Religion in the Anthropocene
Nonhuman agencies, (re)enchantment and the emergence of a new sensibility

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The turn to nonhuman agencies

Arguably one of the most fruitful theoretical developments in the last quarter of a century within the humanities and the social sciences has been the work on nonhuman agencies developed by scholars in science and technology studies (Haraway 1991, 2003; Latour 1991, 2005), sociology of scientific knowledge (Pickering 1995) and, more recently, new materialism (Barad 2007) and object-oriented ontology (Morton 2013). Although coming from a variety of disciplinary traditions, a common element in this theoretical shift has been a problematization of the boundaries of the human as well as the nature/culture binary. By becoming attentive to a more-than-human world (Abram 1996) scholars have started to rethink key concepts in social theory, above all in relation to agency. This new preoccupation with the nonhuman has flourished in different disciplines, inspiring a call for a new wave of ‘turns’ such as the posthumanist turn (Pickering 1995), the nonhuman turn (Grusin 2015) or the ontological turn (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

To understand the import of this theoretical shift it is necessary to briefly elaborate on its key concepts. Nonhuman stands here for a broad category that includes not only other animals beside the human (Haraway 2008) but also everyday objects (Latour 2005), complex processes such as global warming (Morton 2013), biomes (Kohn 2013) as large as the biosphere (Latour 2015), or even matter itself (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010). The diversity of contours under which scholars have delineated the nonhuman corresponds also to a variety of understandings of agency. Here a few examples should suffice. Haraway (2008), for instance, challenges the notion that humans are essentially different from other species (i.e., human exceptionalism) and details the ways in which agency emerges in relations between humans, animals and technologies that are mutual without being symmetrical (pp. 262–263). In the case of Bruno Latour and other actor-network scholars, their understanding of agency is detached from humanist notions of reflexivity and intentionality. An actor is thus described as ‘any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference’ (Latour 2015, p. 71). From that perspective, agency is not a capacity that someone or something has, but rather an event that results from the interactions between humans and nonhumans...
distributed in a particular network. Following that definition, we could say, for instance, that a pilot can fly because she has access to a plane, which is running on fossil fuel formed from dinosaurs and plants dead millions of years ago, and so on and so forth. Such understanding of agency could also be described as a theory of interconnectedness in which actor-network theory provides both the methodology as well as the theoretical underpinnings for tracing those connections. Drawing mostly from Latour’s actor-network theory and Lucretius’ exposition of the clinamen or the ‘swerve’ of atoms responsible for introducing indeterminacy into an otherwise deterministic system, Jane Bennett (2010) introduces a ‘vital materiality’ (p. vii) in which matter is not reduced to inert stuff, but instead reveals itself as vibrant and infused by an open-ended creativity. Finally, Timothy Morton (2013) takes global warming as one example of what he calls hyperobjects, i.e., objects so massively distributed in time and space that challenge the human ability to grasp and act upon them. As a result of the inhuman scales in which they operate, hyperobjects have a tendency to intervene in the world through a logic of their own, not reducible to human calculations. For Morton (2013), hyperobjects are not only major actors in the theater of history, but also they cut down to size modernist notions of human mastery. Confronted with the reality of hyperobjects, human beings according to Morton (2013) become reduced to the category of hyposubjects.

Charles Taylor’s ‘construals of agency’

As the previous section has illustrated, theoretical scholars working within a more-than-human framework have radically reworked classical notions of agency. Following Charles Taylor (2007) I would argue that changes in our sense and conceptualization of agency have deep consequences for how we look at and relate to the world. In A Secular Age, Taylor (2007) describes what he refers to as ‘construals of agency’ (p. 566) as the value-loaded stories about agency that operate at the level of taken-for-granted assumptions. In a secular context, characterized by Taylor (2007) as that human existence which is contained in an immanent frame closed to transcendence, such construals of agency draw on important notions, such as (1) the distinction between religion as a childish illusion and unbelief as the mature and sober view that courageous moderns should embrace; (2) the favouring of one’s own disengaged reason over authority; and (3) the enormously world-transforming powers that are unleashed by that combination of cool-headedness and self-reliance (Taylor 2007, pp. 556–566). The question, then, is what construals of agency are emerging as a growing number of scholars and disciplines are reckoning with the nonhuman.

Taylor’s (2007) work again may provide a clue about where the new construals of agency might be heading. For Taylor (2007), one of the characteristics of the secular age is the emergence of the ‘buffered self,’ that is, the self that exists at a distance from the world, ‘disengag[ed] from everything outside the mind’ (p. 38). The ‘buffered self’ is presented by Taylor in opposition to the ‘porous self’ of a bygone, pre-secular age in which the self was ‘vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers’ (2007, p. 27). Taking those definitions into account, it seems clear that the work in nonhuman agencies strongly resonates with Taylor’s (2007) notion of porosity. The construals of agency that emerge from such work disrupt the cogency of a secular outlook, as described by Taylor (2007), and usher us into a time in which the self is once more sensitized to a world of nonhuman powers (as it still is the case in much of the non-Western world).

From the brief review in the previous section, though, it should be clear that this new sensibility generally remains firmly anchored in the immanent frame and cannot, therefore,
be assimilated to Taylor’s (2007) personal preference for monotheism. Taylor’s account, however, echoes the transition from an enchanted to a disenchanted world as described by Max Weber (1917–1919). The notion of enchantment, to which I will return later, is in this case much more promising than Taylor’s (2007) narrow definition of religion. I will suggest that the construals of agency facilitated by the work on more-than-human worlds exceed the straitjacket of the religious/secular outlook as characterized by Taylor (2007), thus paving the way for a contemporary reappraisal of enchantment that is important for the study of religion in global societies.

Religion and the nonhuman

Among the scholars working in the field of nonhuman agencies, references to religion have been rare, though Latour (2002, 2012, 2015) is an exception. Similarly, religious studies scholars have largely been absent from this debate around questions of nonhuman agency, even though a preoccupation with nonhuman agency—in the form of spirits, gods or other supernatural beings—is important to them and remains an ancient and recurrent feature of religion.

Bennett (2001, 2010), a political scientist, has been among the few scholars to put religious language at the center of her exploration of the nonhuman. In particular, Bennett (2001) develops the notion of ‘enchanted materialism’ (p. 80) as a disposition to create attachments with the world by appreciating its strangeness and liveliness in a variety of sites including the animal kingdom, technology, commodity capitalism and Kafkaesque bureaucracies. In her later work, Bennett (2010) emphasizes a second kind of enchantment focused on ‘the agency of the things that produce (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies.’ Bennett (2001) makes clear that the enchantment she describes is not a return to the ‘cosmology of the Christian Middle Ages’ (p. 9) and its world of spirits as neither fits the contemporary understanding of the secular. In her exploration of enchantment, Bennett (2001, 2010) gropes for a new language and sensitivity that breaks away from the binary religious/secular while at the same time is indebted to it. Such ambivalence is probably best expressed in what Bennett (2010, p. 122) herself describes as ‘a kind of Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists’:

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that his pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually doing things. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chaste my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.

(Bennett 2010, p. 122)

We find another example of a similar emerging sensibility in the work of Morton (2013). In the discussion of the ‘Age of Asymmetry’ (2013, pp. 159–201)—that is, the age in which humans, now reduced to hyposubjects, must reckon with hyperobjects—Morton (2013, p. 161) refers to Hegel’s (1835) three stages in art history (Symbolic, Classical and Romantic). According to Morton’s rendition, in the Symbolic stage human understanding (the Spirit in Hegel’s terminology) ‘is dwarfed by materials’ (p. 161) which are endowed with their own agency. In the Symbolic stage ‘stones speak’ and ‘nonhumans seem to possess godlike powers’ (Morton 2013, p. 161). A few pages later, Morton (2013, p. 172) correlates
his description of the Symbolic stage with animism and he concludes that our own time, the ‘Age of Asymmetry,’ resembles the Symbolic stage with an important caveat:

Humans can’t unknow what they know. We know about quarks and sine waves and Beethoven and the Anthropocene. So the Age of Asymmetry is not a return to animism as such, but rather animism sous rature (under erasure).

(Morton 2013, p. 172)

Given Morton’s (2013) highly erudite but also cryptic style, it is not completely clear to me what is implied by the reference to quarks, sine waves, Beethoven and the Anthropocene beyond a gesture to a wealth of knowledge in sciences, music and the biosphere which makes it impossible to return to some kind of naïve animism. That being said, Morton (2013) concedes that from within the semantic field of religious language a form of animism under erasure is what better defines the Age of Asymmetry. Although originally developed by Martin Heidegger, the concept of ‘under erasure’ (sous rature in French) was popularized in scholarly circles by the works of Jacques Derrida (1967) to indicate a term that is both inaccurate and, yet, for lack of a better word, necessary. In this sense, Morton’s (2013) strategy is not different from Bennett’s (2001, 2010) who also affirms and undermines enchantment in one and the same move.

Finally, among the examples of religion under erasure in the works of prominent scholars in the field of nonhuman agencies, Latour’s contribution deserves a special mention. Latour’s (2015) most recent and direct engagement with religion, Facing Gaia, came out from his 2013 Gifford Lectures. Latour’s interest in religion, though, is not new (see Latour 2002, 2012). In Facing Gaia, Latour (2015) tackles directly the question of religion, particularly in the context of the ‘religion versus science’ debates, and advocates for the need to redistribute the properties both of science and religion in light of what he calls the ‘new climate regime’ (p. 3). The idea of religion that Latour (2015, p. 155) addresses, though, is a very specific strand that he identifies, following Jan Assmann (2003), with monotheism.

The title in Latour’s 2015 book, Facing Gaia, is a direct reference to the famous Gaia hypothesis developed by James Lovelock. As Lovelock explains (2006, pp. 28–29), he started to think about his hypothesis in the 1960s and it was his friend and Nobel Prize laureate William Golding who in 1969 suggested Gaia as its name. ‘The Gaia Hypothesis’ according to Lovelock and biologist Lynn Margulis ‘views the biosphere as an active, adaptive control system able to maintain the Earth in homeostasis’ (Lovelock 2006, p. 29). Facing Gaia is not only an account of Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis through the lens of actor-network theory but also a strenuous effort on Latour’s (2015) part to expunge any religious associations from Lovelock’s hypothesis. This prevents Latour from exploring the complex entanglements of scientific and religious language. Latour’s position, though, is not surprising given how, since the early 1970s, the Gaia hypothesis resonated within the new age and the counterculture as some sort of scientific validation for ancient animist beliefs, while it was being reviled by the mainstream scientific community for similar reasons (Ruse 2013). Latour writes that:

The paradox of the figure that we are attempting to confront is that the name of a proteiform, monstrous, shameless, primitive goddess has been given to what is probably the least religious entity produced by Western science. If the adjective ‘secular’ signifies ‘implying no external cause and no spiritual foundation,’ and thus ‘belonging wholly to this world,’ then Lovelock’s intuition may be called wholly secular.

(Latour 2015, p. 87)
It is remarkable that Lovelock has stuck with the name of Gaia, given how, by his own account (Gaia—An Interview with James Lovelock 2014; see from 1:42 onwards), scientists afraid of the controversy have preferred to use the more secular-sounding term of ‘Earth systems.’ According to Latour (2015, p. 98), Gaia acts as a superorganism but is not really one; Gaia is able to regulate itself at the same time that it lacks anything resembling a ‘governor.’ Latour’s (2015) Gaia is indeed a paradox, even a mystery, in which a collective of uncoordinated, disparate elements are not only able to produce consistent effects but also to sustain those effects over time by generating resilience and adapting to changes. No wonder then that Lovelock (2006, p. 20) calls Gaia a ‘metaphor’ or, echoing the paradoxical language of religion under erasure, he refers to Gaia’s ‘unconscious goal’ (Lovelock 2006, p. 19) of sustaining the necessary conditions for life. Latour describes Gaia as a ‘muddle’ (2015, p. 100).

What makes these examples interesting is that sophisticated scholars working at the forefront of the research on nonhuman agencies had no other way of naming their objects of study than by deploying a religious language under erasure. In the next section, I will explore a possible explanation for such state of affairs.

**Cross pressures and (re)enchantment**

I have made the argument that a turn to the nonhuman and nonhuman agencies makes the buffered self of modernity that Taylor describes no longer viable. With its demise, the secular outlook would also enter into crisis. A possible response to such a crisis is to flip the switch and revert to religion as the default existential framework. Such a response would entrench the binary secular/religious, upon which the scientific study of religion was founded in the 19th century and which has continued to be operative to this day. The phenomenon of religion under erasure, in spite of being to a large extent a product of the tension within that binary, points towards a different possibility. The grappling for language indicates a deeper shift in outlook and the emergence of a new set of ideas, which are still in search of form.

Taylor (2007) once more provides an important insight into the background factors that might be behind the expressions of religion under erasure. Taylor (2007, p. 595) perceptively describes the contemporary phenomenon of ‘cross pressures’ understood as the reluctance to return to religious modes of thought at the same time that secular narratives feel increasingly inadequate to grasp the complexity and richness of the present moment. The examples discussed above of religion under erasure, then, could be read as an attempt to express the emergence of a new sensibility that is indebted to aspects of the secular and the religious at the same time that it feels unease in rigidly inhabiting any of those positions.

This new sensibility, in effect, is a hybrid. It is not a coincidence if such thought structure (neither A nor B but containing elements both from A and B) reminds readers familiar with nonhuman research of one of its main theoretical pillars, namely, the criticism of the nature/culture divide. Already in the seminal book *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour (1991, p. 13) pointed out that modernity arose from a double process of separation and purification between nature and culture, on the one hand, and the religious and the secular, on the other. In the case of the latter, that work of purification was achieved by relegating God to a transcendent sphere (what Latour (1991, pp. 32–35) called the ‘crossed-out God’) thus freeing human and natural law from divine interference. Modernity’s two processes of separation were deeply intertwined, but subsequent scholars in nonhuman research have focused their criticism on the nature/culture divide while remaining oblivious, or at least silent, on the secular/religious chasm. As Latour’s (1991) work already...
adumbrates, though, the blurring of the nature/culture divide also has corroding consequences for the consistency of the secular/religious chasm. Through work on nonhuman agencies, those consequences are finally becoming fully apparent.

An emerging outlook in which the self becomes ‘porous and vulnerable’ (Taylor 2007, p. 27) to a world of nonhuman powers strongly resonates with the notion of enchantment. If we take Weber’s work (1917–1919) as our point of departure, the meaning of enchantment must actually be inferred from its opposite. In one of his famous lectures, Weber (1917–1919, p. 35) defined disenchantment as ‘the knowledge or belief that if we only wanted to we could learn at any time that there are, in principle, no mysterious unpredictable forces in play, but that all things—in principle—can be controlled through calculation.’ Through reversal, we can infer that enchantment occurs when those ‘mysterious unpredictable forces’ can no longer be dismissed, thus revealing the precariousness of the project for human mastery.

An important question, then, is if this kind of enchantment is a return to the past or something else. From the examples I have reviewed above, it is clear—and explicitly so in the case of Bennett (2001, 2010)—that those scholars of the nonhuman do not envision as possible and/or desirable a return to the past. For a contemporary appraisal of enchantment that would align itself with recent work in nonhuman agencies, it would be more appropriate to speak of (re)enchantment. In this account, the prefix ‘re’ should not be understood as a return or a repetition of what once was, but rather as a rearticulation. By rearticulation I understand the idea that the world has never been fully disenchanted but rather enchantment has been undergoing a process of deep changes and transformations not unlike what Bronislaw Szerszynski (2005, p. 40) calls the ‘reordering [of] the sacred.’ The heart of the matter, then, will be to assess which elements stay constant, fade away or change in the rearticulation of enchantment for the 21st century. At the very least, (re)enchantment implies a heightened awareness of the world, to which the human subject has again become porous, and in a planet facing rapid environmental degradation such awareness requires coming to terms with the ecological emergency.

The ecological emergency

In pre-modern times, notions of enchantment were associated with the natural world (Bennett 2001, p. 63). It is significant that the work on nonhuman agencies and the (re)enchanted outlook that work evokes, have taken place at a time of massive ecological degradation (see McNeill and Engelke 2016) and a concomitant growth in awareness concerning environmental issues. Of equal importance is that the global impact of technology and mass production have created an unprecedented proliferation of human-made things—from large infrastructures, to industrial goods to waste. We live in a world crowded by stuff. Under such circumstances, the rearticulation of enchantment is not the recreation of an ancient nature religion, but rather a coming to grips with a messier reality in an irreversibly changed planet in which sequoias and giant squids coexist with trash islands and shopping malls. Similarly, instead of evoking nostalgic, upbeat attitudes towards the goodness of ‘Mother Earth,’ (re)enchantment is attuned to the fact that giving up on the modern illusion of living controlled, sanitized lives, is both sobering and terrifying in a time of global warming and widespread ecological degradation.

In this context, the meaning of ecological emergency is twofold. On the one hand, it should be understood in the regular sense of crisis, the realization that we are living through a time of rapid ecological degradation. On the other, the term ecological emergency also gestures to the
emergence of a new ecology of things (Mickey 2016) characterized by the irruption of the nonhuman onto the theater of history. Bringing this insight to the extreme, Morton writes (2013, p. 201) ‘nonhuman beings are responsible for the next moment of human history and thinking.’ As Morton (2007) points out, a crucial part of coming to terms with this new ecology is to get rid of the concept of nature as that which is separate and, by dint of its otherness and distance, as an object for aesthetic contemplation. Ecology, by contrast, suggests a world of human and nonhuman interconnectedness and entanglement.

The concept of the Anthropocene is where the two notions of ecological emergency, both as crisis and as ‘that which emerges,’ converge. It also provides the bridge between the theoretical reflections on nonhuman agency and the previous ecological reflections. The Anthropocene is the proposed name for a new geological epoch currently under evaluation by the International Commission on Stratigraphy, the official body in charge of establishing the geologic time scale. This new epoch, which would follow over 10,000 years of climatic bonanza known as the Holocene, is characterized by the geologic scope of the impact of human activities on the planet and their detrimental effects. Global warming would be the best known of such effects, but there are others such as the increasing acidification of the oceans or the rapid extinction of wildlife species. The term Anthropocene has been criticized by some for its problematic figuration of a universalized anthroops that obscures the disparities in the impacts of different human groups, while at the same relativizing the key role of capitalism in the current ecological crisis. In response, critics have offered alternative terms such as Chthulucene, Plantationocene or Capitalocene (Haraway 2015). While geologists still discuss the merits of the new epoch, an increasing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences (Palsson et al. 2013) have already adopted the term and have started to rethink their work in light of the new paradigm.

The body of work on nonhuman agency offers a promising theoretical framework to study the Anthropocene. This is so because the Anthropocene, at times translated as the ‘Age of Humans,’ remains a deeply ironic term. What stands at its core are not claims about human mastery, but rather the unintended effects of human activities with potentially catastrophic consequences (e.g., global warming) caused largely by the failure to recognize the myriad ways in which humans and nonhumans are entangled in complex networks. It is no surprise that the Anthropocene figures prominently in some of the works reviewed here (Latour 2015; Morton 2013). With the Anthropocene, the ontological category of the nonhuman, which was supposed to provide the inert backdrop to human action, has suddenly become one of the major actors. As Latour (2015, pp. 255–256) illustrates, by way of referencing a student simulation, climate negotiations should not only include actors such as France, India, or the Indigenous Peoples but also Forests, Oceans, and the Atmosphere. The Anthropocene has allowed us to discover something that was always true, but that until recently we could afford to ignore. The agency to geologically transform the planet is not in human hands alone but distributed among countless other beings and systems, each operating at their own scales and in their own circumstances. As Morton (2013, p. 201) puts it, hyperobjects have ‘contacted us’ in the Anthropocene not because they were not here before but because their effects on our lives have become too frequent and obvious to overlook.

Conclusion

As with the massive hurricanes conjured by global warming, in the course of this chapter I have laid out the elements for a perfect storm. On the one hand, the dissatisfaction with secular and religious narratives (Taylor’s ‘cross pressures’) has created a vacuum for a new sensibility. On
the other, the ecological emergency in its twofold meaning—both as a crisis and as emergence—has made it impossible to ignore any longer the intricate ways in which the human and nonhuman are intertwined and agency distributed. The rearticulation of enchantment, or (re)enchantment for short, is indebted to both processes and, although often under erasure, it finds one of its best expressions in the work of nonhuman agencies. In its ongoing work of critique, future research in nonhuman agencies will hopefully not stop its enquiry at the challenge of the nature/culture divide but will pay greater attention to how any reckoning with modernity’s premises must also include a rethinking of the secular/religious chasm.

Notes

1 Emphasis in all quotes in this chapter appear in the original.
2 In this description, Latour (2015) gestures to the emergent qualities of Gaia. In complex systems, the interactions with different entities may generate emergent phenomena, that is, phenomena that cannot be reduced to their parts (Page 2010). Emergence is a regular feature in the natural world, from the fractal patterns in snowflakes to the organization of ant colonies. The difficult question to answer is rather how an emergent phenomenon, which is not guided by any sense of purpose, can become resilient and adapt to changes and disruptions over time.
3 See previous note.

References


