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Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism? On Tanya Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back* and Bruno Latour.[1]

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ABSTRACT: In the anthropology of Christianity, and more broadly in the anthropology of religion, methodological atheism has foreclosed ethnographic description of God as a social actor. This prohibition is the product of certain ontological presumptions regarding agency, an absence of autonomy of human creations, and a truncated conception of what can be said to exist. Reading Tanya Luhrmann's recent ethnography, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, in light of both the postulates of "Object-Oriented Ontology" and the work of Bruno Latour, this article proposes an ontological framework that makes it possible to ethnographically describe God as a social actor without adopting methodological theism; this article also notes, however, that the ethnographic description of religious practice found in both Luhrmann's work, and in other ethnographic descriptions of the Vineyard, the denomination that Luhrmann focused on in her monograph, challenges Latour's own account of the difference between science and religions as distinguishable enterprises.

> "What's the use of doing any study in the anthropology of religion if you fix at the beginning and say 'well, of course we know that all these fetishes are just representations in the minds of people." - Bruno Latour[2]
>
> "God is real since he produces real effects" - William James[3]

This is a paper on how How God Is Real - anthropologically speaking, that is, and when viewed from a certain ontological perspective. This is a little bit unusual for a few reasons. The first reason is that I am in effect an atheist, though saying what it means to 'think that God is not real' might have some different connotations after this conversation is over. The second reason why this might be a bit of a surprise is that with some *very few exceptions*, speaking of God isn't commonly done either in anthropology generally, and particularly, I would suggest, in the anthropology of religion, the one place where, innocently, one might expect it the most. This essay takes up the issue of God today because I think his absence is a lacuna that needs to be addressed in discussions in the anthropology of religion, in the anthropology of Christianity, and specifically in the anthropology of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, which will be the target domain for much of this discussion. To be blunt, to ignore God as an agent in the world is not just to ignore or belittle the beliefs of many of our informants, but to overlook an often vital mode of their engagement with the world, and specifically of the various objects that they are enmeshed in. This will not be a one-way conversation, however. The process of consciously adopting an ontology to force anthropology to talk about God will have effects that may suggest that ontologically based discussions will have to listen to anthropology's own god-talk if it wants to be more coherent as well.

Methodology

There are historical-disciplinary reasons as to why God is absent as an actor in the anthropology of religion. At least as far as an intellectual history goes, this is in large part due to a disciplinary wide presumption of what Peter Berger (1969) has called methodological atheism, the imperative that all religious concepts and social institutions be considered externalizations by human beings. While this does not preclude the possibility of these religious externalizations having a divine referent, it does bracket this possibility, focusing on how gods and devils are crafted from human ideational material. Now, methodological atheism is not the only methodology that has been proposed either in anthropology (Droogers 1996; see also Yong 2012) or in the wider social sciences (Poloma and Hood 2008; see generally Popora 2006). Nor does this mean that belief itself hasn't been interrogated as a possible engine of anthropological knowledge or byproduct of ethnographic engagement (Ewing 1994; Favret-Saada1981), that there haven't been anthropologists whose analytic programs were in dialogue with their religious convictions (Engelke 2002; Howell 2007), or even that there haven't been anthropologist who have either toyed with (Pels 2003) or openly endorsed (Turner 2003) the reality of the supernatural agents their informants claim to be interacting with. Even Peter Berger himself (1979) has backed away from methodological atheism by stating that the secular social sciences are but one social formation, thereby relativizing what was already solely a methodological claim. For the most part, though, methodological atheism is the default position in the anthropology of religion (or at least appears to be, at the exoteric level of most anthropological texts). In this light, it is not surprising that God or gods should disappear from the Anthropology of Religion. If one

is given the option of studying either a hypostatized externalization on one hand, or alternately human agents, the font of such creation, on the other, which would merit more attention? If one must choose between an anagentive representation and a human whose agency is promethean – so promethean that she can even choose to alienate her agency in her own creations – which would be the more natural object of study?

These choices, though, are informed by a set of often unthought ontological presumptions that regard existence and non-existence are binary operations, that takes it for granted that agency is to be located solely in human agents, and final assumes that human creations cannot exceed in their capacities that with which their creators have endowed then with. It is these set of ontological presuppositions that this essay whishes to tease open.

Now, ontology has always had an important place in anthropology. Its history includes long-running realism/nominalism tensions in the discipline that could be traced at least as far back as the Kroeber/Sapir debate about the Super-organic (Kroeber 1917, Sapir 1917); in different forms, ontology continues in discussions of Amazonian perspectivalism by the likes of Vivieros de Castro (1998), and Descola's (2006) four-ontology critique of the nature/culture divide.[4] Recently, in large part because of figures such as Vivieros de Castro, ontology had been the object of heightened debate in anthropology (Pedersen 2012, Laidlaw 2012), and the intensity of such discussions has lead to what has been described as an 'ontological turn' in the field (Course 2012).

As this ad-hoc conflation of the ethnographic and the theoretical suggests, sometimes anthropological discussions of ontology are thought of as addressing

conceptions particular to some human collectivity that is being interrogated, as in Descola, and sometimes as being addressed to our own disciplinary presumptions about what is and is not real apart from any specific ethnographic domain, as in the Sapir/Kroeber discussion (see Bialecki 2013). And there are times, as in the discussion of Viveiros de Castro's perspectivalism, when it is unclear at what level we are to place the nature of the claims being made. As we will see, the claims we are dealing with in this essay are of that latter variety, in which the ontological categories of the ethnographer and the ontological imagination of her interlocoutors in the field to some degree are meshing.

Without exception the discussions of ontology that I have referenced here have all had at least their proximate origins from within anthropology as a discipline, though this is not always the case, as anyone familiar with anthropology's recent vociferous thirst for theoretical models from other disciplines might suspect. So I'll hopefully be forgiven for some filching from another domain, though as we will see, at least one of the figures that we are smuggling into anthropology seems to already have had "residency papers" within the discipline for quite a long while.

Ontology

The movement that I'd like to invoke here is called object oriented ontology (or "OOO");[5] it is a loose confederation of authors from disparate disciplinary backgrounds, including the political scientist Jane Bennett (2010), anglophone continental philosophers such as Graham Harman (2011) and Levi Bryant (2011), theorists of technology like Ian Bogost (2012), critics of the concept of nature such as Timothy Morton (2010), the most senior

member, and founding figure (in effect if not intention) Bruno Latour. While it would be a mistake to completely assimilate all these authors into one congealed mass of theory, and not all of these authors see themselves as being engaged in the same project, using some global descriptors and ascribing them some common traits is still a useful heuristic.[6]

The chief principle of an object-oriented ontology is rather unsurprising, given its name. What is central is the idea that what the world is composed of is not, say, subjects on one hand and neumenal objects on the other, but rather of nothing but objects, animate and inanimate, human and non-human, all of which have to be taken as agents.[7] This is usually taken at the crude level as an imperative to include material objects and non-human actors into accounts of human society, but if a moment is taken to consider what is implicit in the postulate that "all accounts should be composed of objects instead of active subjects and passive objects," we see that by nature it has to be much more than that. This is also not to say that objects aren't in some way decomposable; a common presumption here is that all objects are composed of other constitutive elements. But it is important to understand that these constitutive elements are themselves categorized as objects as well, with all the autonomy associated with that status. At the same time, these constitutive objects neither completely control the nature of the larger object (in that there could be specific and irreducible aspects of the larger total element absent from any of the comprising objects, due to emergent properties), nor with the smaller composing elements being automatically governed by the larger system which they are imbedded (as each objects alway has the potentiality to offer its own resistances and surprises).

Several things follow from these presumptions. First, this entails a flat ontology,[8] in which all objects are said to "exist" equally, or a least be granted the dignity of being named objects, regardless of differences of composition, or of scalar differences. This also implies a suspicion of 'reductionist' (or alternately, onto-theological) accounts, which would privilege one strata or framework as either an explanatory site or engine; this would foreclose, for instance, explanations centered entirely on concepts such as discourse, society, or any kind of biological or psychic naturalism. Finally, in this mode of thought there is a tendency to think in terms not of global effects on collections of objects, which would again be the logic of reductionism, but (when it does not think of objects as entirely independent entities) to instead to think that these objects interact with each other in the form of networks, chains, or assemblages. This also implies a different assessment of what counts as “truth,” though what the means of assessment would be, and why a different means of assessment would be a consequence of these claims, is something that will be addressed in detail latter on in this essay.

While all the proponents of object-oriented ontology have something to contribute to a consideration of ontology in anthropology in general, and to the anthropology of Religion and of Christianity in particular, and we will continue keep all these notions in mind, this essay will focus mainly on Latour. The focus on Latour is in part because Latour has had the widest reception in anthropology, and in part because of all these authors he has gone furthest in taking up the issue of religion first hand. In fact, because Latour has had such a broad reception in anthropology, there may seem to be a coals-to-Newcastle element to my argument for numerous reasons.

The first reason that Latour might initially appear to be superfluous or redundant has to do with anthropological conceptions of materiality and objects. Generally speaking, concerns with material objects have been missing in discussions of North American Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. This is perhaps due to the influence of Protestantism, the "religion of talk," on both how these forms of religiosity are conceived of by scholars, and on how they are carried out by practitioners. In these two arenas, it is the discursive aspects which tends to be emphasized. But this is not the overall case either in anthropology at large, which has had a long engagement with the circulation and capacities of objects,[9] or in other aspects of a larger anthropology of Christianity.[10] And while few of these works specifically cite Latour, the *surface* resonances with his themes are obvious.

However, Latour's influence has been more direct than that, brining us to Latour's second (illusionary) redundancy. To the degree that a field as new and heterogenous as the anthropology of Christianity has founding texts or a canon, one of the key works in the sub-discipline has been Webb Keane's *Christian Moderns* (2007). Keane sees his work as explaining in part Latour's (1993) claims that the engine behind modernity is 'purification.' For Latour, modernity is understood as being determined by two dichotomies. This first, which Latour calls purification, is the continuing attempt to dis-articulate nature from culture, human agency from dross materialism. The second dichotomy is between the visible and the invisible, and is a function of the fact that not only despite, but because of, this continuing process of purification, hybrid forms proliferate: strange mixtures of biology and culture, science and society. These hybrid forms, irreducible to any one of the categories favored by the process of purification,

exist in concatenated chains with other objects, and are effectively rendered unrecognizable, and hence effectively unregistered, by purification.

Keane's project is to account for the existence of this double-pronged process of purification. Noting that Latour gives no founding reason for purification's, Keane proposes a genealogy that makes purification a consequence of the Protestant Semiotic Ideology, his name for a Calvinist-infused presumption about what is communicative and how communication functions. For Keane, Protestantism has a marked tendency to valorize the immaterial, the interior, the spontaneous and the agentive aspects of speech, all of which works to immunize the absolute, otherworldly God that Protestantism developed from any contamination with either dross matter or mere human institutions.[11] Keane argues that it was this first separation of God from nature, and the human soul from the fleshy body, that was the germ of the latter, wider bifurcating process that is Latour's purification.

Now, it takes nothing away from the influence, importance, or utility of Keane's work to observe this: Keane's work can be seen not as an anthropological adoption of Latour, but rather a domestication of him, and a moment of disconnection, rather than engagement, with Latour's chief ontological claims. Consider this: Keane is concerned primarily with how it is that human subjects create, decode, and even identify what is construed as effective and ethical communication. However, these meta-semiotic operations, which have different outcomes depending on the different semiotic ideology that the subject may be beholden to, is something that is operated *upon* objects that are candidates for being vehicles for or means of semiosis. It is not that the materiality doesn't matter – Keane is careful to attend to how the specific capacities of differing

forms of material is taken advantage of in semiosis, but attention to the material aspect of mediation does not put subject and media on equal footing. And while Keane is clear in saying that there is always a risk of a failure of semiosis, these objects are effectively passive entities that are colored by the action of human subjects, rather than being ontologically co-equal actors - or as Latour would say, actants, with their own autonomy and resistances. This includes the way that Keane addresses the divine; ironically, in the process of articulating how Protestants accuse others of engaging in fetishism, Keane makes a fetish of the Protestant God as well, reducing this God's capacities to merely what mechanically follows from His human production.

The point here is not that Keane is running afoul of OOO or Latour, but merely that we can't look to him for a window into what an adoption of Latour as an ontologist (as opposed to a theorist of modernity or semiosis) might mean for an anthropology of religion or of Christianity.[12] In fact, the same observation could be made not just of Keane, but of any of the anthropological theorists of Christian materiality and objects, to the degree that these theorists focus on human projections upon, or extraction of, ideational meaning or social connectivity from the passive objects that they utilize or create.

Religiosity

If an anthropology of Christianity cannot take a concern for materiality or a ratification of semiotic ideology as a privileged analytic from a Latour-infused OOO, then what utility does this ontological turn bring? Rather than emphasize these already thought through arenas I would suggest that it is the core *ontological* concepts of 'all objects as equally

objects,' and of 'a flat ontology' that we should turn to. Furthermore, I suggest that if we take these categories seriously, then in societies where He is produced, we have to ethnographically include God - and specifically, include him as a social actor. Let me explain.

One of the things that is surprising is how rarely God appears, as even a phantasmatic interlocutor, in ethnographies of North American Pentecostals, charismatics, and Charismaticized Evangelicals. Let me take as an example a book I choose not because it is weak, but because it has so much to recommend it: Omri Elisha's recent monograph, *Moral Ambition*. Elisha's book is a nuanced snapshot of Southern Evangelicals struggling to work through how they are suppose to practice and campaign for Christian charity in an age that is ideologically and structurally Neoliberal; Elisha depicts his informants as struggling against the constituting bonds of their ethical individualism, their petit-bourgeoisie consumerist quietism, and a salvation economy skeptical of the social *and* the institutional as they attempt to imagine new forms of evangelical social action that would take service to the poor and disenfranchised as a primary good.

There is a much to recommend in Elisha's book, and particularly in Elisha's meticulous portrait of his believers struggling to build the type of social bonds and charitable initiatives that they feel compelled by God to carry out. But what is striking in Elisha's work is that there is one entity missing - God himself. We are given a great deal of description regarding how these people act out the convictions they have regarding God, but the phenomenal, evidential, or practice based aspect of how they relate to,

and interpret, God - the source of that conviction - is absent from Elisha's account. Or to be more exact, it the question of how God works on *them* which is absent.

I mention this not because this is some kind of absence particular to Elisha's work, but because it is a common elisions in anthropological accounts of Pentecostal, charismatic, and Evangelical Christianity both in the United States and globally. With one or two noted exceptions, the procedures through which God is accessed by believers are not addressed - and this is especially the case when dealing with modes where God is accessed in ways that are not mediated by texts. Viewed in light of Latour, this is a telling omission. This is because Latour's before mentioned work of purification – the division of society from nature, of the agentive from the material – has an additional dimension. Latour argues that this process also works to "cross out" God, removing him as an actor in that he can to be thought of as transcending nature, yet not having any effect natural laws, or metaphysically ordering society or human agency while at the same time being in effect little more than a private spirituality or a symbol, a fetish (Latour 1993:32-25). This makes the ethnographic absence of God as an actor - even an actor that must be produced - all the more suspicious, the function of a very specific set of presumptions about who (and what) are subjects, who (and what) are objects, and how the relations between 'nature,' 'society,' and 'transcendence' are arranged.

This is normally the moment where one would point to one's own work (which will be relevant at a later point in this essay) but in this case it would be more productive to take up the arguments of Tanya Luhrmann's book, *When God Talks Back* (2012). Luhrmann's book takes as its task determining how it is that well educated suburban

evangelicals learn to recalibrate their reflective sense of self so that they believe that an invisible God is their sensorially apprehendible companion. What I want to do is to show how her text breaks with this general trend of avoiding “God” as an ethnographic presence, but also how her work appears when we take a shift from a psychology-oriented epistemology that is central to her project, and reread it through the lens of a Latourian inflected ontology.

Truth be told, there is another reason to think this project through Luhrmann's ethnography. Luhrmann and I share a common, "non-contiguous" field-site: The Vineyard. The Vineyard is a Southern California based, but now world-wide denomination, with roughly six hundred churches within the United States, and well over a thousand internationally. The Vineyard is characterized by a wealth of traits that, while no longer particular to the Vineyard, can arguably be said to have originated with them. These include a relative informality, a desire to be 'culturally current,' and the adoption of a particular genre of "praise music" that is marked by its purposeful borrowing from pop music in both musical form and lyrical content. But what the Vineyard is best known for is its embrace of intense, Pentecostal-style supernatural practices (often referred to as ‘gifts’) such as healing, speaking in tongues, prophecy and deliverance from demons.

This borrowing of Pentecostal-style practice does not mean that they are carried out in exactly the same way as they are carried out by their Pentecostal brethren, however. There is something hesitant in the way that the gifts work in the Vineyard, a phenomenon that Luhrmann refers to in her work as an "as if" sort of framing, where the boundary lines between supernatural action and subjective imagination is purposefully

and consciously blurred, both as these Pentecostal practices are enacted and as they are retrospectively recounted. In the Vineyard, explanations for charismatic activity waiver between supernatural and naturalistic accounts, like a quantum object fluctuating between a particle and a wave. When discussing an instance of demonic attack, people will one minute talk about it as a disruptive alien presence, and at another moment as a kind of psychological acting out (Bialecki 2011b); when praying for healing, descriptions of the supernatural intervention will be so detailed, and so couched in the language of natural medical processes, that it could be seen not as a request for an otherworldly intervention, but a description of an already-ongoing organic process; and when giving words of knowledge (also known as 'prophecy), they will be described as an image or an affect that burst spontaneously into consciousness, as if from some other plane of reality, only to be repackaged again as a form of psychological intuition - as a response to subtle cues which, while not necessary falling into the space of the consciousness, were still present, insisting (Bialecki n.d.).

The specific aspect of this as-if phenomenon that Luhrmann focuses on in her book is how this flutter in reality plays out in prayer. Luhrmann sees this wavering state as a product of prayer as a ludic, auto-pedagogical process in which individuals train their imaginative facilities and sensorium by repeatedly playing at conversing with God, until the point is reached when that act no longer is effectively subjectively perceived as a form of play. It is important to note that the approach to this limit of a completely-convincing sense of conversing with a real entity is asymptotic; as Luhrmann is careful to point out, no matter how much seeming verisimility the phenomenon has, believers never get so caught up in the practice as to being equivalent to human interactions. This

transformation is accomplished not just by repetition (a repetition strongly recommended by the numerous manuals on how to pray that Luhrmann relies on as diagrammatic representatives of the practice), but is also supported by a series of material props, such as a second cup of coffee set out for God while one talks to him one morning, or a journal where everything that He "says" in prayer is written down by his interlocutor. This is a state that Luhrmann likens as being equivalent to having an "imaginary friend", a framing that, when Luhrmann presented it to Vineyard believers, they immediately denied, only to affirm - but with the proviso that it was the term imaginary that was the problem, and not the formal structure of the comparison itself.

In explaining the psychological mechanisms that animate this process of producing God as a spectral best friend, and also in accounting for the beneficial psychic effects that she sees as an-oft realized potentially associated with such "as if" practices, Luhrmann turns to the psychoanalytic concept of the transitional object. In this turn of phrase “object” means something much different than it does when it is used by object-oriented ontology types. But despite that, I think that thinking through God as an object in the second sense, to supplement the Object-relations psychoanalytic theory sense in which Luhrmann uses the word, brings out a valuable strand in Luhrmann's ethnography that otherwise might be occluded. What does this phenomenon that Luhrmann discusses look like when viewed from that vantage point where, without undoing any of Luhrmann's substantive claims, one shifts from an epistemological framing, where one asks how it is that something appears as real, to the ontological question of what kind of being something is?

Viewed in this light, the first thing that stands out is that Luhrmann's Vineyard informants are right to object to the description of God as an imaginary friend, if imaginary is taken to be a synonym for *not real.* Because at least in an ontological framing, even if God were to be nothing other than a phantasm, a phantasm is at least an object, and therefore must be given the dignity of being seen as such; it must be conceived as being equivalent to all other objects in its potentiality of both affecting and being affected *by* all other objects, human and otherwise, that it becomes entwined with. But also note that to view God this way, as pure phantasm, would be to fall for the work of purification, automatically situating an object on one side or the other of an agentive-immaterial/anagentive-material divide. When viewed this way, we can see that God is in essence a hybrid object, composed by a series of heterogeneous constitutive objects set in relation to each other, such as the space holding items such as the second coffee cup, as well as numerous productive and stabilizing texts, such as the before mentioned prayer manuals and hand written journals. Even the neurological wet-ware that serves as the supporting stratum allowing these imaginary practices to occur should be included. They are all subordinate objects of various degrees and differing forms of *materiality*, but under the presumption of this analytic, of equal degrees of *reality*.

The genius of Luhrmann's description is not the way in which God is decomposed, however, but the way in which the decomposition process does not in the end undo God as a larger integrated object with which individuals have relations. In fact, this de-composite nature is *essential* to the idea of God as an object with a unity, not antithetical to it. This is because it is the heterogeneous composition that allows God to function as a constant source of *surprise*. Why Luhrmann does not quite foreground this

in her ethnography, instead emphasizing a domesticating sense of familiarity when it comes to God, it is the aspect of Charismatic surprise which allows for the sense that one is dealing with an agentive alterity, of being confronted with something that exceeds one's expectations (Bialecki 2008, Smith 2010). Surprise is important because it helps address one of the chief issues that Luhrmann's believers struggle with: creating a sensation that one is interacting with an autonomous being with an independent will. God, working through means of an unanticipated coincidence, or through suddenly producing an image or intuition in the mind of a believer which conveys knowledge she wouldn't normally possess, or informs the believer or a duty or obligation that she would not normally feel beholden to, leaves a psychic impression of an encounter with an entity that very much has its own powers and intentions. If the contemporary God of Western Charismatic Christianity is merely and solely a self-created phantasm, a product solely of one's own mind, then producing that element of surprise associate with alterity in what is in essence a solipsistic bubble would seem to be a challenging proposition, one which may indeed presume fractures in the phantasizing self associated with the kinds of pathology that Luhrmann is rightly skeptical of. But if God is built of unconnected heterogeneous objects, each with different substrates from the grossly material to the subtlety neurological, each with its own range of internal variability or degree of plasticity, and each with its own unconnected historical trajectory, then one would be little surprised by the fact that as a greater composite object, God displays an effective "will" autonomous of those who in effect produce Him. Different psychic, semiotic, material and social systems, each operating to their own ends, could not help but create patterns that are both emergent, and often novel.[13] And this is

important not because heterogony is unique to God – but rather, because this internal difference is *not* unique. Conventional human actors are heterogonous as well, and it is this shared commonality that makes this God seem all the more identifiable, and perhaps even relatable, as an agent.

None of this is absent from either Luhrmann's ethnographic evidence, nor from the substantive argument that she mobilizes this evidence to defend. But cast in terms of experience and epistemology rather than ontology it is the heterogeneous nature of the composite object that is God stands in sharper relief in Luhrmann's work. While that is certainly an important contribution to make, what I would like to point out is that an account of God as a heterogeneous, *yet simultaneously singular and unified object* allows us to think of God as a *social actor* - that is, with a certain range of capacities that is a function of his composition in the space where he is constructed, and yet at the same time including an emergent capacity to escape prediction or control by those who fabricate him. In short, as portrayed by Luhrmann and as articulated here, God acts with the same kind of stochastic wildness that is usually allocated to the other, human agents that stand in the center of so much of contemporary anthropological writing.

Now, it is not clear what it would mean to insert God as an actor in social networks, but one surprise might be that the accounts of social processes within ethnographies might come to more closely resemble the way that these movements are both understood and experienced by the ethnographer's subjects. This would also mean a break with how the divine is normally portrayed in ethnography – which is normally solely as a warrant for human action, reflexive and otherwise – and would therefore mean the end to a certain kind of humanism present in much of the best of

contemporary ethnography, and particularly present in the ethnography of American religion; while humans may in some ways still constructing God, we may find that it might be in much the same way that economic actors construct the economy in Marx. Finally, we should mention that this is a possibility that might exist as much under erasure as it does as a presence ethnographically; there might be powerful reasons, having to do with the nature of authority, charisma, and institutional longevity, that all mitigate against God being present as a social actor, even in the Charismatic/Pentecostal circles that specialize in producing him. For instance, to return to Elisha's monograph as an example, we don't know if it is a sensual God that speaks directly to believers – through affect, or perhaps even visionary processes – in the process of producing a conviction in them; or alternately if it is God that is textually expressed, a logocentric deity created by and constrained through hermeneutic imperatives that leave their mark, perhaps negatively, on these believers who struggle to break with a Christian individualistic ethos. We know that they read texts, and we know that they have affects and sensibilities, but presenting all those things as the properties of Humans, as opposed to a Human constructed, but non-Fetishized God, prevents us from seeing all the agents that might be in play. Again, this is not to criticize Elisha – or any other anthropologist – as lacking, but instead to ask what more could be done in the future, by an anthropology that is willing to also include entities beyond 'anthropos.' But these are the sorts of issues that in some ways the anthropology of Christianity, and a wider anthropology of religion, has yet to grapple with, or at least, had yet to grapple with before Luhrmann's book.

Veridicality

Let me conclude by observing that this is not a one-way operation, however. As we might expect in a discussion about object-oriented ontology, the object called anthropology has an agency of its own, working independent effects that are performed on the object called Latour. Specifically, there is an operation that it performs on Latour's account of *religion*. Recall that it was Latour's attention to religion that recommended him to us in the first place, an attention that makes him unique, to my knowledge, among object-oriented ontologists. Latour's account of religion, though, contains some surprising inversions. He sees the religion/science distinction as one in essence between the familiar terms of immanence and transcendence. This may seem to be a rather tired opposition until one learns that it is religion that is on the side of immanence, and it is science that is on the side of transcendence. For Latour, science is transcendent because it is always attempting, through corralled chains of objects, to either be affect by or 'translate' that which would escape human senses, such as the microscopic, the statistical, or the cosmological. By contrast, religion is that which is directly and immediately apprehensible to the senses, without recourse to any prostheses, and which produces no knowledge. Instead of an extension, religion is a revivification and an intensification of an intimate knowledge that is already grasped, but which is in danger of being forgotten; despite this being a return, it is also a recreation, for it is being brought forward in new circumstances with each moment of the 'religious.' In short, for Latour religious practice is on the order of a performative, a statement that functions to recreate a state of affairs through its declaration (Latour 2001; see generally Miller *in press*).

Now, this may seem to be a very particular and historically specific imagination of what religion is and how it functions, and Latour would acknowledge this, stating that what he puts forward is a view of religion from his singular position - that of a somewhat free thinking French Catholicism (Golinski 2010). But that specificity does not mean that Latour is against counting sheep and goats. For Latour, religion that does not follow this performative model runs the risk of being *incorrect*. An example of this would be certain forms of fundamentalism, particularly fundamentalisms that aspire to the level of self-accredited certainty associated with science, such as young earth creationism (Latour 2005). With this type of religiosity, rather than focusing on the immanent, performative aspects of the practice, these forms of crypto-scientific faith attempt to create the kind of long referential, transcendent chains associated with scientific enterprises. In short, they use religious texts either in the place of, or as supplements to, scientific prosthesis, to interrogate things beyond the immediate sensory, cognitive and affectual horizon. These forms of religiosity are targets of Latour's opprobrium because he claims that these chains fail - or rather, open themselves up substantially to running the risk of failure. For Latour, making these sort of transcendent claims, claims which exceed a space of immediacy and which privilege a ‘referential’ over a ‘performative’ content, is dependent upon one's capacity to establish the sort of long-running chains of objects forged by scientific practices. The trouble is that this process is conducted with material that is not scientific, but rather religious either in impetus, method, or origin – one attempts to enchain the stars or the fossil record with sacred texts rather that with scientific instruments. And this risk is a serious one, since it is a maxim for Latour that objects that are candidates for being caught up in these religio-scientific assemblages,

like any other object, may "resist" this attempt, using their own agentive capacities to act in ways that may be independent of the religio-scientific projects which motivate those chains (Latour 1988). The earth may not ‘want’ to be ten thousand years old, as opposed to four and a half billion.

What does failed enchainment mean? To the extent that these chains fail to endure, to hold together, then according to Latour, *they are not true*. Frist this gives us a definition of truth that is independent of the question of existence, since these larger composite and collapsing objects are still objects; they are just not "true" objects. Second, this is a form of truth that is situational, relative, and open, in that we can talk about how stable a particular information transducing chain or assemblage is in relation to another information transducing chain or assemblage, and we can still be open to the possibility that further events may strain a larger composite object in ways that have not been anticipated, rendering it false at some future moment.

But what might this relative and situational mode of truth/verification look like in practice – and specifically, in religious practice? Now, certainly, the total catastrophic collapse of the chain of composite objects that fail to corral the target objects that they address might be one of the forms that failure or falsehood takes. One can think of instances of failed prognosticated apocalypses, predicted using religious-originated assemblages (both Harold Camping and William Miller come to mind). But in citing young earth creationism, a field that appears to always be leaning to one side without tipping over, Latour seems to suggest that there may be instances when rather than having the entire facade fall, you may get quivering instabilities as objects such as the earth's geology, fossils and carbon 14 atoms go one way, while other implements –

instrumental, but textual and human as well, struggle vainly to lead them another way altogether.

This would create the appearance of a shimmer in the constitutive object, as it starts to fly apart from centrifugal forces, only to be hesitantly and temporarily reassembled by centripetal work. Now, this shimmering is something that has already encountered in this essay: it can be seen in the manner in which Charismatic phenomena are discussed in the Vineyard, where explanations for phenomena such as prophecy and healing flutter between naturalistic and supernatural frameworks

This is not to say that the God of the Vineyard is a false object, in the Latourian sense (especially since claims of truth or falsity are not of a binary nature, except in states of obvious collapse, but are rather relative claims). However, we should notice this: this shimmering in Vineyard religiosity complicates an easy reading of religion - even "proper" religion - as a pure, immanent performative that stands in a stark opposition to a transcendent science. These Vineyard Pentecostal practices can be conceived of as transcendent in the Latourian meaning of the term, in that they could be articulated as ways to capture knowledge or manipulate objects that would elude the immediate senses. However, Luhrmann follows the usual Vineyard framing of classifying these gifts as "Signs and Wonders," where the supernatural aspect, regardless of the apparent utilitarian edge inherent in some of the gifts, is ultimately destined to assist in belief – to create the sense of certainty regarding the divine, solving what Matthew Engelke (2007) has called “the problem of presence.” They remind one of what they already know, though in a novel way – that they have a relationship with God. To the degree that this is the ultimate desideratum, then, these gifts follow in

aspiration if not design the Latourian logic of an immanent performative, rather than a transcendental chain. But despite this supposed immanence, these Pentecostal-style religious practices seem to be subject to falling apart, having the armature of objects that hold and represent it being reconstructed on the fly with the use of entirely "naturalistic" objects. It seems to me that this means that at least in some moments, even the seemingly most intimate of religious acts such as these are not mere performatives, but to an extent are also enchained objects, objects that differ from the objects in "transcendent science" not in the length of the proposed chains, but in the effective relations that they give rise to, a series of smaller objects such as material props, cultural practices, and neurological structures that reach out and co-construct a God, but with the goal not just grasping some alterity, but of allowing this form of alterity to reach back and seize the believer in turn.

In short, the Pentecostal style gifts in the Vineyard, even if they are intended to act as immanent and immediate reminders of God's love, reality, and power, do so only through extended chains of objects that reach up to the heavens and back again, and therefore run the risks of any other long, transcendent chain. And while it is hard to generalize from a single case, it may be that this is a risk by all chains that include something like the God of Abrahamic faiths – Latour's God included. This makes sense. In a world of nothing *but* objects, *all* objects are vulnerable to separation and decomposition; and while this reading might distress or annoy those who rely on long chains involving or invoking God, those who don't rely on God as an object should humbly remember that the chains they rely upon are in the end no more secure, either.

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[2] Latour, Bruno, Graham Harman, and Peter Erdélyi 2011:101.

[3] James 2008:374.

[4] Again, it is important to remember that despite the surface similarities between Descola and Vivreiros de Castro, what is meant by the term, and what it portends, is quite different from these two thinkers, as Latour (2009) himself has observed,

[5] This should be separated from an overlapping, but non-identical, movement often referred to as ‘speculative realism,’ which is more broadly concerned with critically interrogating the Kantian “Copernican Revolution” and allowing for direct metaphysical speculation about aspects of reality that can not be reduced to mere representations in human consciousness (Bryant, Srnicek and Harman 2011); the most notable figure in this broader movement is probably Quentin Meillassoux (2008).

[6] The chief fault lines into the movement are whether or not one should foreground objects apart from, or embedded within, larger networks, as well as whether or not one should describe objects as having both virtual and actual components, as opposed to merely conceiving of them as having multiple internal aspects, tensions, and polarities.

[7] “Agents” and “objects” are occasionally also glossed as “actants,” though the word “object” should be understood as all these concepts, as least as far as this discussion goes.

[8] While this concept is common to much of this school, the particular term is one that Bryant (2011:112) has imported from DeLanda (2002).

[9] A legacy that runs from Mauss (2000) to Appadurai (1988) and Strathern (1988), and continues with Henare, Holbraad and Wasell (2007).

[10] Eastern orthodoxy has been a particularly rich domain; One can think of, for instance, Gabriel Hanganu's (2010) work on Icons in Romania, or Angie Heo's (2012, 2013) recent pieces on the circulation and visibility of relics and apparitions in Coptic Christianity; closer to forms of religiosity that are in identifiable dialogue with the North American Pentecostal/charismatic Christian scene has been Fenella Cannell's work on the materiality of Christianity both in Catholic Bicol (1999) and in the Utah-based church of the Latter Day Saints (2005). We would also be remiss if we didn't mention Britt Halvorson's (2012) work with the materiality of volunteer produced medical devices in American based, but internationally directed Lutheran medical missions, or more importantly, Simon Coleman’s work (2004, 2006) on the materialist and donative aspects of economic and linguistic exchange in The Swedish Prosperity Gospel. Finally, Blanton’s (2012) work on the materiality of Pentecostal Appalachian Radio is opening up new vistas a phenomenology of technology that will have strong and lasting effects on the conversation in the sub-discipline.

[11] See also Engelke (2007), Robbins (2001), Bialecki (2011a), Bialecki and Hoenes del Pinal (2011).
[12] See Keane 2009, which seems to argue for a limitation of social/cultural variance to different *interpretations* of realty, rather than different projects, successful or otherwise, working towards assembling objects in particular, local manners, in furtherance of particular, local ends.
[13] It should be noted that as the various elements of this assemblage are placed in different relations with each other, and as elements are added or subtracted, the character, intensity, and speed of both production and transmission of surprise may change, which suggests how it is that Christian devotional and spiritual experience varies so much across differently constituted Christianities.