

Entangled Genealogies and False Dichotomies: Anthropology, Theology and the Post-Secular Paradigm in World Christianity. Journal of World Christianity, Vol. 9 (No.1) (2019), 61-74.

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The tremendous impact of the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in the global South on matters of money, health, sexuality - just about everything - has prompted scholars of Christianity of every stripe to take heed of such developments and evolve the conceptual analytics appropriate for deeper theorization. This is no straightforward intellectual challenge; the entangled genealogies of the social sciences and Christianity as culturally-produced discourses that largely emerged within the West makes the effort to subject Christian systems of belief and practice to critical analysis at best confusing, and, at worst, vertiginous.

On first impressions, Pentecostal and Charismatic movements of the global South seem to capture a stirring combination of the strange and the familiar, the global and the local, and the pre-modern, modern and the postmodern all at once. Bound by a disciplinary oath of self-reflexivity, anthropologists of Christianity in particular have thus been compelled to reconsider what it means to be 'Other', to excavate age-old debates about the insider/outsider problem, and, ultimately, to question the ongoing heuristic value of these problematics. Social scientists more generally have also come under pressure from postmodern critiques of the secular emerging from philosophy (notably, Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age'), and theology (such as, John Milbank's polemic against the social sciences and the Radical Orthodoxy position more generally), to justify and ultimately re-evaluate their agnostic (read, atheistic) commitments to the study of Christianity.¹

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Signposts in Theology. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

Critiques such as the ones above have not fallen on deaf ears: for example, a formidable group of anthropologists of Christianity are actively seeking to address the questions raised by these intellectual provocations, cultivating what is fast becoming known as a “theologically engaged anthropology”.² Several theologians have responded with openness and reciprocity, making complementary efforts to incorporate social-scientific methods into their work and setting into motion the ethos of scholarly inter-disciplinarity that is au courant within the academy.³ In this article, I hope to shed light on some of the methodological challenges that currently face scholars in World Christianity and map out genealogically how ontology has come to be a concern for anthropologists of Christianity, in particular. By unravelling some of the guiding theoretical principles of the study of religions more generally, I will reveal more clearly the conditions which have ultimately rendered the ‘problem of belief’, in fact, a ‘problem’ for (purportedly) secular explorations of Christian cultures.⁴ Lastly, I tentatively offer some of my own solutions to these predicaments – such as a reorientation away from belief and toward embodiment - for scholars of World Christianity going forward.

Presenting the Problematic

Admission to the ‘scientific conversation’ is for anthropologists predicated upon their pledging allegiance to the principle of objectivity, which itself has acquired a kind of ethico-religious status in the long shadow of Enlightenment thought. Typically, this entails maintaining a professional distance between oneself and one’s interlocutors, particularly with regards to religious belief. Holding the same religious beliefs as the ‘natives’, or perhaps any belief at all,

² J. Derrick Lemons, *Theologically Engaged Anthropology: Social Anthropology and Theology in Conversation* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ N. Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014).

⁴ Matthew Engelke, ‘The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on “The Inner Life”’, *Anthropology Today* 18, no. 6 (2002): 3–8.

has come to be regarded as an “embarrassing possibility”.⁵ Joel Kahn observes that anthropologists are reluctant to present any first-order accounts of spirituality as “a consequence of fear of being exposed to ridicule by professional colleagues”.⁶ I recall a case-in-point where at a recent conference, an anthropologist prefaced her paper on Pentecostalism by offering the disclaimer, “of course, I am not myself a Christian”, to which a respondent commented, “Are any of us?”

This disciplinary “taboo” is nothing new.⁷ Bruno Latour observes that “social scientists have for long allowed themselves to denounce the belief system of ordinary people”.⁸ From the 1960s, Evans-Pritchard noted that his colleagues were all “bleakly hostile” to religion, regarding it as “not something an anthropologist, or indeed any rational person, could himself believe in”.⁹ Fuelling this attitude, Matthew Engelke argues, is “the implicit concern of the discipline”: that sharing religious beliefs with one’s subjects may involve “surrendering too much anthropological authority”, or, to put it bluntly, relinquishing too much power.¹⁰ For Katherine Ewing, that “the subjects of one’s research might actually know something about the human condition that is personally valid for the anthropologist”, threatens the privileged position she holds as a researcher.¹¹ In co-opting the methodological agenda of the ‘hard’ sciences, anthropologists of religion re-modulate the religious subject as an item of data so that a process of representative objectivation can take place.¹² Whilst this procedure may be apt for a naturalistic enquiry, human social subjects – with their many whims and fancies - are not so

⁵ Katherine P. Ewing, ‘Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe’, *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (1994): 571–583.

⁶ Joel S. Kahn, ‘Encountering Extraordinary Worlds: The Rules of Ethnographic Engagement and the Limits of Anthropological Knowing’, *Numen* 61, no. 2–3 (18 March 2014): 247.

⁷ Ewing, ‘Dreams from a Saint’.

⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 51.

⁹ E. Evans-Pritchard, ‘Religion and the Anthropologists’, *New Blackfriars* 41, no. 480 (1960): 104, 110.

¹⁰ Engelke, ‘The Problem of Belief’, 3.

¹¹ Ewing, ‘Dreams from a Saint’, 571.

¹² Gavin D. Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London ; New York: Cassell, 1999).

easily reduced to ‘things’; as Gavin Flood has shown, they exist in a reciprocal, and at times, mercurial relationship of an intersubjective kind with those that study them.¹³ Thus, when adopted in the social sciences, this technique of naturalistic objectivation acts to conceal the privilege it bestows upon the researcher, as a detached *Cogito*, in the subtextual power relation it constructs between her and the ‘object’ of her enquiry. For which kind of allegedly-detached observer could this be deemed more morally problematic than for the Western anthropologist studying non-Western religions, including the Christianities of the global South? Under these conditions, the misappropriation of the naturalist’s *modus operandi* simply serves to underscore an outlook of cultural and even racial superiority that has haunted the discipline of anthropology historically, and perhaps still continues to do so.

Nevertheless, the anthropologist’s perceived need to establish epistemological distance between herself and her informants must be countered with the commitment to minimise this distance simultaneously. Observing and coming to understand the inner lives of her informants are, after all, both the means and the ends of her method. Anthropologists must walk a tightrope between becoming an insider and remaining an outsider.¹⁴ This exposes a two-horned dilemma: either the anthropologist insists on disengaging language from ontology, or is truly converted by the ‘insider discourse’ and comes to accept the correspondence between meaning and being.¹⁵ In other words, she must either maintain allegiance to her own *episteme* or face up to the limits of it. Either way, she comes to learn that the anthropological discipline necessarily undercuts the value it bestows upon those methods it holds dear. In practice, this means that anthropologists are all too keen to maintain their willingness to become an ‘insider’ during

¹³ Flood *Beyond Phenomenology*.

¹⁴ Engelke, ‘The Problem of Belief’, 3.

¹⁵ Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 102.

fieldwork, but rarely allow themselves the possibility of sustaining this perspective when back in the secular arms of the academy.

For Phillip Fountain, “the ‘temptation’ of going native” suggests that the perimeters between the anthropologist and her subjects are “in constant danger of collapsing”.¹⁶ This tightrope becomes all the more delicate to tread when the anthropologist’s subjects are Christian and hence most likely share parts of her own intellectual worldview. Christians constitute “disappointing subalterns” or “repugnant cultural ‘others’”, who appear “confusingly to be at once too similar and too different to be easily amenable to study”.¹⁷ This sense of the canny is all-the-more pronounced amongst Pentecostals of the global South, whose use of media technologies in particular, has been shown to create a “moral and physical geography whose domain is one of transnational cultural inter-penetration and flow”.¹⁸ Accordingly, Christianity as an object of anthropological enquiry calls for an examination of the ways narratives and images are circulated in an online world, and therefore the processes through which ‘Otherness’ is constituted and reconstituted for both Christians and those studying them. This involves a heightened awareness of the Christian genealogies of anthropological thought and the categories it employs. It demands anthropologists to reflect upon, even re-evaluate their own metaphysical commitments and, rather uncomfortably, submit themselves as objects of enquiry. In Bourdieu’s thought this entails a “second break”;

¹⁶ Philip Fountain, ‘Toward a Post-Secular Anthropology’, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (December 2013): 313.

¹⁷ David Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism & the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement* (Oxford : Athens, Ohio : Ohio University Press ; Harare, Zimbabwe: James Currey ; Weaver Press, 2006), 10; Susan Harding, ‘Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other’, *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 392; Jon Bialecki, Naomi Haynes, and Joel Robbins, ‘The Anthropology of Christianity’, *Religion Compass* 2/6 (2008): 1140.

¹⁸ Rijk A. Van Dijk, ‘From Camp to Encompassment: Discourses of Transsubjectivity in the Ghanaian Pentecostal Diaspora’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 27, no. 2 (1997): 142; Ruth Marshall-Fratani, ‘Mediating the Global and Local in Nigerian Pentecostalism’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (August 1998): 278.

a breaking with the act of objectification in order to submit the objectifying mode of knowledge itself to a kind of reflexive analysis.¹⁹

Genealogies of Secular Modernity

The modern scientific discipline of anthropology was an intellectual child of the Enlightenment. The bracketing (*epoché*) of truth-claims in order to focus on analysing experience, a Husserlian reduction, served to emancipate the study of cultures and religions from the restraints of a confessionalist discourse and the “theological dogmatism” that accompanied it.²⁰ Using this method, social scientists and those engaged in other modern scientific disciplines set aside questions about the metaphysical reality of phenomena - such as, in this case, religious beliefs - in their phenomenological explorations: it was felt that “the two ought to be practiced in separate, discrete, and specialized spaces or arenas from which expertise, modes of reasoning, truth claims, and values stemming from the other sphere should be effectively ignored”²¹. As Casanova has shown, attempts at “the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science), usually understood as ‘emancipation’ from religious institutions and norms” are considered typical to processes of secularisation²².

Today, radical suspicion about the metaphysical reality of non-empirical phenomena manifests itself in the materialistic outlook of anthropological practice, which views “religion

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 27.

²⁰ Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*. The idea of the “view from nowhere” goes back to Renaissance perspectivalism. Husserl wants us to bracket whether or not we think our perceptual *noema* are veridical or not. Feminist standpoint theorists such as Donna Haraway would argue that all human knowledge is necessarily human and therefore necessarily perspectival. They might claim that we should not aspire to a “view from nowhere” anyway. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, 1859-1938 v.1-v.3 (The Hague ; London: Nijhoff, 1980); Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

²¹ Kahn, ‘Encountering Extraordinary Worlds’, 241.

²² José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); José Casanova, ‘Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective’, *Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1/2 (2006): 7.

as purely epiphenomenal to ‘real’ underlying political, economic or sociological causes”.²³ A thoroughly secular approach to the universe that “replaces God with man” continues to orient discourse in the social sciences and humanities, and yet rests “on a particular ontology of reason and rationality that has its source in the Enlightenment”.²⁴ As Bruce Kapferer puts it, “the dominating figure of Kant looms over anthropological discourse (even in his current Nietzschean extension or rejection)”.²⁵ Latour’s genealogy of modernity demonstrates masterfully how, with Kantianism, the distinction between subject and object is “sharpened into a total separation” whereby “things-in-themselves become inaccessible while, symmetrically, the transcendental subject becomes infinitely remote from the world”.²⁶ Social theory’s epistemology of the subject/object relation, he argues, has unfolded within this trajectory: all objects, and especially the transcendent, are viewed through the lens of the ‘hard’ sciences which “are so strong that they simply determine social order which in turn becomes flimsy and immaterial” in comparison.²⁷

Insisting upon the ‘Great Divide’ (between object/subject, nature/culture, religious/secular, or, in my case, Pentecostal/anthropologist) has typically thwarted Western efforts to make sense of, and pay due respect to ‘native’ belief systems, Latour argues. The

²³ Fountain, ‘Toward a Post-Secular Anthropology’, 314; Fenella Cannell, ‘The Anthropology of Secularism’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (21 October 2010): 85–100. For example, in their study of conversion accounts amongst the Tswana society in southern Africa, anthropologists of Christianity Jean and John Comaroff concluded that “in most situations of ‘religious’ transformation, professions of new belief...belied the fact that older modes of thought and action were never fully laid aside”. Ruth Marshall, known for her work on Pentecostals in Nigeria, has aligned herself with the Comaroffs more recently, stating that they “rightly question the notion of conversion itself” on the grounds that the term ‘conversion’ reifies the role of religious belief in abstraction from its wider socio-cultural context. In response, Joel Robbins has criticised the Comaroffs on the grounds that their “engagement with the logic of Christianity is never described in detail”. He concludes that their refusal to take conversion seriously allows them to discount conversion as a “significant analytic category in its own right”, in their own words. Jean Comaroff and John L Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 247; Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 56; Joel Robbins, ‘Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity’, *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 1 (February 2007): 8; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 250.

²⁴ Bruce Kapferer, ‘Anthropology. The Paradox of the Secular’, *Social Anthropology* 9, no. 03 (2001): 342.

²⁵ Kapferer, 341.

²⁶ Latour, *We Haver Never Been Modern*, 56.

²⁷ Latour, *We Haver Never Been Modern*, 54.

modern and secular mythology, formed in the crucible of post-Kantian ontology, thus “consists in imagining ourselves as radically different” to those who do not subscribe to the modern orientation, who thus become “premodern by contrast”.²⁸ As a corollary, colonialists have typically accused natives of making a “horrible mishmash of things and humans, of objects and signs”.²⁹ In sub-Saharan Africa in particular, intricate, hybridized networks commonly span across the civic and domestic spheres, expressing themselves in patron-client relationships which end up looking ‘corrupt’ from a Western gaze.³⁰ In this way, the narcissistic narrative of secular positivism becomes trapped in its own reflection - unable to constitute itself as much more than, at best, a triumph of reason over folly, or at worst, a vicious attack on those worldviews that were, or ‘remain’ enchanted.

Methodological Secularism: A Religious Ideology

Anthropology’s “cavalier attachment to secular rationalism” is propped up by a kind of implicit certainty that operates as though it were a religious ideology, and as such the discipline has developed its own “doctrine of cultural relativism”.³¹ For Talal Asad, liberalism presents itself as a kind of “redemptive myth” which virtually parodies that of Christian salvation narrative.³² Graham Ward calls secularism “fragile because private interests are always leaking into public space” and “incoherent because as an enforced ideology it is at odds with liberal freedoms and

²⁸ Latour, *We Haver Never Been Modern*, 116, 38. Post-colonial theorists also engage in this project, oftentimes viewing the pre-colonial period through rose-tinted (and historically inaccurate) lenses (for an example of this discussion, see John DY Peel, ‘Gender in Yoruba Religious Change’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, no. 2 (2002): 136–166; Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis ; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

²⁹ Latour, *We Haver Never Been Modern*, 39.

³⁰ For example, Daniel Jordan Smith’s eye-opening anthropological monograph about corruption in contemporary Nigeria illustrates how “in a patron-client system, almost everyone has a stake in corruption”. This, he concludes, propels Nigerians to participate in corruption even if they simultaneously attempt to resist it; it is a “culture of corruption” as much as it is a “culture against corruption”. Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 13, 5.

³¹ Kapferer, ‘Anthropology. The Paradox of the Secular’, 342; Ewing, ‘Dreams from a Saint’, 578.

³² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 26.

the democracy of human rights”.³³ Secularism “presents itself as universal, neutral with regard to all particular cultural roots”, and yet “continues to rely on categories that remain Eurocentric” as Žižek has shown.³⁴ Those secularising maxims pawned from phenomenology and deployed by anthropologists of religion have not been developed since their adaptation by Van der Leeuw, and yet, Flood observes, “outside of religious studies things have moved on considerably and the phenomenological tradition has offered critiques of Husserlian method”.³⁵

It is for reasons such as the ones above that anthropologists of religion continue to draw on a mixture of phenomenological and post-phenomenological, modern and postmodern, Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment, and ‘secular’ and religious methods and assumptions simultaneously, unwittingly applying latent categories they themselves have so convincingly deconstructed in recent times. This is evidenced in their employment of *epoché* whilst simultaneously accepting the critiques of standpoint theory, in their insistence on the possibility of objectivity whilst maintaining there is no ‘view from nowhere’, and steadfast adherence to relativism as an absolute. Far from furthering the anthropological project, secularism in this sense functions as an undetected ideological motivator and an obstacle to the discipline’s progress.³⁶

Others have raised ethical reservations about the kind of relativism that a secular anthropology assumes. A liberal and culturally relativistic approach fosters a kind of “blindness to oppression on behalf of the respect for the other’s culture”, viewing cultural differences as “something given, something that cannot be overcome, but must be merely tolerated”.³⁷ Whilst the “suspension of disbelief” may be a productive strategy for winning over informants in the

³³ Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don't* (I.B.Tauris, 2014), 177.

³⁴ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Tolerance as an Ideological Category’, *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2008): 667.

³⁵ Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, 16.

³⁶ Charles Stewart, ‘Secularism as an Impediment to Anthropological Research’, *Social Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (2001): 325–328.

³⁷ Žižek, ‘Tolerance as an Ideological Category’, 667, 660.

field, it “hardly seems the best model for conducting respectful intercultural relations more broadly and over the longer term”, Kahn acknowledges.³⁸ I would push this even further: from my own fieldwork experiences amongst deliverance Pentecostals in Nigeria, Los Angeles, and Oxford, honest discussion about my own religious, cultural and to some extent ethical views has proved not only unavoidable but imperative in gaining the trust and respect of my interlocutors. Naturally, they desire for their openness to be reciprocated and surely deserve that too. To my informants, by remaining silent in response to questions relating to my own worldview I am necessarily situating myself in an antagonistically secular and atheistic space, for my silence speaks of a false sense of neutrality or betrays a claim to having superior (perhaps cultural and racial) access to objectivity. It disguises the kind of voyeuristic power play involved in penetrating another’s interior world whilst protecting one’s own, like asking someone to strip naked whilst remaining fully clothed.

Nevertheless, these challenges to the pre-existing epistemological canon are not to be underestimated; it is perhaps precisely because of the difficulty in accessing our own biases, affects and convictions that Christianity has received the least anthropological analysis of all the world religions so far.³⁹ Numerous scholars have drawn attention to the ‘invisibility’ of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and ability in dominant social science discourses which renders the power it wields and the differences it obfuscates almost imperceptible and hence insidious.⁴⁰ The secular habitus is so much a part of contemporary modern life that it is “not easy to grasp it directly”: it is a field of *doxa*, of “that which is taken for granted...[which] goes without saying because it comes without saying”.⁴¹ The established social and cosmological

³⁸ Kahn, ‘Encountering Extraordinary Worlds’, 242.

³⁹ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995).

⁴⁰ Richard Dyer, ‘The Matter of Whiteness’, in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, 3rd ed. (Worth Publishers, 2005); Susan Brooks Thistlewaite, *Sex, Race and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990).

⁴¹ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 166–67.

order is not perceived as arbitrary but “as a self-evident and natural order...validated by the objective consensus on the sense of the world”, which is why Asad concedes it must be pursued “through its shadows” to be rendered visible.⁴² A highly cognitive form of critical reflection may allow us to invert these ‘shadows’ and illuminate the shadow-puppets behind the screen, but nevertheless, this only takes us so far. After all, the move is not in itself sufficient to debilitate the disciplinary effects of these power structures and hence ultimately dissolve all epistemological divisions between anthropologists and their informants.

Secularism: The Religion that is Not One

Christian theologians remonstrate against the fact that the social sciences have carved a space for religion such that it can be “observed, mapped and catalogued without posing any threat to the observer”.⁴³ Some protest that such a move has served to “police the sublime” and hence disarm it, resulting in the ghettoization of theology in the modern university setting.⁴⁴ By locating itself firmly on the secular side of this distinction, anthropology inadvertently foils its own claims to religious neutrality, which are pure fiction.⁴⁵ For the Anglican theologian John Milbank, the ‘religious’ ideology of the social sciences renders their work more accurately a kind of “theology or anti-theology in disguise”.⁴⁶ In moving forward, we must resist the temptation to view the religious and scientific approaches as in pursuit of different *kinds of questions* about reality, as mutually exclusive realms, or as “non-overlapping magisteria”, as Stephen Jay Gould has argued.⁴⁷ If anthropology in fact has its own ‘secular’ mythos and ethos,

⁴² Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 166–67; Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 16.

⁴³ Fountain, ‘Toward a Post-Secular Anthropology’, 313.

⁴⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 140; Graham Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 2nd ed. (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), viii.

⁴⁵ Cannell, ‘The Anthropology of Secularism’.

⁴⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 3.

⁴⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, ‘Nonoverlapping Magisteria’, *Skeptical Inquirer*, no. 23 (1999): 55–61.

however concealed they may be, theology is not absent from anthropology; it is merely “repressed”.⁴⁸

Even so, it must be noted that Milbank has also been complicit in fostering this false dichotomy between religious and secular belief, and he is not exceptional amongst theologians in this regard. “Every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective,” he writes, “otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in *nothing*” (italics mine).⁴⁹ For Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy movement of which he is a part, *that* ‘God’ necessarily denotes *the* Christian God, but what of adherence to other faiths? Is the ‘crossed-out ~~God~~’ necessarily the same for you as it is for me, or anyone else for that matter?⁵⁰ Is the only choice available to me that of confessing the truth of Christianity or descending into nihilism?

These questions hint at the confusion this kind of Manichean approach can promulgate. Milbank’s straw-man argument serves to ‘other’ secularism, constructing it as the feminine ‘other’, “the religion which is not one”.⁵¹ It underestimates the human epistemological capacity, reducing its functions to that of a computer’s, oscillating between outputs of 0-1 and only printing in shades of black and white. Upon reflection, surely we can concede that any position can have multiple opposites. Probing these dualisms reveals that the referent of the ‘other’ shifts depending on the context. In a scholastic context, reason’s ‘other’ is faith. In a modern context, the opposite of reason may be emotion. Yet, that would surely not mean that faith is actually identical to emotion!

⁴⁸ Cannell, *The Anthropology of Christianity*, 4. Asad’s first chapter in *Formations* explicitly addresses myth. See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*. See also Chapter 7, ‘Myths, Lies and Ideology: The Politics of Belief’ in Ward, *Unbelievable*, 2014.

⁴⁹ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

⁵⁰ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 33.

⁵¹ Although, presumably, Milbank would protest that Christianity is the oppressed ‘other’ in this dichotomy.

In this way, both theologians and social scientists become complicit in the act of “qualify[ing] the binary opposition by recognising the presence of the ‘other’ in each category” (atheism/theism), rather than problematising it.⁵² As a result, “the hierarchical opposition, the story it emplots, and the points of view engendered remain essentially intact”, as Susan Harding has persuasively shown.⁵³ One’s opponent’s positions are thus reduced to that of mere false consciousness, with Christians maintaining that those who are ‘secular’ participate in behaviour that should rightly be called religious and self-identified secularists collapsing faith into a hard-line materialism. Instead, a better way of getting beyond the impasse would surely be to submit the terms of the choice itself – and the compulsion we feel to make that choice – to critical analysis.

Towards Solutions

The contemporary ‘postmodern’ paradigm in the humanities has opened up a line of communication between those working in social and critical theory, and those theologians whose contributions had been rendered opaque under the harsh light of Enlightenment epistemology.⁵⁴ The critical engagement with Saint Paul as a political and philosophical exemplar of radical change represents an important example of how “the shame associated with admitting religious belief in the secular world of the human sciences” has begun to dissipate.⁵⁵ Some theologians have responded to these invitations with reciprocity, seeking to incorporate social scientific methods into their work. For instance, Sarah Coakley speaks of her desire to

⁵² Harding, ‘Representing Fundamentalism’, 391–93.

⁵³ Harding, ‘Representing Fundamentalism’, 391.

⁵⁴ I am thinking of the contributions of the Continental theorists in particular, such as Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Julia Kristeva and others.

⁵⁵ William A Johnsen, ‘The Religious Turn: René Girard’, *English Language Notes*, Literary History and the Religious Turn, 44, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 5; Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey, Meridian (Stanford, Calif.) (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).

draw on the social sciences in her Trinitarian theology, so that they “may become handmaids of theological awareness, not tools of theological reduction”.⁵⁶

Anthropologists are also actively seeking new ways in which it is possible to take religion “seriously” today in anthropology.⁵⁷ Michael Scott calls for “more biblically literate, theologically acute ethnography”, whilst Kahn suggests that “at a minimum, we need to proceed methodologically as if...there were some sort of residue that transcends all such ‘mediating’ processes”, a residue that “escapes cultural, linguistic, discursive, psychoanalytic, sociological, or neurological analysis”.⁵⁸ Robbins argues that Milbank’s provocation does not necessarily mean anthropologists must “commit ourselves to Christianity”, but rather, to “finding *real* otherness in the world” (italics mine).⁵⁹ This surely begins with the deployment of a critical awareness of the role of theological ideas in the formation of the concepts and tools deployed by anthropologists.⁶⁰ For Latour, this demands the mapping out of those complex, hybridised networks which are concealed behind “our strange obsession with dichotomies” that embolden us to believe we are successfully distinguishing between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’.⁶¹ It would reveal that both theology and anthropology are not disciplines unmoored from their historical contexts but are in fact cultural productions inseparable from other forms of cultural production and from each other. It is the disentanglement of the two to begin with, (Latour’s process of “purification”), which has given a false sense of their incommensurability.

⁵⁶ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay ‘on the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12.

⁵⁷ Joel Robbins, ‘Afterword: Let’s Keep It Awkward: Anthropology, Theology, and Otherness’, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (December 2013): 331.

⁵⁸ Michael W. Scott, “‘I Was Like Abraham’: Notes on the Anthropology of Christianity from the Solomon Islands”, *Ethnos* 70, no. 1 (2005): 120; Kahn, ‘Encountering Extraordinary Worlds’, 245-6.

⁵⁹ Joel Robbins, ‘Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2006): 292.

⁶⁰ For example, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Marshall Sahlins et al., ‘The Sadness of Sweetness: The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology [and Comments and Reply]’, *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 3 (1996): 395–428.

⁶¹ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 103.

Invigorating the body as a site for critical analysis will also serve to redress the overstated focus on belief in the academic study of religions more generally, as Asad has so convincingly demonstrated. After all, the content and structure of belief is not purely cognitive or intellectual; it is also physiological and affective, and these features it shares with “disbelief” too.⁶² The strong emphasis on the legitimacy of somatic indexes for God’s presence in Pentecostalism – for example in glossolalia, deliverance, being slain in the Spirit, and so on - call for a recognition of the significance of “nonlinguistic variables”, (e.g. affective, imaginal and haptic) in shaping those experiences and the theologies they give rise to.⁶³ A theologically and anthropologically literate project should therefore aim to produce thick descriptions that tie in with the “new centrality of the body” as a “reinvigorated site of knowledge, analysis, and investigation” in the humanities and social sciences more broadly.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Whilst the Christianities of the global South have been addressed by both theologians and anthropologists alike, a widespread assumption that these groups of scholars seek to ask different questions in their explorations nevertheless prevails: the former, it is said, are concerned with ‘truth’, whereas the latter are simply interested in describing, deconstructing, and demystifying said practices from a position of cultural relativism. With help from the contributions of scholars operating in theology and the study of religions, I have argued here that the alleged distinction between a prescriptive (confessional and theological) approach and a descriptive (anthropological) one is to some extent illusory: the emergence of the fact/value

⁶² Ward, *Unbelievable*.

⁶³ Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 2.

⁶⁴ Ferrer and Sherman, *The Participatory Turn*, 12.

distinction can be situated historically in modernity, and is actually a distinction of value A/value B rather than anything else.

How then should scholars in World Christianities resolve their methodological predicaments, and approach their subject matter in today's 'post-secular' intellectual context? My response is not to feign that anthropologists, despite their protestations, subscribe to positions that have been enmeshed, historically, with Christianity, or that they should now profess them from a confessional standpoint. That position conceals another agenda at work in theology - a conservative undercurrent which seeks to apportion the blame for the *anomie* in our contemporary world on secularisation, whilst nevertheless maintaining that the emergence of the secular masks the ongoing, even foreordained Christianization of the world. Instead, my response is to submit the theological and anthropological approaches to the same degree of critical analysis, regarding them both as cultural productions that emerged in particular historically contingent conditions. It is to recognise the force behind value A and value B and understand how, historically, these values have come to gain that force. It is to avoid remaining captive to the "immanent frame", instead choosing to problematise its apparatus and to recognise the "dialogical" nature of any encounter between oneself and one's religious subjects – Christian or otherwise.⁶⁵ And, finally, it is to place oneself in an "open space", where one can feel the force of all kinds of beliefs, shifting with the winds.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549 cf.; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, (Auckland, New Zealand: The Floating Press, 1902).