A Tour Around Latour: Religion and Fidelities

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Introduction

I am sure there will come a point where someone more qualified than I will write a scholarly and comprehensive introduction to the theological implications of the work of Bruno Latour. This is not the objective of this document and that is for two reasons. The first is that his work is still growing and developing and such an assessment would be premature. The second is that it is beyond the scope of this Temple Tract which aims simply to provide some accessible ways into some of the key ideas that I have found useful in my own theological journey. So these can only be reflections upon a personal encounter, with an explanation as to how and why I have found his work of interest over the last ten years.

Although my main motivation for engaging with Latour is because of my interest in and commitment to environmental issues in particular, there is a broader significance which contributes to my work in what used to be called philosophical theology but often appears now instead as Philosophy of Religion as it engages with contemporary continental philosophy. When I first encountered Latour I was concerned to identify areas for interdisciplinary theological engagement which I then termed blurred encounters, and one of those was a relationship between theology and science. As Latour was examining the operations of scientific research in a very practical and down-to-earth manner his work was of obvious interest. Since then, the interest has broadened as will be seen later in this tract. I will aim to keep references and quotes to a minimum and try instead to tell the story of this encounter and also to link this to some practical examples.

What do we know about his life?

So who is Bruno Latour and what has been the overall trajectory of his work so far? For this I draw upon a book written by Graham Harman entitled *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (2014). Latour was born on 22nd June, 1947 in the town of Beaune, south of Dijon in Burgundy. He is the youngest son of a large family known for their wine

production. Abandoning any thoughts of following in the family business, he studied philosophy and achieving outstanding results as a student chose to pursue an academic career. A spell of national service in Africa shifted his focus from philosophy to anthropology and a particular interest in how science operates in practice rather than theory (we will come to this shortly). He moved to San Diego from where his first book, co-authored with the British sociologist Steve Woolgar, was published in 1979 (*Laboratory Life*). However, his approach did not receive universal approval so in due course he moved back to France to the Centre for the Sociology of Innovation at the School of Mines in Paris where he found a sympathetic collaborator in Michel Callon. During 20 years at this institution he published a number of books which established his international reputation such as *The Pasteurization of France* (1993); *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and *Pandora's Hope* (1999). It was the last of these that I found by chance (if there is such a thing) in a second-hand bookshop in Hay-on-Wye and bought because it looked intriguing and seemed to link with some of my own ideas. In this random fashion do intellectual journeys develop. I had never heard of Latour and could find no references to him in any theological literature.

In 2006 he moved to the Paris Institute of Political Studies (known as Sciences Po) since when he has consolidated his reputation as one of the global figures in the human sciences and received various awards. I have been asked about his religious allegiance and he is indeed a practising Roman Catholic but with his own particular interpretation of religion which we will also refer to in due course. If people question the legitimacy of using his work for public and practical theology I point out that he has taken part in a live [debate](#) from the London School of Economics with Rowan Williams, chaired by Craig Calhoun, and that he gave the Gifford Lectures on the subject of Gaia which have just been published in translation as *Faces of Gaia* by Polity Press (2017). In terms of his intellectual trajectory he is associated with a movement called Science Studies and particularly with an approach that he has called Actor Network Theory although he has distanced himself from such labels as his work has developed. There are inevitably questions about his approaches as one would expect with any significant intellectual figure, ranging from whether his work is too positivistic (thus dependent upon scientific

theory alone), to how it might have ethical and practical implications. This tract is not an attempt to uncritically endorse his work but instead to show how some of his ideas can inform a theology that wishes to engage both with science itself, but also develop its own more appropriate understanding of how humans fit into and relate to the non-humans of our world which include both other animate and inanimate forms of life. In that sense Harman places him in a similar camp to the pragmatist philosopher William James and the main figure behind Process Thought (and Process Theology which derives from it) Alfred North Whitehead. Some of these references may themselves be unfamiliar to a theological audience but it is important to locate Latour as a public intellectual of global standing within the fields of science and indeed environmental debate.

A case study to help us understand how we can use Latour's thinking for mission and practice

Before entering the detail of the intellectual debates, it might help to earth these with reference to a specific example from my own context as a rural parish priest. Within my benefice of eight churches in North Oxfordshire there are two Church of England Aided Schools, both of which are now registered as Forest Schools and one of which is also a school in the Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (the main Diocesan Multi Academy Trust). While none of this might seem to be relevant to such a discussion, what Latour shows through his work is that all the different components of any particular context or 'matter of concern' are part and parcel of what need to be taken into account. One of the most helpful ideas that I have gleaned from Latour is the importance of reassembling all those different components in proper speed and detail, which invariably means slowly and carefully, paying attention to the empirical. So even though the Forest School matter of concern might appear to involve only environmental and educational issues, the reality is much more complex and interesting. Anyone of my generation who encounters the concept of a Forest School might ask how the practice differs from what we might have been brought up with at primary school as Nature Walks. So it is simply a matter of

spending time outdoors – in the countryside if one is lucky enough to be so located – and paying attention to and learning about "the natural world". However, the current movement is more complicated than that.

The Forest School movement began in Sweden in the 1950s and is now gaining popularity in this country as a means of enhancing various aspects of child development. The documentation available makes reference to developing such skills as concentration, coordination and indeed intellectual attainment. It is seen as adding to self-esteem, well-being and emotional intelligence, as well as providing skills such as building fires and more general countryside requirements. There are links to other areas of the curriculum such as Maths and English as the whole experience can be used as the basis for what is argued to be a holistic approach to child development. All of this is highly commendable from an educational perspective but it does raise other interesting questions. For instance: is this a means of establishing what is a purely instrumental approach to nature (or the non-human)? In which case is it a means to an end rather than viewing the natural world as having an intrinsic value? If this is the case, how, for example does it link to the Eco Church project that we are hoping to establish in the benefice which would aim to go beyond this and to build an understanding of a much deeper relationship to the non-human? What does such an approach say about our contemporary culture and the removal of humans from their wider environment which has to be reversed or challenged by such means? Are we now so detached from the natural world that this process of re-engagement becomes vital for an understanding of ourselves?

Then there is a whole set of questions surrounding education itself in the UK as it is at the moment, particularly with the academisation programme and its implications for school organisation and funding. This may not seem relevant but once a school is part of a Multi Academy Trust it does not have the same level of autonomy over decisions such as health and safety policy and what the individual institution is allowed to do. The question of risk assessments when taking children outside is unavoidable in this current culture and we know that a tree survey would have to be carried out before a specific piece of land could be used for a Forest School project.

Once one begins to examine the project in proper detail there are so many other issues in play: those of buildings, land ownership, finance, parental choice, government educational policy, legal requirements, let alone the questions of child development and the more obviously environmental ones as above. What Latour highlights is the need to reassemble all the different components of what appears to be a straightforward project in order to make decisions, in addition to establishing some ethical evaluation of the whole. This is characteristic of any serious matter of concern and requires of those involved close attention to detail and an understanding of the complexities entailed. Two dangers that practical theological engagement run are of making hasty judgements without going into the detail of the debates concerned or else failing to take the time and research required to enter that level of discussion. The antidote that Latour provides is that of making the effort to reassemble all the different aspects and components of any specific matter of concern. The following sections introduce some of the key ideas from Latour's thinking that are critically relevant to public and practical theology today.

Circulating References

As I explained above the first book I encountered was *Pandora's Hope*, a title which caught my attention despite the fact that I had never heard of this author. The idea which I subsequently used in my own work (2009) is that of truth as circulating references. Latour is presenting an alternative to the classic truth theories in philosophy which argue either that truth is when a word corresponds to an external reality or else when a consensus develops within a particular community – so everyone agrees that is what *x* means. Examining the actual practices of the scientific community, Latour suggests that the process is very different and involves a constant process of feeding new ideas and information into the complexity of the issues. Rather than a purist understanding of the process of scientific research and the subsequent development of theories, Latour describes a process whereby the actual materials and techniques employed are as much a part of what happens and contribute to any end product. So he says that science is concerned with the question of how the world can be progressively

packed into discourse through successive transformations so that a stable flow of references in both directions can ensue. In other words, all those involved keep the references circulating rather than attempting to pre-emptively short-circuit the process at any particular point. This is not simply a matter of how to use language but of acknowledging the role of all the different components involved in scientific research, including the non-human as well as the human. The truth of what scientists say no longer comes from breaking away from society or its conventions, mediations and connections, but from the safety provided by those circulating references that cascade through a number of transformations and translations, modifying and constraining the speech acts of many humans. So scientists plunge ever more deeply into the secular world of words, signs, passions, materials and mediations rather than trying to detach themselves from these in some artificial manner. The more connected a science the more accurate it will become. This is in contrast to the popular view of science as remote and detached, an image that scientists themselves do much to promote. Hence one can see that Latour's interpretation is controversial within that community.

As examples, he offers a number of areas where one can see this process at work. The instruments which are employed is the first of these. So equipment, expeditions, surveys and questionnaires in addition to the actual tools of the trade are all involved in scientific research, and it is through the deployment of these that the world is transformed and new arguments proposed through creating new areas and horizons of knowledge. Then there is the way by which these arguments become established within the scientific community, which one can examine from a sociological perspective as certain groups attain status and popularity and others become marginalised or dismissed. The writing and publication of learned papers disseminated through publications and shared at conferences are vital to this part of the process. Alliances are formed with non-scientific organisations in order to obtain funding, quite often with the military but also with industry, politicians and the media and this requires skills of negotiation and building up relationships. This then often leads to the ideas being placed into the public domain through the use of the media and raises questions about trust of scientists (or otherwise) within the wider public forum. The ideas popularised may depend upon who is better at

presenting themselves on TV or video. Finally, there are all the different knots or connections which are important for such projects, the veins or arteries through which ideas and relationships flow and which are often not directly under any one person's deliberate control. Each of these components illustrates that the process of scientific research and development is quite different from the popular perception of the individual genius beavering away in isolation until a breakthrough emerges and is shared with the world.

Why did I find this approach interesting and helpful? At the time I was experimenting with the concept of blurred encounters as an appropriate way of describing my own experience as a parish priest also engaged in academic work. The idea that there is some pure process of theological engagement which avoided any notions of compromise or "getting one's hands dirty" by being involved with the nitty gritty of real life did not seem to match up to the reality. So this was my first encounter with Latour and how I found his descriptions of scientific research helpful, not only for understanding how science itself functions and links to the wider society but also for practical theology. It now has resonances with the environmental debate and one could argue that the growing professionalisation of environmental campaigning and organisations requires a more critical perspective which might stem from a Latourian analysis.

Latour and Realism: The human and the non-human

As we have seen, one of Latour's major objectives is to bring to the surface the actual practices of the scientific community and to acknowledge the role of all the non- human components in the process of scientific research. This can be described as a form of realism – so dealing with matters as they 'really' are in fact rather than according to some abstract theory. For me this has resonances with a Christian realism that intends to address the world as we experience it rather than how we might like it to be in a perfect world. It also has a significance for environmental debates as it brings into play all the non-humans and their role in our ecosystems. Non-humans have to be granted a history and allowed into a multiplicity of interpretations. Instead of a "mind in a vat"

model of human beings, disconnected from a host of external manifestations, there is the whole human being, mind and body, always interconnected with earthly experience and in relationship with whatever it is that functions within a particular collective or assemblage. So we could say that we live in a hybrid world, made up of people, stars, electrons, nuclear plants, markets and each and every collective has to be examined in detail in order to understand what is happening. In the local Forest School, for example, there are trees, bushes, fences, birds, legal documents, school buildings, teachers, students, insurance companies, educational policy and so on. These are but some of the components that go to make up this specific assemblage and there will be elements true only for this particular case such as the fact that most of the land in the area is owned by Trinity College, Oxford who have a particular relationship with the locality going back to the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the reign of Henry VIII. A relational realism then, one that stresses the impact of all relationships on one another – both human and non-human.

How does Latour's thinking on realism play out when it comes to thinking about the relationships between the human and the non-human? One of the problems stemming from the language we use, which tends to make a sharp distinction between subject and object, is that it creates an artificial gap between the two rather than examining the detail and complexity of the relationships themselves. It presents humans as active actors and non-humans as passive subjects with no real role to play. In the environmental debate this itself creates a divide that seems difficult to justify. As recent catastrophic flooding in Texas and Louisiana as well as vast swathes of South-east Asia highlight, how can rising sea levels, hurricanes, melting ice sheets and feedback loops that radically disturb current climatic conditions seriously be described as passive objects at the mercy of the impact of human-induced climate change?

Instead of 'actors' Latour suggests that we talk about 'actants' which can include both human and non-human (1990). Another key example of this at the moment would be information technology and the ways in which social media and the application of algorithms to shape human responses are responsible for creating problems which are not the result of deliberate human design. Is the technology in control of us or vice

versa? I hear people asking themselves this question on a regular basis, particularly when struggling with how to cope with the effects the technology is having upon children. Smart phones are actants in this understanding, as are computers as we all know that the machines are capable of far more than we actually use them for and are in danger of running ahead of our practical and ethical judgements. Such non-humans have their own intelligence, their own cunning and design and exist in and for themselves irrespective of how humans might attempt to employ or manipulate them. If faith engagements fail to acknowledge the reality of this then they are missing the point and in danger of interpreting the non- human as simply objects to be used or exploited for human ends. As we have already seen, it is one of the questions that could be raised about the Forest School project: does it just view the natural world as existing only for the benefit of humans or will it teach children to respect and value nature in its own right? If it is solely a matter of increasing human wellbeing or contributing to educational or personal development, then it risks being an instrumental understanding of the natural world or non-human. So by leaving behind the language of subject and object, of active human and passive non-human, and talking instead about the human and non-human in relationship, collective or assemblage – a "Parliament of Things" – we stand a better chance of understanding the reality of this complex and interconnected world of which humans are ever only a part (see *The Politics of Nature*, chapter two especially).

The Fact-Value distinction: Matters of concern

As we have seen above with the established distinction between subjects and objects, Latour has a habit of challenging such ideas as presenting more problems than they solve. Another such verbal binary that is in his sights is that between facts and values. A traditional way of understanding this is that there are matters of fact that are to be established through some form of objective assessment and then quite separately questions of value which are then attached to these assessments as an afterthought. Ethics, in other words, comes late upon the scene and a sort of bolt-on once the facts

have been established and agreed. So many issues are matters of technical judgement first and only then become a legitimate subject for ethical evaluation. An example of this would be the decision to build the High Speed Rail Link from London, first to Birmingham and then further north with spurs to Manchester and Leeds. The arguments presented in favour of this project are presented in technical language and justified in economic terms rather than being seen as already themselves embedding certain values which one might want to question or challenge. There are indeed many technical issues involved such as the engineering requirements for the high speed link which become matters of safety of course. But the more contentious issues such as the routes of the rail links are much more complex and involve difficult political decisions which are subject to other external influences. For instance, the route of the northern spur to Manchester has been influenced by the then Member of Parliament and former Chancellor of the Exchequer to the extent that a loop around the town of Knutsford in his former constituency has been agreed despite the fact that it is not the most direct path. Exactly which values are at work here one wonders?

What Latour does is to challenge the discourse of matters of fact and argue instead that a more appropriate term to use when deciding upon ethical inputs and values is *matters of concern*. By doing this he suggests that the purely technical is always already infected by value judgements that are often hidden beneath the surface. The task then is to examine each matter of concern in its own terms in order to identify the values that have already been built in and to articulate them in a way that can lead to an open discussion. This is really important for those – including, one might suggest, church congregations and leaders – who want to enter what appear to be technical debates but are unable to engage with that level of detail. The temptation is to leave such detail to 'the experts' who 'know about such things', and only enter the discussions once the facts have been established. If Latour's approach is to be adopted, then this is to come too late upon the scene and fail to recognise that certain values are always already built into the particular matter of concern. So if we shift the discourse from the beginning and attempt to share debates about matters of common or public concern rather than conceding that the facts have to be established before those debates about values and

ethical responsibility can begin, then there is a much better chance that alternative values and judgements can have an impact upon what happens. Behind the Forest School project lie certain values or judgements about what is important, for instance. As we have seen, the arguments are presented in terms of educational value and child development. This is not to say that these are inappropriate, but they may not be adequate if the wider objective is to encourage or enhance a different understanding of the relationship between the human and the non-human which might be required to provide the basis for a sound environmental approach. If nature is only of instrumental value then it may not be enough to prevent the excesses of human exploitation that have contributed to the environmental problems we now face. Far better then to make those values explicit and then question and propose alternatives. Are there such things as pure facts in this sphere of human/non-human relationship? By focussing instead on matters of concern Latour opens up a much more creative and constructive path through which to engage ethical issues at the very heart of specific debates. We should beware of all attempts to reduce such issues to the purely technical as this often conceals a motive to pre-empt critical thought.

From Latour to entangled fidelities

To recapitulate the problem to be addressed: how does one develop a public conversation capable of acknowledging the presence of values and ethical stances before it is so late in the process that they are bound to be ineffective?

As Latour has shown throughout his work in Science Studies, it is the intricate and intimate detail of these attachments that is the reality of how science, politics and other areas of human life become interwoven and connected. Science, technology and what we call nature are more closely related than ever before and yet there is still this paradoxical attempt to tear them apart as if this constituted some form of progress. A further consequence of this that is also damaging to efforts to incorporate the pre-autonomous and ethical dimensions into political debate on environmental issues is that humans and non-humans are treated as if they must be pulled apart and kept in separate

worlds. By pre-autonomous I mean that which occurs at a subjective or pre-reflective level even before one is consciously aware of what is happening – the moment of eye contact which begins a relationship for instance. This category of human thinking and experience is to be separated from other categories such as the rational and post-autonomous (Reader, 2005). This is exactly the experience that emerged from the Foot and Mouth crisis in the UK in 2001.

What needs to be recognised, by contrast, is that the complexity, confusion, and entanglement which invariably occurs as a consequence of the unforeseen effects of human activity, is precisely what is to be expected and requires constant monitoring and response. It is the interventions, the wanting things to be different and the caring for all that is happening, that have to be taken up into the political debates and turned into action. As Latour says, however, we seem to lack the appropriate emotions and attitudes which would allow this to flourish. We lack the mental, moral, aesthetic and emotional resources to follow through on the attachments. At this point in the argument he turns to an unexpected source for a model of how to counter this.

Latour examines the strange connections between mastery, technology and theology. Drawing on the Frankenstein myth he concludes that the sin involved in the story was not that of the creation of this strange creature, but when the Creator abandoned the creature to itself. So it is this failure to follow through, to keep faith with our creations and attachments which needs to be brought into question. It is not technology itself, but the absence of love for the technology we have created, as if we had decided that we were unable to follow through with the education of our own children. To imagine that emancipation from or distancing from creation is an accurate reflection of what the Christian God is about is surely a gross misrepresentation, as this is a God who gets folded into, implicated with and incarnated into His Creation. If this is mastery then it is very different from an understanding which presents a detached form of autonomy or power. So Latour concludes that what we should be working towards is a politics of things in which humans are entangled, involved, implicated and indeed incarnated. In language that he uses elsewhere, this requires an assembling and reassembling of the

human and the non-human which takes into account all the different dimensions of human subjectivity, the pre-autonomous, the autonomous and the transformational.

The whole way of setting up the relationship between agent and structure is misconceived. What is wrong with the term 'actor' is not that it is limited to humans all too often but that it always designates a source of initiative or starting point, the extremity of a vector oriented towards some other end. Instead, one actant making another do something is not to be equated with causing or determining, but is the mediating of a relationship. The more attachments or mediations any particular actant has, the better. Emancipation does not therefore mean being made free from bonds, but rather being 'well-attached'. In language that I have used, it is about being blurred, entangled, bundled up and interconnected. Rather than being distanced and detached, one needs to be (as Levinas might say) in proximity to and a companion to all those other components that go to make up a particular gathering or matter of concern.

What this new approach offers to the debate about creating a credible public discourse for the articulation of ethical concerns and moral values so essential if there is to be a politics of life in the current climate, is the insight that instead of detaching or removing from the public square those apparently pre-autonomous dimensions of what it is to be human, they need to be more firmly connected and included in the debates. Without explicit recognition of how these impact upon and relate to what we describe as 'autonomous human action', we are operating with an inadequate and inaccurate understanding of human subjectivity. But this is never the end of the process, only a more promising beginning. Once the myriad of connections is acknowledged and permitted into the circulating references which I referred to earlier and which form the process of truth formulation, it can be seen that fidelity, conviction, commitment, and openness to the novel and unexpected, can be catalysts for change. By reassembling the human in this way and allowing for the entanglements that go to make up matters of concern, one can challenge the mantra that 'there is no alternative' and argue that life is indeed open to new possibilities and imaginings.

Latour on religion

One of the potential criticisms of adopting a Latourian approach to public and practical theology is that it appears to address what are largely methodological issues. This stems from his own background in anthropology and then his subsequent interest in Science Studies. Although his ideas so far certainly have implications for how we understand the relationships between fact and value, the human and the non-human and the ways in which ethical decisions are always embedded in what are apparently technical discussions, it is less obvious that he has anything directly to say about religion. In fact one might argue that his concept of human agency actually undermines what might be a Christian anthropology. If humans are so entangled, implicated and thus constrained by the collectives or assemblages of which they are a part, then is there still a role for human agency which sets it apart from those wider constituencies? Another dimension which could be a cause for concern from a theological perspective is that of transcendence. Is Latour's view of the world so linked to concepts of immanence that any traditional understanding of God is ruled out of court? It is all very well giving attention to empirical detail and keeping the references circulating, but is there not a point where the circulating has to come to a halt and decisions need to be made? If everything is accessible, close to hand and entangled what are the prospects for standing apart and making those hard judgements that sometimes have to be made when matters require difficult decisions and dilemmas cannot be easily resolved? In fact Latour has recently turned his attention more explicitly to religion and, following that, has brought his interpretation to bear upon questions of the environment.

One of the reliable theological commentators on Latour provides a helpful summary of his position:

> Transcendence, rather than naming a single, definitive, supernatural difference between this world and another, higher, more original and unconditioned one, names instead the multitude of diffuse, localised non-supernatural transcendences that constitute the resistance of each object as such. And, for Latour, it is important to note that, among these transcendences, no

transcendence is different in principle from any other. There are a multitude of others, but no other is Wholly Other. (Miller, 2013: 41).

Rather than opposing some notion of transcendence to one of immanence this feels like a typical Latourian move to combine if not conflate the two into some emulsified heaven and earth, the global and the local, the human and the non-human, into a single, messy metaphysical pulp. At least, according to Miller. Instead of vertical lines we encounter only horizontal ones with small incremental differences rather than large and overwhelming ones. In Latour's pluriverse if there are gods at all they are not pure, unconditioned or exceptional, but themselves fully entangled with the tasks of mediation and translation so dear to his heart for the rest of us. In which case, one can question how this coheres with anything like a traditional interpretation of the divine, even given Latour's own Catholicism, and how such a concept can inspire and motivate the practical, ethical and political activities to which those of faith might find themselves moved. Is this sort of God/gods quite enough to drive others to such commitments?

In a more recent work Latour designates religion as one of his "modes of existence" and gives the subject more detailed and explicit examination, so it is best not to give too much emphasis to Miller's earlier interpretation although it does raise the crucial questions. Other modes of existence include science, politics, economics, technology and law. The key aspect for Latour is still that religion does not refer to some other world. It is this-worldly rather than other-worldly. The sort of immanence it refers to is not the one that is opposed to transcendence as traditionally thought, but a form of materialism in the sense that it functions from within normal human experience. Religion in practice, he argues, does not point beyond to another world, but directs our attention firmly to what is going on in the here and now. Religion is not about what is distant and remote, but rather what is immediate and close to hand. There is no information as such in matters of religion, no references, no mastery or control and nothing that we can dominate by sight. Even religious texts are not to be treated as road maps which provide access to anything. Religion is more like the language game of love so Latour then goes on to provide what he calls the felicity and infelicity conditions for this specific language game. Amongst the former are that words that redress must be

comprehensible and said in the language of the person being addressed. They must also refer to the here and now and not compromise between creating closeness and seeking the distant. The words that give life must have a direct impact, one which reflects and captures the love itself. By contrast, infelicity conditions are when the words are couched in a language that is remote to others in space and time (how much liturgy let alone biblically based language falls short of this requirement and alienates those who are not already part of the in-house language game?). Unless challenging tasks of translation and mediation are undertaken much of what currently passes as religious language passes most people by as it aims to achieve the wrong objectives and misses the mark of articulating the feelings which are central to the religious life. (See Reader: 'Entangled Fidelities: Reassembling the Human' in Moody and Shakespeare: *Intensities: Philosophy, Religion and the Affirmation of Life*. Ashgate. 2012).

It is possible to criticise Latour here on the grounds of relativism as there seem to be no clear or firm foundations against which to judge what might pass as religion, but he argues that the right kind of relativism is exactly what is required. So matters of religion should speak of relationship, attachment, care and contemplation rather than making metaphysical claims about an external reality above or beyond this world. We can either start with the substance we call God to which we attribute certain characteristics such as Creator, merciful and all-powerful, or we can begin with the attributes that we believe are appropriate and work out from there how to address others in ways that they are able to identify with our experiences. Instead of travelling from the past to the future via an inaccessible language, we start with the present and ideas that people can recognise and to which they can relate more readily. Acknowledging that the above can be no more than a cursory glance at what is a more detailed exposition by Latour, it does offer an accurate taste of his general approach, one which, we can see, is consistent with the trajectory of his other ideas and strategies. The question remains whether Latour captures enough of the picture of religion – and this is firmly based in his own European Christian background – to do justice to what traditional worshippers would sign up to or present as their faith. He certainly brings religion down to earth, but is this now rather

too earthly and omits the more mystical and elusive characteristics of faith as most would recognise it?

I have argued elsewhere that there needs to be a balance between the relational aspect of religion as identified in Latour and what my colleague Catherine Keller refers to as the apophatic tradition. So there are elements of religion that remain beyond articulation and point to a dimension which is not so much about creating another world but acknowledging the greater depth and mystery which are part of the religious experience, and cannot be fully captured by the day to day exercise of care, compassion and the search for social justice. Keller talks about both the difference and the relationship between the crowd and the cloud. Latour is very strong when it comes to talking about the crowd and the messy entangled relationships, but less so when religion needs to acknowledge that one also enters the cloud (of unknowing?). Although he does talk about contemplation he perhaps underestimates the cost and struggle entailed when one does enter the cloud and realises that one is indeed lost and potentially alone. There is an element of desolation which must be experienced before one passes out onto the other side. One cannot look upon the face of God and live, so instead one enters the cloud as a protection from that experience but with the risk that one never comes through on the other side. Perhaps this is to stretch the language too far, but I think it does express something characteristic of the Christian faith and to which the mundane and familiar language of love and emotion to which Latour appeals cannot do justice.

Latour and Gaia

The final section refers more explicitly to the environmental as, in his Gifford lectures which have just been published in translation in the UK, Latour addresses himself to the concept of Gaia, not in an uncritical fashion which repeats the interpretations of James Lovelock but as a means of opening up once again the failures of humans to adequately respond to current challenges. It will take more time to absorb and reflect upon this major work, but it is possible to offer some brief thoughts. As with his take on religion,

Latour criticises Christian sources for deflecting the debate about creation and nature onto a world beyond. In *Facing Gaia* he says:

> The Incarnation has been changed into a vanishing point far from all flesh, pointing toward the disembodied realm of a remote spiritual domain. As if the calamity of the natural were not enough, generation of priests, pastors, preachers and theologians have started mistreating the Holy Gospels in order to add, above nature, a domain of the supernatural. As if the (non)-existence of Nature could serve as a solid foundation to the (non)-existence of the Supernatural! The whole of religion, or at least of Christianity and its avatars, has gradually been displaced toward the project of saving the disembodied souls of humans from their sinful attachment to the earth. (2017: 279)

What is required instead is a form of Christian materialism which places humans squarely in this world here and now and encourages them to take their responsibilities for nature – or whatever we care to call the full panoply of the human in relation to the non-human – seriously enough to start to counteract the most damaging consequences of their struggle for control and exploitation. Rather than talking about Creation which still retains those inappropriate connotations for Latour, he prefers to talk about Gaia as it moves us away from those destructive concepts and practices. Using Moltmann he argues that the term ecology takes us back to an understanding that the earth is the house of the Logos, but one that has many rooms. In order to occupy the earth we have to learn to inhabit all these rooms at the same time, very much as Latour identifies the different modes of existence in his previous book and of which religion is simply one.

This approach has important implications for the relationship between science and religion. Religion has to limit itself and its claims to truth by acknowledging the contributions of science and politics to the cause of Gaia. Interestingly Latour says that he had given up hope of this happening until he read Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*, although he was keen to avoid an overly sentimental approach to the environmental debate. He sees in this document and in Moltmann's recent work a move towards acknowledging the limits of religion and the value of science and politics. Rather than saying "only a

God can save us now" Latour would rather say "only the assembly of all the gods can save us now". Despite this air of apparent optimism, Latour concludes that everything is still to play for and the outcomes unknown and unpredictable, but at least Latour offers a trajectory that brings together elements of religion alongside those of science and other practices and disciplines, and one wants to agree that nothing less than this is required as we face increasing environmental challenges.

Yet I would argue that he still does not fully come to grips with the psychological dimension that he identifies in some of his earlier work. Why is it that we are still unable or unwilling to address the issues facing us? Is he correct that we have not yet developed the appropriate emotional self-understanding required for the task but still see this in largely technical and objective terms? Matters of fact rather than matters of concern? I don't think it is possible to escape the underlying fear of apocalypse that haunts our responses to Gaia and the way in which climate change has replaced the fear of nuclear war that dominated the psyche of a previous generation. The danger is that this fear steers us either into denial or else inaction in the belief that there is nothing we can do as the tasks are too great and too difficult. Our fear paralyses us rather than driving us to direct action. Until or unless this can be addressed I suspect that the motivation required will not be forthcoming. In the meantime, Latour has helpfully identified some of the factors which contribute to this paralysis and pointed us towards constructive alternatives. In terms of a practical or public theology he offers a challenge to take proper time and to give adequate attention to the details and complexity of specific debates rather than making grand statements or swift ethical judgements and so contributes to a realist and empirical approach which is consistent with a William Temple Foundation understanding.

For reflection

How might Latour's understanding of the relationships between the human and the non-human contribute to a better theological understanding of environmental issues?

Can you think of examples where church leaders have spoken too broadly on ethical debates without considering the complexity and detail involved?

How does Latour's idea of a slow and deliberate reassembling counter such examples?

Is there a point where the references have to stop circulating and decisions made, and, if so, how does this operate?

What are the limits of a purely relational approach to theology?

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