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PRACTICING MYOPIA

SNB Magazin 18

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A. Introduction

Say we assumed that everything religion tell us – Eastern, Western, Buddhist, Christian, Whatever – was true . . . except that all of it applied exclusively to the ordinary, commonplace stuff circulating here and now and in plain sight.

Say we assumed, with just one caveat, that religion was right about everything – the caveat being that we would refuse, from this moment on, to countenance the idea that any religious claims ever referred to any absent objects.

Say we assumed that the one thing religion is never about is a tenuous "belief" in AWOL people or places.

Say we assumed a kind of non-religious religion for the sake of being super-serious about religion. What would we see? Wearing such spectacles, how might things look?

If religion corrects for my defective vision, what's the nature of my defect? Wearing an earnest religion on the bridge of my nose, what kind of specular correction am I getting?

B. Hyperopia

The defect is common enough. Hyperopic, we mistake the living for the dead.

Religion corrects for this congenital farsightedness. It brings into focus bodies that are otherwise too close to be seen.

Life, like breath, is too close, too familiar, to be easily seen. Absorbed in the middle-distant gray of worry and desire, a tree, a dog, a neighbor, even my own flesh, may show up as lifeless simply because I

fail to notice its breathing. A breathless body is a corpse and a living body that looks breathless presents as undead. Absent the breath of life, the world rolls by like an empty carnival ride, bumper to bumper with weirdly mobile but gaily painted sepulchers.

Phenomenologically, this hypermetropia should be familiar. Without quite meaning to, you can easily spend unbroken years wavering in limbo between the living and the dead – hoping for this, avoiding that, clenching your teeth asthmatically.

But whiting your sepulcher is no kind of life. No one cares about the shade of your semi-gloss. Quit this work and, instead, roll back the stone. These bodies are no tombs. Their hearts still beat, their nerves still crackle, their bowels still move, their lungs still breath.

The answer is not to see farther or move faster. Rather, get religion and start practicing nearsightedness. Sit in self-emptying silence with the pulse of your temple and the swell of your lungs.

Religion is nothing but this corrective practice of myopia. Religion is no cure-all, but you may, at least, stop mistaking the living for the dead.

According to Bruno Latour, confusion about religion results when we expect religion to do some other kind of work. In particular, confusion results when we ask religion to do the work of science.

Latour claims that where religion corrects for our inability to see what is otherwise too close, too familiar, too immanent, science brings into focus those bodies that would otherwise be too distant, too transcendent, and too strange to be seen.

Mark this distribution. On Latour's account the field of religion is immanence, the discipline of science is transcendence.

C. Irreduction

This unusual distribution of tasks follows, for Latour, from an "experimental" approach to metaphysics that is, in turn, shaped by what he calls "the principle of irreduction."

If any single term characterizes the antithesis of Latour's project, it is reductionism. Latour isn't opposed to reduction per se, but he views the blanket imposition of any preliminary expectation of reduction as the primary obstacle to an actually empirical metaphysics.

Reductionisms that attribute explanatory strength to hidden macro-forces, assume some original ontological unity or fundamental compatibility, and then sublate any remaining local differences in the conspiratorial movement of a global system make for bad science and bad religion.

We must resist the metaphysical temptation, Latour pleads, to assume some elementary force that would "be capable of explaining everything, translating everything, producing everything, buying and redeeming everything, and causing everything to act" (PF 172).

Instead, Latour argues, we must begin by making the axiomatic move that characterizes an experimental metaphysics as such: we must begin by granting full metaphysical dignity to the buzzing multitude of objects that are presently and availably at work in the foreground of the world and then assume that they are capable of explaining themselves.

Latour refers to this axiom as the principle of irreduction. Its formal version looks like this: "Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else" (PF 158).

The brilliance of Latour's formula shines in how it balances reduction and irreduction. On my account, as an axiom, it makes two distinguishable but soldered claims. Given an original multiplicity, (1) no object can be entirely reduced without remainder to any other

object or set of objects, and (2) no object is a priori exempt from being reducible in part to any other object or set of objects.

Latour doesn't describe things this way, but we might summarize the two halves of the principle of irreduction in terms of (1) resistance, and (2) availability. Every object resists relation even as every object is available for it. No objects are wholly resistant and no objects are entirely available. Objects are constituted as such by this double-bind of resistant availability.

Phenomenologically, the "visibility" of each object also depends on this double-bind of resistant availability. The visibility of an object depends on the varying degrees of resistance and availability that characterize it relative to a given line of sight.

Developing an image depends on optimizing the balance between an object's resistance and its availability. Objects that are either too resistant or too available will fail to appear. Both the unavailable and the acquiescent tend toward invisibility. In one case, the object is too distant, too opaque, too transcendent. In the other, it is too close, too transparent, too immanent.

The phenomena of life, depending on our line of sight, may be either.

D. Science and Religion

For Latour, science and religion differ in their approach to life because they address two different kinds of invisibility. Where science aims to illuminate resistant but insufficiently available objects (like cell structures), religion aims to illuminate available but insufficiently resistant phenomena (like breathing).

Science is a third-person exposition of the unavailable. Religion is a first-person phenomenology of the obvious.

With this distribution of work, Latour means to untangle religion from the wide web of vestigial expectations that now only serve to hamper it. In defending religion, he says, "I am not longing for the old power

of what was in effect not religion but a mixture of everything" – politics, science, philosophy, mythology, psychology, art, etc. (TS 217).

Religion is just one among many "different types of truth generators" or "regimes of enunciation" that help relate and articulate the multitude of objects at work in the world.

With respect to Latour's take on religion, his originality lies less in his attempt to identify a more modest but still viable role for religion than in his striking redistribution of its responsibilities in relation to science. For Latour, religion and science do have distinguishable magisteria – but these magisteria are anything but "non-overlapping" and, more critically, Latour finds their commonly assigned division of labor laughable.

"What a comedy of errors! When the debate between science and religion is staged, adjectives are almost exactly reversed: it is of science that one should say that it reaches the invisible world of the beyond, that she is spiritual, miraculous, soul-lifting, uplifting. And it is religion that should be qualified as local, objective, visible, mundane, unmiraculous, repetitive, obstinate, sturdy." (TF 36)

It is the work of science to build fragile bridges of carefully constructed, painstakingly tested, and incessantly extended chains of reference. It is science that gropes out into the dark beyond and bring us into relation with the distant and the transcendent. It is science that funds the miraculous, defends the counterintuitive, excavates the unbelievable, and negotiates with the resistant and unavailable.

But the invisibility of the resistant and transcendent is only one kind of invisibility. The invisibility of the available, obvious, familiar, local, repetitive, sturdy, matter of fact phenomena remains. This invisibility, while quite different in character, is just as difficult to breach.

Confusion results when it is assumed that all invisibility is reducible to a single kind, accessible from a single line of sight. In particular,

confusion results when it is assumed that the invisibility proper to religious phenomena is identical to that of scientific phenomena.

On Latour's telling, the story of our common confusion about science and religion goes something like this (though the analogy is mine).

To great applause, science works out dependable methods that correct for our near-sightedness and bring into focus distant, transcendent phenomena. This work is to be commended. However, full of its own success, science starts comparing itself with the Joneses. Science borrows some spectacles from religion (spectacles meant to correct for our hyperopia), puts them on, and then loudly complains that these glasses are useless. All of its hard-earned objects have suddenly become blurry or disappeared altogether!

The mistaken assumption that commonly follows – for religious folk and scientists alike – is that religious talk, because it doesn't address the transcendent objects articulated by science, must then be referring to "an invisible world of belief" that is even more distant, even more transcendent, even more miraculous, than the one science itself is articulating.

As a result, both science and religion get backed into a corner. Scientists think such religious talk about the super-transcendent is ridiculous and religious folk feel compelled by the strength of their own practice – knowing that religion does in fact bring something crucial into focus – to make a public virtue out of believing in the super-absurd.

"Belief," claims Latour in response, "is a caricature of religion exactly as knowledge is a caricature of science" (TF 45). Both of these caricatures need to be abandoned. Science doesn't deal with obvious facts any more than religion deals with magical beliefs.

"The difference between science and religion would not be found in the different mental competencies brought to bear on two different realms – 'belief' applied to vague spiritual matters, 'knowledge' to directly observable things – but in the same broad set of competencies

applied to two chains of mediators going in two different directions. The first chain leads toward what is invisible because it is simply too far and too counterintuitive to be directly grasped – namely, science; the second chain, the religious one, also leads to the invisible but what it reaches is not invisible because it would be hidden, encrypted, and far, but simply because it is difficult to renew." (TF 46)

Science corrects for our myopia. Religion corrects for our hyperopia.

E. Presence

Sciences that dispense with the religion of science are more scientific. Similarly, on Latour's account, religions that dispense with the religion of religion are also more religious.

In particular, Latour claims, such religions are more religious because they are more revelatory. Correcting for our farsightedness, religion draws us close to the invisible and brings into focus those bodies that science leaves untouched, those bodies that are hidden not because they are too distant and too transcendent, but because they are too close, too available, to be seen.

Religion displays the invisible, "but what is hidden is not a message beneath the first one, an esoteric message disguised in a banal message, but a tone, an injunction for you, the viewer, to redirect your attention and turn it away from the dead and back to the living" (TF 42).

To be unfamiliar with the tone of this message – with the breath-giving, life-saving tone of the living rather than the dead – is to be unfamiliar with religion itself. "If, when hearing about religion, you direct your attention to the far away, the above, the supernatural, the infinite, the distant, the transcendent, the mysterious, the misty, the sublime, the eternal, chances are that you have not even begun to be sensitive to what religious talk tries to involve you in" (TF 32).

Latour is impatient with believers and nonbelievers alike who insist on mystifying religion as a poor man's science. "I always feel more at

home with purely naturalistic accounts than with this sort of hypocritical tolerance that ghettoizes religion into a form of nonsense specialized in transcendence and 'feel good' inner sentiment" (TF 34).

"Religion," he continues, "in the tradition I want to render present again, has nothing to do with subjectivity, nor with transcendence, nor with irrationality, and the last thing it needs is tolerance from open-minded and charitable intellectuals who want to add to the true but dry facts of science, the deep and charming 'supplement of soul' provided by quaint religious feelings" (TF 35).

Religion has no role to play in helping us escape this world. This very desire to escape, to turn away, to avoid the demanding familiarity of the present, the close, the nearby, is at the root of our crippling detachment from life. It is this desire to escape that leaves us bent over, vision blurred, coughing, wheezing, and breathless.

Religious practices intervene and force the breath of life back into our lungs by arresting our attention and prompting us to lower our gaze. "Religion, in this tradition, does everything to constantly redirect attention by systematically breaking the will to go away, to ignore, to be indifferent, blasé, bored" (TF 36).

To purposefully disappoint the drive to escape, "to divert it, to break it, to subvert it, to render it impossible, is just what religious talk is after" (TF 32).

Mark this definition: religion is what breaks my will to go away.

"It is religion," Latour argues, "that attempts to access the this-worldly in its most radical presence, that is you, now, here transformed into a person who cares about the transformation of the indifferent other into a close neighbour, into the near by" (WS 464-465).

"The dream of going to another world is just that: a dream, and probably also a deep sin" (WS 473).

We practice myopia in order to quell our indifference and acquaint ourselves with life in its most radical presence. We sit in self-emptying silence in order to feel, again, the swell of our lungs and hear, again, the approach our neighbors.

Surrounded by silence, listen for that particular, peculiar tone that is the mark of religion.

"Religious talk, as we begin to see, cannot be about anything other than what is present. It is about the present, not about the past nor about the future. It speaks when we no longer strive for goals, far away places, novel information, strong interests, as though all had been replaced by a much stronger sort of urgency: it speaks of now, of us, of final achievements that are for now, not for later." (TS 232)

Abbreviations:

(PF) Latour, Bruno. *The Pasteurization of France*. Translated by Alan Sheridan and John Law. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

(TF) ——. "'Thou Shall Not Freeze-Frame' or How Not to Misunderstand the Science and Religion Debate." *In Science, Religion, and the Human Experience*. Edited by James D. Proctor. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

(TS) ——. "'Thou Shalt Not Take the Lord's Name in Vain': Being a Sort of Sermon on the Hesitations in Religious Speech." *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 39 (Spring 2001): 215-234.

(WS) ——. "Will Non-Humans Be Saved? An Argument in Ecotheology." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 459-75.

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