

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013, 174 pp. \$24.95, paper (978-0-7456-6007-3)

Rejoicing begins much as one might expect of a work by an intellectual engaged in secular pursuits (in Latour's case, the study of scientific communication) who nonetheless takes seriously a religious commitment. The tone at first is embarrassed, even tortured. Latour resists facile criticisms of religion by so-called new atheists, but finds the standard rationales for religious commitment lacking. However, past the midpoint of the book, the tone shifts toward a startling recuperation of the whole of the faith. But he does *not* do so as a "believer": "belief in belief" is one of the book's targets. Latour speaks out of a specific religious tradition (Roman Catholicism), but he carries a bomb with him.

Rejoicing does not comfort or direct its reader; there are no chapters, subheads, summaries, or index, only the occasional enigmatic header. It proceeds through a vertiginous twisting and turning from question to assertion to "diabolical" pitfall to sudden shift. One cannot say easily, "the argument is...". It does, nonetheless, connect to the larger body of Latour's work. Those who have read *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (2010) and *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013) will find much that is familiar; the French original of *Rejoicing* predates both these works.

Latour contrasts three types of communication, all of which may be "reasoned", but in different ways. One, the aesthetic, is discussed only briefly. Scientific speech is characterized as "informative"; its assertions depend on the painstaking construction of "chains of reference" through measurement and experimentation, and the making and remaking of assertions. Latour, however, is not a facile relativist. The work of construction involves judgement, decisions, risks, ambiguities, but it accomplishes something *worthwhile*. The enemy – and simulacrum – of science is "double-click" communication, which takes for granted, or worse occludes this labour, presenting its accomplishments as simple facts of modernist "progress".

By contrast to scientific communication, religious and aesthetic speech bring the distant close by what one appear to be intuitive leaps: the scientist, confronted with these modes of thought, is tempted to dis-

miss them as facile and insupportable. Neither demonstrates or informs in the way science does. Rather, religious speech transforms; it draws together and (unlike the aesthetic), it can *convert* and *save*. Through repetitive imitation, it connects past directly to present, but what it repeats is the same and *not* the same; in its reapprehension, it *translates* and makes radically new; the opposite of preservation. The connections it makes are not only vertical, but transverse across different situations and languages. For religious speech, the enemy is a rationalization which turns away from this illumination to focus instead on “belief” and description of its objects. For Latour, this is a category mistake which represents religious speech as a poor cousin of scientific communication, attempting the same results without effort or accountability. But it is also *false friendship to religion* to try, in response to this embarrassment, to reduce it rationally to a least-offensive common denominator of descriptive universals. The point of religious speech is that it *acts*, and in acting, it makes connections, and agents, and it changes things, at times *discomfortingly*.

Latour employs an analogy to make this more comprehensible. What lovers say to each other is *performative*; the question “Do you love me” is not asking for an objective description of a physiological response, nor a phenomenological description of a feeling-state. The question demands words that are commitment or refusal, not mere description. The proper *religious* question is not “Does God Exist?”, but “Who do you say that I am? Will you follow me?” Unlike history, which anchors the present in the past, religion brings the past forward and re-presents it, making it not “a presence” but urgently *present*. In the end, Latour argues that the substance of religious speech does not matter. For all its words, narratives, sayings, religious speech *says nothing*; its Good News contains *no news*. It does not present us with a constitution, a manifesto, a guarantee of happiness. Its Way is not a map; if made into a map, one is sure to lose the way. What matters is not substance but “attributes”; not an informative melody but a transformative rhythm; not the topic but a connection. Like the “talk of lovers that saves them from moving apart,” this language “lives among them”; it “doesn’t add one bit of information, no knowledge, not a single fact to their little world, yet it has already transfigured that world from within” (138). The Body of Christ, the Holy Spirit, “Jesus”, are ultimately a matter of what Christians *do in and through this language*. Getting caught in theological tangles over *what* or *who* these are misses the point. Latour recognizes that this conclusion will be equally frustrating to many who practise religion and to those who study it. But it is in exactly this frustrating emptiness that he makes his apologetic stand. The most kitschy of traditional formulae are

worth preserving, not for their descriptive truth-value, nor their aesthetics, nor their simplicity or elaboration, but because, somehow, somewhere, to someone, they can suddenly flame alive – despite themselves. Attempts to reduce this awkwardness to some acceptable, reasonable common denominator are doomed. No love relationship is “pure”; none is a mere expression of some pristine inner core; all are tangled and baffling jumbles of accretions, contradictions, waffling, backtracking, and moments of clarity (which are precisely *indescribable*) in which things are clearly fulfilled, or clearly over.

What, here, is of interest to a sociologist “of” religion? Perhaps a warning about the penchant of sociology to maintain its own versions of “double-click” certainty about what religion is. But the displacement of religious substance which is associated with such a warning raises its own issues. For Latour, the substantial human variety of religious life matters as *occasions* for religious transformation, but not as definitive features. Other reviewers of Latour resist his thesis on precisely this point: for them, substance *matters*. Latour might not disagree, but *how* it matters, and how his strictures on the role of substantive description avoid reduction in another direction, beg further elaboration.

Latour’s discussion of religious speech is informed by his appreciation for Gabriel Tarde’s refusal of grand designs; “ghosts of ideas” taken to be definitive of actualities; more actual than the actual. For Latour, the social is *associative*; it is *made* by particular agents, themselves made of other associations. The work of religious speech is to draw together and make things and people anew, and this does not take place in terms of an underlying mechanism. Latour consciously poses this approach as a challenge to the Durkheimian tradition in the sociology of religion. For Latour, religion is not a social fact; not a derivative of social structure or function, nor of the collective. Religious communication is not primarily about classification; it is neither prescientific description nor prescientific theory. Nor is religion reducible to collective emotion or a collective force. It is not an emanation or effect of a fundamental sacred/profane dichotomy. However, there is one possible point of connection. For Durkheim, like Latour, the importance of the sacred lay in its attributes, not its substance – in the act of distinguishing. Could one argue that the importance of setting apart a sacred thing does not lie in the thing, nor even in its symbolic value, but instead in something *else* that distinguishing it communicates? Namely a reserved space and a vehicle through which religious agency may work?

However, is it not precipitous to shunt aside the variegated substance of the human side of religion? Given Latour’s own ethnographic emphasis on the particularity of scientific work, one might argue that what is

good for the scientific goose might also serve for the religious gander. One might also argue that Latour challenges only a particularly reductive version of Durkheimian sociology; that Durkheim – at least in some moments – did not see religion as derivative of the social, but as a mode of action constitutive of it; that he did not hypostasize “beliefs” in the way Latour might claim he did, and that Durkheim, too, would have asserted that religion is *made*. The debate, then, would be over that making, and how it can be called social.

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