

FAMILY, RELIGION, PEDAGOGY AND EVERYDAY EDUCATION PRACTICE

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BRUNO LATOUR'S THEO-ECOLOGIES AND ECO-THEOLOGIES, OR ON THE PEDAGOGICAL POTENTIAL OF A HYBRID LANGUAGE AS AN INSPIRATION FOR A RELIGIOUS STUDIES PEDAGOGY OF RELIGION

ABSTRACT:

We live in an age of planetary instability. The climate crisis has effectively captured the public imagination. It seems that in the face of numerous environmental crises, even science and religion, despite all their irremediable differences and mutual biases, are sometimes able to think and act together. The interpenetration of these two distinct orders: 'knowledge' and 'faith' is a symptom of such a change. The example of Bruno Latour's ecotheological argument presented in this study is an interesting testimony to the hybridization of the language of science and the language of religion. Since Latour's 'negotiations' touch upon such unobvious interfaces as STS and humanities or science and religion, it is worthwhile for the pedagogy of religion to reach not only to theology, which is a constant point of reference for the traditional pedagogy of religion, but also to critical religious studies. Its theoretical potential could help integrate the topic of religion with new-materialist, post-secular, non-anthropocentric, post-humanist, and pro-ecological thought.

KEYWORDS:

Bruno Latour, Anthropocene, science, religion, hybridity, hybridization, pedagogy of religion

We live at a time of planetary instability¹. The climate crisis has effectively gripped the Western imagination and it is hard not to get the impression that in the face of challenges on this scale, all hands must be on deck! Discourses of disparate orders, conflicting ways of thinking, theories and ideologies are rapidly acquiring an equal status in the public space. It is as if the severity of the ecological *fin de siècle* and the gravity of the *earth's* situation began to effectively burst through the thick and baked armour of political indifference, which Robert Esposito defined as a liberal paradigm of immunizing the individual from communal negativity, when a systemically produced series of defence mechanisms relieves the individual from his communal obligations². It looks like the somewhat dusty utopia of global solidarity has been given a boost (is it not too late, though?). The agitation about the state of the world is spreading unexpectedly widely, not only in the sciences, but also in... religion. This fever reverberates in an interesting way in language: 'the apathy of the Anthropocene'³, 'the arrogance of the Anthropocene'⁴, 'the policy of nature'⁵, 'catastrophic climate change'⁶, 'climate wars'⁷ –

¹ E. Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka. Retoryka i marazm antropocenu*, Warszawa 2018, p. 11.

² *Immunitas* "reconstructs their [individuals' – MH] identity by protecting them from a risky contiguity with the other, relieving them of every obligation toward the other and enclosing them once again in the shell of their own subjectivity" (R. Esposito, *Terms of the Political. Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, transl. R. N. Welch, Fordham University Press New York 2013, p. 49). See also: M. Ratajczak, "Poza paradygmat immunizacji: biopolityka w projekcie filozoficznym Roberta Esposito", *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 2011, no. 2-3, p. 176; J. Bednarek, *Życie, które mówi Nowoczesna wspólnota i zwierzęta*, Warszawa 2021, p. 102 ff.

³ E. Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka*, op. cit.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 121.

⁵ B. Latour, *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Cambridge, London 2004.

⁶ U. Beck, "Global Public Sphere and Global Subpolitics or: How Real is Catastrophic Climate Change?"; [in:] U. Beck, *World at Risk*, Cambridge 2009, p. 81-108.

⁷ H. Welzer, *Climate Wars. What People Will Kill for in the 21st Century*, Cambridge 2012.

the categories and terms work in the social sciences and the humanities parallel to other ones, from theological or religious discourse: 'ecothology'⁸, 'save the creation'⁹, 'ecological spirituality'¹⁰, 'ecological conversion'¹¹, 'ecological apocalypse'¹², 'cosmos' which 'walks the way of the cross and resurrection'¹³ or 'cosmic brotherhood'¹⁴.

Is this ceasefire between the discourses of 'knowledge' and 'faith' just an accident, or is it perhaps a signal of some long-term regularity? What should be favourable and what should stand in the way of this surprising conjunction? In the face of the apathy of the Anthropocene and numerous ecological crises, would science and religion, having accepted each other's incompatibility and inconsistency, really be able to think and act for the common good in the long term, despite all their mutual prejudices? If so, what kind of concessions would both have to make? Perhaps, still, this kind of rapprochement is illusory, and the utopia of the mythical 'common good' would turn out to be just a pipe dream, a paltry consolation of two separate orders, which have not much time left anyway? Finally, does this peculiar, hybrid alliance have any bearing on pedagogical thinking? Although I find all these questions intriguing, I will certainly not be able to answer them in this study. Instead, I want to focus primarily on outlining a new-materialist, ethical and post-secular framework for this type of linguistic recognition and exemplify it with ecotheological arguments for establishing a new relationship between religion and matter as proposed by the philosopher of science and anthropologist Bruno Latour. Finally, I will try to signal the potential of such hybridization of language for pedagogical thinking.

⁸ B. Latour, "Will Non-Humans Be Saved? An Argument in Ecotheology", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2009, no. 15, p. 463.

⁹ T. Twardziłowski, *Ocalić stworzenie. Teoria i zastosowanie ekologicznej hermeneutyki Biblii*, Warszawa 2017.

¹⁰ Francis, *Encyclical Laudato si', mi' Signore. On care for our common home* (24 May 2015), Vatican 2015, p. 161 ff.

¹¹ A. Annett, Z. Radzik, "Wybór ekonomiczny jest wyborem moralnym", *Magazyn Kontakt* 2017, no. 34.

¹² E. Bendyk, *Ekologia i klimat, pokusa katastrofizmu*, <https://antymatrix.blog.polityka.pl/2019/12/23/ekologia-i-klimat-pokusa-katastrofizmu/>, access: 12.05.2021.

¹³ After: W. Hryniewicz, "Chrześcijaństwo a świat przyrody", *Miesięcznik Znak* 2008, no. 637.

¹⁴ S. Jaromi, "Na straży stworzenia", *Magazyn Kontakt* 2014, no. 26, p. 9.

THE HYBRID LANGUAGE OF 'THEO-ECOLOGY' – MATERIALIST, ETHICAL AND POST-SECULAR IMPULSES

It seems that the horror of the ecological crisis makes us think, speak and act in a *Totally New Way*. The capital letters and italics of the last words are by no means accidental: imparting new shapes and meanings to earlier ways of talking about the world bears the signs of a profound ecological trauma (among other things)¹⁵ and of an attempt at its overcoming. The earlier language at this stage of the history of Western philosophy seems to poorly reflect current imagery and states of the world, statuses of humans and non-humans. Let us recapitulate.

The social sciences and the humanities, in attempting to theorise a new type, have made numerous transgressions within it. For decades, with more or less care, they have been seeking support for it on a broader scale, including in science and technology studies (STS)¹⁶. The good old humanistic concern with thought is increasingly confronted in them with what can be called 'the material of the real'¹⁷, i.e. with matter, the real and the sensual. They reshape the language of talking about the world and generated within it ever new categories, better suited to the 'new times', often running contrary to established modern criteria of the division of the sciences¹⁸. Researchers representing such hybrid practices of thinking and speaking make up a broad, internally diverse current of new materialism(s).

This current has emerged as an attempt to overcome the legacy of broadly defined deconstruction and the ethical turn. The basic motivation here is the conviction that

¹⁵ The ecological crisis remains a fact of life that has dire consequences for philosophy. However, there is of course a broader, post-anthropocentric and post-humanist context for reflection on the condition of the planet and the people and non-humans who inhabit it. A sense of general disillusionment with the thought of the modern West seems to be reflected perfectly in the various philosophies of new materialism. In them, this weariness with the thinking of a mono-subject manifests itself in various ways. We see a turn towards life understood as a network of interrelations that spawn non-isolated organisms, see J. Bednarek, *Życie, które mówi Nowoczesna wspólnota i zwierzęta*, op. cit., p. 75.

¹⁶ See K. Abriszewski, R. Wiśniewski, "Wstęp", [in:] B. Latour, S. Woolgar, *Życie laboratoryjne*, Warszawa 2020, p. 17.

¹⁷ See E. Robakiewicz, Review "Nowa filozofia francuska", *Machina Myśli* 2014, no. 6.

¹⁸ See e.g. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis, London 1987.

the deconstructive conceptual apparatus is insufficient from the political point of view (because, as an anti-essentialist, it does not have a sufficiently strong concept of social change) and ontologically non-modern (because it is in fact an idealism indifferent to the latest scientific achievements). The unifying element of these theories, which are gaining momentum, has become a call for a renewed materialism that does not restore traditional forms of essentialism, but transforms the very concepts of identity and essence, opening up the possibility of their effective and critical application¹⁹.

The ecological crisis is thus no longer just a pressing internal problem for the earth sciences, but also a challenge for the social sciences and the humanities²⁰. At the same time, it is one of the key catalysts of ongoing theory-generating transformations occurring within these sciences. One type of theoretical perspectives must be highlighted here; it is the actor-network theory, originating in the STS²¹.

Krzysztof Abriszewski believes that it offers an opportunity for expanding ontological imagination beyond earlier, bipolar solutions such as nature-culture, or, within culture itself – beyond the ambivalent *freedom, creativity* on the one hand and *order, regularity and stability* on the other²². Following Bruno Latour, Abriszewski indicates that in ‘cognitive’ processes we never deal with a simple ‘one cause-one effect’ principle, but with whole chains (or networks) of actions. These networks are highly dynamic and are never fixed once and for all²³. Applying terms ‘used’ by various theories of this type, such as ‘negotiations’, ‘black boxes’, ‘stabilisations’ and ‘punctualisations’, Abriszewski indicates the irremovable and continuous processuality of the emergence and disintegration of cultural orders, their trajectories, dynamics

19 “Filozofie plastyczności i przygodności”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 2018, vol. 28, no. 2 p. 8-9.

20 Naomi Klein, for instance, directly calls climate change an existential crisis, see N. Klein, *This Changes Everything. Capitalism vs. The Climate*, New York 2014, p. 13.

21 See K. Abriszewski, “Teoria Aktora-Sieci Bruno Latoura”, *Teksty Drugie* 2007, no. 1-2, p. 113-126.

22 See K. Abriszewski, “Teoria aktora-sieci jako teoria kultury”, [in:] *Kultura nie-ludzka*, ed. A. Kil, J. Małczyński, D. Wolska, *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 2015, xviii, p. 101-105.

23 See K. Abriszewski, “Teoria Aktora-Sieci Bruno Latoura”, op. cit., p. 115. As one might guess, the dispute in science will therefore largely involve strengthening one’s own network and weakening that of competitors.

and causality assigned by humans, non-humans, processes, and procedures²⁴. In principle, in posthumanism, which continues to use the category of culture, 'humans', guilty of all kinds of 'sins' of modernity and modern philosophy, ceases to be a measure of subjectivity. The bigger the distance to humans' central position, the more one hears a subject of a new type. As Joanna Bednarek observes, "one no longer speaks of life as encapsulated in individual organisms that can then be subjects of interests worthy of consideration; rather, one speaks of life as a network of interrelationships emerging from organisms that are never isolated"²⁵. Such an ecological and biopolitical approach to the subject will trigger ever new, transgressive fields of empathy. It will extend its 'cultural-natural' scope towards the *non-human*, towards animals, plants, matter, processes, machines; in a word – towards a world as a net-organism, as a complex and indivisible multiplicity.

Unfortunately, purely rational reasons were never enough to extend the fields of empathy indispensable for dealing with the ecological crisis.

Good arguments are not enough to make us act; they do not engage our emotions; they do not make the shifts in perception necessary to discern evil in what [...] constitutes 'normal practice'. [...] In addition, reason remains inseparable from a particular form of violence, no less terrifying than the violence of irrationalism: an essential dimension of [modern] analytic ethics remains the formulation of rules for making decisions, including decisions about who will live and who should die, without hesitation, without arbitrariness, based on accurate criteria²⁶.

The state of the world cannot therefore be corrected solely on the basis of what is rational. After all, according to some, modernity predicated on the 'rational' has led to the current ecological crisis. Critical of modernity, contemporary sciences attempt to 'generate' a new type of arguments and a new language that can cope with them, unhindered by old conventions. As Marcin Napiórkowski, a researcher of contemporary myths, stresses:

²⁴ See K. Abriszewski, "Teoria aktora-sieci jako teoria kultury", op. cit., p. 107.

²⁵ J. Bednarek, *Życie, które mówi Nowoczesna wspólnota i zwierzęta*, op. cit., p. 75.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 96-97.

An effective fight against anti-scientific myths cannot be limited to refuting false information, because every debunked nonsense is replaced by three more. The discussion around the causes and effects of the climate crisis is a perfect example. Therefore, instead of being reactive, we should launch a counterattack. To begin with, we must understand the needs that pseudo-scientific content serves today, and the patterns that determine what we deem scary or menacing. Instead of debunking myths, we must learn to create our own myths!²⁷.

Thus, today we revert to religion and a religious language, which was seen as irrational in modernity. As Rosi Braidotti explains the post-secular turn:

A post-secular approach, posited confirm anti-humanist grounds makes manifest the previously unacceptable notion that rational agency and political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality. Belief systems and their rituals are perhaps not incompatible with critical thought and practices of citizenship²⁸.

Thus, within post-anthropocentric and post-humanist thoughts there are intriguing mixtures of languages and styles of speaking of e.g. the ecological crisis. The language of science is inspired here by the language of religion, and the other way around. As a result, the plea to save the planet seems to resound more powerfully and can appeal directly to 'hearts' and emotions better. Political action built on transcended empathy, to use Max Weber's term, gains an important causative potential, which cannot be overestimated in the face of the grim facts of the climate disaster.

FROM ECOLOGY TO SOTERIOLOGY – BRUNO LATOUR'S ECOTHEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The intriguing hybridisation of language is fittingly illustrated in scientific discourse by Bruno Latour's text "Will Non-Humans Be Saved? An

²⁷ M. Napiórkowski, "Dlaczego potrzebujemy mitów, żeby uratować świat?", <https://klimatyczneabc.uw.edu.pl/dodatki>, access: 7.07.2021.

²⁸ R. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge 2013, p. 35.

Argument in Ecotheology”²⁹. The author’s main claim is the conviction that one cannot do contemporary anthropology or stimulate ecological awareness without the ability to understand and ‘speak in tongues’, i.e. without “to be sensitive to each of the original ways of speaking truthfully which have been developed and nurtured”: scientific, legal, political, but also religious³⁰. The concept of a ‘negotiable’ approach to agency and policy, key for solving problems of common good also in language, is developed by Latour in the book *Politics of Nature*. Here he stresses that “Everything is negotiable, including the words ‘negotiation’ and ‘diplomacy’, ‘sciences’ and ‘democracy’—simple white flags waved at the front to suspend hostilities”³¹. In his view, current eco-friendly policies, which boil down, for example, to the widespread mobilisation of the ‘rich North’ to segregate waste, give up plastic or turn off the water while brushing teeth, are marked not only by a highly illusory efficiency (as Latour observes, “When the first tremors of the Apocalypse are heard, it would seem that preparations for the end should require something more than simply using a different kind of lightbulb...”³²), but also by a dark shadow of ethnocentric pride.

According to the French philosopher, ecology should be practiced in a religious way, because religious passions have the potential of mass agency. In his opinion, modernity has robbed religion of this kind of energy, causing a progressive shrinkage of the religious ethos and reducing religion to the non-political private sphere. Religion could, however, gain a renewed chance to enter the game, a chance to postpone the ‘inevitable apocalypse’. It might become an alternative to modernisation and a powerful aid to environmentalism. There are, however, certain preconditions imposed on thinking which religion would have to confront first. Their illumination requires a correction of modern conceptions of the so-called ‘natural world’ and a transformation by religion of its own attitude toward matter.

In his further explanations, Latour refers to two orders, two layers of meaning within what is commonly referred to as ‘the natural world’ or ‘the material world’, to *reference* and *reproduction*. *Reference* involves

²⁹ B. Latour, “Will Non-Humans Be Saved?”, op. cit., p. 459-475.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 460.

³¹ B. Latour, *Politics of Nature*, op. cit., p. 221-222.

³² B. Latour, “Will Non-Humans Be Saved?”, op. cit., p. 462.

the ways of ordering so-called reference chains to be able to adequately fulfil the task of providing knowledge of “far-away entities and processes of all kinds”. *Reproduction* involves the ways of beings themselves sustaining life³³. The author indicates that modern teaching about ‘the world of nature’ erroneously identified or mistook these orders. As a result, referential principles of cause-and-effect chains, identified with scientific procedures of generating knowledge of the world, were projected onto processes linked with reproduction. In other words, despite the different logic and patterns of these processes, reproduction was ‘read’ as one reads ‘reference’. This has led to the creation of the modern illusion of cause-effects and ‘indisputable necessity’ in the ‘natural world’, imagery associated with some transcendent force, some mythical ‘order’ of nature, which the determined matter understood that way would follow. As Latour points out, this modern ‘spiritual’ force imposing supposedly necessary meanings on the world of matter, be it Blind or Smart (the figure of the Blind Watchmaker or Smart Design), has become a phantasm which erroneously attributes spirituality to what is material, while Reproduction is a separate, autonomous and causative process. “Let us at last secularize the world of reproduction. Saint Darwin pray for us to succeed”³⁴, calls the author somewhat sarcastically, directing attention to the mechanism of creativity and causality of matter and non-human actors, crucial for reproduction. In other words, it is the organisms themselves that decide about their own significance. Creativity emerges where these organisms encounter gaps and ruptures. Then, without the support of any transcendent force, without a pattern, they face the risk of reproduction in an all-too-spontaneous and undetermined way in an attempt to prolong, perpetuate and duplicate their existence. As the philosopher explains in a post-humanist vein,

Non-humans have not been emerging for aeons just to serve as so many props to show the mastery, intelligence, and design capacities of humans or their divine creations. They have their own intelligence, their own cunning, their own design, and plenty of transcendence to go on, that is, to reproduce³⁵.

³³ See *ibidem*, p. 466.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 472.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

Freed from theological or crypto-theological thinking, this state of the world of matter, diagnosed by a philosopher inspired by evolutionary biology, would be both an opportunity and a challenge for religion in the context of the ecological crisis. The modern approach to 'the world of nature' made religion withdraw from its relationship with matter. It has turned either to the 'inner sanctuary of the soul' or to the supernatural. Both entail an abandonment of 'creation'. By renouncing its claim to influence the course of events, religion betrayed creation, ceased to care for it and its 'salvation'³⁶. Latour sees, however, the chance of religion redeeming its trespasses against matter. The opportunity could be found in two ideas that are particularly familiar to the 'modern' version of religion, namely Roman Christianity. One is the idea of radical transformation, a fundamental change in everyday life ('*metanoia*', 'conversion', 'Earth's renewal'). The other is 'incarnation', an artificial transformation of the world in the Eucharist (transubstantiation). Latour pins on them a hope of a return of religion to the material world. A gesture of religious transformation and a transformation of things might restore matter to religion, simultaneously changing its status: modern 'nature', discredited, excluded from the field of religion, would be permanently replaced by the theological 'Creation'. Bruno Latour concludes his lecture:

'Creation' could instead be the word to designate what we get when Reproduction and Reference are seized by the religious urge radically to transform that which is given into that which has to be fully renewed. The dream of going to another world is just that: a dream, and probably also a deep sin. But to seize, or seize again, this world, this same, one and only world, to grasp it *otherwise*, that is not a dream, that is a necessity³⁷.

The reconstructed example of Bruno Latour's so-called ecotheological argument illustrates well the process of hybridization of the language which is used to talk about the ecological crisis. It is no coincidence that combining categories drawn from the language of science and religious discourse captures the spirit of science and technology studies (STS), where the category of hybridity is one of the most theoretically

³⁶ See *ibidem*, p. 465-466.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 473.

significant ones. Thus, if contemporary philosophical theories and the humanities, inspired by the latest technologies and neuroscience, unabashedly surrender to the post-secular practices of drawing from the reservoir of fields of religion considered irrational and unscientific, from their theories, imaginaries, concepts, and language, without losing their scientific identity and critical distance from religious ideologies, then also general pedagogy could, on similar grounds, deal with the study of religion and seek in it inspiration for its own theoretical solutions.

What is particularly telling is that within religion itself, even the confessional religion of monotheistic Christianity, readings of biblical texts which firmly turn towards scientific and ecological propositions are increasingly common. I think here of biblical radical ecological, deconstructive-reconstructive hermeneutics³⁸, rejecting the anthropocentric perspective of reading a biblical text for the sake of the 'Earth's perspective'. Tomasz Twardziłowski explains the turn as follow:

the Earth's problem needs an answer, not from human beings, but from the Earth that is capable of solving its own problems provided it is listened to. This form of ecological hermeneutics of the Bible suspects the biblical texts, written by a human hand, of reflecting human interests at the expense of the non-human members of the Earth community, whose suppressed voice must be restored³⁹.

Since Latour's 'negotiations' relate today to such unobvious contacts as STS and humanities, or science and religions, it would be worthwhile also in the field of pedagogy to attempt to transform the theoretical foundations of its sub-discipline, which is the pedagogy of religion, regrettably appropriated by theologies and confessional ideologies. After all, the theoretical potential of religions taken up in the way it occurs in interdisciplinary religious studies, with more than one theory of religion, has a lot of potential. Addressing concepts used in religious studies, such as a ritual of radical micro-sociology by Randall Collins⁴⁰,

³⁸ See T. Twardziłowski, *Ekologiczna hermeneutyka Biblii*, Warszawa 2015, p. 85-86. See T. Twardziłowski, *Ocalić stworzenie*, op. cit.

³⁹ T. Twardziłowski, *Ekologiczna hermeneutyka Biblii*, op. cit., p. 86.

⁴⁰ See R. Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Princeton, Oxford 2004.

the concept of invisible religion by Thomas Luckmann⁴¹, tapping into economics, teaching theory and cultural anthropology of Stark and Bainbridge's theory of religion⁴², or Polish studies by Rafał Włodarczyk on the concept of religion as a general theory of ideology⁴³ or Maciej Czeremski's studies on the evolutionary and cognitive foundations of myths⁴⁴, and of many other theoretical frameworks used for a long time in the social sciences, especially in religious sciences, regrettably left out by pedagogy dealing with religion, might prove rejuvenating for pedagogy itself. Their theoretical potential could provide a major impetus for integrating the topic of religion with new-materialist, post-secular, non-anthropocentric, posthumanist, and pro-ecological thought. The impulse comes from Bruno Latour's hybrid concept, reconstructed in the study, conducive to constructing a pedagogy that could become a pedagogy of *religion* instead of a *religious* pedagogy.

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⁴¹ See T. Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion. The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, New York 1967.

⁴² See R. Stark, W. S. Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, New York 1987.

⁴³ See R. Włodarczyk, *Ideologia teoria edukacja Myśl Ericha Fromma jako inspiracja dla pedagogiki współczesnej*, Kraków 2016.

⁴⁴ See M. Czeremski, *Mit w umyśle Ewolucyjno-kognitywne podstawy form mitycznych*, Kraków 2021.

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