming to appreciate that patterns of organisation in the world can be traced to the internal activity of their constituent parts, to “the ontological qualities of matter itself”.⁶⁹⁹

The word “design” is therefore instructive. It provides an index to the revised understanding of creation that Latour advocates. The theological idea of creation *ex nihilo* describes a God who has imposed order upon the material world, just as a designer imposes form upon his or her raw materials. Within this scheme, created beings become the intermediaries of a providential ordering decreed by a sovereign Designer. And the course of human history is conceived as “consisting merely of the fortunes of matter in its adventure through space”.⁷⁰⁰ But the theologeme of creation inscribes “creativity” into the material world itself. God as Designer becomes God as “re-designer”, whose providential activity is expressed by his submission to and involvement in the processes of composition and construction that take place within the realm of the immanent world, rather than by his power to interrupt or manipulate

⁶⁹⁸ Latour (2008), *ACP*, p.2.

⁶⁹⁹ Latour (2007), *CWMB*, p.139.

⁷⁰⁰ Whitehead (2015, 1919), *The Concept of Nature*, chapter 1, paragraph 21.

these from above.⁷⁰¹ According to this theologeme, then, “*la création peut être reprise, aimée, rachetée; mais elle ne peut pas être interrompue*”.⁷⁰²

The delicate relationship Latour wishes to maintain with his theological tradition is evident here. He seeks not to overturn, but to recapture or repristinate the proper sense of a doctrine he believes has become infected over time by a category mistake. Creation as creativity draws attention to the dispersed, local and fluid processes of composition that take place within the immanent boundaries of this world, processes that are not managed or controlled by a sovereign entity. And this in turn draws attention to the material world itself as the crucible of history and as the site from which meaningful change can emerge.

A second theologeme that arises within Latour’s work is related to Christology. Here also, Latour seeks to recapture or repristinate a doctrine he claims has been misappropriated. Throughout the history of the church, Christology has proceeded as if the meaning and significance of the Jesus of history could be determined as an item of “information transfer”.⁷⁰³ Latour rejects this deployment of “the logic of incarnation”.⁷⁰⁴ The Jesus of history is the originating event of Christian faith. But the meaning and significance of that event cannot be divorced from the processes of its subsequent transmission in space and time. The Jesus of history becomes the Christ of faith as the former is elaborated within a network topology.

⁷⁰¹ Latour (2008), *ACP*, p.5.

⁷⁰² My trans. “creation can be *reprised*, loved, redeemed; but it cannot be interrupted” in Latour (2008), fr. *SVPT*, p.11.

⁷⁰³ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.312.

⁷⁰⁴ Latour (1998), *HIASR*, p.434.

These processes are not extraneous; they are constitutive of its meaning. Christian faith begins with the event of the incarnation. But fidelity to that event requires the believer to *reprise* it continually within the contemporary conditions of existence. This puts great responsibility on the believer in the here-and-now: “the truth-value of this story depends on us tonight, exactly as the whole history of the two lovers depends on their ability to re-enact the injunction to love again”.⁷⁰⁵ And it is their acceptance of this responsibility, followed by their attempt to serve as mediators of the Christ-event in the present moment, that qualifies religious believers to contribute to political society, precisely because it renders them conscious of the qualities of “care” and “attention” required to facilitate it.

By addressing Christology as a theologeme, Latour shows how his tradition can be engaged in service of a political theology. Comparable ideas can be discerned in the systems of other theologians. Friedrich Schleiermacher, for example, who was similarly disinterested in “the ecclesiastical formulae concerning the person of Christ”, dismissing these as expressions of a dogmatic metaphysics imposed by the institution of the church, developed an understanding of Christ as “*Vorbild*”, that is, as the one who quickens a religious consciousness in human beings by dint of “the constant potency of His own God-consciousness”.⁷⁰⁶ For Schleiermacher, the logic of incarnation was therefore to be found in the ongoing, creative activity that the Jesus of history induced in the lives of those who come after in the conditions of

⁷⁰⁵ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.33.

⁷⁰⁶ Schleiermacher (2011, 1830), *The Christian Faith, Second Edition*, pp.388–389.

“actuality”.⁷⁰⁷ Likewise, in the Schelling-inspired existentialism of Paul Tillich, Christian faith is understood as derivative of the “new being” that was originally and once-for-all offered in Christ. But this gift has to be “made-present” or “appropriated” in the experience of religious believers moment by moment and in relation to one another.⁷⁰⁸ For Tillich, the substance of the Christian religion is identified with the subsistent relations that pertain between human beings who appropriate the Christ-event for themselves in time.

The third and final theologeme I would like to consider is that of ecclesiology. For Latour, the unity and internal cohesion of any human society is secured by appeal to a norm or value that is higher than itself:

*Nous le savons depuis que l'anthropologie existe: pas de collectif sans un rituel au cours duquel on découvre que le seul moyen de se rassembler réellement comme groupe consiste à être convoqué par une autorité et à l'invoquer en retour.*⁷⁰⁹

But he then poses the question: to what degree is this made explicit? In the case of modernity, the answer is clear: Its internal cohesion is secured by means of appeal to “the crossed-out God”. Hence, modernity has no political basis. But for Latour, religion functions with the opposite effect. To be in a religious collective is likewise to be convoked by a norm or value that is higher than oneself. But it is also to make

⁷⁰⁷ My point here is indebted to the argument of Kevin Hector that Schleiermacher’s Christology must be understood in terms of “actualism”. See Hector (2006), ‘Actualism and Incarnation: The High Christology of Friedrich Schleiermacher’, especially p.312.

⁷⁰⁸ Tillich (1963), *Systematic Theology, Volume III: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, pp.138–141.

⁷⁰⁹ My trans. “we have known this as long as anthropology has existed: there is no collective without a ritual during which people discover that the only real way to come together as a group entails being convoked by an authority and by invoking it in return” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.201.

explicit the terms on which its internal unity is secured. By contrast with the power relations encoded within modernity, religious communities should be able to welcome others into the collective and to engage them freely in the agonistic relations that determine its own borders. That which is outside and excluded may be included later. Interiority depends upon responsible engagement with the plural world.

Latour frequently uses biblical “Pentecost” imagery and refers to the formation of “ecclesial” communities to describe this.⁷¹⁰ Hence, he deploys the language of ecclesiology as a theologeme. Ecclesiology does not refer to an institutional grouping *per se*, “a concrete and well-delineated congregation that shares the same faith, vocation and rituals”.⁷¹¹ It refers to any group of people able to name and designate that which convokes them as a collective, and therefore in a position to justify why they are constituted in this way and not another, and why the terms of their gathering might be different in the future. It is religion that safeguards awareness of these “interlocking, conflicting, entangled, contradictory networks that no harmony, no system, no third party, no overall Providence of any sort may unify in advance”.⁷¹²

By exploring these theologemes, I have attempted to show how Latour diverges in important respects from his own Catholic heritage. And yet, at the same time, his intention with regard to the latter is positive and constructive. He seeks to

⁷¹⁰ See Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*, pp.49, 119; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.58; Latour (2001), *TNLV*, p.228. Latour’s “Pentecost” language likely derives from Michel Serres. See Serres (1997, 1980), *The Parasite*, pp.42–47.

⁷¹¹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 2, p.34.

⁷¹² *Ibid*, lecture 5, p.119.

demonstrate where the categories of systematic theology have become obscured within modernity in the hope of calling the discipline of theology back to a more defensible and warranted appreciation of its own *logos*.

3.2.2 Comparable Approaches in Anglophone and Francophone Contexts

Latour does not claim to be a theologian. And yet, his writing on religion has important points of connection with ideas currently being developed within the discipline of theology and in related fields. A brief overview of these will be instructive, both as a means of clarifying the context in which Latour is operating and as a way of indicating future areas of development and cross-fertilization of ideas.

To begin with, Latour's writing on religion can be compared with other attempts to (re-) conceive the task of theology apart from the influence of epistemological assumptions that are deemed characteristic of modernity. One such approach has been developed by Richard Kearney under the title of "carnal hermeneutics".⁷¹³ Kearney begins with the assumption that modernity has facilitated the detachment of rationality from the realm of concrete, embodied existence. This has spawned the dualisms of transcendence/ immanence that are also identified in Latour's work. Building on the thought of Michel Serres,⁷¹⁴ and making use of a wide range of twentieth-century philosophers from the continental tradition, Kearney

⁷¹³ Kearney & Treanor (eds.), (2015), *Carnal Hermeneutics*; Kearney (2015), 'What is Carnal Hermeneutics?'. See also various articles in *New Literary History*, Winter 2015, Vol. 46, No. 1, 'Special Edition: What is Carnal Hermeneutics?'.

⁷¹⁴ Serres (2008, 1985), *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies I*.

proposes a return to the human body as a site of “epistemological mediation”.⁷¹⁵ This, he claims, will provide a bulwark against the dualisms of modernity, rendering human beings sensitive again to the hybrid reality that subtends them. Although it finds its primary locus in continental philosophy, figures and themes from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition have also been suggested as resources able to facilitate such a turn.⁷¹⁶

A related attempt to (re-) conceive the task of theology in the context of modernity is found in a 2011 book by Kevin Hector entitled *Theology without Metaphysics*.⁷¹⁷ Building on the work of Heidegger, Derrida, Caputo, Marion and Meillassoux, Hector argues that, because it is wary of adopting an “essentialist-correspondentist” model of language, (post-) modernity has lost its ability to conceive of metaphysics at all, resulting in a generalized “becoming-religious” of thought itself.⁷¹⁸ Human society becomes vulnerable to the influence of various profane absolutes, whether they are offered by esotericism, political ideology or consumer culture. In reaction to this, Hector seeks to provide a “therapeutic” account of religion that might allow the discipline of theology to counter these profane absolutes with a language of its own that is not inflected by the “essentialist-correspondentist” mode of rationality encoded within modernity.⁷¹⁹ In its desire to

⁷¹⁵ Kearney & Treanor (eds.), (2015), *Carnal Hermeneutics*, p.209.

⁷¹⁶ See *ibid*, part IV, ‘Divine Bodies’, pp.251–316, especially Falque (2015), ‘This is My Body: Contribution to a Philosophy of the Eucharist’. See also Kearney (2011), *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*.

⁷¹⁷ Hector (2011), *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.27.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.201 ff.

map out a terrain for theological enquiry that will bypass or overcome the epistemological categories bequeathed to it by modernity, Hector's work has many points of connection with Latour.

Catherine Pickstock's 2013 book, *Repetition and Identity*, also bears comparison.⁷²⁰ Pickstock provides an account of the secular that echoes Latour's language and terminology in interesting ways. She argues that "where divine transcendence is occluded, one finds oneself in the domain of buttressed immanence".⁷²¹ Secular discourse promotes the idea that, having banished the disruptive forces of belief and superstition, human society can now proceed on a trajectory of inexorable progress, driven by its own rational powers and ingenuity. And yet, by definition, the claim to have enclosed the realm of immanence in this way presupposes an occupation of transcendence itself. To announce that "the ontological bounds of finitude have been set once and for all" assumes a vantage-point that is situated outside or above them. Far from energising or unleashing political activity, then, the secular therefore oversees a zone in which "nothing new can ever happen".⁷²² In reaction, Pickstock seeks to reclaim the concept of transcendence by re-inscribing it ontologically. To do so, she defines transcendence as that which can be posited of the "non-identical repetition" that is generated by the interaction of different beings in space and time.⁷²³ The narrative of human existence is altered: rather than the trajectory of inexorable progress, society becomes open to

⁷²⁰ Pickstock (2013), *Repetition and Identity*.

⁷²¹ Ibid, p.xi.

⁷²² Ibid.

⁷²³ Ibid, p.21 ff.

the risk of variable turns and emergent possibilities. “History flows unpredictably forward in serpentine lines which bear and receive new disclosures, and yet sustain, refine, and extend consistent identities”.⁷²⁴

Pickstock’s account of the secular relates closely to Latour’s ideas about modernity. And yet, there is a crucial difference, one that serves to highlight what is distinctive to Latour. Pickstock concedes that the idea of “non-identical repetition” renders the lines between the real, the historical and the fictional blurry: in order to avoid endless, nihilistic recursion, “non-identical repetition” thus requires consummation (or “outwitting”, to use her own phrase) in the Christian theological concepts of incarnation, atonement and Trinity, and in their liturgical re-dramatization.⁷²⁵ Thus, for Pickstock, “non-identical repetition”, if it is to avoid the indeterminacy of mass identical duplication, must be fixed by reference to an eternal exemplar. Latour’s definition of religion as *reprise* is more radical than this. It refuses to shift one iota out of the immanent realm of space and time in which its own *logos* is generated. Latour therefore provides a more complete flattening of the dualism of transcendence/ immanence that both agree are generated within the domain of the secular.

⁷²⁴ Ibid, p.xii.

⁷²⁵ Ibid, p.xii ff. See also Pickstock (1998), *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. In an article of 1999, Simon Oliver attempts to co-opt Latour’s work in a similar direction to that which was later articulated by Pickstock. Oliver provides an accurate account of the understanding of religion that Latour associates with modernity. He then proposes some plausible ideas for its genealogy in the work of Aquinas and Calvin. But he finally suggests that the “objective ontological categories” that are artificially imposed upon the world by modernity can only be overcome by “the supernaturalizing event of the Eucharist and the divine culture of the liturgy of the Church”. See Oliver (1999), ‘The Eucharist before Nature and Culture’, pp.344, 331. Oliver’s article predates by many years the *Inquiry* and other texts in which Latour has clarified his ideas since then.

Another point of comparison with Latour's writing on religion is provided by a recent, edited volume entitled *Theologies of Retrieval*.⁷²⁶ This declares itself to be an attempt to re-invigorate Christian theology by considering the mode in which it appropriates its own tradition. The contributors conceive this in terms of "non-identical repetition". Thus, on the one hand, Christian theology is understood as a creative act, demanding that its own tradition be constantly re-imagined by the plural actors who are responsible for its articulation in the contemporary moment. But on the other hand, these acts of retrieval must still take place in relation to an originating event or experience that must be carried forward or passed along responsibly. Hence, citing Rowan Williams, Christian theology is conceived as a site of "creative archaeology";⁷²⁷ its own internal dynamic, when properly understood, contributes to maintaining a vital and vibrant public space where more and more actors are able to represent their own voices and interests as interpreters of a tradition, and as vehicles by which that tradition can be carried forward in a way that incorporates their ongoing contribution. As the editor of the volume summarises:

[Theologies of retrieval] move beyond the state of the present and what is commonplace within contemporary thinking by reconnecting with the legacies of the Christian tradition, thereby seeking to renew the present via accessing insights that lie outside its scope.⁷²⁸

Within the book, this insight is applied to the work of a number of different theologians and theologies. But the methodology itself is highly consonant with

⁷²⁶ Sarisky (ed.) (2017a), *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal*.

⁷²⁷ Ibid, p.194, citing Williams (2005), *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*, p.100.

⁷²⁸ Sarisky (2017b), 'Tradition II: Thinking With Historical Text: Reflections on Theologies of Retrieval', p.202.

Latour's idea of *reprise*. In both cases, theology is envisaged as uniquely placed to hold together the relationship of past with present: the *logos* of religion is concerned with how an originating event or experience can be responsibly articulated within the immanent conditions of existence. The present is connected with the past. But it is not over-determined by it; the past is taken up and integrated within a flow of history that is open to new directions and where the future has not been providentially fixed and decreed. This is the sort of temporal thinking that Latour believes must provide the foundation of future human society.

One final point of comparison comes from a Francophone context. In recent years, a shared approach to the study of religion has emerged amongst a number of French and French-speaking ethnographers, anthropologists and sociologists. These include Elisabeth Claverie, Anna Fedele, Albert Piette, Anne-Marie Losonczy and Anna Poujeau, many of whom are associated with *l'Institut des sciences sociales du politique* at *l'université Paris Ouest, Nanterre*.⁷²⁹ These have all contributed to (what

⁷²⁹ For representative texts, see Claverie (2003), *Les guerres de la vierge: une anthropologie des apparitions*; Claverie, (2008a), *Le monde de Lourdes*; Fedele (2013), *Looking for Mary Magdalene: Alternative Pilgrimage and Ritual Creativity at Catholic Shrines in France*; Piette (1999), *La religion de près: l'activité religieuse en train de se faire*; Losonczy (1997), *Les Saints et la forêt. Rituel, société et figures de l'échange entre Noirs et Indiens Emberà*; Poujeau (2014), *Des monastères en partage, Sainteté et pouvoir chez les Chrétiens de Syrie*. See also Albert (2005), 'Qui croit à la transsubstantiation?'; Lamine (2013), 'Croire et douter: une perspective sociologique et pragmatique'. In an Anglophone context, the work of social anthropologists Tanya Luhmann and Anna Strhan might also be included on account of the methodology they adopt. See Luhmann (1991), *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*; Luhmann (2012), *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*; Strhan (2016), *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in the Everyday Lives of Evangelicals*. Strhan has been explicit in citing Latour as an influence on the methodology she has adopted. See Strhan (2012), 'Latour, Propositions and the Instauration of Secularism'.

they call) studies in “*les religions vernaculaires*”.⁷³⁰ What unites these studies is a concern to avoid defining religion in terms of orthodoxy of belief or orthopraxy of conduct. Religion is not “*un préalable assentiment global*” to a founding set of doctrines or norms of behaviour “*envisagées comme un corpus*”.⁷³¹ On the contrary, it is a phenomenon that is maintained in existence by its practioners within the material and historical context in which they are situated. The focus of interest is shifted “*aux acteurs qui la déclarent ou y souscrivent et à leurs registres d’action*”.⁷³² These studies foreground the complexity of the relationship of religious practioners to their own statements of belief, the role of the different contexts of enunciation and interlocution in which religious communities are maintained, and the realization on the part of such communities that their religious beliefs can never be fixed, but require ongoing composition and liturgical re-enactment over time.

Latour demonstrates awareness of the findings of these studies at various points in his writing, including in texts pre-dating the *Inquiry* by many years.⁷³³ He interacts with two of them in particular. The first is the work of Belgian ethnographer Albert Piette.⁷³⁴ In a 1999 work entitled *La religion de près: l’activité religieuse en train de se faire*, Piette documents and describes in great detail the everyday

⁷³⁰ My trans. “vernacular religions”, in Claverie & Fedele (2014), ‘Incertitudes et religions vernaculaires’, p.493.

⁷³¹ My trans. “a preceding total consent” to a founding set of doctrines or dogmas “understood as a corpus” in *ibid*, pp.489, 487.

⁷³² My trans. “on the actors who announce it or subscribe to it [that is, to religion], and to their registers of action” in *ibid*, p.483.

⁷³³ See for example Latour (2001), *TNLV*, pp.230–232; Latour, with Weibel (eds.) (2002), *IBIW*, pp.460–461; Latour (2010), *MCFG*, pp.42–44; Latour (2013), *WUCD*, p.8.

⁷³⁴ Piette (1999), *La religion de près: l’activité religieuse en train de se faire*. See also related articles Piette (2010), ‘L’anthropologie existentielle: présence, coprésence et leurs détails’; Piette (2012), ‘Le croyant, la divinité et l’anthropologie’.

religious activities of a number of rural Catholic parishes in the central region of France. He collects data multifactorially to show how activities that at first glance would appear to be mundane, incidental and perhaps even ancillary to institutional religion are in fact the real mediators of religious experience. Piette does not begin with a definition of religion as a norm of belief. Rather, he shows how the phenomenon of religion emerges through and is maintained by material and historical networks, “*un ensemble de médiations qui assurent la présence de Dieu qui agit auprès de ceux-là*”.⁷³⁵ In each case, these mundane processes constitute delicate acts of *reprise*, carrying forward and passing along a tradition in such a way as to render the present moment one that is pregnant with responsibility and meaning. Latour cites Piette’s work in his own texts as beings emblematic of what he means by “religion as a mode of existence”.⁷³⁶

Second, Latour also interacts at length with the work of French social anthropologist Elisabeth Claverie. He is particularly interested in a series of studies Claverie has been conducting since the late 1990s into Catholic pilgrimage sites where there have been reports of ecstatic religious experience: these include Lourdes in southwest France,⁷³⁷ the San Damiano monastery near Assisi in Italy,⁷³⁸ and the shrine at Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁷³⁹ The latter is the subject of her

⁷³⁵ My trans. “an assembly of mediations that guarantee the presence of God who acts through those things” in *ibid*, p.258.

⁷³⁶ See for example Latour (2001), *TNLV*, pp.230–232; Latour (2005), *RS*, p.119. See also Appendix, p.369.

⁷³⁷ Claverie, (2008a), *Le monde de Lourdes*; Claverie, (2009), ‘Parcours politique d’une apparition: le cas de Lourdes’.

⁷³⁸ Claverie (2002) ‘Taking Pictures of Supernatural Beings’.

⁷³⁹ Claverie (2008b), ‘Voir apparaître: les événements de Medjugorje’.

longest and most detailed work, published in French in 2003 as *Les guerres de la vierge: une anthropologie des apparitions* (not yet translated into English).⁷⁴⁰ Claverie begins her study of pilgrimage activity at Medjugorje by describing how complex material apparatuses are set up by the guardians of the shrine in order to facilitate the religious experience of the pilgrims who visit. To cite one example, the official website of the shrine provides a printable list of the physical features of “Our Lady” as she has appeared in that location before.⁷⁴¹ The pilgrims are invited to use it as a means of recognising whether a “real” apparition has occurred or not (included on the list is even the detail of whether a pilgrim might expect to see her fingernails or not, were she to appear!) Pilgrims at the shrine continue this process by deploying material apparatuses of their own during and after their visits. Claverie observes how they use cameras and microphones in an attempt to capture the apparition, coming together in informal social groupings later in the day to compare and contrast their images and recordings. As she points out, this seems to overlay two different modes of rationality. How can a claim to ecstatic religious experience be mediated through and authenticated by material and historical processes such as these? She shows how these are cited as “*attestateurs*” and as “*évocateurs de la mémoire*” of what was experienced on location at the shrine.⁷⁴² They will carry forward the “presence” of what was experienced there once the pilgrims have departed: “*ces choses [...]*

⁷⁴⁰ Claverie (2003), *Les guerres de la vierge*.

⁷⁴¹ See < www.medjugorje.hr/en/medjugorje-phenomenon/detailed-description >, as well as other pages on the site (accessed 10 June, 2018).

⁷⁴² My trans. “attesters/ witnesses” and “memory prompts” in Claverie (2003), *Les guerres de la vierge*, p.347.

*prendront valeur d'équivalents de la 'présence' dans le monde qu'ils ont quitté".*⁷⁴³

Thus, according to her ethnographical description, and contrary to what might be assumed, the pilgrims do not attest in a naïve way to the apparition of “Our Lady” as an indisputable truth. The pilgrims exhibit a high-degree of self-awareness in this regard. They realise that they will face “*des questions ironiques*” from family and friends as they recount back home what they think they have seen at the shrine.⁷⁴⁴ They do not attempt to justify their experience in the mode of apodictic certainty. Indeed, they are hesitant to define exactly what the original apparition signified for them, a typical comment being something like: “*je ne sais pas ce qui m'arrive, je ne peux pas en parler*”.⁷⁴⁵ Their experience at the shrine is not filtered through the meta-logical categories of modernity. Its value is to embed them in an alternative mode of epistemology: it confronts them with the ontological status of different actors and events in the world; it alerts them to their own role as mediators ensconced within the plural world; and it draws attention to the different material apparatuses through which their original experience must be constructed if it is to be relevant in the present moment.

In the final section of the book, recounting her own experience, Claverie reports the disdainful reaction of many of her colleagues in Paris when they encountered her analysis of the religious activity she had witnessed at the shrine.⁷⁴⁶ She argues this reaction betrayed epistemological assumptions that unconsciously

⁷⁴³ My trans. “these things [...] will have a status equal to that of ‘presence’ in the world they have left behind” in *ibid.*

⁷⁴⁴ My trans. “ironic questions” in *ibid.*

⁷⁴⁵ My trans. “I don’t know what happened to me, I can’t speak of it” in *ibid.*, p.348.

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ‘Conclusion: le retour de l’anthropologue’, pp.350–352.

structure academic enquiry. Her colleagues were assuming that they themselves occupied “*une position normative*”, a vantage-point from which they were able to denounce the pilgrims’ experience as irrational and superstitious.⁷⁴⁷ For Claverie, this is a category mistake. These apparitions cannot be referred to “Nature” as a transcendent arbiter, via its transparent intermediary “science”. Her work seeks instead to represent the complex, dynamic public space in which nothing is excluded *a priori*, accepting the risk that this ungroundedness confers upon critical enquiry.

Claverie’s work is frequently cited by Latour.⁷⁴⁸ He notes how her ethnographical approach to religion resists fixing the status of religious experiences in relation to an external and unified “substance”. Instead, that status is constituted in space and time within the immanent conditions of existence, and through the material networks in which the pilgrims are continually engaged:

Claverie’s studies on Catholic pilgrimages show how the pilgrims photograph the apparitions of the Virgin Mary and discuss endlessly the shapes appearing in their polaroids, without insisting very much on eliciting the ontological status of an obdurately long-lasting Virgin Mary.⁷⁴⁹

Her work shows how the *logos* of religion dismantles the dualisms and dichotomies that have become central to modern thought: nature as divided from society, objects as divided from subjects, real as opposed to man-made or constructed, and existent as opposed to (merely) believed-in. “The ontological envelope drawn by the Virgin

⁷⁴⁷ My trans. “a normative position” in *ibid*, p.351.

⁷⁴⁸ See for example Latour (2001), *TNLV*, p.230; Latour (2010), *MCFG*, p.44.

⁷⁴⁹ Latour (2001), *TNLV*, p.230. Latour’s article is dated before the release of Claverie’s book *Les guerres de la vierge*, which was published in 2003. His comments were based on personal communication with her that had taken place before that time.

who saves” points us to a hybrid reality that is in excess of the purified epistemological categories of modernity.⁷⁵⁰

There is no doubt that Latour’s work has points of connection with contemporary theology. The significance of these studies in “*les religions vernaculaires*” is the explicit nature of Latour’s engagement with them. It is to be hoped that more direct engagements like these might be possible in the future as a means of applying Latour’s ideas to real-life situations.

Conclusion to Chapter Three

In this chapter, I have described and analysed the type of religion that Latour proposes in lieu of modernity. This is what he calls “religion as a mode of existence”. He defines this in terms of the subsistent movement of beings. Religion generates the ethical comportment of “care” and “attention” to one’s embedded situation in the world; it demands an act of fidelity to the immanent conditions of existence; and it nurtures a sense of responsibility to one’s own role in determining the trajectory of the future.

The stage is now set for my final chapter, where I will relate these values to the contemporary global situation. Latour claims that the ethical comportment generated by religion is needed more than ever at the present time on account of an urgent challenge facing us all. It is religion alone that he believes can generate and incubate the mode of political activity required at this important time.

⁷⁵⁰ Latour (2010), *MCFG*, p.44.

CHAPTER FOUR

**THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY
OF THE ANTHROPOCENE**

Introduction

In his most recent work Latour has identified a single, urgent and predominant challenge facing global humanity at the present time. In his view, this challenge exceeds all others because it is of an entirely different order to anything that has come before. The situation he has in mind is the advent of the Anthropocene. It is no exaggeration to say that over the last few years the concept of the Anthropocene has become the primary frame through which Latour has chosen to filter and apply his ideas.⁷⁵¹ It is therefore crucial to evaluate his writing on religion in relation to it.

What does the concept of the Anthropocene signify and why has it been of interest to Latour? Although precursors of the concept have been identified in earlier writing,⁷⁵² it is generally agreed that the term itself was introduced and described as recently as the year 2000 in a research article jointly written by the atmospheric scientist Paul J. Crutzen and the marine biologist Eugene F. Stoermer.⁷⁵³ In that article, the authors define the Anthropocene as referring to the historical period in which human activity, the footprint of the *anthropos*, can be shown to have produced a significant impact on the Earth system, to such an extent that an entirely new

⁷⁵¹ See especially Latour (2011), *WG*; Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 4, pp.75–97; Latour (2013), fr. *ANC*; Latour (2014), *ATA*; Latour (2014), *WPTEC*; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, pp.147–192; Latour, with Davies (2015), *DFG*; Latour, with Paulson (2018), *CZSP*.

⁷⁵² See Hamilton & Grinevald (2015), ‘Was the Anthropocene Anticipated?’ This article considers the work of Antonio Stoppani, George Perkins Marsh, Vladimir Vernadsky, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Edouard Le Roy, among others. However, it concludes that the Anthropocene is best considered as being of very recent origin, because its proper definition derives from work carried out in Earth Systems Science, whose roots as a distinctive disciplinary field can be traced back to the 1980s. For other reviews of possible historical precedents, see also Steffen, Grinevald & Crutzen (2011), ‘The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives’; Zalasiewicz, Crutzen & Steffen (2012), ‘The Anthropocene’; Charbonnier (2017), ‘Généologie de l’anthropocène: la fin du risqué et des limites’.

⁷⁵³ Crutzen & Stoermer (2000), ‘The Anthropocene’.

geological classification is required to take account of it. Its admission as a formal demarcation within the Geological Time Scale (GTS) of the Earth's history, replacing the epoch that preceded it, the Holocene, is currently under consideration by a nominated scientific committee on the basis of analysis of stratigraphic and atmospheric data.⁷⁵⁴ The decision of that committee is expected later this year.⁷⁵⁵ If (and when) their decision is made official, it will declare that the burden of human activity “has now become so large that it rivals some of the great forces of nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system”.⁷⁵⁶ The concept of the Anthropocene is thus proposed as a scientific description of human impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, the phenomenon of anthropogenic climate change.

In recent years, however, the meaning and significance of the Anthropocene has been discussed in disciplinary areas beyond those of the natural sciences.⁷⁵⁷ This

⁷⁵⁴ This is the responsibility of the ‘International Commission on Quaternary Stratigraphy’ (ICQS), a professional body that falls under the auspices of the ‘International Union of Geological Sciences’ (IUGS). For more information on both, see < www.quaternary.stratigraphy.org > (accessed 25 June, 2018). For more on the process by which they are analysing this decision, see Warde, Robin & Sörlin (2017), ‘Stratigraphy for the Renaissance: Questions of Expertise for “the Environment” and “the Anthropocene”’.

⁷⁵⁵ For Latour's analysis of the ramifications of the decision facing the committee, see Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 4, pp.75–78.

⁷⁵⁶ Steffen, Grinevald & Crutzen (2011), ‘Conceptual and Historical Perspectives’, p.843. For more on the formal criteria by which the Anthropocene is defined, see Steffen, Crutzen & McNeill (2007), ‘The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?’ For a general description of the concept for a non-scientific reader, see Hamilton (2017), *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*, especially chapter 1, ‘The Anthropocene Rupture’, pp.1–35.

⁷⁵⁷ The literature is vast. For discussion of the concept of the Anthropocene within the history of ideas, see Davies (2016), *The Birth of the Anthropocene*; Sloterdijk (2018b), ‘The Anthropocene: A Stage in the Process on the Margins of Earth's History?’. For the significance of the concept in contemporary art, see Bordeleau (2015), ‘Faire face à Gaïa avec les ressources de l'art et de l'apocalypse’; Davis & Turpin (eds.) (2015), *Art in the*

is because the concept is able to frame important questions about the exercise of human agency in the world. It is within this context that Latour has also taken up and written about the Anthropocene. This new direction was prefigured in Latour's work in the early 2000s, where he began to show an interest in environmental science and in the nature of the threat that human-induced climate change was likely to pose to our current, habituated patterns of existence.⁷⁵⁸ This culminated in his book *Politics of Nature*, published in 2004, where he began to make strong claims that the contemporary environmental crisis would be an issue that would reconfigure human politics and society in radical ways. In that work, he coined the term "political ecology" as a way of describing this shift and proposed a methodology for its adoption within the human sciences.⁷⁵⁹ In the mid to late 2000s, Latour encountered some of the scientific literature on the Anthropocene that was emerging at that time and began to employ the concept himself explicitly, replacing his earlier use of the phrase "political ecology".⁷⁶⁰ Since then, the concept of the Anthropocene has provided an important frame for his analysis of the contemporary global situation.

Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies. For a survey of how the concept has been taken up in literature and political theory, see various articles in *Oxford Literary Review*, Volume 34, Issue 2, especially Szerszynski (2012), 'The End of the End of Nature: The Anthropocene and the Fate of the Human'.

⁷⁵⁸ Latour (2003), *IRMO*; Latour (2003), *WTPL*; Latour (2004), *WCWC*; Latour (2007), *IDS*; Latour (2007), *RMAA*.

⁷⁵⁹ Latour (2004), *PN*, p.1 ff. For further description of Latour's use of this phrase, see Wilding (2010), 'Naturphilosophie Redivivus: On Bruno Latour's Political Ecology'; Turner (2015), 'Travels Without a Donkey: The Adventures of Bruno Latour', pp.131–135.

⁷⁶⁰ The first reference to the Anthropocene I have been able to locate in Latour's published writing is found in Latour (2010), *PFES*, p.74. That article is based on a keynote address Latour delivered at the 'British Sociological Association' in London in April 2007. After this date, he uses the concept very frequently. For Latour's description of his abandonment of his earlier concept of "political ecology", see Latour (2014), *ATA*, p.16.

The concept has a double function within Latour's thought. On the one hand, he interprets the Anthropocene as being the product of the ideology of modernity, reflecting attitudes to the world that derive from its covert metaphysics. This is a development of the proposal of Ulrich Beck that the risks posed to us by the contemporary environmental crisis are the "unintended side-effects" of modernity.⁷⁶¹ On the other hand, Latour treats the Anthropocene as the occasion for a possible transition into something new: its advent represents "the best alternative we have to usher us out of the notion of modernization" and into a mode of collective human existence constructed on an entirely different foundation.⁷⁶² The Anthropocene prompts us to consider how our understanding of the world has been poorly reflected by the epistemological categories bequeathed to us by modernity and that, if our existence on this planet is to be sustainable in the future, we will need to conceive of ontology in a fundamentally different way. "To modernize or to ecologize?—that is the question".⁷⁶³ The Anthropocene therefore represents both a moment of decisive rupture with what has come before and a moment of potential opportunity for the pursuit of an alternative, more sustainable and more hopeful future for human society.

The turn to the Anthropocene that has taken place in Latour's recent thought is incontestable. The argument I wish to develop is that this turn must be understood in the context of his writing on religion. Latour develops an understanding of the

⁷⁶¹ Beck (2009), *World at Risk*, p.109. For a comparative study of the ideas of Latour and Beck, see Doncu (2016), 'Theories of Agency in Contemporary Social and Culture Studies: Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour'.

⁷⁶² Latour (2015), *FF*, p.145; Latour, with Paulson (2018), *CZSP*, question 4.

⁷⁶³ Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.462.

aetiology of the Anthropocene—the human attitudes and worldviews that have brought it about—as having a religious basis. But he also suggests that an appropriate human response to the challenge of the Anthropocene can only come about through qualities and values that are associated with religion.

My objective in this chapter is to describe and evaluate the relationship between Latour's writing on religion and his diagnosis of the Anthropocene as an immediate, existential threat to global human society. I have placed this chapter at the end of my study for two reasons. First, it provides a context in which the arguments I have made about Latour's writing on religion can be tested and validated. As I have shown, Latour began to develop his ideas about religion from the very beginning of his intellectual career, well before the issue of environmental change became a prominent public issue. And yet, the political theology he has developed over time suddenly finds itself thrust into the spotlight at this moment. This presents an opportunity to evaluate its relevance. Second, placing this chapter at the end of my study allows me to show in a very practical way how and why Latour's thought might be useful for the discipline of theology itself. For, by conjoining religion with broader questions about human political and social organisation at the time of the Anthropocene, Latour shows how theology has an important role to play in contemporary public debates. This chapter therefore anticipates new directions for theology that might arise in the wake of Latour's writing.

Chapter Summary

This chapter will proceed in two sections. These will be based around ideas of space [4.1] and time [4.2] in the situation of the Anthropocene. I have argued previously

that to be modern is to find oneself inhabiting material space and historical time in a way that is abstracted from reality itself; this has then subtended contemporary motifs such as progress, globalization and secularism.⁷⁶⁴ But, for Latour, at the time of the Anthropocene that spatio-temporal effect is necessarily challenged. Whether we like it or not, the advent of the Anthropocene compels human beings to confront the grounded, territorialized reality of our existence on Earth and the responsibility we have as actors within a flow of history whose end can now be conceived as open and indeterminate.

In the first section, I will consider how the Anthropocene reconfigures our conceptualization of space. I will begin by considering Latour's recent interest in the figure of "Gaia", which derives from the work of James Lovelock [4.1.1]. I will argue that Latour engages with this concept as a way of describing the new way in which space itself must be occupied by human beings at the time of the Anthropocene. By contrast, modernity, whose ideology dislocates people from the ontology of actors and events that operates within the boundaries of this world, the contemporary moment is one that requires us to become "earthbound" again. I will then explore the role and function of religion in this process and hence how theology might become a vehicle for this new way of thinking [4.1.2]. For Latour, it is religion alone that can nurture the movement "back down to Earth" that is necessary at the time of the Anthropocene. His thought here is reflected in the recent papal encyclical

⁷⁶⁴ See above, 2.2, 'Religion, Modernity and Contemporary Western Society', pp.154–187.

Laudato Si', which is a text that Latour himself has heralded as a key statement of how he believes theology can and should be functioning at the present time.⁷⁶⁵

In the second section, I will consider how the Anthropocene reconfigures our conceptualization of time or history. I will begin by considering the meaning of Latour's recent references to the "apocalypse" and "apocalyptic time" [4.2.1]. The implications of the contemporary environment crisis for global humanity, both this generation and future ones, is frequently conveyed using apocalyptic imagery. Latour attempts to redeem this word as one that will prompt in us not hopelessness or despair about what is to come, but rather a renewed sense of our role as agents able to do something to bring about an alternative future to the one that otherwise seems inevitable. The Anthropocene therefore reconfigures the trajectory of progress inculcated within modernity and prompts us to understand the flow of time as "geostory" or "geohistory", in which human beings can appreciate in a new way their role as agents. For Latour, religion is the means by which this new sense of time can be experienced. Finally, I will introduce one more theological concept to illustrate the new mode of temporal thinking that interests Latour [4.2.2]. Drawing on the New Testament concept of the "katechon", exploring in particular its appropriation within the work of Carl Schmitt, I will argue that Latour's political theology ultimately envisages the end of time as being held back or restrained in such a way as to imbue the present moment with the potential for genuine political activity. The political theology of Bruno Latour is therefore one that is *katechontic* in nature.

⁷⁶⁵ Pope Francis (2015), 'Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*: On Care for Our Common Home'.

4.1 A Geopolitical Theology of the Anthropocene

4.1.1 Gaia, Earth System Science and the “Good Anthropocene” Strategy

In his recent work, Latour has made use of the figure of Gaia as an emblem or motif of the situation of global humanity at the time of the Anthropocene.⁷⁶⁶ The figure of Gaia derives, of course, from the work of James Lovelock. A huge literature, specialist and non-specialist, exists in relation to Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, both supportive and critical of its methodology and discoveries.⁷⁶⁷ There is no doubt that Latour reads Lovelock as a non-specialist, engaging his work in “an enthusiastic but creative manner” as one commentator puts it.⁷⁶⁸ He readily concedes that he approaches the science as an amateur—“I’m not going to be evaluating Lovelock’s discoveries the way an Earth Systems specialist could do”, he admits—and requests a “charitable” hearing from his readership in this regard.⁷⁶⁹ This is an important disclaimer. My own task in what follows will not be to address the science behind the Gaia hypothesis *per se*, but to consider how Latour makes use of Lovelock’s

⁷⁶⁶ See Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 3, pp.53–74; Latour (2014), *ATA*; Latour (2014), *GGT*; Latour, with Williams (2014), *RE* (audio); Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, especially pp.101–146; Latour (2015), *FSG*; Latour (2015), *DSG*; Latour (2016), *TGE*; Latour (2018), fr. *BLPG*.

⁷⁶⁷ For a history of Lovelock’s development of the Gaia hypothesis, beginning with his work in the Pasadena Jet Propulsion laboratory in the 1960s, see Tyrrell (2013), *On Gaia: A Critical Investigation of the Relationship between Life and Earth*, chapter 1, ‘Gaia, The Grand Idea’, pp.1–13. For a history of the reception of his ideas by the scientific community, see Turney (2003), *Lovelock and Gaia: Signs of Life*.

⁷⁶⁸ Conway (2015), ‘Back Down to Earth: Reassembling Latour’s Anthropogenic Geopolitics’, p.12. For additional comments on Latour’s use of Lovelock, see also Dalby (2015), ‘Taking Gaia Seriously in Bruno Latour’s Geopolitics: Comment on Philip Conway’s *Back Down to Earth*’.

⁷⁶⁹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 3, p.58.

ideas for his own purposes and how these serve to elucidate his political theology of the Anthropocene.⁷⁷⁰

Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis begins with the observation that the planet Earth is "unique in the universe" on account of its ability to sustain organic life over time (famously, Lovelock made this observation while working at NASA's *Jet Propulsion Laboratory* at the California Institute of Technology, Pasadena on methods of detecting the possibility of life on the planet Mars).⁷⁷¹ Given the various shocks that are continually assailing the biosphere of the Earth, both internally and externally, it is extraordinary that this should be the case. What can account for the continuity of life on Earth over time? Lovelock's radical proposal is that it is the "ensemble of organisms who inhabit the face of the planet" who themselves maintain the chemical and climactic conditions conducive to the continuation of their own existence.⁷⁷² The homeostatic equilibrium of the Earth is therefore the achievement of self-regulating interactions that take place between organisms (the biota, including human beings) and the non-living chemical and physical parts of the environment in which these organisms exist (the abiota). For Lovelock, it is in and through the complex and contingent interactions of biota and abiota that a stable mode of collective existence

⁷⁷⁰ For the history and current status of the Gaia hypothesis as a scientific model, and for its role within contemporary debates about a "philosophy of nature", I am indebted to the unpublished thesis of Sébastien Dutreuil, defended in December 2016 at *l'université Paris I: Panthéon-Sorbonne*, for which see Dutreuil (2016, unpublished), *Gaïa: hypothèse, programme de recherche pour le système terre, ou philosophie de la nature*. Latour served on the jury committee for the defence of this thesis and has recommended Dutreuil's work to me in personal correspondence.

⁷⁷¹ Lovelock (2009), *The Vanishing Face of Gaia: A Final Warning*, p.1.

⁷⁷² Lovelock (2006), *The Revenge of Gaia: Why the Earth is Fighting Back and How We Can Still Save Humanity*, p.208.

emerges, facilitating the continuation of life on the planet Earth. “Gaia” is the name he gives to this hypothesis.

There has been some debate within the scientific community as to the precise nature of the homeostatic mechanism that the Gaia hypothesis entails.⁷⁷³ Latour enters this debate with the strong conviction that the Gaia hypothesis does not stipulate a teleology of any sort. For him, Lovelock’s ideas necessarily entail that the continuation of life on Earth is a function of “multiple, reciprocally-linked, but *ungoverned* self-advancing processes”, and hence does not require an intentionality to be posited beyond that which is manifest in the individual beings of the plural actors, human and nonhuman, who inhabit the Earth itself.⁷⁷⁴ Organisms adapt the environment to create the conditions for their own flourishing and continuation; Gaia is the result and permissive condition of this arrangement, not its cause. The distinctions here can be quite fine. But they are important for understanding why the Gaia hypothesis has been of such interest to Latour. This is illustrated with reference to a debate he has conducted with the British oceanographer Toby Tyrrell. In a recent monograph, Tyrrell acknowledges the fact that complex interactions between biotic and abiotic components of the environment take place over time but, unlike the Gaia hypothesis, he does not concur that any emergent homeostatic property can derive from these interactions.⁷⁷⁵ Latour’s response, which he developed in a lengthy review of his monograph, in parts of *Face à Gaïa*, and in other articles, is that Tyrrell

⁷⁷³ See Moody (2012), ‘Seven Misconceptions regarding the Gaia Hypothesis’; Bondi (2015), ‘Gaia and the Anthropocene; or, the Return of Teleology’.

⁷⁷⁴ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 1, p.8, original emphasis.

⁷⁷⁵ Tyrrell (2013), *On Gaia: A Critical Investigation of the Relationship between Life and Earth*.

necessarily has to posit a “third factor” in order to account for the properties of life on Earth.⁷⁷⁶ This third factor is equivalent to the epistemological concept of “Nature”, a law-like force determining the homeostatic equilibrium of the Earth independently of the agency of the organisms who inhabit its space. Interestingly, Latour does not hesitate to frame his critique of Tyrrell’s science in religious terminology. Because he posits this third factor, Tyrrell has “shifted unwittingly to the classical distinction between parts and whole, borrowed straight out of social theories—which, in turn, have borrowed them off the shelf from theology”.⁷⁷⁷ For Latour, it is as if Tyrrell’s account of life on Earth is “marked with the seal of a Providence”.⁷⁷⁸ The homeostatic mechanism provided by the actors themselves has been replaced by a metaphysical attribute that bears resemblance to the attributes of the God of classical theism, “*un Dispatcher à qui est attribuée la tâche—ou plutôt le saint mystère—de réussir la coordination entre les parties*”.⁷⁷⁹

Latour offers this strong interpretation of the Gaia hypothesis because he notes important points of synergy and equivalence between Lovelock’s non-teleological account of life on Earth and his own depiction of the logistical processes that take place between actors in “trials”. “The technical argument of Lovelock”, writes Latour, “is that the Earth behaves as a sort of interconnected set of entities—in

⁷⁷⁶ Latour (2014), *GGT*, p.1 and throughout. See also Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, pp.173–180; Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, pp.13–14.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.6.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.11. See also Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.450.

⁷⁷⁹ My trans. “a Dispatcher, to whom is assigned the task—or rather the holy mystery—of successfully co-ordinating the parts” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.128, original capitalisation.

which each of them makes its own environment—but it's not a whole".⁷⁸⁰ As one commentator has put it, Latour takes from Lovelock's work the idea that "there is only one Gaia, but Gaia is not One".⁷⁸¹ Because it resists the premature unification of the plural world by a concept of the "One", the Gaia hypothesis acts as a sort of secular drag on attempts to explain reality by means of a transcendent vantage-point:

There is no 'whole'—which is very perturbing, because of course people always use the global view 'as a whole'. It's very difficult to talk about connectedness without the holism. And I think this is actually what Lovelock sort of sneaks in-between, which is that the Earth is connected. Every element of the entities is building its own environment, but there is no 'organizer'. There is no God, basically.⁷⁸²

Unlike the epistemological categories of modernity, then, Gaia is a fully secularized concept, of which one need suppose no absolute transcendence or immutability.

Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis is associated with a territorial focus on the physical area occupied by organisms. This too is of interest to Latour. He even tweaks Lovelock's original terminology: rather than "Gaia", Latour often refers to "sub-lunar Gaia",⁷⁸³ so as to emphasize that what is in view is exclusively the activity of the beings that are situated in the space of the planet's biosphere, in "the thin spherical shell of matter that surrounds the [Earth's] incandescent interior".⁷⁸⁴ Nothing in the Gaia hypothesis relies on the postulate of a third factor situated away from this material space. Latour therefore makes use of the figure of Gaia to refer to

⁷⁸⁰ Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.13.

⁷⁸¹ Conway (2015), 'Back Down to Earth', p.12.

⁷⁸² Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.13.

⁷⁸³ Latour (2015), *FF*, p.145.

⁷⁸⁴ Lovelock (2006), *The Revenge of Gaia*, p.19.

a local, territorially-grounded space of activity that is entirely sufficient to itself, and that is not framed by a vantage-point situated outside or above its own sphere of operation.

Latour's interest in the spatial connotations of the Gaia hypothesis reflects an important shift that has occurred in recent years within the discipline of Earth Science itself, which has increasingly conceived its own mode of enquiry in terms of "Earth System Science" (ESS).⁷⁸⁵ Although it is a complex and evolving field, ESS is "the integrative meta-science of the whole planet understood as a unified, complex, evolving system".⁷⁸⁶ Rather than understanding the Earth in terms of various local and non-connected ecologies, ESS insists that the various constituent subsystems of the Earth are in dynamic relation to one another as parts of an integrated whole. And, precisely because it understands the Earth in these terms, ESS strictly regulates its own boundaries: its mode of enquiry considers what takes place within the geographical space of the surface and near-surface environment of the Earth, incorporating the lithosphere, pedosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere and atmosphere. Within the terminology of ESS, this is the "critical zone" of the Earth: "the heterogeneous, near-surface environment in which complex interactions involving rock, soil, water, air and living organisms regulate the natural habitat and determine the availability of life-sustaining resources".⁷⁸⁷ Nothing is postulated

⁷⁸⁵ For an overview of the field of Earth System Science, see Lenton (2016), *Earth System Science: A Very Short Introduction*.

⁷⁸⁶ Hamilton (2017), *Defiant Earth*, pp.11–12.

⁷⁸⁷ Giardino & Houser (2015), *Principles and Dynamics of the Critical Zone*, p.364, citing the 2001 report of the National Research Council entitled 'Committee on Basic Research Opportunities in Earth Science'. For Latour's interest in the concept of critical zones, see Latour (2014), *SACZ*; Latour, with Paulson (2018), *CZSP*, question 26; Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.13.

beyond the critical zone of the Earth to explain the stability of what takes place within it.

The territorial focus provided by the Gaia hypothesis, and its methodological application within Earth System Science, are indicators of the space of politics, broadly conceived, that Latour seeks to recuperate in his work. The Earth itself, understood as Gaia, is a “political entity”, providing the conditions for actors to define the terms of their own existence themselves.⁷⁸⁸ There is no need to posit anything that lies outside this sphere of activity as a third factor to explain what takes place within it. Latour’s understanding of the political can now associated in concrete terms with a particular way of occupying the planet Earth itself.

For Latour, the advent of the Anthropocene is a moment that strongly foregrounds this territorial focus. This is because it draws attention to the way in which human beings have sought to evade the fact of their own embeddedness in the immanent, logistical and spatially-determined processes that determine the sustainability of life on Earth. The narrative of modernity, with its mythological promise of a trajectory of endless progress, has promulgated the idea that human beings have the ability to extract themselves from or elevate themselves above their nested situation within the world in order to extract, store and deploy its resources for their own benefit. As Latour is fond of pointing out, merely to sustain for another century the rate of consumption of natural resources currently being enjoyed by the continent of North America would require the equivalent of “five planets” just like this one to be made available—and that is without reckoning with the legitimate

⁷⁸⁸ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 6, p.135.

claims being made by other, so-far undeveloped societies to attain to the same standard of living themselves.⁷⁸⁹ It is as if the logic of modernity and its narrative of endless progress can be conceived in spatial terms as stipulating a kind of flight away from the Earth itself.⁷⁹⁰ The new narrative being introduced by the advent of the Anthropocene, however, is one of limits and boundaries. To use Isabelle Stengers' provocative formulation, the Earth itself has become "*chatouilleuse*" and will no longer sustain an ideology of progress that is premised on the endless deployability of its resources for human consumption, with the implied assurance that these resources will be forever available for our use.⁷⁹¹ At the time of the Anthropocene, then, human beings are being compelled to consider anew their responsibility to engage in "Gaian interconnections" with the plural actors who occupy the face of the

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid, p.126.

⁷⁹⁰ Intriguingly, this idea once again reflects the thought of Carl Schmitt. In the foreword to his 1950 book *The Nomos of the Earth*, Schmitt argues that the relative stability of the European political order in the mid to late nineteenth-century was a function of the availability of extra-European territory in the New World and elsewhere for "discovery, occupation and expansion" by the European powers. In the post-war and post-colonial situation, that "outside" was no longer available. Schmitt predicted the contemporary political order in Europe would therefore be unsustainable in the medium term. Instead, an entirely new spatial ordering, which he refers to as a "*nomos*", will be required. Schmitt ruefully notes that the "outside" space of expansion that facilitated the previous political order in Europe would need some "fantastic parallel". Whimsically, he proposes this might only come "if men on their way to the moon discovered a new and hitherto unknown planet that could be exploited freely and utilized effectively to relieve their struggles on Earth". See Schmitt (2003, 1950), *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europeaum*, pp.66, 39. Schmitt's understanding of the post-war European political order as being in some way in excess of the boundaries of the planet itself (and thus requiring the fantastical discovery of some other planet) is linked to Latour's understanding of modernity as taking the form of a flight from the Earth. See Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.302 ff. For more on the spatial implications of Schmitt's political thought, see Minca (2011), 'Carl Schmitt and the Question of Spatial Ontology'; Meyer, Schetter, Conrad & Prinz (2012), 'Spatial Contestation? The Theological Foundations of Carl Schmitt's Spatial Thought'.

⁷⁹¹ My trans. "ticklish" in Stengers (2009), *Au temps des catastrophes: résister à la barbarie qui vient*, p.36.

planet Earth alongside them, so as to ensure a “safe operating space” for all.⁷⁹² Latour conceives of this new narrative, superseding that of modernity, as one that will require human beings to come “back down to Earth”.⁷⁹³ To do so, new forms of political imagination will be required. This explains why the Anthropocene is such a significant concept for Latour: it has the potential to recalibrate the entire narrative by which human society has hitherto been orientated. The Anthropocene is thus a radical and a revolutionary concept, equivalent to or greater than other ones that have likewise precipitated moments of sudden and irruptive alteration in the course of human history:

*Je pars de l'idée très simple que la mutation climatique et son déni organisent toute la politique contemporaine depuis au moins trois décennies; cette mutation joue le même rôle que la question sociale et la lutte des classes pendant les deux siècles qui précédent.*⁷⁹⁴

⁷⁹² The phrase “safe operating space” identifies and quantifies planetary boundaries that, if transgressed, will lead to unacceptable environmental change and catastrophic destruction of the habitable conditions for human life. See Rockström & Steffen (2009), ‘A Safe Operating Space for Humanity’.

⁷⁹³ Latour (2013), *CS*, p.66; Latour (2015), *FSG*, p.5; Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.2; Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.6. In a related phrase, Latour refers to those who have become “earthbound”, for which see Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 5, ‘War of the Worlds: Humans against Earthbound’, pp.98–122; Latour (2014), *WPTEC*, p.59; Latour (2014), *CTC*, pp.1–3. As an illustration of this movement “back down to Earth”, Latour is fond of referring to the final scene in the film *Gravity* (2013, dir. Cuarón) where the main character, having finally returned to the planet Earth as sole survivor of a catastrophic space disaster, crawls out of the lake in which her Soyuz capsule has landed, grabs a handful of dirt and mud, and (in a parody of the moment in which human life emerges from the primordial soup) takes her first steps on dry land. See Latour (2015), *FF*, p.145 ff. For a related image, see Latour (2008), *ACP*, p.8.

⁷⁹⁴ My trans. “I begin with the very simple idea that climate change and its denial have been organizing contemporary politics at least for the last three decades; climate change thus plays the same role that social questions and the class struggle did in previous centuries” in Latour (2017), fr. *ESSE*, p.1. For equivalent statements, see Latour (2013), *HP*, p.6; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, pp.362–363. The idea of the Anthropocene as a force of sufficient scale to recalibrate contemporary politics is one that has been discussed from a number of perspectives in the critical literature. See Northcott (2013), ‘Eschatology in the Anthropocene: from the *Chronos* of Deep Time to the *Kairos* of the Age of Humans’;

It has often been argued that the Anthropocene has its roots in attitudes inculcated by the Judeo-Christian religion. This argument normally adverts to the Genesis creation narrative, accusing it of assigning to man the role of “master” over nature, having been granted “dominion” by God over its various forms of life. This narrative, it is suggested, has provided warrant for the eccentric position human beings have taken vis-à-vis their participation in and alongside the created world, and has justified in the name of religion unsustainable patterns of consumption and wastage. Strongly associated with the article of American medieval historian Lynn White Jr., published in 1967,⁷⁹⁵ this argument has been developed in studies of the history of religion,⁷⁹⁶ as well as in studies of contemporary American evangelicalism (which is sometimes considered to be a salient expression of such a theology).⁷⁹⁷ But I suggest that Latour’s work allows for a more subtle configuration of the relationship between religion and the Anthropocene. Rather than tracing its origin to the Judeo-Christian Scriptures *per se*, Latour demonstrates how the roots of the Anthropocene are better

Purdy (2015), *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*; Fressoz (2015), ‘Losing the Earth Knowingly: Six Environmental Grammars around 1800’; Parenti (2016), ‘Environment-Making in the Capitalocene: Political Ecology of the State’; Hamilton (2017), *Defiant Earth*; Northcott (2017), ‘On Going Gently into the Anthropocene’; Wellman (2017), ‘The Anthropocene and the Future of Diplomacy: Religion, Ecology and Transnational Relations in the Age of Human Responsibility’.

⁷⁹⁵ White (1967), ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis’. Latour cites this work directly in Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 4, p.77. For a useful retrospective of White’s article, including a study of its context within his broader ideas about medieval history, and a survey of responses to it in the years since its publication, see Whitney (2015), ‘Lynn White Jr.’s *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis* after Fifty Years’.

⁷⁹⁶ See Noble (1998) *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*; Szerszynski (2017), ‘From the Anthropocene Epoch to a New Axial Age: Using Theory-Fictions to Explore Geo-Spiritual Futures’; Baumgartner (2017), ‘Transformations of Stewardship in the Anthropocene’; Bergmann (2017), ‘Religion at Work within Climate Change: Eight Perceptions about its Where and How’.

⁷⁹⁷ See Northcott (2004), *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire*; Ronan (2017), ‘American Evangelicalism, Apocalypticism, and the Anthropocene’.

accounted for in terms of modernity. It is the form of covert religion or religiosity ensconced at the heart of modernity, rather than in Christian theology *per se*, that provides an aetiology for the human spatial dislocation and disembedding that is characteristic of the Anthropocene.

This allows for a more expansive and nuanced investigation of the metaphysical and theological implications of the contemporary environmental crisis. It also allows for some of the discussion around possible responses to the crisis to be re-evaluated, even where these are ostensibly constructive in intent. Latour's work reveals that much of this discussion is mistaken, often calamitously so, precisely because it replicates and perpetuates a modern understanding of the relationship between humans and the Earth, and thus does not conceive a solution that gets to the heart of the matter.

One interesting application of this can be detected in Latour's engagement with a group of philosophers and environmental activists who self-identify by the collective title of "ecomodernists". Prominent among these are writers and scientists such as David Keith, Erle Ellis and Mark Lynas.⁷⁹⁸ A recent policy document, counter-signed by these writers and others, has proposed (what is called) a "Good Anthropocene" strategy.⁷⁹⁹ This phrase is intended to indicate a positive

⁷⁹⁸ For representative publications, see Keith (2013), *A Case for Climate Engineering*; Ellis (2015), 'Ecology in an Anthropogenic Biosphere'; Lynas (2011), *The God Species: How the Planet Can Survive the Age of Humans*. For a general study of the theoretical and empirical approach of ecomodernism, see Isenhour (2016), 'Unearthing Human Progress? Ecomodernism and Contrasting Definitions of Technological Progress in the Anthropocene'.

⁷⁹⁹ Shellenberger & Nordhaus (2015), (eds.), 'The Ecomodernist Manifesto'. The manifesto was produced by *The Breakthrough Institute*, which is the political lobby wing of the ecomodernist movement.

understanding of the human being, the *anthropos*, as the one who not only generated the crisis of the Anthropocene in the first place, but also as the one through whose initiative and technological ingenuity the crisis can now be decisively resolved. Proponents of the “Good Anthropocene” strategy therefore advocate the development and deployment of human-devised technologies as a means of reversing the effects of anthropogenic environmental change.⁸⁰⁰ As the document states, the idea is that “human beings should use their growing social, economic and technological powers to make life better for people, to stabilize the climate, and to protect the natural world”.⁸⁰¹

The “Good Anthropocene” strategy puts into sharp relief what is so distinctive about Latour’s approach. For Latour is highly critical of the assumptions that lie behind it.⁸⁰² Although he concedes that ecomodernists do appreciate the scale of the contemporary environmental crisis (and the need to react quickly and collectively to it), he interprets their response as an expression of modernity. In their optimistic belief that one actor, namely the *anthropos*, will be able to devise and enforce a solution to this situation by means of his own “social, economic and technological powers”, Latour claims that ecomodernists are simply re-stating the

⁸⁰⁰ The technologies that are of most interest to ecomodernists relate to geo-engineering, that is, technologies designed to artificially alter the Earth’s atmosphere in order to reduce solar radiation. For a description of geo-engineering, albeit written from the perspective of an advocate of its role and function in the context of the Anthropocene, see Morton (2017), *The Planet Remade: How Geo-engineering Could Change the World*.

⁸⁰¹ Shellenberger & Nordhaus (2015), (eds.), ‘The Ecomodernist Manifesto’, no pagination given.

⁸⁰² See Latour (2007), *IDS*; Latour (2015), *FSG*. For a critique of ecomodernism in related terms, see also Crist (2015), ‘The Reaches of Freedom: A Response to *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*’; Hamilton (2017), *Defiant Earth*, pp.21–27.

modern dualism of the human subject facing a passive, de-animated and inert world of nature, with the expectation that through his ingenuity he will be able to dominate and master it. The “Good Anthropocene” strategy thus fails to engage with the implications of “Gaian interconnectivity” described above. And this failure is closely related to a religious thematic, for at least three reasons. First, the strategy does not constitute any kind of grappling with the social, political, economic or cultural ideologies that have led to the crisis in the first place. Rather, it seeks to enable the same trajectory of quasi-providential progress to continue in the time of the Anthropocene just as it did before—albeit its impact will now be managed by the development of new technologies to alleviate its deleterious effects. The political epistemology of modernity, underwritten by “the crossed-out God”, can continue unmolested. Modern people are not challenged to reconsider the responsibility they themselves have to change their behaviour.⁸⁰³ Second, the “Good Anthropocene” strategy actually serves to legitimize the agency of a minority group or sub-set of the population, in this case, a cadre of human beings who have the technological means by which to take charge of and manage the crisis effectively. It falls to a few people to become *de facto* agents of salvation for the remainder.⁸⁰⁴ Latour, alongside a number of others, has pointed out the theological connotations of this manoeuvre.⁸⁰⁵

⁸⁰³ See Hoffman (2011), ‘The Culture and Discourse of Climate Skepticism’, who argues that resistance to climate change science has been strongest amongst individuals, groups and organisations who identify with the political claim that individual choice and the pursuit of self-interest are the primary vehicles for human flourishing in the world.

⁸⁰⁴ This language is positively embraced by one of the writers associated with the ecomodernist movement. See Sagoff (2015), ‘A Theology for Ecomodernism: What is the Nature we seek to Save?’.

⁸⁰⁵ Latour (2014), *WPTEC*, p.62; Latour (2015), *FF*, p.146. See also Hamilton (2015), ‘The Theodicy of the Good Anthropocene’; Bonneuil & Fressoz (2016, 2015), *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, chapter 3, ‘Clio, the Earth and the Anthropocenologists’, pp.47–64.

One group of human beings is elevated to act in a “god-like manner” by means of their superior knowledge and technological ability: “they not only desire favourable weather, but now have the means to bring it about”.⁸⁰⁶ This does not reflect the new mode of responsibility and humility that, as I will show, Latour believes must be at the heart of our collective response to the challenge of the Anthropocene. Third, rather than unleashing any real political activity in the present time, the “Good Anthropocene” strategy merely generates a sense of redundancy and powerlessness for the majority of the global population. We are constantly reminded of the role we need to play in tackling the challenge facing us. And yet, its scale seems to be beyond us. We despair of contributing anything meaningful. This psychological state is encapsulated by the French word “*désinhibition*”, which might be translated into English as “dis-inhibition”. This term was coined by the environmental historian Jean-Baptiste Fressoz as a means of describing the experience of stasis and inertia for individuals when confronted by the challenge of the Anthropocene,⁸⁰⁷ a challenge whose resolution seems so distant and implausible that it is as if, recollecting Heidegger’s famous (and enigmatic) comment, “only a god can save us”.⁸⁰⁸ Latour points out the quasi-religious structure of this psychology when he describes it as a mode of “quietism”, a term which he proposes “*en référence à cette tradition religieuse où les fidèles s’en remettaient à Dieu du soin de leur salut*”.⁸⁰⁹ In other

⁸⁰⁶ Northcott (2017), ‘On Going Gently’, p.25.

⁸⁰⁷ Fressoz (2012), *L’apocalypse joyeuse: une histoire du risque technologique*, p.9 ff. See also Fressoz (2015), ‘Losing the Earth Knowingly: Six Environmental Grammars around 1800’.

⁸⁰⁸ Heidegger (1981, 1966), ‘Only a God Can Save Us’. For Latour’s commentary on this phrase, see Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.368.

⁸⁰⁹ My trans. “with reference to that religious tradition where the faithful yield to God the task of their salvation” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.20.

words, whilst the “Good Anthropocene” strategy appears to celebrate the best of humanity by dint of its proposal that there is a form of action we can all take to manage the contemporary environmental crisis, it actually has the effect of reifying a sub-set of humanity *contra* the remainder. It does this by enforcing obedience to a word-from-above delivered by a minority group with quasi-divine authority, thereby disenfranchising everybody else. No true collective action is unleashed by the “Good Anthropocene” strategy: the majority are encouraged merely to submit to a technological solution donated to us from above.

The “good Anthropocene” strategy is just one example of how the covert religious thematic of modernity operates at the time of the Anthropocene. Rather than carefully and judiciously considering how our habituated patterns of behaviour might need to be re-configured at this time, we are being invited instead to continue along the quasi-providential trajectory of progress that modernity itself has set out. As Clive Hamilton points out, this can be understood as form of “secularized theodicy” or as a “quasi-Hegelian theodicy of the idea of providence”.⁸¹⁰ A better term might be “anthropodicy”, since what is being justified here is a justification of the ways of man to man. Latour’s work shows why this is an inadequate response to the challenge of the Anthropocene: it fails to address the key question of our ethical comportment to the world around us. For this, something entirely different is required.

⁸¹⁰ Hamilton (2017), *Defiant Earth*, pp.68, 70.

4.1.2 *Laudato Si'* as an Expression of an “Earthbound” Theology

It is clear that the Anthropocene confounds supernaturalist theologies that locate creativity, mystery, transcendence and providence primarily or exclusively in a divine being, since these qualities are now disclosed as being dispersed among a plurality of actors located in the territorial space of the Earth itself. And yet, Latour also shows how theology can still contribute to the new expressions of political imagination that are required at this time. This is his political theology of the Anthropocene. In a rather apt turn of phrase, Latour actually refers to this as “a kind of *geopolitical theology*”.⁸¹¹ This phrase draws attention to the way in which he envisages theology as providing a perspective on the relationship of humanity with the Earth at the time of the Anthropocene.

The understanding of religion that Latour has previously sketched out is the perfect ingredient for a geopolitical theology of this sort. As I have shown, Latour conceives of “religion as a mode of existence” as that which is able to nurture in the human subject an awareness of the immanent, spatially-bounded order of things in which he or she is situated. This provides an antidote to the “flight from the Earth” generated from within modernity. It generates a sensibility that is “*mondaine, terrestre, incarnée*”.⁸¹² And it provides a platform for the advocacy of alternative

⁸¹¹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 4, p.97, original emphasis.

⁸¹² My trans. “mundane, down to earth [or: terrestrial], incarnate” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.315. The French adjective “*mondain*” is particularly apt: although it can be translated into English as “mundane”, which is a useful way of describing the subsistent operation of “religion as a mode of existence”, it also retains in French the connotation of “being of this world” (French: “*monde*”). My attention was initially drawn to this word in the debate Latour conducted with Rowan Williams at the London School of Economics in October 2014, at which I was in attendance, for which see Latour, with Williams (2014), *RE* (audio). He also makes brief mention of the word in Latour (2012), fr. *STVPT*, p.12.

forms of political action to those advocated within modernity (and exemplified by the “good Anthropocene” strategy).

Latour suggests that geopolitical theologies of this sort are already being developed. For example, in a recent interview he refers to “a pastor writing along these lines in Edinburgh”: the person he has in mind is Michael Northcott, whose work he cites approvingly.⁸¹³ In a Francophone context he mentions the writing of Christophe Boureux, a Dominican theologian based in the priory of Sainte Marie de La Tourette, near Lyon. Latour approves Boureux’s work for showing how the Christian doctrines of creation and eschatology can function to draw religious believers to a greater consciousness of their responsibility to the Earth itself as its stewards.⁸¹⁴ Latour whimsically calls these “geocentric theologians”, since their work has as its aim that religious believers should “not look up, but down!”⁸¹⁵ Other examples of geopolitical theology, conceived in these terms, might also be adduced.⁸¹⁶

But the theological work that Latour cites as exemplary in this regard is the recent papal encyclical *Laudato Si’*.⁸¹⁷ He reports the impact of reading this text for the first time after its publication in 2015:

⁸¹³ Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.2. See in particular Northcott (2013), *A Political Theology of Climate Change*. I am grateful to conversations with Professor Northcott on this issue over the last few years.

⁸¹⁴ Latour (2008), fr. *STVP*, p.1; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.172, fn.47. See especially Boureux (2014), *Dieu est aussi jardinier. La Création, une écologie accomplie*.

⁸¹⁵ Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.3.

⁸¹⁶ See for example Simmons (2014), ‘Theology in the Anthropocene’; Roberts (2018), ‘Intersubjectivity in the Anthropocene: Toward an Earthbound Theology’.

⁸¹⁷ Pope Francis (2015), *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home*.

My reading of political theology was renewed very deeply by Pope Francis' encyclical letter on climate change, because that is exactly his argument. It is dynamite ... boom! And the fact that this came from the Vatican is quite extraordinary. It really is an extraordinary text, completely original.⁸¹⁸

Latour has subsequently referred to the text a number of times.⁸¹⁹ A close examination of these references reveals why he holds it in such high esteem.⁸²⁰ For him, the theology of this encyclical stems from its insight into the ontological situation that pertains at the time of the Anthropocene. The encyclical begins with words from the canticle of St Francis: “praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us”.⁸²¹ Latour acknowledges that a sentence like this has “[...] *un aspect poétique, bucolique, médiéval; ce n'est qu'une joliesse du passé, quelque chose de sympathiquement franciscain*”.⁸²² It risks lapsing into sentimentality about the natural world. It might even seem to authorize human beings to perceive themselves above or apart from the created world, even as they celebrate its beauty and interest; this would be equivalent to the ideology that Latour believes has contributed to the environmental crisis we now face. And yet, for Latour, what is different here is that the encyclical immediately engages this entity, “Mother Earth”,

⁸¹⁸ Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.603.

⁸¹⁹ See for example Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.368 ff.; Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.3; Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*, p.1 ff.; Latour (2018), fr. *OA*, p.5; Latour (2018), *DESM*, p.359. Of particular importance is an article Latour contributed to the edited French volume of the papal encyclical itself, where he explains his thought at length. See Latour (2016), fr. *LGC*.

⁸²⁰ I am indebted to discussions held at the *Connecting Ecologies* conference, which took place at Campion Hall, University of Oxford, between 6–9 December 2017, especially conversations on this topic with Professor Celia Deane-Drummond.

⁸²¹ Pope Francis (2015), *Laudato Si'*, §1, citing Francis of Assisi (1999), ‘Canticle of the Creatures’.

⁸²² My trans. “a poetic, bucolic and medieval aspect; it is nothing but a decorative historical detail, something pleasantly Franciscan” in Latour (2015), fr. *LGC*, p.225.

not as an object of contemplation, nor as an inanimate canvas to be acted upon by human beings, but rather as an actor in its own right: “this sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her”.⁸²³ For Latour, this is the crucial turn. The encyclical proceeds from the idea that the “tyrannical anthropocentrism” of previous theologies is no longer viable at the time of the Anthropocene.⁸²⁴ An Earth that modernity assumed to be mute and inert, whose supply of resources modern people believed themselves appointed to master and deploy with impunity, now shows itself as possessing “*une puissance d’agir, une capacité de pâtir, de souffrir, de gémir*”.⁸²⁵ The Anthropocene explodes the bifurcation of “Nature” and “human” that has upheld the modern constitution itself.⁸²⁶ A fresh awareness of the plural ontological scenography of existence must inevitably follow, with its complex feedback loops and emergent effects. Moreover, because the impact of global environmental change will pertain not only to the planet itself, but also to the human individuals and societies who live on it, “*le cri de la terre*” is conjoined with “*le cri des pauvres*”.⁸²⁷ A wide variety of voices, nonhuman and human, have been

⁸²³ Pope Francis (2015), *Laudato Si’*, §1.

⁸²⁴ *Ibid*, §101, §118.

⁸²⁵ My trans. “a power to act, a capacity to suffer, to be hurt, to groan” in Latour (2015), fr. *LGC*, p.226.

⁸²⁶ Latour illustrates this with reference to the film *The Life of Pi* (dir. Lee, 2012), which depicts the attempted co-habitation of a young man with a Bengal tiger in a small lifeboat floating on the Pacific Ocean. He draws a thematic comparison: the very “Nature” that we once thought to be locked away in its cage and firmly under our control, is now to be found prowling around in our midst, refusing to be dominated, and threatening the very conditions of our survival. The situation demands a new settlement between the actors involved, man and animal, if the survival of both in this shared space is to be possible. See Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 5, p.104; Latour (2014), *CTC*, p.2; Latour (2015), *FSG*, p.5.

⁸²⁷ My trans. “the cry of the Earth” and “the cry of the poor” in Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*, p.2.

obscured by the political epistemology of modernity. A new accommodation or “contract” between them will be necessary if these voices are to be fairly represented.⁸²⁸

For Latour, the value of the papal encyclical is that it acknowledges this altered ontological situation and develops its theology on this basis. Whilst urging the development of scientific and technological initiatives to combat environmental degradation, and whilst also sensibly recognising the role of political institutions, schools, and other social and community groups in identifying and nurturing environmental values amongst their members wherever possible, the encyclical also asks questions about the motives that underlie these. To what extent do they derive from the same epistemology that underwrites modernity itself? And hence to what extent are these responses expressions of the same trajectory of progress that generated the crisis in the first place? The encyclical argues that human initiatives, whether individual or communal, will be counter-productive if there has not first been some kind of alteration or transformation of the human subject him or herself. What is needed is nothing less than the creation of a new “ecological citizenship”, that is, a population of human beings with an entirely different rationale for action than the one supplied by the ideology of modernity.⁸²⁹ “Many things have to change course”, Pope Francis writes, “but it is we human beings above all who need to

⁸²⁸ This language of “contract”, which is frequently found in Latour’s writing on the Anthropocene, derives from the work of Michel Serres, who used it to describe a new mode of association between humans and the Earth. See Serres (1995, 1990), *The Natural Contract*, especially p.22 ff. For Latour’s reasons for adopting the term, see Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 6, p.126.

⁸²⁹ *Ibid*, §211.

change”.⁸³⁰ To describe how this change might be brought about, the encyclical deploys the theological language of conversion. There will have to be a “profound interior conversion” of humanity itself at the time of the Anthropocene.⁸³¹ For Pope Francis, “the rich heritage of Christian spirituality, the fruit of twenty centuries of personal and communal experience, has a precious contribution to make to this renewal of humanity”.⁸³² And indeed, Saint Francis himself, his spirituality and deeds, are offered as an emblem of this Christian heritage and as an example of why we need to be “converted” in some way if our relationship with creation is to be put on the right footing.⁸³³

Having ventured this strong or even radical statement about the need for a new mode of “ecological citizenship”, with its inescapable religious connotations, the encyclical then seems hesitant to explore it in more detail.⁸³⁴ But where the encyclical is reluctant to tread, Latour steps into the breach. He already has available to him an understanding of religion in precisely these terms: after all, he has defined

⁸³⁰ Ibid, §202.

⁸³¹ Ibid, §217, see also §5, §221–226.

⁸³² Ibid, §216.

⁸³³ For the significance of the ideas of Francis of Assisi on the theology of the encyclical, see Irwin (2016), *A Commentary on Laudato Si’: Examining the Background, Contributions, Implementation and Future of Pope Francis’ Encyclical*, pp.32–36; Mongrain (2017), ‘The Burden of Guilt and the Imperative of Reform: Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew Take Up the Challenge of Re-Spiritualizing Christianity in the Anthropocene Age’. For a study of these ideas in relation to the hagiography of Saint Francis, see Hurlbut (2013), ‘St. Francis, Christian Love, and the Biotechnological Future’.

⁸³⁴ I have articulated and explored this argument in more detail elsewhere, for which see Howles, Reader & Hodson (2018), ‘Creating an Ecological Citizenship: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives on the Role of Contemporary Environmental Education’. For an account and defense of the concept of conversion in *Laudato Si’*, see also Morgan (2018, forthcoming), ‘*Yet All is Not Lost: An Account and Defense of Ecological Conversion in Laudato Si’*’.

“religion as a mode of existence” as that which nurtures or incubates in the human subject attention to the constituent parts of a whole, resisting the premature unification of these parts by means of a transcendently-determined meta-logic. Latour therefore celebrates the papal encyclical as giving preliminary form to a new and radical form of “earthbound” theology:

*Le doigt du Pape François désigne quelque chose de nouveau qui se situe, dans l'ordre métaphorique, bel et bien « en bas » et pas « en haut ». En tous cas, pas de doute, elle désigne un nouvel horizon. Changement de direction, de vecteur.*⁸³⁵

This is the “direction” or “vector” Latour believes he has already signposted in his own writing on religion. The papal encyclical therefore represents an authoritative public statement that, he hopes, will prompt consideration and take-up of these theological ideas by the public in general.

Summary of Section One

In the first section of this chapter I have argued that Latour envisages the Anthropocene as an occasion for us to re-examine the nature of our occupation of the Earth itself. He provides a critique of responses to the contemporary environmental crisis that elide this territorial focus by duplicating or extending the transcendent motifs of modernity, motifs that themselves encode a religious thematic. But at the same time, he also suggests that the Anthropocene might be a moment that is able to prompt a fresh acknowledgment of our existence vis-à-vis the plural world and a new

⁸³⁵ My trans. “the finger of Pope Francis points out something new that is located, metaphorically-speaking, well and truly *down below*, and not *up high*. In any case, there is no doubt that it points out a new horizon. A change of direction, of vector” in Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*, p.4.

appreciation of the need to find a new political settlement with actors who share the same space with us. Religion has a crucial role to play in nurturing this response. Hence, he advocates a form of “geopolitical theology”.

In the second part of this chapter, I will turn from the idea of space to the idea of time. My objective will be to show how and why the Anthropocene is reconfiguring our understanding of the flow of history, just it has done for our understanding of the materiality of existence.

4.2 The Anthropocene as Geohistory

4.2.1 The Resources of Apocalypse and the Deep History of the Earth

Latour reports that the word “apocalypse” is one that “is interesting me greatly at the moment”.⁸³⁶ He first referred to it in his 2013 *Gifford Lectures*.⁸³⁷ This was a significant new departure.⁸³⁸ Since then, he has employed the word as a “trope” in his analysis of the human situation at the time of the Anthropocene.⁸³⁹ Latour is interested in this word because he believes it facilitates a novel kind of temporal

⁸³⁶ Latour (2012), fr. *STVPT*, p.3.

⁸³⁷ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 5, p.98 ff.

⁸³⁸ The appreciative words of Anna Tsing, a fellow academic and collaborator with Latour on other texts and articles, are worth noting: “let me say first how much I loved it when you, Bruno, talked about the apocalyptic in these lectures. For me this was a revelation. Because I had until then always experienced the term ‘apocalypse’ as a punishment. It was used to tell people: ‘you cannot go there because you are being apocalyptic!’ And being apocalyptic was not amenable to being an academic in many ways. And then you came along in these lectures and said: ‘yes, OK, apocalyptic is a trope. But why not *use* that trope?’” in Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.18, original emphasis.

⁸³⁹ Latour (2013), fr. *ANC*; Latour (2013), *CS*; Latour (2015), *TOSE*; Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*, p.5 ff; Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.24 ff. Latour’s use of the word has resonance with what Michael Taussig calls “pre-emptive apocalyptic thinking” in Taussig (2009), *What Colour is the Sacred?*, p.14.

thinking, one that lies beyond the narrative of progress that he associates with modernity.

First of all, Latour points out the prevalence of this word in contemporary discourse and debate.⁸⁴⁰ He finds it curious that a word that is religious in origin should be so prominently employed, especially by societies and social groups with a strong secular commitment. He notes, for example, a number of newspaper articles and popular-level books on the subject of climate change whose titles alone “have made me lose a lot of sleep” on the basis of their depiction of the apocalyptic consequences of continued human destruction of the natural world.⁸⁴¹ The connection of apocalyptic discourse to a politics of crisis and revolution is long-established, particularly in the context of nineteenth-century industrializing societies.⁸⁴² Latour’s point, however, is that this discourse is now being used not only by political activists, but by the climate scientists themselves. The terminology is even being found in the academic reports scientists make of the future world that likely awaits us if we continue along our present trajectory. It is as if the challenge posed by the contemporary environmental crisis is so severe, and the requirement that humans change their behaviour so urgent, that such language alone can attain the

⁸⁴⁰ Latour (2013), *CS*, p.67.

⁸⁴¹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 5, pp.100–101. The books cited are Weltzer (2012, 2008), *Climate Wars: What People Will be Killed for in the 21st Century*; Hamilton (2010), *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change*.

⁸⁴² See Gervereau (2000), ‘Symbolic Collapse: Utopia Challenged by its Representations’; Lockley (2012), *Visionary Religion and Radicalism in Early Industrial England: From Southcott to Socialism*.

necessary register. We all live under the apocalyptic injunction: “your entire way of life must be modified or else you will disappear as a civilization”.⁸⁴³

But second, Latour notes a disjunction between the severe connotations of this language and the practical action it seems able to incite. For notwithstanding the sounding of the alarm, it does not appear that human societies are yet marshaling their resources to bring about a response to the environmental crisis that is sufficient to the scale of the threat. This is true at the level of international politics.⁸⁴⁴ But it is also true at the level of individual choice, since we all hear the apocalyptic warning about the future we are bequeathing to our children, and yet fail to change our own personal and domestic patterns of consumption and wastage accordingly, thus revealing ourselves to be climate deniers in a functional sense, if not in a literal one.⁸⁴⁵

Various theoretical frameworks have been developed in an attempt to explain this disjunction between knowledge and behaviour, including linear progression models, altruism, empathy and pro-social behaviour models, and models based on “deliberative and inclusionary processes”.⁸⁴⁶ Latour, however, attempts to address the matter from within the framework of his own system of ideas. To do this, he considers the word “apocalypse”. He suggests that the reality to which this word

⁸⁴³ Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.462.

⁸⁴⁴ Latour has written various responses to international negotiations on climate change, especially the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21). See for example Latour (2016), *OOT*, p.16.

⁸⁴⁵ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 5, p.109.

⁸⁴⁶ For a summary of these and other analytic models of human behaviour in relation to environmental issues, see Kollmus & Agyeman (2010), ‘Mind the Gap: Why do People Act Environmentally and what are the Barriers to Pro-Environmental Behaviour?’.

points has been emptied of its force within modernity. The narrative of progress modernity celebrates is towards a future whose essential form has already been revealed. The apocalyptic injunctions emanating from the climate scientists, which are then relayed through the media and other channels, is hard to assimilate with this narrative. To the extent that modern people can conceive of a cataclysmic event at all, they are at best able to posit it as something that has already taken place and that has been assimilated, and not as something that may still lie ahead. Thus, to all extents and purposes they live “*après l’Apocalypse*”.⁸⁴⁷ This has an effect upon their understanding of time, their sense of being in the world, and their conception of history:

*Les modernes se disent désormais absolument certains d’avoir atteint la fin des temps, d’être parvenu dans un autre monde, et d’être séparés des temps anciens par une rupture absolue.*⁸⁴⁸

Modern people believe that the essential trajectory of their own future, the “line of progress we are all moving along”, has already been set (even if minor adjustments and set-backs are likely to occur along the way).⁸⁴⁹ They can no more envisage disruption to this trajectory than a religious believer can envisage the flow of history somehow slipping away from the control of a sovereign God. For Latour, this is the reason why the scale and likely impact of the contemporary environmental crisis has yet to gain its full traction. If we live “*après l’Apocalypse*”, our capacity for action

⁸⁴⁷ My trans. “after the apocalypse” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.252. See also *ibid*, p.281; Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.14.

⁸⁴⁸ My trans. “[the moderns] tell themselves henceforth that they are absolutely certain they have reached the end of time, have arrived in another world, and are separated from the times of old by an absolute rupture” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.253.

⁸⁴⁹ Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.13.

will be substantially reduced. We will hear the apocalyptic injunction. But we will lack the requisite motivation to respond, no matter how well-informed and convinced we may be about the reliability of the science that undergirds it. For Latour, this is the inevitable effect of the political epistemology of modernity:

*[Les modernes] vous répliqueront avec condescendance qu'ils ont déjà passé de l'autre côté, qu'ils ne sont déjà plus de ce monde, que rien ne peut plus leur arriver, qu'ils sont résolument, définitivement, complètement, et pour toujours modernizes!*⁸⁵⁰

Since modern society has become “disinhibited” in this way, Latour concludes that it stands in need of some kind of affective, moral or spiritual transformation in order to have the capacity to address any large-scale risk to itself. This transformation echoes the theological language of “profound interior conversion” introduced in the papal encyclical.

In a colloquium held at Cerisy-la-Salle in 2015, Latour proposed that the word “apocalypse” might be redeemed from its banal appropriation within modernity, so as to become instead the catalyst for the sort of affective, moral or spiritual transformation that is needed at the time of the Anthropocene.⁸⁵¹ This will entail retrieving the word’s original theological meaning.⁸⁵² Latour proposes that the apocalyptic genre within the biblical and Christian tradition describes the temporary

⁸⁵⁰ My trans. “they will reply condescendingly that they have already crossed over to the other side, that they are already no longer of this world, that nothing more can happen to them, that they are resolutely, definitively, completely and forever modernized!” in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.254. For a related statement, see Appendix, p.372.

⁸⁵¹ No transcript was made of this colloquium, but Latour’s speech is reported indirectly in Bordeleau (2015), ‘Bruno Latour and the Miraculous Present of Enunciation’.

⁸⁵² In an earlier article, Latour wrote: “it is probably also true that when people use apocalyptic terms it is safer to go straight to religion instead of using them metaphorically” in Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.462.

unveiling of a future reality in such a way as to generate new or renewed forms of belief or action in the present moment. This is the derivation of the word he seeks to reclaim. When the word is understood in this way, the apocalyptic injunction associated with the contemporary environmental crisis will have the requisite effect: it will energise and inspire new expressions of political activity in the present moment. There are two components to this vision. First, Latour proposes that the most important aspect of the genre of apocalypse is not that it discloses a future that is fixed and certain, but rather that it discloses a future that is yet-to-happen. Second, this means that apocalyptic discourse, properly received, represents a call to acknowledge one's role as an agent equipped to bring about an alternative future. "*Il ne faut pas se tromper sur le sens du mot apocalypse*", Latour writes in a recent newspaper article, "*l'apocalypse signifie la certitude que le futur a changé de forme, et qu'on peut faire quelque chose*".⁸⁵³ Apocalyptic discourse thus has "an activating relation to the future".⁸⁵⁴ Although it discloses that which is yet-to-come, this is a future that could be otherwise. This has the effect of throwing us back into the present moment as newly responsible and responsive agents. These are "the resources of apocalypse" that Latour seeks to reclaim:

We shouldn't deprive ourselves of the resources of apocalypse, for they allow us to pose the problem of our presence in the world, of *how to be present* to the challenges we are now facing.⁸⁵⁵

⁸⁵³ My trans. "we mustn't be mistaken about the word 'apocalypse'. Apocalypse signifies the certainty that the form of the future has changed, and that we can do something about it" in Latour (2013), fr. *ANC*, no pagination given.

⁸⁵⁴ Bordeleau (2015), 'Miraculous Present', p.159.

⁸⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.159, original emphasis.

Latour's constructive retrieval of the language of apocalypse is similar to that proposed by Jean-Pierre Dupuy, who likewise is prepared to consider the role of "enlightened doom-saying" as a means of disrupting the trajectory of modernity and bringing about new configurations of human social existence beyond those prescribed by its received categories.⁸⁵⁶

How does this relate to the Anthropocene? For Latour, the Anthropocene is a moment in which constructive apocalyptic energy of this sort can and must be unleashed. The Anthropocene disrupts the inexorable line of progress imposed upon us by the narrative of modernity, inviting us to enter into an entirely new sense of unfolding history. Latour refers to this as the advent of "geostory"⁸⁵⁷ or "g  ohistoire".⁸⁵⁸ He proposes this term to convey how the new circumstances of the Earth, that is, its refusal any longer to play a mute and submissive role in relation to the political epistemology of modernity, are reminding human beings of their responsibility to be agents of change within a history that is, at least in part, responsive to their own voices.

The idea that the Anthropocene presages a new understanding of history itself is one that has been explored from different perspectives within the humanities. For example, Dipesh Chakrabarty has noted how the contemporary environmental crisis is causing "the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history" to collapse, a distinction that has prevailed from the time of Burckhardt

⁸⁵⁶ Dupuy (2013, 2009), *The Mark of the Sacred*, p.33.

⁸⁵⁷ Latour (2014), *ATA*, p.4.

⁸⁵⁸ My trans. "geohistory" in Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, pp.54, 179–180, 312–316; Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*, p.3.

onwards.⁸⁵⁹ Chakrabarty works within a Hegelian framework of ideas. Latour, by contrast, relates the advent of geohistory to his understanding of religion. “For me, the theological aspect is absolutely central here”, he writes.⁸⁶⁰ He interprets the apocalyptic material within the Christian Scriptures not as “preparing us for a rapturous upload to heaven” but, on the contrary, as reminding us of our responsibility to make the Earth a habitable place for all in the present moment.⁸⁶¹ It represents an urgent call-to-action in the here-and-now. Thus, for Latour, the function of religion, and religious apocalyptic in particular, is to nurture in human beings a sense of time as the crucible of new possibilities and of our own role as responsible agents within a flow of “earthbound” history that is still emerging and unfolding, and that can be altered by the input we ourselves provide.

Martin Rudwick’s lengthy studies of the emergence of geology as a disciplinary field in Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offer support to Latour’s argument about the close connection between geohistory, understood in these terms, and religion.⁸⁶² Rudwick shows in painstaking detail how the new science of geology was proposing revolutionary insights into the deep history of the Earth itself, insights that burst the limits of time that biblical religion, with its interpretation of a short Earth history, apparently could allow. But intriguingly, Rudwick argues that there was no conflict here at all: the new discipline

⁸⁵⁹ Chakrabarty (2009), ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, pp.201, 211, 220.

⁸⁶⁰ Latour, with Stengers et al (2018), *ACEA*, p.14.

⁸⁶¹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 5, p.111.

⁸⁶² Rudwick (2005), *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution*; Rudwick (2008), *Worlds Before Adam: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Reform*. A shorter and more accessible version of these studies, offering similar insights, is Rudwick (2014), *Earth’s Deep History: How It Was Discovered and Why It Matters*.

of geology did not at all understand itself as having to escape from “the narrow prison of the Church’s teachings”.⁸⁶³ In fact, quite the opposite was the case. The idea of the Earth having a long history of its own, during which it had been subject to various forces, none of which could be explained by an external or programmed temporal development, was most congenial to those who “already had a profoundly historical perspective, not only on their own human world but also on the cosmos as a whole and on the transcendent realm of divine initiative that they believed underlay it”.⁸⁶⁴ Rudwick argues that “the biblical narrative of human history” actually provided a model and analogy for the mode of enquiry that the discipline of geology needed to establish itself.⁸⁶⁵ Among the many case-studies he provides, the example of Swiss geologist and meteorologist Jean-André de Luc is particularly interesting. Rudwick shows how de Luc’s reading of the book of Genesis committed him to “an understanding of history that was radically contingent, precisely because it was perceived as being dependent on divine sovereignty, or God’s voluntaristic freedom of action in the world”.⁸⁶⁶ The history of the Earth, just as was the case for the history of humankind, “would have to be compiled bottom-up from the empirical evidence of how things had *in fact* happened, rather than being deduced top-down from some simple physical principles that stated how they ‘must’ or ‘ought to’ have happened”.⁸⁶⁷ For de Luc and for many of the geologists that Rudwick describes, the Christian religion was a valuable resource. It was this that helped them appreciate

⁸⁶³ Rudwick (2005), *Bursting the Limits of Time*, p.183.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.7.

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.237.

⁸⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.234.

⁸⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.235, original emphasis.

history as a contingent and intrinsically unpredictable flow of time. And, having done so, they were able to understand in new ways how humans beings were intertwined and embedded, for better or for worse, in geohistory, rather than partakers of a providential narrative that had already been ordained for them.

Rudwick's account corresponds closely to Latour's ideas.⁸⁶⁸ For Latour, both human history and the history of the Earth must alike be understood as a series of events that might have unfolded otherwise because they are not directed by an invisible providence of any sort. This is the conceptualization of history that has been obscured and overlaid by modernity. The Anthropocene, with its sudden and enforced breaking-down of the categories of "Nature" and "the human", represents an opportunity for the flow of time to be appreciated in a new way as geohistory. Religion is the crucial resource to facilitate this. For Latour, this constitutes the affective, moral or spiritual transformation that is needed to face the challenge of the contemporary environmental crisis.

4.2.2 The *Katechon* and the Restraining of the End of Time

The new mode of temporality that Latour explores can also be illustrated with reference to the idea of the "*katechon*". This term is found in an eschatological context in 2 Thessalonians 2:1–10, where it describes a force that restrains or holds back the coming of the end times or the end of time. In response to

⁸⁶⁸ Although they are rarely footnoted in his work, Latour has frequently mentioned Rudwick's books to me in private correspondence. He makes reference to Rudwick's ideas, without citing him directly, in the third of his *Gifford Lectures* when he comments that "to be able to read cosmic events out of minuscule disruptions in the orderly layers of life was something common to the emerging science of geohistory, in the same way as it was to the deciphering of 'Incarnation' and its complex web of textual emendations" in Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 3, p.73.

rumours about the imminent return (παρουσία) of Jesus Christ, generated (it seems) by a letter purporting to have been written by him, the Apostle Paul reminds the Christian community in Thessalonica that first of all “the man of lawlessness” (ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας) has to be revealed, that is, “the son of perdition” (ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας), “the one who is opposing” (ὁ ἀντικείμενος) Christ and his followers. This adversary is “already at work” (ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται) in the world. But the fullness of the impact of its opposition is being held back at the present moment by a power that “restrains it” (τὸ κατέχον, ὁ κατέχων).⁸⁶⁹ Only when this restraining force is removed will the final confrontation between “the man of lawlessness” and Christ take place, with the final triumph of Christ then being followed by the end of world history itself.

The referent of the term *katechon*, the power that restrains this eschatological moment, has been interpreted in various ways in Christian history. It is left vague in Irenaeus, who was the first to quote the Scriptural text itself in his *Adversus haereseos*, as well as in Hippolytus’ *Commentary on Daniel*.⁸⁷⁰ Tertullian proposes a more concrete interpretation in his *Apologeticum*:

The tremendous force which is hanging over the whole world, and the very end of the age (*saeculum*), with its threat of dreadful afflictions [...] is arrested (*retardii*) for a time by the continuance of the Roman Empire. This event we have no desire to experience and in praying that it may be deferred (*differiri*) we favour the continuance of Rome.⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁹ Verse 6 uses the neuter gender, “τὸ κατέχον”, and verse 7 the masculine, “ὁ κατέχων”.

⁸⁷⁰ See references in Cacciari (2016), *Europe and Empire: On the Political Forms of Globalization*, pp.145–158.

⁸⁷¹ Tertullian, (1997), *Apologetic Works*, chapter 32, section 1, p.88.

For Tertullian, the Roman empire, being in its essence law, opposes that which is lawless and therefore can be equated with the force the Apostle identifies as restraining or holding back “the man of lawlessness” and the eschatological events associated with his appearing. The implied alignment of the mission of the Roman empire with that of the church projected onto the *katechon* the shadow of the various political theologies that were developed in the fourth and fifth centuries, particularly that of Eusebius of Caesarea.⁸⁷² Later it finds echo in political thinkers of the post-Napoleonic restoration period, especially Joseph de Maistre and Donoso Cortés, with the idea that earthly sovereignty can embody a power capable of preventing cataclysmic forms of violence and lawlessness being unleashed upon human society.⁸⁷³

However, another strand of interpretation within the history of Christian thought can also be identified. Here, the term *katechon* is understood not as referring to a secular power, but rather to the spiritual jurisdiction of the Christian church itself. For example, by the end of the fourth century Augustine, although he expressed caution about his exegesis of these verses, was associating the *katechon* not with the restraining power of the Roman empire, but with the mission of Christians to proclaim the Gospel to all the world: for Augustine, the reason the eschaton was being postponed was to allow time for more people to be converted to the faith.⁸⁷⁴ The restraint of the eschaton was therefore a direct expression of the

⁸⁷² For the idea of Eusebius as “publicist of Constantine”, which has been assumed from the time of Burckhardt, see Toda (2009), “On the so-called ‘Political Theology’ of Eusebius of Caesarea”, p.13 ff.

⁸⁷³ For an overview of these ideas, see Spektorowski (2002), ‘Maistre, Donoso Cortés, and the Legacy of Catholic Authoritarianism’.

⁸⁷⁴ See Augustine (2007), *City of God*, 20.19.

mercy of God. And its function was to energize Christians to engage in mission to the world now. This was also the view advocated by Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret of Cyrus.⁸⁷⁵ A tension between these two interpretations—the *katechon* as referring to a temporal power or to a spiritual power—is evident throughout church history.⁸⁷⁶

The term *katechon* is also found in the work of Carl Schmitt, where it has an important part to play within his political theology. It seems likely that Schmitt took the idea from his friend Wilhelm Stapel, a political journalist and member of the German nationalist ‘Conservative Revolutionary Movement’, who used it in texts dating from the early 1930s in the context of the parliamentary crisis of the Weimar Republic.⁸⁷⁷ The first mention in his own work derives from 1942, where Schmitt refers to the *katechon* as “the power that prevents the long-overdue apocalyptic end of times from already happening now”.⁸⁷⁸ The term then features prominently in his post-war writing, including in his diaries and in *The Nomos of the Earth*.⁸⁷⁹ Its meaning within Schmitt’s work is often interpreted through the oft-cited comment of

⁸⁷⁵ For a survey of these early Christian writers and others, see Witt Hughes (1989), *Early Christian Rhetoric and 2 Thessalonians*.

⁸⁷⁶ See Lietart-Peerbolte (1997), ‘The κατέχων / κατέχων of 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7’.

⁸⁷⁷ Koenen (1995), *Der Fall Carl Schmitt. Sein Aufstieg zum ‘Kronjuristen des Dritten Reiches’*.

⁸⁷⁸ Schmitt (1995, 1942), ‘Beschleuniger wider Willen oder: Problematik der westlichen Hemisphäre’, p.436, cited and translated in Hell (2009), ‘*Katechon*: Carl Schmitt’s Imperial Theology and the Ruins of the Future’, p.283.

⁸⁷⁹ See Schmitt (1991), *Glossarium, Aufzeichnungen der Jahre 1947–1951*, p.63; dated 19 December, 1947; Schmitt (2006, 1950), *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, especially part 1, chapter 3, ‘The Christian Empire as a Restrainer of the Anti-Christ’, pp.59–62. Felix Grossheutschi identifies the term as occurring in nine of Schmitt’s texts written between 1942 and 1957. See Grossheutschi (1996), *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon*.

Jacob Taubes: scarred by his experience of the disintegration of the German political system in the 1920s and early 1930s, Taubes argued that the central preoccupation of Schmitt's work was to be found in only one thing, namely, "[...] that the chaos should not rise to the top, that the state remain. No matter what the price".⁸⁸⁰ For Taubes, Schmitt's references to the *katechon* must be understood in light of this controlling preoccupation:

This is what Schmitt later calls the *katechon*, the restrainer (*der Aufhalter*) that holds down the chaos that pushes up from below.⁸⁸¹

The majority of critics after Taubes have essentially agreed with this reading, supposing that Schmitt uses the *katechon* as a category to explain and justify the right and responsibility of a political entity, a nation-state or an empire, to enforce legal order within its boundaries.⁸⁸² This reading is elaborated in a recent article by Julia Hell which argues that Schmitt's use of the term *katechon* relates to his understanding of empire and the German imperial project.⁸⁸³ Hell argues that the *epoché* of empire, from the ancient world to the contemporary political project of European union, has always consisted in an attempt to regulate the flow of time itself: within the overarching framework of its provision, an empire presents to its constituent members a vision of their future security, stability and prosperity, as if the unpredictable forward motion of events could somehow be placed under its sovereign control and authority. It is this claim upon time itself that allows the

⁸⁸⁰ Taubes (2004, 1993), *The Political Theology of Paul*, p.103.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸⁸² See for example Agamben (2005, 2004), *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, pp.108–111; Rosenstock (2014), 'Palintropos Harmoniê: *Jacob Taubes and Carl Schmitt "im liebenden Streit"*'.

⁸⁸³ Hell (2009), '*Katechon: Carl Schmitt's Imperial Theology and the Ruins of the Future*'.

complicated, divergent internal parts of an empire to be held together as a collective. This generates a sense that its own dissolution and fall will be at a time that is “sometime in the future, not now, not yet”.⁸⁸⁴ The authority of empire thus takes the form of a holding back or restraining of the end times. Hell argues that Schmitt purposefully linked his understanding of the term *katechon* with Tertullian in order to select “an exegetic variant of the concept that was closely tied to imperial discourse”.⁸⁸⁵ And although its religious connotations were useful to Schmitt, allowing him to soften the offensive politics associated with his pre-war advocacy of a pan-European German *Reich*, she does not see any other theological significance in his use of term: Schmitt simply appropriated the word *katechon* as a convenient vehicle to articulate what was essentially a secular thought.

However, there are grounds for proposing an alternative interpretation. For Schmitt’s use of the term *katechon* is better understood as referring to a spiritual, rather than to a temporal, power. To see this, we can revisit his short essay of 1950 entitled ‘Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History’.⁸⁸⁶ In it, Schmitt identifies the *katechon* as the central element of the Christian religion and writes that we should be careful not to “transform this term into a generalized designation of simply conservative or reactionary forces”.⁸⁸⁷ For Schmitt, then, it is religion, and Christianity in particular, that has the function of holding back or restraining the end of time.

⁸⁸⁴ Ibid, p.284.

⁸⁸⁵ Ibid, p.286.

⁸⁸⁶ Schmitt (2009, 1950), ‘Three Possibilities for a Christian Conception of History’.

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid, p.169.

Re-assigning Schmitt's use of the term to the Augustine-axis (the *katechon* as referring to a spiritual power), rather than to the Tertullian-axis (the *katechon* as referring to a temporal power) is in line with the interpretation of his political theology I have already advanced above: for Schmitt, the political unity of human society cannot be conceived apart from religion or, to put it more precisely, apart from the assimilation and creative integration of certain themes from Christian theology. Although there is no doubt that he envisages the *katechon* as that which maintains a politico-legal order, it is in its essence a religious idea and can only be understood within this framework.

Latour takes up the language of the *katechon* in some of his recent writing.⁸⁸⁸ He uses it as a way of articulating his understanding of history and the role that human beings have to play within it. For Latour, modernity functions as though the end of history is already known. This results in human beings no longer seeing themselves as agents of potential change in the world. They do not feel that have the power to work for a future that is different to the one hegemonically prescribed for them. But the *katechon* brings about the opposite effect. It reminds human beings that the end will come, but that it is not-yet. And because it is not-yet, the present moment takes on a new force and potential. In this interim time, the eschatological paralysis of modernity is broken. We are reminded that every single actor—whatever its size, type or property, and whether it is human or nonhuman—is able to manifest itself as a voice or impact in the world. In the presence of the *katechon*, the current moment is pregnant with opportunity precisely because it is not fixed within a

⁸⁸⁸ See Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 6, p.141; Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.123, fn.51; Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.7; Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*, p.10 ff.

temporal frame that has already determined its future direction and unfolding. As a consequence, the contemporary public space becomes one in which real political interactions can finally take place.

It is crucial to understand that, for Latour, this new temporal thinking is associated with a religious worldview. Just like Schmitt, then, his use of the term *katechon* can be plotted on an Augustine-axis, rather than on a Tertullian-axis: the “minimal form of restraint” that is required to keep the contemporary public space open for political interactions is provided by a spiritual, not by a temporal, power.⁸⁸⁹ For many, the eschatological motifs of the Christian Gospel seem to close down the idea of the meaningful exercise of agency in the world. If the end of time is assured, then what can we do here on Earth that is of enduring value or that might contribute to permanent change? But Latour rejects such quietistic implications. For him, the eschatological motifs of the Christian Gospel are the guarantee that our agency is meaningful now. Because the end is at the end, held in abeyance by the *katechon* itself, the present becomes the site of real, consequential and purposeful activity. It is religion alone, with its careful attention to the immanent conditions of its own *logos*, that can supply this *katechontic* principle.

For Latour, this is the kind of temporal thinking that is needed at the time of the Anthropocene. The contemporary environmental crisis is threatening to overwhelm us. Human beings often feel de-animated in the presence of the huge challenges that face us. Political co-operation to mitigate the effects of the crisis is

⁸⁸⁹ Latour, with Salter & Walters (2016), *BLIR*, p.7.

proving difficult to achieve. What is needed, then, is a new form of *katechontic* political theology, that is:

[...] *la retour de la grande question du katekon, de la capacité à ralentir, suspendre, retarder la fin des temps qui n'est plus devant nous, mais, dans un sens imprévu, derrière nous, comme s'il s'agissait d'un coup déjà joué.*⁸⁹⁰

A sense of agency to address the challenges facing us in the contemporary environmental crisis will only come when we understand that we do not yet know the end that has been ordained for human society and that the catastrophe that seems to be coming our way with inexorable force can still be held back by decisions we ourselves are able to make and put into effect. It is precisely because the end is at the end, and not now, that the present time can be envisaged as one for genuine political activity. The radical suggestion that Latour makes is that the resources to communicate this *katechontic* vision are contained within religion itself.

Conclusion to Chapter Four

The concept of the Anthropocene has been widely debated in recent years because it is able to frame important questions about the exercise of human agency in the world. Latour's work provides a unique perspective on these debates. For him, the Anthropocene must be understood as having a religious aetiology: the contemporary environmental crisis ultimately reflects attitudes to the world that have been inculcated by the covert metaphysics of modernity and its universalizing norms. But

⁸⁹⁰ My trans. "the return of the important question of the *katechon*, the ability to slow down, to suspend, to delay the end of time that is no longer in front of us but, in an unforeseen way, behind us, as if it consisted of a move that had already been made" in Latour (2018), fr. *SNIS*, p.10.

crucially, Latour also envisages the Anthropocene as a moment of opportunity for global humanity to reclaim a form of politics that is connected to the immanent and indomitably pluralistic conditions of existence on planet Earth. It is religion, with its sensitivity to the space actors inhabit and to the historical conditions in which they operate, that alone can facilitate this move. This is the form of “earthbound” religion that Latour’s writing ultimately seeks to explore. The political theology that ensues is one that leads not to “another world”, but to “this same world grasped in a radically new way”.⁸⁹¹ For Latour, the discipline of theology can contribute to contemporary public debates insofar as it recognizes and deploys its unique ability to render us sensitive to the immanent conditions of existence.

⁸⁹¹ Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 6, p.139.

DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Latour's writing on religion presents an invitation to theology that, in many ways, has not yet taken up. Before concluding my study, then, I wish to propose two areas in which further research might be desirable. My intention is to map out possible future directions for theologians wishing to develop Latour's work more systematically within their discipline. In particular, I wish to highlight areas in which cross-disciplinary collaboration will be required to take this forward. Within the scope of my study, I am only able to hint at what this might entail.

The first area that would profit from further research concerns the concept of modernity itself. When Latour uses this term, the critical literature has tended to assume that he is referring to "educated, post-Enlightenment, and more or less secularized westerners".⁸⁹² I have tried to disaggregate this simplistic identification by showing how modernity is better envisaged as an epistemological front whose impact has been more apparent at certain times in history than at others, and whose distribution might be unevenly spread across different human societies at any given moment. This facilitates a richer analysis of how the political epistemology of modernity has functioned in history. But it still leaves open the task of specifying where and to what extent modernity is operational in the world today. This will be the remit of sociologists, anthropologists and political geographers. Their work will need to be carried out in association with intellectual historians who can align contemporary expressions of modernity with its analogous iterations in human

⁸⁹² Herrnstein Smith (2016), 'Anthropotheology: Latour Speaking Religiously', p.348, fn.9.

history.⁸⁹³ And, in addition to these, the input of theologians will be crucial. As I have shown, the categories in which modernity must be analysed are theological in nature. The discipline of theology therefore has a unique role to play in identifying the operation of modernity in the contemporary public space. A good example of this is found in a recent study by Johannes Zachhuber of the emergence of the terms “transcendence” and “immanence” in recent history, from their appearance in the critical philosophy of Kant to their deployment in debates about the status of religion in Germany in the early part of the nineteenth-century.⁸⁹⁴ Zachhuber argues that the emergence of these terms as binary opposites of each other at this particular time in history can be attributed to the progress of modernity itself: the terms were deemed useful in framing a polemic between “advocates of traditional religion” and “proponents of modern science”.⁸⁹⁵ Although the precise terms of that polemic eventually shifted, the duality of “transcendence” and “immanence” was subsequently imported into the theistic philosophy of Maurice Blondel and was later taken up by some of the most influential Catholic theologians of the twentieth-century such as Erich Przywara and Karl Rahner.⁸⁹⁶ Zachhuber shows how this dualism continues to function today. Working independently of Latour’s work, then, this study provides support for Latour’s core claim that modernity functions according to a religious thematic. It provides an example of how the discipline of theology, in co-operation with other disciplines, might have the expertise to parse

⁸⁹³ A methodology for such an approach is found in a recent publication by Peter Sloterdijk, for which see Sloterdijk (2018a), *What Happened in the Twentieth Century?*

⁸⁹⁴ Zachhuber (2017), ‘Transcendence and Immanence’.

⁸⁹⁵ Ibid, p.164.

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid, p.180.

debates currently underway about the role and limits of human agency in global society.

A second area that would profit from further research concerns Latour's understanding of "religion as a mode of existence" in relation to other modes. For although Latour does describe the former as a "regime of truth" in its own right,⁸⁹⁷ he also proposes that there are a number of other modes, each one "able to define, often with astonishing precision, a mode of veridiction that has nothing to do with the epistemological definition of truth and falsity, and that nevertheless warrants the qualifiers *true* and *false*".⁸⁹⁸ Within modernity, it is not just religion that has been misrepresented. Latour proposes that other domains of knowledge and discourse have also been the subject of category mistakes. These too need to be re-instituted with reference to an ontology of actors and events. In *The Inquiry*, Latour identifies fifteen modes in total, ranging from "law" to "technology", and from "fiction" to "morality", each of which is accorded an abbreviation of its own (represented as: [LAW], [TEC], [FIC], [MOR], and so on). These modes have their own "felicity conditions", that is, their own ways of distinguishing success from failure, truth from falsehood. A full representation of the pluralist ontology of the world will be one that takes into account not just the contribution of the *logos* of religion, but the "*logoi*" of different modes also,⁸⁹⁹ so as "to be sensitive to each of the original ways of speaking truthfully which have been developed and nurtured: scientific, yes, to be sure; legal,

⁸⁹⁷ Latour, with Tresch (2013), *ATANT*, p.303.

⁸⁹⁸ Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, p.53, original emphasis.

⁸⁹⁹ Latour, *PF*, p.9.

political, yes, yes, but also religious”.⁹⁰⁰ The new form of human politics that is required at the time of the Anthropocene will have to take account of each of these modes. Latour thus invites theologians to engage in dialogue with those from other disciplines who recognize that their own domains have been corrupted and misrepresented in an equivalent way under the aegis of the political epistemology of modernity. Real change in the world will only come about when this work of “intellectual diplomacy” has first been carried out between these domains.⁹⁰¹ The discipline of theology has a crucial role to play in preparing the ground for this, since it is uniquely equipped to diagnose the religious thematic that prevents this exchange from being initiated:

These diplomatic conditions are *not even going to be looked for* as long as we believe that the world has *already* been unified once and for all—by Nature, by Society or by God, it doesn’t matter which.⁹⁰²

I have already sketched out the terms of this diagnostic work in chapter two. But it remains the case that this work will implicate a number of different modes of existence, each of which has its part to play in creating a nonmodern form of human political existence. This cross-disciplinary exchange has been initiated via the AIME project apparatus and by various face-to-face meetings and seminars that took place between 2013 and 2017. But so far the surface has barely been scratched, as Latour himself acknowledges.⁹⁰³ A productive future direction of research would therefore

⁹⁰⁰ Latour (2009), *WNHS*, p.460.

⁹⁰¹ Latour (2015), fr. *FG*, p.201 ff.

⁹⁰² Latour (2013), *GL*, lecture 4, p.83, original emphasis.

⁹⁰³ Appendix, pp.372–373.

entail developing the understanding of religion I have provided here in relation to other modes of existence.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have offered the first full critical engagement with Latour's writing on religion and thus with Latour as a potential contributor to the discipline of theology. I began with what I perceived to be a disjunction in the reception of his work to date. References to religion permeate Latour's texts, published and unpublished, from the earliest stages of his intellectual career right up to the present day. The author himself declares these to be integral to a proper understanding of his philosophical system taken as a whole. And yet, these references have largely been ignored in the critical literature to date. Where they have been addressed, they have generally been disdained as naïve transcriptions of Latour's personal religious faith and hence as being inconsistent with the radical commitment to immanence that is evident everywhere else in his philosophy. My awareness of this disjunction provided the impetus for the study I have subsequently pursued.

By means of direct exegetical immersion in his texts, and by paying close attention to the various interlocutors with whom he has been in dialogue, both past and present, I have argued instead that Latour's work can contribute to the development of a political theology.

To begin with, I attempted to frame the understanding of politics with which Latour is working. For him, political activity is that which arises from and represents an ontology of actors and events in the world. It is only when a claim to meaning or truth arises in conjunction with this mode of political activity that it can purport to be rational: a rational claim about the world is one that is provisionally assembled by the actors who operate in the realm of immanence and that is held in place from below.

I then mapped Latour's understanding of rationality onto his handling of the concept of modernity. I showed that, for him, modernity can be understood as a regime that obscures and abridges the political movements of beings in the world by "prematurely unifying" their activity according to transcendent epistemological categories such as "Nature", "Society" and "The Economy". I analysed this in terms of the figure of "the crossed-out God, relegated to the side-lines" and described its operation in terms of ontotheology. For Latour, a sublimated religious thematic is to be found at the heart of modernity. Its effect is to cause the public realm, populated by a multitude of different actors, each seeking to have their own voices and interests represented as constituent parts of a greater whole, to become de-politicized. For this reason, Latour's concept of modernity offers itself to the discipline of theology: it can be used for a theological critique of contemporary modes of thought and behaviour that are assumed to be emancipated from any kind of religious particularism or confessionalism, as well as for an analysis of the ebb and flow of these at different times and places in human history. One application of the political theology of Bruno Latour, then, is to show how modernity is engaged in the production of metaphysical images around which its communities are organised, with or without their explicit consent or awareness. All politics has theology embedded in it. And so one of the tasks the discipline must take up is "to expose the false theologies underlying supposedly 'secular' politics".⁹⁰⁴ The intellectual categories supplied by Latour can be useful in aiding this task.

But Latour offers more than merely tools for critique. For I have also argued that his work provides the means for a positive re-imagining or re-conceptualization

⁹⁰⁴ Scott & Cavanaugh (2003), *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, p.2.

of religion as that which stays within the realm of immanence, counteracting the depoliticizing effect of modernity and providing the basis for new forms of connectivity, responsibility and agency in human society. For Latour, religion generates the ethical comportment of “care” and “attention” to one’s embedded situation in the world; it demands an act of fidelity to the immanent conditions of existence; and it nurtures a sense of responsibility to one’s own role in determining, at least in part, the future trajectory of history itself. In this way, religion can be seen as commensurable with the activity of politics. And so it can contribute to the development of modes of thought and behaviour that are truly political in nature. As well as “exposing the false theologies underlying supposedly ‘secular’ politics”, then, Latour’s work also contributes to the task of “promoting the true politics implicit in a true theology”.⁹⁰⁵

On this basis, I proposed that an engagement with Latour’s writing on religion will enable the discipline of theology itself to be challenged, enriched and even recalibrated in new and constructive ways. In particular, I suggested that it will enable the discipline to engage with greater confidence in debates about the aetiology of the contemporary environmental crisis and the nature of the solutions that must be devised to address it. Within modernity, human beings and societies have been encouraged to understand themselves as disaggregated from the immanent ontological processes that Latour depicts in such detail; this has been the crucible for attitudes towards the natural world that have generated the crisis we now face. But, for Latour, the conditions for a new mode of action to address the crisis are ripe at the present time. For the crisis is compelling human societies to open themselves up to

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid.

new ways of thought and behaviour. We are becoming conscious that longstanding and established patterns of consumption need to be halted. We are realizing that our relationship with the natural world has to be re-orientated in some way. And we are appreciating that fresh expressions of human organisation and co-operation will be required to devise a solution that will work for all, including future generations to whom we are bequeathing this damaging situation. Existing modes of human political negotiation are proving insufficient for this task, precisely because they are expressions of the de-politicizing ideology of modernity. What is needed is an affective, moral and spiritual transformation. Latour's work shows how religion is able to effect this by generating a fresh awareness of our "earthbound" existence, a new sensibility towards the human and nonhuman actors with whom we must negotiate to share that space in a sustainable way, and a re-invigorated understanding of our own role and responsibility as actors able to play a part in forging a different future to the one that has been envisaged within modernity.

By engaging with Latour's writing on religion, then, I have attempted to show a way for the discipline of theology to be at the forefront of important debates about the direction of global human society and the ethical comportment that must underlie its footprint in the world in the future. It is here, I conclude, that his work offers itself as fertile ground on which theology might hope to build in the future.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW WITH LATOUR

This interview was conducted with Professor Bruno Latour on 26 October, 2014 at the London School of Economics (LSE). The recording was transcribed verbatim with minor modifications to the order of questions and with minor edits of superfluous or supplementary material. It was then sent to Latour, who clarified some comments for the written version. A relevant section is included below. Texts referred to in my study are not footnoted here; footnotes are supplied only where the context requires clarification.

Tim Howles: What was the role of religion in your early life?

Professor Bruno Latour: I was raised in a Catholic family in Beaune.⁹⁰⁷ It was a bourgeois, provincial family, like many others. But we were relatively open in terms of Catholic dogma.

When I was still a young man, my older sister, supported by my family, took her vows to enter a religious community called the *Petites Sœurs de Charles de Foucauld*. This was known as a contemplative order that placed great stress on situating itself in the world. In fact, her vocation took her to a remote Amazonian tribe located on the banks of the Tapirapé river in western Brazil: she worked amongst this people-group for many years, living in poverty, but sharing with them her understanding of the value of a contemplative religious life. It is no exaggeration to say that the subsequent course of my own life and work has taken place in light of her decision and the inspiration it gave to me.

As a young man I was a member of the JEC (the *Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne*) and, indeed, was actively involved in the organisation and running of their summer camps.⁹⁰⁸

But at this time, again under the influence of my family, who were enthusiasts, I was also reading a great deal of the work of Charles Péguy. Every September, even though this was a vital moment in the winemaking calendar, when there was much work to be done, my parents would take me on a pilgrimage to Orléans for events associated with the celebration of his life and work.

⁹⁰⁷ Beaune is the wine capital of Burgundy in the Côte d'Or department in eastern France.

⁹⁰⁸ For more on this organisation, see Giroux (2013), *La jeunesse étudiante chrétienne: des origines aux années 1970*.

I'd like to ask you about a little-known detail of your intellectual biography at this time, namely, your encounter with André Malet, the first translator of the work of Rudolf Bultmann into French. What was the significance of this encounter?

Malet, with whom I worked for some three or four years in the late 1960s, was very important. It was through him that I encountered the work of Bultmann. And with that something *clicked*, something that I immediately saw was complementary to what I had been reading in Péguy.

What I realised was that the deconstructivist tendencies of the former could be synchronised with the constructivist tendencies of the latter in order to create something entirely new. In fact, with Péguy at my side, I was prepared to use Bultmann, but to take him further than he himself was prepared to go: whereas his process of demythologization, or de-rationalization (“rationality” is always an important word for me), was aimed at identifying what lay at the core of the Christian religion, Péguy enabled me to see that even such a project had remnants of historicism in it. Bultmann’s demythologization, then, was not the way to do it. On the contrary, the way forward was to see the whole Christian tradition as a series of movements, right down to the very bottom. That is to say, to understand the *political* dimension of the movements of actors in determining the rationality of religion.

So my reading of Bultmann’s project of demythologization was to open it up, to observe how inside every mythologization there is a good and a bad part, and to provide a framework for how these might be sorted out. This was the method he gave me. It is up to the Church, and it is up to every faithful Christian disciple since the time of Christ, to do this work, to provide a faithful interpretation, to open up anew each time the mythological item and to work out which part is good and which part is bad.

But you are searching for a kerygma of sorts too, right?

Yes. But I was diffident of buying into Bultmann’s idea that the kerygma could be attained via layers of text, as if there was one single fact that could be taken as constituting the kerygma. This need not necessarily be much, but something, one fact that could be located down there somewhere at the bottom. Bultmann believed that this small fact, this kerygma, would enable him to reconnect to the Christian tradition he had inherited. But it seems to me that when Bultmann found what he was looking for he was alarmed at how small it was, and so he had to make use of a Heideggerian, existentialist meta-language, an existentialist vocabulary, to keep the whole thing moving.

I think that is wrong. What I wanted to do was to assert that everything is true, in a certain way, if you seize it as a movement.

Perhaps I have misconstrued what Bultmann himself was trying to do. But it doesn't really matter, because what I took from him was a method, or more precisely, an exegetical method. And this is what I have continued to do ever since, that is to say, I have practised exegesis in the domain of science, in the domain of technology, now in the domain of religion, and in many other domains too.

All this came from Péguy. He had a clear idea of it all. Just think of the methodology he employs in *Le mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc*, for example.⁹⁰⁹

I wasn't afraid of myth, then. I was only afraid of historicism (which I understood as directing our sights to a kernel of objective fact which had absolutely no meaning) and of the Kantian sort of religion, that is, religion within the limits of reason alone (which I understood as requiring the admission of a vocabulary designed to replace all the movements that are essential to religion). Kantian rationalism or existentialism, then, I took to be aspects of the same project, for they both entailed the cleaning away of what was most essential about religion.

Cleaning away, cleaning out, sorting: it's a hopeless task. For where do you ever stop? Anyway, I'm a Catholic, and so the idea of clearing away is not for me. On the contrary, I am able to assert that everything is true. But only in a certain sense. And of course, it all depends on the meaning of that *in a certain sense*.

Can you provide an example? How were you beginning to apply this exegetical method? How was it manifest around you at the time?

Just after I was married, in the early 1970s, we chose to live for a while in the *banlieue* of Dijon, in the parish of my uncle, who was serving there as a priest. This was after Vatican II of course. And my uncle made the decision at this time to go about (what I call) that very Protestant work, that very Protestant movement, of sorting out what was not essential to the faith. We stayed there with him for three years. And every year I noticed that he had cleaned up more and more and more. So first he decided not to have a church building. Then he decided to celebrate the Mass in a basement of one of the tall buildings in the city. Then there was no linen on the altar. And so on and so forth.

This was a very important experience for me. Because watching all this I realised, I felt in my own flesh, that when you start in that direction, there's no reason to stop anywhere. He had cleaned away so much, that there was no truth in it any more.

⁹⁰⁹ Péguy (2015, 1910–1912), *Le mystère de la charité de Jeanne d'Arc*.

So he was making the Bultmannian movement, but to extremes ...

In a way, yes, although he didn't know that of course.

But what is interesting is that I fell for it. I became a fellow activist. From that moment and for about the next fifteen years (let's say from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s) I pursued exactly the same movement in my own life. I, too, got rid of everything. And eventually I stopped being a Catholic altogether.

So I have lived through the experience of the sorting out mechanism and I can see what is wrong with it.

So there was a hiatus. When did you return to religion once again? And how did this begin to feed into your project concerning the modes of existence?

What has to be remembered, of course, is that I have been working on my modes of existence project for many, many years. And so there have been hints of "religion as a mode of existence" throughout my work, from quite early on, places in which I have made the attempt to contrast "religion as a mode of existence" with other modes.

It was around 1987 that I picked up religion again explicitly. And at that point, I went over again the patterns of reading I had learnt from Bultmann and Péguy. They assisted me to pick up the thread of the modes of existence, not just the mode of existence of religion, but all the modes.

I was working at this time with an interesting lady called Françoise Bastide, a remarkable person, who was a semiotician, and a Protestant (it's funny how I have often ended up working with Protestants in one way or another). She was a very important figure for me. I worked with her in a laboratory environment. And before her premature death in 1988 we were beginning to use the quasi-semiotic tools that exegesis had given us, that a reading of biblical texts had given us, in order to apply them to other domains.

From the mid to late 1980s, then, I published various works that foreshadow my thinking on "religion as a mode of existence". In the early 1990s, I published a short paper on angels as messengers. In *We Have Never Been Modern* there is of course the idea of "the crossed-out God", a God relegated to the side-lines, but deployed to shore up a whole scheme of rationality and comportment within the world. This idea has actually been very important to me and provides a point of reference for all my thinking about human existence in the crucible of modernity. The exhibition on *Iconoclasm*, which I had been preparing for over 8 years, was at this time too. And throughout the 1990s, I was getting very interested in the idea of fetishism and anti-fetishism, the destruction of fetishes, and what could explain the obsession of the moderns to destroy (what I call now) the beings of metamorphosis in the name of religion. This eventually

resulted in the book on factishes (although I don't think the term was necessarily very successful). I'm dissatisfied with that book. But you can't succeed every time!

There's a footnote in that text that refers to an interesting work in French by Albert Piette, entitled La Religion de Près, which is an empirical investigation into religion as practice, or, in your own terms, as a "regime of enunciation". Did you ever engage with him directly?

Yes, and I like his book very much. It's a good expression of what I have been trying to describe with the idea of "religion as a mode of existence".

So the period from your doctoral work up to the publication of Jubiler in 2002 was full of religion, even if in your personal life you had stopped being a Catholic.

Oh that period of my life was filled in with many things: Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, anthropology, Serres ...

But the activity I just listed points to the fact that I was certainly thinking about religion, thinking about it very intensely. And the more I thought about religion in these terms, and the more I began to compare it with other modes, the more I relied on ideas I had first explored in my doctoral work.

So, yes, I had thought that religion was behind me. But I was wrong. I'd made the modernist mistake. I'd made the Gnostic mistake. I was trapped in the breaking movement traced out by my uncle. And that was epitomized by the fact that I did not baptize my children, which was one of my greatest sins, I guess.

But, as I said, in the late 1980s, by 1987 let's say, I was engaging with religion once more in my writing.

You mentioned Michel Serres. References to his works, in particular Genesis (1982), Statues (1987) and The Natural Contract (1990), are found in much of your writing from this period. You speak as well of the influence of your regular attendance at this time at his seminar, held every Saturday in the smoke-filled amphitheater in the Sorbonne, at which you found yourself "profiting from the boldness with which he developed his anthropology of the sciences".⁹¹⁰ What is the influence of Serres on the modes of existence project? Do you continue to read him now?

No! Early Serres is vital, but I've stopped reading him now. The reason, I think, is that Serres stopped working in a group (the book I wrote in collaboration with him in the

⁹¹⁰ Latour (2013), *BOI*, p.293.

1990s makes that clear) and, in doing so, Serres closed off for himself the possibility of mediation in his own work. He is quite different from René Girard in that regard.

*Let's move into the heart of the modes of existence project now. All the modes, including religion, begin with actors in the world. Through their activity, something is constructed. You use many terms, but one that is of interest to me is "instauration". The word "instauration" has a heritage, if little known, with Deleuze and Guattari, and especially with Étienne Souriau. But there is another source for this term, of course. In the *Instauratio Magna*, unfinished at his death, Francis Bacon sought to equip modern man for the systematic accomplishment of all knowledge. But as the title indicates, this was conceived as an "instauration" (usually translated into English as a "great restoration"), according to which man would return to his Edenic state and possess complete knowledge of all creation once again.⁹¹¹ Bacon, it seems to me, is a quintessentially modern figure, as you conceive of that concept. What, then, are the religious connotations of "instauration" as the process by which religion comes about in the world?*

I took the term from Souriau as an alternative to the term "construction" and as a way of describing the reception of beings that are mediating to us the loops of a *reprise*.

Instauration is true of all beings. It's true of the beings of technology and politics and law, but also, yes, the beings of religion. Instauration describes the agency of beings who render the human able to do something, which is the idea of call-and-response. In this sense, the word has an inescapable theological heritage. Instauration is the way in which religion comes to us.

This is the movement that is almost impossible for modern people, operating under the requirements of modernity, to follow. They cannot see the link between the beings of religion and instauration.

I think the link with Bacon, that proclaimer of modernity, is perfect. But I didn't particularly consider the Baconian heritage of this word when I first appropriated it.

I believe that you were recently engaged in an (attempted) outworking of religion as a mode of existence in which the idea of the instauration of the beings of religion was tested ...

Yes, it took place last year (2013) when I went to Wittenberg at the invitation of a teacher of homiletics at a Lutheran seminary. On the first night of my stay there was a reading of *Rejoicing*, my book on religion as a mode of existence, in German, to the

⁹¹¹ Bacon (2012, 1620), 'The *Instauratio Magna*'.

assembled audience of student ordinands. On the following night we discussed its implications for practical ministry.

As always, and especially when it is a matter of a Catholic speaking to Protestants, there was a great deal of confusion. The instinct was at first to discuss the instauration of religion in the mode of referentiality. This, of course, gets us nowhere. And so we had a lot of questions about history and objectivity and things like that. But eventually the audience began to pick up the interpretive key and discussion got going.

On the final day, when I was preparing to leave, the lady in charge of the event said to me: “if your interpretation of religion is right, then everything we’ve assumed since the time of Schleiermacher is wrong”. And that’s the whole point. They were thinking according to the Kantian settlement. That is what has to change if religion as a mode of existence is to be encountered.

But some time later, after there had been some coverage for the book on the radio, I was told that a number of priests expressed great interest in the change of tone that I am offering.

According to the Inquiry, there is no essence to religion other than that which is instaurated by the beings of religion. And yet many who practise religion would no doubt reply to the contrary that there is an essence to what they believe and indeed a representational function to the language they use in order to describe that essence. What can you say to those who, on first encountering religion as a mode of existence as it is presented in your work, jump to the conclusion that it is threatening what they always took to be the objectivity of their religion?

For this we need to appreciate the value of comparing and contrasting the various modes (plural) of existence.

If you were to ask about the essence of a technological project, it would take less than five minutes to show how *this* telephone or *this* computer requires a whole assembly of beings behind it to keep it in existence. Those beings are aligned in a trajectory and it is that trajectory that ensures the telephone or the computer retains its technical existence. It’s not difficult. The same would be true if you were to ask about the essence of a scientific fact (although it would take longer to demonstrate, maybe up to an hour in that case!)

All I am doing is applying the same demonstration to religious experience. What is it that ensures the existence of a reality that you believe in, whether it be God, the Virgin Mary, a Saint, or whatever? Does it not follow a trajectory, does it not perform a movement, just like I have demonstrated above?

So I'm not threatening the substantiality of the objects of religion that are experienced by religious subjects. I'm just querying the category of "object" itself. Is that category sufficient to describe the being of the religious entities we believe in, pray to and worship? Does it bear any resemblance to our actual experience of religion? If not, then we need a new category.

It's ironic. People want an assurance of objectivity from religion. But the objectivity they seek is normally one that is imported from science and from the mode of referentiality that is its domain. That's not fit for purpose when it comes to talking about religious experience. If that's what you're looking for from religion, then your religion will be empty: science does that mode of referentiality far better. I'm looking to describe the experience of religion in a more faithful way, in a more accurate way, and so, in this sense, yes, in a more objective way.

Is there a genealogy to this? Is there a historical trace? When did the problematic bifurcation of religious experience take place, such that the moderns came to understand religion as a 'known object' grasped by a 'knowing subject'?

All the modes have a history and this one especially. The history of religion as a mode of existence is particularly difficult to trace.

Assmann provides a clue, with his notion of the Mosaic division. And Voegelin, who is an author I'm reading very carefully at the moment, is important too. He depicts the fragile historicization of the beings of religion. He can do this because he diagnoses with great accuracy that most modern tendency of presuming that the movement of *reprise* has finished and that everything has culminated. This culmination is what he calls the triumph of Gnosticism in the form of a secularised apocalyptic.

In fact, Voegelin describes perfectly why we (if we are modern) are finding it impossible to respond appropriately to the apocalyptic moment that is currently facing us, namely, the global ecological crisis. Voegelin points out that we have *already* been apocalyptically transformed and therefore that we *cannot be transformed a second time*. Here are a group of people who since the early modern period (since the time of Bacon) have assumed that we've *already* experienced our transformation and that we've *already* reached the end of time. And here we are, we who have never been modern, trying to approach them with the message that *the end of history is near* (in the looming figure of Gaia, with her injunction to change your behaviour, or else). Are we surprised that they don't have the capacity to understand our message? On the one hand, we've got a group of people who think of themselves as having achieved heaven on earth, and then, on the other hand, we come along, saying them: "I'm sorry, but you must have been wrong, for look: the Earth is fighting back!" "No", they will say, "that can't be the case, for we've already lived through the end times and come out the other side". Modern people, those who inhabit the timeline of modernity that Voegelin describes, simply cannot face the question of global ecological destruction. It is beyond their

rational comprehension. Some change of mind is required for them to even begin to grasp it.

I think this is precisely why the evangelical constituency in the United States is so resistant to face the threat of climate change. Where does it fit in their timeline? What kind of apocalypse can they even begin to conceive?

So whilst I make no claim to be a historian, and my reading is inevitably patchy, it's clear that history, that is, apocalyptic history, is at the heart of our understanding of "religion as a mode of existence". And I am keen that theologians in particular get onto the work of tracing this out.

And that means that religion, as you understand it, will have a history very different from any of the other modes ...

Yes. All this will be quite different from law, for example: the forms taken by the beings of [LAW] are very ancient. They can even be recognised in the works of Cicero. By contrast, there is a mutation, a historicity, that is quite specific to "religion as a mode of existence", one that makes the beings of [REL] particularly difficult to spot. So once again, I put it to the theologians: can you help?

Earlier in the year we had a meeting on the AIME project in Paris.⁹¹² Representatives from various faith traditions were present. And yet, what was interesting at this meeting was that the discussions on religion didn't degenerate into what I call merely 'inter-faith' discussions (that is, justifications, however friendly and respectful, of one's own religious commitments). For me, 'inter-faith' can only and ever be disparate and mushy, because it is assembled around belief. What was different at the Paris meeting, however, was that, powered by the methodology of AIME, we were able to consider rationally what could be accepted as a being of [REL]. The set-up was not epistemological (that is: *how can we compare and contrast the validity of different beliefs?*), but ontological (that is: *what are the beings that that are acting when that person describes what they believe?*) When you frame the question in this way theology takes on an entirely different tone. Thus, at that meeting, we found ourselves equipped to make very clear, finely-discriminating descriptions of the beings that subsist in religion.

That was a good example of the sort of collaboration that theologians can make as *co-enquêteurs* to the modes of existence project. We need to invent a *dispositif*, that is, we need to re-stage a space in which the beings who actually compose religious experience

⁹¹² Latour is referring to an evaluation meeting of the AIME project that took place from 28-29 July, 2014.

in the world can be addressed. What will result will not take the form of a study of comparative religion, let alone a discussion of doctrine in a conventional sense, but an investigation into the ontological alterations that the beings of religion can induce in those who inhabit religion. It is this kind of religious experience that we need to understand. It is this kind of religious experience that will change the world. It is this kind of religious experience we need to celebrate at the time of the Anthropocene.

WORD COUNT

SUMMARY

| | |
|--|---------------|
| Title Page | 25 |
| Contents | 375 |
| Short Abstract | 306 |
| Long Abstract | 1,683 |
| Acknowledgements | 654 |
| List of Figures | 53 |
| Introduction | 5,832 |
| Avant-Propos | 3,015 |
| Chapter One | 22,818 |
| Chapter Two | 20,558 |
| Bridge | 1,793 |
| Chapter Three | 20,235 |
| Chapter Four | 15,275 |
| Directions for Further Research | 1,124 |
| Conclusion | 1,146 |
| Bibliography (excluded) | |
| Interview (excluded by agreement with Faculty) | |
| Total | 94,867 |

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