

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”.¹ Latour often describes himself as a sociologist.² And it is true that his work has frequently been taken up within that field.³ But the word “anthropology” appears in the titles of two of his most significant books,⁴ and Latour even claims that he was “converted to anthropology” as early as 1973, before he had published anything, whilst he was engaged on a research project in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire.⁵ Upon closer examination of the rest of his published corpus, other affiliations come to light. A number of his books declare themselves to be studies on the *modus operandi* of laboratory science.⁶ There’s a long book on the subject of law.⁷ There’s a shorter, co-authored book in the field of economic anthropology.⁸ There’s even one whose title might identify it as being some kind of travel guide.⁹ In addition, in a recent interview conducted in French Latour made the strong claim that his work as a whole should be considered as being “philosophical” in form and that he himself is best understood a “philosopher”—albeit he immediately sought to clarify what this might mean in his own case: “*en fait, moi je suis un philosophe, mais je suis un philosophe qui utilise les méthodes empiriques*”.¹⁰ As one commentator has aptly noted, there are “many faces” to Bruno Latour.¹¹ And this presents a challenge to the critic seeking to engage with his work.

However, nowhere does Latour self-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 shown much interest in

¹ Latour (2010), *COAP*, p.600. For my method of referencing and citation, see Bibliography, p.*.

² Latour (2010), *NSS*, p.10. For a representative text, see Latour (2005), *RS*.

³ For a survey of the reception of Latour’s work within the discipline of sociology, see Restivo (2011b), ‘Bruno Latour: The Once and Future Philosopher’.

⁴ Latour (1993, 1992), *WNM*; Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*.

⁵ Latour (2014), *ATA*, p.15.

⁶ For representative texts, see Latour, with Woolgar (1986, 1979), *LL*; Latour (1987), *SA*; Latour (1993, 1984), *PF*; Latour (1993), fr. *CB*; Latour (1999), *PH*; Latour (2004, 1999), *PN*; Latour (2010), fr. *CSL*.

⁷ Latour (2010, 2002), *ML*.

⁸ Latour, with Lépinay (2009), *SPI*.

⁹ Latour, with Hermant (2008), *PVI*.

¹⁰ My trans. “actually, I am a philosopher, 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.

¹¹ Schmidgen (2015), *Bruno Latour in Pieces: An Intellectual Biography*, p.1.

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 (the merits or demerits of these will be considered in the study that follows).¹² 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 that Latour has published.¹³ Some valuable and interesting discussion has taken place on social media and on other online forums. There have even been attempts to utilise concepts found generally in his work for the articulation of theological arguments¹⁴ or as analytical tools in the study of world religions.¹⁵ But Latour's name is entirely absent from an otherwise excellent study of the "return of religion" in French intellectual life.¹⁶ Nor does he even receive mention in a recent volume exploring how the theme of religion has "continued to colour the Continental philosophical idiom", a volume whose breadth extends to French postmodern thinkers as different as Jean-François Lyotard, Luce Irigaray and Alain Badiou.¹⁷ 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 to the discipline of theology.¹⁸

And yet, upon closer examination of Latour's own work, a more nuanced picture begins to present itself. To begin at the most important place, namely, his recent magnum opus entitled *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, it will be observed that Latour specifies religion as one of fifteen "modes of existence" that he believes can be justified as "rational" in the contemporary world and devotes a whole

¹² For example, see Holbraad (2004), 'Response to Bruno Latour's *Thou Shall not Freeze-Frame*'; 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'.

¹³ Miller (2013), *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Orientated Theology*.

¹⁴ For example, see 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.

¹⁵ For example, see Seng-Guan (2016), 'Religious Praxis, Modernity and Non-Modernity in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia'.

¹⁶ McCaffery (2009), *The Return of Religion in France: From Democratisation to Postmetaphysics*.

¹⁷ Dickinson (ed.) (2013), *The Postmodern Saints of France: Refiguring 'the Holy' in Contemporary French Philosophy*.

¹⁸ Even in the secondary 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. As with any treatment of a contemporary writer who continues to publish, and concerning whom the secondary literature continues to develop, the situation is liable to evolve. I have been able to include all published primary and secondary material up to the end of 2016, although selected material published in 2017 has also been considered. For a full explanation of the material under consideration in this study, see Bibliography, p.*.

chapter to its description.¹⁹ In the same year in which the *Inquiry* was published, Latour was invited to deliver the 2013 Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology at the University of Edinburgh,²⁰ which were written up with significant amendments and published in French two years later under the title *Face à Gaïa: huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*.²¹ A deeper foray will reveal that there are a number of publications 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.²² One of these identifies itself as nothing less than a personal spiritual manifesto on behalf of the author.²³ 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.²⁴ These can now be supplemented by an extended personal interview I conducted with Latour 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 what follows.²⁵ And intriguingly, although it is virtually unacknowledged in any of the secondary literature, Latour's very first intellectual engagement was with the work of the German theologian and New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising to note Latour's claim that from the earliest days his concern has been to work out what he calls the "truth" of religion,²⁶ alongside the "truths" of other domains of knowledge that are also of interest to him, all of which he believes have become misrepresented in some way within the prevailing epistemology of 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", he writes.²⁷ To engage Latour as a writer about religion, then, is by no means to impose upon him a category or a framework that is alien to his stated intentions.

¹⁹ See Latour (2013, 2012), *AIME*, chapter 11, 'Welcoming the Beings Sensitive to the Word', pp.296–325.

²⁰ Latour (2013), *GL*, lectures 1–6.

²¹ Latour (2015), fr. *FG*. This text will be a crucial resource for the argument that follows and I will cite from it in French in a number of places. At the time of writing, this book has not yet been translated into English. However, I have had some personal involvement with the translation project, which is due to be published in late 2017 or early 2018.

²² For a full literature survey, see below pp.*.

²³ Latour (2012, 2002), *RTS*.

²⁴ In particular, see 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*.

²⁵ Appendix, pp.*.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.3.

²⁷ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.28.

There is evidently a disjunction here. On the one hand, the theme of religion is important in Latour's work. And yet, on the other hand, the theme finds itself undertreated in the secondary literature. Where it has been addressed, Latour complains that he has been misunderstood.²⁸ 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 more questions about this apparent disjunction. What is the significance of the various references to religion that can be traced in Latour's work? If Latour's interest in religion is granted, should we understand this as a superficial interest or as an essential one? And to what extent can his work sustain an explicitly theological treatment? In fact, 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 the rationale by which my own study will proceed.

The first response is framed in terms of autobiography. Latour is a professing Roman Catholic. 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. Thus, the references to religion that are found in his writing might be supposed to be merely transcriptions of his personal religious life. Although this may designate Latour as 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 it here because it seems to be the cause of the habitual chariness displayed by a number of critics towards integrating the theme of religion in his work. This much is suggested by anecdotal reports. For example, Golinski suggests that "in off-hand remarks some of Latour's colleagues have expressed the suspicion that his Catholicism constitutes a hidden agenda for his work in Science Studies".²⁹ Golinski extends this observation to the reception of Latour's work by the Anglophone reading public in general: "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

²⁸ Latour (2010), *COAP*, p.600.

²⁹ Golinski (2010), 'Science and Religion', p.51. For a definition of what is meant by "Science Studies" and how this relates to Latour's work, see below p.*.

³⁰ Ibid.

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

I believe that this response, the autobiographical explanation for the theme of religion in Latour's writing, cannot be easily be dismissed. This is because the core agenda of Latour's intellectual project is found in its resistance to ontological reductionism. That is to say, at every point in his work Latour is concerned to diagnose and challenge descriptions of the world that abridge or curtail the activity of the various beings, both human and nonhuman, who actually inhabit the world. In the next chapter, I will refer to these as "actors".³¹ For Latour, it is only by careful attention to and representation of the agency-configurations generated by such actors that a rational account of the world can be provided. Ontological reductionism therefore occurs whenever such an account is deferred to a higher-level principle that purports to explain these agency-configurations from a vantage-point that is supervenient over them. Latour often refers to this in terms of the "premature unification" of the local by the non-local.³² Elsewhere, making use of the spatial imagery of 'above' and 'below', he describes it as the phenomenon of "bad transcendence".³³ Whichever term he employs, Latour claims that ontological reductionism is the primary characteristic of what he calls 'Modernity'—this will be a crucial concept in what follows and it will be necessary to define precisely what Latour means when he uses it, since his deployment of the term does not map straightforwardly onto what contemporary intellectual historians, social scientists or historians of religion might mean when they refer to 'modernity'.³⁴ By resisting ontological reductionism wherever it is found, Latour seeks to provide an account of the world that derives from empirical representation of the activity of the plural beings who are operational in the realm of immanence. Via a somewhat innovative reading of the work of Carl Schmitt, I will describe this as a 'political' account of the world.³⁵

Hence, there is an important kernel of recognition in the autobiographical explanation of Latour's writing on religion. 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

³¹ See below, p.*.

³² Latour (2006), *PN*, p.233, and various places.

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

³⁴ For a full description and definition of what Latour means by 'Modernity', see below p.*. For an explanation of why the word is capitalised, see below p.*.

³⁵ See below, pp.*.

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 commitment. This concern has even been articulated by one of the most sympathetic of his readers, namely, Donna Haraway, who argued at a Cerisy conference in 2013 that a vexed relationship existed between Latour’s work and “the Christian tradition, with its world-making modes of narration”.³⁶ Haraway’s implication is that Latour’s personal Catholic faith is problematic for his intellectual project in general, 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.

And yet, if I must concede that the autobiographical explanation has identified something important, I nevertheless contend that in terms of its close engagement with Latour’s texts and in terms of its systematic description of Latour’s thought it is 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 over another on the basis of revealed truth.³⁷ In fact, I would suggest that the autobiographical explanation for the presence of the theme of religion in his work actually disregards what Latour himself says about religion and how he reconfigures it relative to the category of transcendence in new and innovative ways.

In this study I wish to move beyond this autobiographical explanation, in such a way as to open up a new channel for the transition of Latour’s work into the discipline of 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, but that has not yet been properly considered or well-understood in the secondary literature. This second response effectively inverts the first. Rather than supposing that his references to religion are nothing but 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 the institutions of religion and the metaphysical systems that such institutions incarnate and represent. Instead, it traces a definition of

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ Appendix, p.*.

religion that is constituted solely within the realm of immanence, that is, by means of material and historical processes. Thus, rather than beginning with a pre-constituted dogmatic or doctrinal system, Latour attempts to define religion contextually. To clarify this, he often refers to a distinction between religion as “substance” and religion as “subsistence”.³⁸ Alternatively, he sometimes characterises this as 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 by the plural actors who mediate its essential value (an adverbial form). “As you can see”, he writes, “my 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”.³⁹

Adopting this alternative explanation for the role and function of the theme of religion in Latour’s writing has a number of advantages.⁴⁰ It circumvents the dismissive or alarmist reactions reported above. It enables proper attention to be paid to the language and concepts that Latour actually employs in his writing. But most significantly, it frames the research question I wish to pursue in this study. This can now be stated as follows: what are the implications of Latour’s understanding of religion for the practice of theology? 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 the disciplinary field of theology itself. My intention is to bring together or bridge these two. In broad terms, I will argue that such an encounter would facilitate two major insights. First, it would enable theology to develop and refine a theological critique of secular modes of thought and behaviour. Second, and more positively, it would enable theology itself to be challenged, enriched and perhaps even recalibrated in new ways. This second insight is more complicated. This is because the encounter of theology with Latour’s thought entails the theological category of transcendence being 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”.⁴¹ All such theologies are vulnerable to the criticism that an interest in the “relational” (the

³⁸ *AIME* (V), ‘substance, subsistence’. For more on these terms, see below, p.*.

³⁹ Latour (2005), *TNFF*, p.28, original emphasis.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed description and evaluation of these contrasting methodological approaches to Latour’s writing on religion, and why I have chosen the latter as the rationale for my study, see Howles (2017), ‘La religion comme un élément structurel du système philosophique de Latour’.

⁴¹ The phrase is borrowed from Hector (2011), *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition*. Other examples would include Kearney (2011), *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*; Keller (2014), *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*. Also relevant are a number of works self-identifying under the title of “relational Christian realism”, especially Baker, James & Reader

immanent) is privileged over a commitment to the “apophatic” (the transcendent), the implication being that what is truly distinct about theology becomes diluted in such attempts.⁴² This is the sentiment that seems to lie behind another anecdotal vignette about the reception of Latour’s writing on religion, 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”.⁴³ Does Latour’s understanding of religion bear any resemblance to that which is understood and practised by religious believers? Would the importation of his ideas into theology result in the deconstruction of theology itself? I will argue to the contrary. My proposal is that the embedding of Latour’s thought into theology would constitute a generative, not a reductive, exercise. To describe what would ensue from the union, I will refer to the concept of ‘political theology’. This is a phrase that Latour himself has begun to use in some of his recent works.⁴⁴ And of course it has a diverse and contested heritage of its own within the discipline of theology. But I will invest the phrase with new significance as a means of describing what might be generated by this encounter.

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 thought.

My study will then proceed in four chapters. In chapter one, I will examine Latour’s intellectual project in broad terms. My aim is to describe and evaluate what Latour means when he refers to “rationality” and “the rational”. It will only be possible to address his understanding of religion when the standard or definition of rationality with which he is working has been established. This chapter therefore serves as a propaedeutic for the argument that is to follow in chapters two, three and four. 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 in the world might be judged as accurate or objective. On the contrary, rationality is a function of what he calls a “network topology”.⁴⁵ By this phrase, and others like it, Latour is seeking to describe a horizontal plane of immanence upon which

(2015), *A Philosophy of Christian Materialism: Entangled Fidelities and the Public Good*. These will be addressed in various places below.

⁴² For a description of a debate between Richard Kearney and Catherine Keller that turned on precisely this critique, see Reader (2017), *Theology and New Materialism: Spaces of Faithful Dissent*, pp.*.

⁴³ Golinski (2010), ‘Science and Religion’, p.59.

⁴⁴ See below, pp.*.

⁴⁵ Latour (1993, 1991), *WNM*, p.3.

different actors combine and associate, each of them according to their own irreducible 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. Rationality must be thought of as “the provisional achievement of a composite assemblage”.⁴⁶ Or, to put it another way, an insight into the whole is accurate only to the extent to which its plural constituent parts are represented. In order to evaluate Latour’s thought here, I will propose two terms of my own as a kind of conceptual scaffolding. The first term is ‘meta-logic’: this is intended to describe a mode of rationality that abridges or curtails the relative movements of actors in the realm of immanence. 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. The latter is the definition of rationality that Latour seeks to re-instate. These two terms correspond with two concepts that are much better-known to readers of Latour, namely, ‘Modernity’ and ‘nonmodernity’. It will be observed that Latour’s writing on religion is not addressed at length in this chapter. Nonetheless, the contrast between rationality as a meta-logic and rationality as a logistics will be crucial to everything that follows.

In chapter two, I will develop an argument that Latour’s understanding of rationality as meta-logic can be mapped onto the modes of thought and behaviour that are prevalent within contemporary secular society. 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 contemporary secular society can be understood as a form of covert religion or religiosity. Borrowing a term from the work of German-American political theorist Eric Voegelin, I will describe this as “political religion”. To understand contemporary society as an operator of political religion is to argue that it is contravention of its own foundational claims to be secular. This corresponds to the first major insight I proposed might accrue from the encounter between Latour’s thought and the discipline of theology: it will enable the latter to develop and refine a fully theological critique of secular modes of thought and behaviour.

In order to develop my argument in chapter two, I will offer close textual analysis of Latour’s own writing. There will be particular emphasis on 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”. However, it is true that Latour offers only hints in this direction and that the concept is fragmented and underdeveloped in his own published corpus. Thus, I will also bring his work into dialogue with other critical thinkers, including the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, in an attempt to tease out the implications of political religion for human existence and for the construction of global society in the future.

⁴⁶ Latour (2005), *RS*, p.208.

In chapter three I will turn to the positive and affirmative description of religion that Latour advances under the title “religion as a mode of existence”. This is a more fully developed part of Latour’s work and thus careful attention will be paid to the various texts I began to sketch out above, in particular to the description of religion provided in the *Inquiry*. My objective is to understand what Latour means when he refers to religion as a mode of existence, how he envisages this as functioning in the contemporary public space (which is what I will refer to as political theology), and what implications this might have for the discipline of theology itself. Crucial here will be the contrast between religion as “substance” and religion as “subsistence”. By recalibrating his definition towards the latter, Latour provides an account of religion not in terms of the preservation and transmission in historical 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. For Latour, religion is what inculcates in the human subject the quality of “hesitation” when faced with the temptation to lapse into the mode of dogmatic assertion. I will propose that, were the discipline of theology to take up this emphasis, revised understandings of the doctrines of creation, the Fall, Christology, redemption and eschatology would ensue. I will conclude by pointing to some recent studies in the sociology of religion that might pave the way for such a new understanding.

In chapter four, I will relate Latour’s political theology to the contemporary crisis of the Anthropocene [redacted].