

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing. Or the Torments of Religious Speech*,** transl. Julie Rose.  
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In his book *Rejoicing. Or the Torments of Religious Speech* Bruno Latour undertakes an attempt at the revival of religious speech, which in his opinion is somehow both needed in contemporary times and requiring a new form within a new outlook.

His diagnosis of the “torments of religious speech” amounts to discovering a kind of crucial contrast between two kinds of discourses of our times: on the one hand, there is the speech connected with positivistic, scientific, factual, referential function of describing facts, measures, and data; on the other hand, there is the speech associated with emotional language able to change people’s hearts and establish unity through internal conversion rather than giving factual information or translating the given data. The difference is between communication achieved through reference *versus* unity achieved through conversion; in other words: unity because of translation or unity caused by transformation. Latour claims that the latter method of attaining unity, which was characteristic to religious speech in the past, has been lost nowadays. Universal standards of metrology, scientific conversion of data, and convenient conventions have dominated over the old religious power of speech which made possible the unity of the disciples during the Pentecost. The latter was achieved through transformation of hearts, emotions, conversion of people, and the Spirit making people hear their own tongues at the same time not through translation or information networks creation. The unity possible earlier through religious speech was not established through standardization but through the words able to influence and change emotional attitudes. Latour asks: “Why has it become so hard to mark the difference between what allows access to the distant—reference—and what allows us to transform someone distant into someone close—conversion?” His answer to this question is descriptive, rather than delving deep to the roots of the problem he identifies. He claims that “we confuse the two universals—the inalterable standard and retrospective understanding—and turn the mix into an amorphous monster.” These two universals (metrology *versus* revival transforming lives) are judged by Latour to be incommensurable. Yes, it seems that at some point in

our history we have wiped out the border between them. Latour does not wonder why it happened but expresses his concern and regret caused by the loss of this border.

A suggestion which may come to mind of the reason for not only eliminating the difference between two discourses but also for the obvious triumph of the scientific, metrological speech is the fact of modern reduction of all kinds of discourses to the language of positivistic science. The Weberian “disenchantment” of the world amounted to reducing whatever was mysterious to only piles of information to be gathered, translated, measured or even traded. Knowledge had to be certain, had to pertain to undoubtable facts, and did not concern internal or emotional conversion. On top of that, as Alasdair MacIntyre noticed in his analysis in *After Virtue*, modernity lost the teleological perspective and in effect lost the sense of community. We may say that the lack of common *telos* and the notion of common good may have caused the fact that Latour so strongly deplores, namely that we got rid of not just conversion but also *conversation* within the communitarian context—being together and being understood within a common vocabulary framework without the necessary exchange of information positivistically understood.

The difference between two kinds of discourse is described and analyzed by Latour later in his book in the following way: “Information networks have their grandeur [...] but in the end they don’t amount to a Pentecost. [...] The apostles had not ‘adapted’ their message to all those barbaric languages trooping past. It had nothing to do with standardization or localization. On that blessed day, people were struck by a different form of progressive universalization: they were finally being spoken to in their own language, and the words spoken called on them to be part once again of the same people, to be faithful once again to the same tradition, to be trustees of the same message whose meaning was at last understood and made real.” Latour wonders: “Can we produce this kind of emotional shock ever again?”

It is worth underlining the positive fact of Latour’s identification and regret about the domination of a metrological kind of discourse over yet another way of communication. However, his proposed strategy of rebuilding the discourse devoted to provoking emotional conversion of listeners has its drawbacks. What he seems to exclude is the possibility of practicing the third alternative, namely a reasonable kind of communication changing attitudes not reduced to emotional aspects, yet different from shallow positivism. What’s more, Latour seems to be mistaken in perceiving the old religious discourse to be reduced to emotional dimension. In such perception he may show his own immersion in the modern positivistic outlook, which since the beginning of modernity persuaded us to judge religion as not only irrational but also unreasonable. The experience described by the apostles during the Pentecost, full of emotions, was not reduced to this aspect. Latour seems to exclude the possibility of there being a real presence of God both in the spiritual sense happening at the Pentecost and in the corporal sense of the Incarnation of Logos. Latour is critical of metrological, positivistic description of the world, yet he continues the Enlightenment simplistic opposition between reason and passion without the possibility of recovering the option of passionate reason and reasonable passion, which was

characteristic to the premodern perspective of reasonable and passionate religion established on the basis of experience of Logos communicating with humanity through Incarnation.

Additionally, besides presenting a reduced vision of religious speech, Latour seems to hold a reduced vision of metrology, too. After all, its standards have not come from conventions only but were and still are inspired by or based on nature and its objective, pre-existent, non-contractual character. Latour wonders: "How can we save religion?" and refers us to the kind of dialogue practiced by lovers in their private domain. Again, it is another inspiring challenge, this time being an attempt at bridging the gap between the private and public sphere, based on the public relevance of private love. However, just like with the case of overestimating the emotional aspect of the religious discourse of the past and underestimating the natural basis of metrology, so it is with overstressing the subjective and constructive power of the lovers' language. Latour claims that it is the lovers' actual and present speech acts which create their love anew rather than relying on its past experience. In fact their speech is what influences even the past by making love happen in the present. In other words, nothing can be said to be stable, substantial, natural, objective or independent of our speech acts. Everything depends on human will to use words creating reality. When a lover asks the question "Do you love me?", he or she does not expect to know about the past state of loving but about the present will of loving. Responding to a question about the actual state of loving or not loving makes love happen in a vivid sense "it takes off from the present and goes back to the past, changing and deepening the past's foundation" in Latour's words. In this sense he may also claim that "[t]he start depends on the sequel. The father depends on the son." The present will influences the past and is completely free of its supposedly foundational power.

My criticism of this view is based on a deeply held assumption that humans do not have such an extreme type of power as to create reality from scratch. True, we can influence and change reality but we need to rely on the material which is given and which carries meaning we can develop or twist and maybe even somehow destroy. Our creative ability depends on the given. Radical constructivism and radical independence on the past and on the given seems to me implausible. That is why Latour's belief in the subjective power of the speech able to create reality independently of its foundations in the past I found hardly persuasive. The present seems to be actively created together, with maybe just the remade sense of the past by our actions, but not started independently from the past. We can forgive someone who harmed us and by this act we can transform the meaning of his harmful act, which finally brought our good action of forgiveness, but we do not create that harm or that forgiveness *in the past*, but just remake it in the present on the basis of what was given in history and in nature in the past. Latour makes the point that lovers feel that their love starts every day. However, it may just as well be claimed that their feeling this way is possible only because love started at some point in the past and they opened themselves to it as well as to co-creating it both then and every day in the present since then.

Latour writes about the analogy of lovers' experience of loving each other anew every day and the Pentecostal experience of reviving a kind of emotional universal religious unity through words, but he ignores the possibility of there being a real God's intervention which made this revival possible, as well as ignores the fundamental condition of Pentecost and the whole Redemption in the fact of God's initial loving existence and creation taking place. Somehow, his willingness to revive the religious speech seems like an attempt to deprive religion of its essence, adjusting it to the framework of religion within the bounds of modern or postmodern reason, and trying to keep its emotional warmth intact in order to compensate for the coldness of positivistic metrology-like discourse of the present.

Speaking of essence or substance, it seems that here we touch the heart of the message developed by Latour. He writes: "We begin to assume that behind every story, regardless of its twists and turns, there is a unique substance, impervious to change, which, remaining always what it was on the first day, would explain the diversity of acts of conversion. As if being converted came down to plugging into this intangible thing so as to retrieve the consoling certainty of absolute immobility, beyond history." In the same vein, he states, we perceive God as stable, as "the constant universal". While such a perspective was true of pre-modern times, it is interesting that Latour still identifies it in our times and tries to fight it as if it was a dominant outlook. It rather seems to me that the dominant outlook is constructionist and anti-essentialist or anti-foundationalist in the style of Richard Rorty, though the realist, essentialist view, while being on the margins of modernity, requires at least some respect rather than disqualification. After all, what is wrong with claiming that beings have essences and some stability? What is wrong with relying on the common sense and experience which suggest such an idea? Would God still be divine if God was totally dependent on speech, analogically to reality created supposedly by human speech acts? Latour even writes "G." rather than "God", not to limit that word to a particular meaning or stable substance. He also warns us not to "confuse G. with sophisticated GPS", which strategy reminds me of something close to negative theology in Christianity—the standpoint based on the assumption that we cannot say anything about God but only negations in comparison with created beings. However, even in negative theology the existence of God's essence is assumed, though it may be hidden from our comprehension. Latour's efforts at avoiding any definite claims about God combined with the efforts of bringing back the emotional appeal of religious speech seems to me like a deficient retrospective example of the negative theology. Its deficiency comes from discarding the possibility of the existence of God's essence (likewise, the existence of essences of created beings, too). The reason for that and the reason for his whole modern and postmodern conundrum may lie in the positivistic turn of modernity which claimed that only scientifically established facts are true. Latour's problems with finding adequate contemporary religious speech may actually constitute proofs confirming that positivism was mistaken. His fear of saying anything about God is like positivistic obsession with sticking only to the so called facts: "How can that name ever be said without striking a false

note?” To this we may respond by claiming that especially since Logos was incarnated and drew as close to humanity as possible, we indeed can speak of God rather than keep on being silent. Instead, Latour still prefers avoiding such discourse and refers to the analogy of lovers again. Lovers’ experience, according to him, teaches them that their love is not an inalterable substance (just like “G.”), that it is changing, unreliable, flowing, fragile, risky, and totally dependent on our words. His argument does not persuade me because it seems, or at least it is plausible that love (just like God, in Christianity being understood as the source of all love), may be quite independent of our speech but only inviting our linguistic or declarative recognition. (The latter motive I find similar to what Charles Taylor writes in his *Sources of the Self*, by the way.) Latour wants us to believe that “[t]here is no right way to speak religiously. Who would dare claim that he has the right, the precise, the definitive, the orthodox metalanguage to talk about these things?” His question is rhetorical but his obvious negative response finds a counterargument in the biblical fact that Christ gave his disciples the right to teach and explain, and baptize in the name of God. While the Old Testament people did not pronounce the name of God, after Incarnation it was possible and even encouraged to call God as Father. Distance was reduced, and this reduction was not made by humanity but by Divinity.

Actually, the reduction of the distance in various dimensions is most welcome by Latour. He deplores the fact that institutions were destroyed in the name of autonomy, e.g. parents did not want to baptize children so that they would be free to choose, and as a result children were deprived of belonging, they grew in distance from one another. He also writes that art turns our gaze towards the remote while religion—towards the close, towards here and now, thus being able to effectively transform people. Religious tale seeks to “convert the distant into the near” in his opinion. True, Incarnation most of all influenced the tendency to cross the bridge and remove the distance. However, it seems problematic how Latour claims that old religious messages are inadequate in new conditions: “All the difficulty of hearing religious messages stems from the fact that they’re forced to refer to the present state of those they address, by replaying utterances with a violence, a twist that makes them inappropriate for current information consumption or communication.” In his opinion religion *should* turn our eyes to the near, not to the distant, while its old utterances are not effective in this respect. Therefore, they should be changed, reformed, made vivid by our will and speech. Well, the New Testament itself calls us to turn our eyes to what (or who) is near because otherwise we live false lives: “If a man says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who doesn’t love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 John 4, 20). However, it persuasively confirms the human experience that loving our neighbors is hardly possible of our own making, not to mention that it should be created by our sole speech power. After all, “[w]hat do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4, 7) Latour’s effort at self-creation and social world-creation seems more existentialist than religiously inspired, so his calls for the revival of religious speech may seem unattractive to

both faithful believers, who do not experience old religious messages as tormenting, and to atheists, who do not see the need for any religious discourse, both old or new.

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