

Article

Gaia and Religious Pluralism in Bruno Latour's 'New-Materialism'

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Abstract: In his works on ecological philosophy, Bruno Latour develops an interesting perspective on religion and pluralism. He proposes a new worldview, in which religion is reinterpreted in view of a Gaian philosophy. He extends 'pluralism' beyond the anthropocentrism that dominates modern humanism. In his book *Facing Gaia* Latour includes nonhuman beings in a larger community and works towards a larger concept of eco-humanism. In this paper, I try to reconstruct his position by showing that the philosophical foundation for his interpretation of religion could be called 'terrorism' and is to be classified as a form of new materialism. This new interpretation of materialism has postmodernist origins (inspired by Gilles Deleuze), but it is not identical to it, because Latour distances himself from 'postmodernism'. He wants to positively contribute to a new ontology. My point is that Latour's 'terrorist' grounding of religious pluralism obstructs any foundation of transcendence and, finally, congests a really pluralistic ecumene because he still adheres to the postmodernist idea that we should renounce to a unitary principle of being. His ideas on eco-humanism and pluralistic ecumene could gain momentum if we opened ourselves to a more holistic and spiritual way of thinking, retaking Lovelock's conception of Gaia. However, Latour's new-materialistic interpretation of 'animism' can be seen as a positive contribution to a new perspective of the world that definitively sets 'materialism' aside.

Keywords: Latour; Lovelock; Gaia philosophy; new materialism; postmodernism; new idealism; religion; (eco-)humanism



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1. Introduction

In his book on the Gaia hypothesis, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the Climatic Regime* (Latour 2015; English: Latour 2017), the French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour states that in order to deal with the ecological challenge, we need a new paradigm of thought. This new 'worldview' is based on a perspective shift he partly already sees effectuated in the work of James Lovelock ([1979] 2009). A discussion of the implications of this new perspective brings Latour to a new concept of matter, an 'earthly materialism' that is compatible, he says, with an 'earthly humanism' that includes nonhuman entities in a large pluralist society and with a new reading of religion, especially of Christianity, that also makes room for a pluralism of beliefs. The idea of creating a new worldview that could constitute a paradigm for a new-materialistic ontology and that gives his former works on modernity (Latour 1991), political ecology (Latour 1999), and his personal sense of religiousness (Latour 2010b), a kind of deep grounding, is what makes *Face à Gaïa* such a fascinating book.

In this book, Latour develops an ecologically entangled humanism related to religiousness, theoretically opening itself up to worldview issues connected to religious pluralism. In this sense, Latour takes a step beyond the self-restrictiveness from big stories that typified postmodernist philosophies, without returning to the philosophical grand narratives that we know from German Idealism since worldviews and religions are now seen as conceptual experiments based on practices of faith. Being a practicing Catholic himself,

Latour has a basic sympathy for the connection of ecological thought and humanism on the one hand and religion on the other. Next to *Facing Gaia*, many of his major works delineate a ‘terrorist’ position, a philosophy of ‘Earthlings’, in fact, a version of new-materialism that tries to encompass ecological Gaia-philosophy, eco-humanism, and religious pluralism. The question underlying this paper is to what extent this terrorism of Latour (Section 1) can contribute to grounding an eco-humanist approach to religious pluralism (Section 2).

2. The Gaian Ontology, a New-Materialist Worldview

In order to show what Latour’s approach to nature is, I would first like to elaborate on his Gaian perspective and then see what his dispersed efforts of delineating a new ontology are. His philosophy of nature is loosely exposed in the form of general reflections in the best French essayistic tradition there exists: every page of this work shows Latour’s Burgundian wit and his sense of self-relativization, which makes the reading of his essay most enjoyable but also requires quite an important effort of conceptual reconstruction. His book on Gaia is based on the Gifford lectures held in Edinburgh in 2013, where he was invited to speak about ‘natural religion’ (Latour 2017, p. 2). Religion however is only thematized in the margins of the book, with many remarks suggesting a possible future elaboration. In fact, it is ‘nature’ and, more precisely, a new view on the ‘natural’ that became its main topic—a worldview that draws its inspiration from Lovelock’s holistic concept, although Latour distances himself from this holism as it implies a paradoxical external point of view on a totality. Latour is explicit about the fact that his view on nature serves to ground a ‘new climatic regime’, a new political and juridical structure of society, which he developed in previous works. Alluding to Montesquieu, he conceives his worldview—his view on nature and matter—as presenting a new ‘Spirit of Laws of Nature’ (Latour 2017, p. 4).

The first step in Latour’s philosophy of nature is partially deconstructive and emphasizes the instability of the modern concept of nature (Latour 2017, p. 7). ‘Nature’ often means a pre-cultural state, to which most people do not want to return. The concept has also been used, he says, to ridicule the ecological movement as people wanting to return to the stone age (p. 15). ‘Nature’ in this sense is marked by two main ‘linguistic’ ambivalences:

1. It first marks a bipolar concept of ‘nature/culture’ that, according to Latour, must be overwon because, in reality, there exists no clear-cut demarcation (Latour 2017, p. 16). This bipolar concept is related to the modern binomial ‘subject/object’. As an object nature is the perceptual scope of a subject (p. 18). This infuses nature with the abstract settings of a ‘non-subjectivity’, thus becoming inert or dead (*nature morte*). Nature is what is contrary to a subject and has no capacity to act from itself, a being without inner agency (p. 49). The oppositions ‘nature/culture’ and ‘subject/object’ already show that in the modern worldview, nature is primarily defined as being inanimate and as being inferior to a subject since, as an ‘object’, it is defined by a subject, which is the agent.
2. It, secondly, also marks a concept that functions in both a normative and descriptive way (Latour 2017, p. 20). When we speak about following the natural way of things, nature is used in a normative (moral or even legal) sense. Nature becomes a model for life that determines what legitimate conduct is. In Aristotle’s time, this normative sense was still capable of enforcing political laws. In modernity, such reasonings may still exist in daily life but epistemologically, nature and morality have been separated by the is/ought distinction (pp. 22, 34). To give nature a moral claim, it is said, comes to essentialize or naturalize our conduct. This essentialism is perceived as a regressive (or conservative) attitude, where nature becomes an enforcing law of its own. But, as the is/ought distinction manifests, the descriptive sense of nature in itself cannot ground any imperatives of conduct. Subjectivity must find its own ways and moral guidelines. This liberation from nature in recent history, for example, made free sexual choices possible. But Latour makes clear that the is/ought ambiguity returns when, in ecological philosophy, ‘respecting nature’ becomes again a moral imperative (pp. 23, 47). Essentialism—now perceived as a progressive attitude—comes in

through the backdoor again: An alteration in the natural state acquires a normative dimension (p. 46). Today, the prescriptive consequences of the ecological crisis are so obvious, Latour says, that the climate skeptics have ‘wisely’ focused on denying the facts (pp. 24, 27).

So, whereas in modernity, the first ambivalence ‘nature/culture’ creates a concept of inert matter exempted from an agency, the second is/ought dualism leads to a ‘nonmoral nature’ exempted from any prescriptive force (Latour 2017, p. 225). These binaries would not, however, be ambivalent if they had no reverse, which is also Latour’s alternative: nature as an agent with a prescriptive force. But in modernity, the idea of a nonmoral domain of inert matter gained influence and became dominant. When Latour says, “nature does not exist”, he means nature as the physicalist aspect of the abovementioned binary: “one half of a pair pertaining to one single concept” (p. 19). Latour, however, goes beyond mere deconstruction and tries to restore the lost balance. In a quite Hegelian way, for Latour, the opposing sets (is/ought, nature/culture) are to be *mediated* by recognizing that ‘is’ can be ‘ought’ and ‘culture’ can be ‘nature’.

In *We have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1991), Latour already elaborated a theory of mediation in order to create a new worldview that could succeed in modernity without one having to become a postmodernist. There, he states that although the modern worldview works with strong polarities, as between culture and nature or human and nature already modern biology, anthropology and sociology progressively have blurred this distinction, reconsidering the naturalness of man and culture. And seemingly, meanwhile, the ecological crisis has blurred the strict is/ought divide (Latour 2017, pp. 34, 35). Today, the Earth is imposing humanity clear limits of action: limits to growth, limits to human centeredness, limits to extraction, and is menacing us with extinction.

However, Latour does not want to dissolve the abovementioned oppositions but only to delimit their strictness. He is looking for a notion that serves as a compound of both sides, the poles in themselves having malleable plasticity:

“We would have to be able to introduce an opposition, not between nature and culture this time (. . .), but between Nature/Culture on one side and, on the other, a term that would include each one of them as a particular case”. (Latour 2017, p. 35)

This is where the notion of ‘Gaia’ comes in. According to Latour, Gaia is not a divinity nor a higher soul or subjectivity governing the world. It is just a metaphor designating a new paradigm, a new perspective on the divide between nature and culture. It permits us to get rid of a concept of nature as something strictly separated from culture, and vice versa. The Gaian conception of nature, which sees nature as an autoregulative system, can blur the opposition nature/culture because it conceives nature as a network (or rhizome) of agents, in which we humans are knots or parts with a specific arrangement of actions and ways of connecting with other knots:

“Only if we place ourselves inside this world will we be able to recognize as one particular arrangement the choice of existents and their ways of connecting that we call Nature/Culture and that has served for a long time to format our collective understanding (at least in the Western tradition)”. (Latour 2017, p. 36)

Whereas the nature/culture divide was privileged in the Western worldview, the new Gaian perspective makes it possible to see this modern divide as an interpretative choice, as a ‘*métaphysique*’ that does not really fit the picture of interconnectedness of existents (Latour 2015, p. 51; Latour 2017, p. 37).

2.1. Compositionism Instead of Holism

Although Latour acknowledges his indebtedness to Lovelock when it comes to defining the concept of Gaia, it seems that he differs considerably from Lovelock’s holism. What Latour calls an earthly (terrestrial or terrarist) perspective is, in fact, an ‘immanent’ and not a holistic perspective (Latour 2017, pp. 38, 39). The Gaian perspective, he thinks, looks at

things only from an inside perspective and takes Earth as a multiplicity, a network (*réseau*) of interconnections: “(…) we are going to try to descend from ‘nature’ down toward the multiplicity of the world” (p. 36). This perspective does not situate itself above nature nor takes her to be a ‘whole’, as an object placed in front of an imaginary spectator or subject. This is the way the classical physics of Galileo Galilei looked at the Earth, as something inanimate and ‘objectivized’ (pp. 69, 76). This is what, according to Latour, Peter Sloterdijk recently called ‘Globe’ (Sloterdijk 2013), an object that can be colonized by modern capitalism (Latour 2017, p. 123). And this is the crux of Latour’s ‘terrorism’, of what he calls the ‘terrestrial’ perspective: it considers entities to be part of a space of interrelations, in which they are or live, and of a ‘habitat’, in which they are always immersed. He sees it as Lovelock’s major challenge to speak of the Earth without taking her as a prefigured ‘totality’: “how to speak about the Earth without taking it to be an already composed whole, without adding to it a coherence that it lacks” (p. 86).

This perspective that rejects the view, on the whole, is, I think, difficult to reconcile with the Gaian paradigm introduced by Lovelock. To the Englishman, we can only represent ourselves as Earthlings, as being part of a web of interconnectedness, if we first manage to see Gaia as a whole: “the recognition of Gaia depends upon our finding on a global scale improbabilities in the distribution of molecules” (Lovelock [1979] 2009, p. 32). This, in some way, already implies a point of view that is transcendent and that, only in a second step, can become immanent. Lovelock integrated a two-level epistemology—transcendent and subsequently immanent—to which Latour’s terrorism does no justice. Lovelock started his Gaia hypothesis by looking back to the Earth after having inferentially inquired (and denied) the possibility of life on Mars. By focusing on the Earth as a totality, as a self-regulative system, the Earth appeared to him as an organism, which he then called Gaia. This is in fact what constitutes Lovelock’s holism. Gaia is to be compared to an organism, to a living totality—Lovelock speaks of a ‘single living’ and ‘planet-sized entity’ (Lovelock [1979] 2009, pp. 9, 10). This is why Anne Primavesi, the Irish feminist theologian, who compared Lovelock with Galilei, sees Gaia as an accomplishment of the idea of the whole as it was already anticipated by Copernicus and Galilei, who created an astronomic heliocentrism, thus preparing a ‘biological heliocentrism’, a sun-centered Gaia (Primavesi 2003, pp. 25–39). Ontologically and historically, this astrobiological totality emerged from within the interrelations of living things in the world. But to Lovelock, the ordering principle that makes it possible to speak of ‘one organism’ cannot be reduced to the relations of the parts. Organisms have interrelated parts, but these are ordered by a pattern and propensity to autoregulation. There is a totality, a principle of autoregulation out there, that cannot be grasped just by showing that things are interrelating: there is a law behind this circular stability constantly constituting the harmony of the whole. Latour is right to say that Lovelock develops a version of the Earth that is “entirely from here below” (Latour 2017, p. 87) because Lovelock is indeed a scientist, who does not see Gaia as a divinity. However, this does not imply, as Latour wants us to believe, that he only takes up an immanent perspective, placing things in a web of interconnections.

To Latour, it is important to see that Gaia is a composite of agents that are not primarily unified as a whole. The Earth is “composed of (…) of agents that are not prematurely unified in a single acting totality” (Latour 2017, p. 87). That is why, to him, Gaia only appears as a battlefield of forces, blindly adjusting and composing a togetherness that constitutes no harmony in a real sense since this togetherness of relations, this ‘*réseau*’ of lifeforms, always has fundamental instability (Latour 2015, p. 186; Latour 2017, p. 141). Here, Latour is indebted to the chaotic model of Gilles Deleuze’s ‘chaosmos’ and Félix Guattari’s ‘chaosmosis’ (Guattari 2013, 1992). Behind nature, there is a subterranean omnipresence of chaotic relations that constitute organisms, which, due to this natural instability, are always very vulnerable. It is clear that for Latour, in line with Deleuze and Guattari, the element of multiplicity is more important than that of unity or totality. This is also what his so-called ‘compositionism’ (Latour 2010a) is all about. Gaia, he underscores, is ‘composed’ of agents relating to each other but also ‘composting’, so they are constantly

decomposing each other. Gaia is not a closed unity, but a composite (Latour 2015, p. 87). In a sense, compositionism is Latour's self-stated alternative to deconstructivism because the composite decomposes and composes at the same time (p. 39), which means that any composition is an ontological process of de-composting and of re-composition. Like other new materialists, Latour tries to overcome deconstructivism by offering a large positive vision of reality—of a reality that is 'out there' and beyond language, an ontology that, declaredly, is relational. Latour loves to compare Gaia with Pasteur's observations on the fermentation of bacteria (p. 126). It remains, however, difficult to immediately discern in such a picture of fermentation, the image of Lovelock's self-regulative system aiming at a stabilizing optimum for life.

2.2. Gaia in Compositionism

Latour's perspective seems more distanced from the idea of divinity than Lovelock's Gaia, which assuredly is no goddess but is at least a kind of ordering or pre-existing natural principle, a general law of biology, 'animating' the whole. But Latour manages to read the myth of Gaia in a compositionist way. Gaia in mythology is not, he says, a divinity on its own but a 'natural force' preceding all other gods (Latour 2017, p. 81). In Hesiod, Gaia is not a caring entity, but an agent of terror, more similar to Chaos, because she gives birth to violent gods capable of abominable crimes (p. 110). She is definitely no figure of harmony in itself, nor of maternal love, as propagated by the spiritual New Age movements described in Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion* (Taylor 2010) and in Galinier's and Molinié's book (Galinier and Molinié 2013) on the current cults of Pachamama (Latour 2017, p. 82). Latour wants to emphasize the 'wildness' of Gaia, that she represents an 'antisystème', a 'hors-la-loi' (outlaw) (Latour 2015, p. 117; Latour 2017, p. 87). To emphasize this chaotic basis of Gaia, Latour also declares that she does not represent a principle of 'harmony'. He says: "There is no harmony in that contingent cascade of unforeseen events" (Latour 2017, p. 107). This is quite different in Lovelock's thought, to whom 'self-regulation', as an overarching principle of harmony, explains the limits in the system of contained violence of Gaia. From Lovelock's holistic point of view, natural violence can also be seen as the way species cooperate in balancing towards a general optimum. Charles Darwin's natural selection itself is, for instance, a form of violence that constitutes the driving force behind the natural balance of Gaia. But, to Latour, all these teleonomic aspects of Darwinism—in this context, he amusingly speaks of 'providence'—are reminiscences of an old theological way of thinking (p. 102). Darwin's "appel à la balance de la nature" (Latour 2015, p. 138) is still based on an old-fashioned natural picture of harmony, but life, Latour thinks, is much more chaotic than what Darwin and, consequently, Lovelock think (Latour 2017, p. 103).

2.3. Latour's Nonholistic Nominalism

Latour's reading of Gaia clearly takes a certain distance from Lovelock's holistic view, defining the Earth as a totality, as an autoregulative 'system'. In a manner reminiscent of postmodernist thinking, Latour declares that certain expressions of holism are dangerous: "'system', 'homeostasis', 'regulation', 'favorable levels', these are all quite treacherous terms" (Latour 2017, p. 94). And "it is essential not to confuse Gaia with the Sphere, the System, or the Earth taken as a Whole" (p. 238). Concepts like globe, sphere, totality, whole, and system tend to overlook compositionism. They tend to conceive things as just being parts of a larger totality: "The notions of globe and global thinking include the immense danger of unifying too quickly what first needs to be *composed*" (p. 138). Much better than Lovelock, who has an extraordinarily philosophical intuition but hardly involves himself in sophisticated philosophical discussions, Latour is aware of the fact that Lovelock's holism is reminiscent of Platonism because Gaia here has much of a platonic sphere, being a kind of principle or idea, including and steering a subset of elements. Latour says: "A sphere (...) it is not merely an idea but the very ideal of ideas" (p. 136). It should be possible, Latour thinks, to avoid a picture that amounts to pantheism, where Gaia is the "orbis terrarium sive sphaera sive deus, sive natura" (p. 136). The dangers Latour perceives are apparently

philosophical: Lovelock works with platonic and pantheistic presuppositions. To Latour, Gaia, however, is not, as we saw, “un tout unifié” (a unified whole) but a composition (Latour 2015, p. 118; Latour 2017, p. 87).

Now, Latour is certainly right that the history of Gaia is not to be viewed as a general plan that delineates the future of the whole (Latour 2015, pp. 129, 135). But to Lovelock, there is for sure a preexisting natural law dynamically and continuously trying to establish an equilibrium in the system. This, Lovelock clearly says, is a “cybernetic process (. . .) having as its goal the establishment (. . .) of optimum physical and chemical conditions for life” (Lovelock [1979] 2009, pp. 45, 46). Latour, however, denies this and prefers to see Gaia as an arbitrary sequence of events: “Gaia is not a cybernetic machine controlled by feedback loops but a series of historical events” (Latour 2017, pp. 140, 141). Latour certainly is aware of the fact that it is undeniable that Lovelock conceives Gaia as a ‘system’, but he himself prefers to emphasize Gaia as a set of ‘events’. Gaia becomes a sum of events, of arbitrarily relating parts, instead of really being a self-regulating whole trying to steer life towards an optimum for life. To Lovelock, this principle of self-regulation is “a key Gaian regulatory function” (Lovelock [1979] 2009, p. 53). It is a natural principle with a predetermined functionality: to create an optimum for life. He even presents this as a ‘purpose’ (Lovelock [1979] 2009, p. 58), as a teleonomic tendency of the system. Latour, conversely, acknowledges no purposes: to him, there is only a casual conflation of events resulting from manifold intentionality: “Gaia captures the distributed intentionality of all the agents” (Latour 2017, p. 98). But this picture is difficult to reconcile with Lovelock’s idea of Gaia as an organism piloting its acts in a self-regulatory way. We can therefore safely say that for Latour, the whole is *not a reality* but a multiplicity, the only real thing being its compositeness.

Summarizing, we may say that there is no divergence between Lovelock and Latour as to viewing entities as symbiotically creating a life supporting system. However, there is an important philosophical divergence as to whether nature is *primordially imbued* with a pre-existent lawlike principle or ‘purpose’ that connects the living knots in such a way as to create a self-regulatory system, progressively steering the whole to an optimum for life. We may say that as to the existence of such a principle, Lovelock is a *realist*. In his most recent futurological works, this becomes very obvious because he speculates about the possibility of an ‘electronic Gaia’ based on robotic ‘life’ (Lovelock [2014] 2015, p. 165; Lovelock [2019] 2020, pp. 11, 123). What is real to Lovelock is the *holistic principle of autoregulation*—whether this system is organic or electrical is not important. The *principle* itself and not its compositeness is what determines Gaia’s reality. Latour, on the contrary, is a Gaian *nominalist* since, apparently to him, the system has no reality in itself, the only existing reality being a multitude of events. This marks, *in nuce*, the divide between Lovelock’s holism and Latour’s compositionism. Whereas in holism, the whole is *no* sum of related parts, Latour’s new-materialist compositionism takes relations as all there is.¹ So, for Latour, not only the name of the system, ‘Gaia’, is a metaphor, but also the ‘system’ itself, since the only ‘real thing’ existing out there is a composite of related agents.

2.4. Agency and Relational Ontology

This epistemological divergence between Lovelock and Latour seems to be based on a difference in ontology. Since I am interested in Latour here, I will not analyze in depth Lovelock’s ontological presuppositions. Lovelock seems to adhere to a more traditional ontology, applying circular structures to the phenomenon of life in general. His ontology is, as we have seen, also spiced with important elements of Platonism and Aristotelianism—think of Gaia as a preexisting idea or law, or as a purposiveness of living nature. It is mainly in later years that Lovelock’s ontological position also comes within the reach of objective idealism properly speaking since, in his *Novacene* (Lovelock [2019] 2020), he adheres to the anthropic principle introduced by Barrow and Tipler (1986). This inbuilt teleonomic purpose of the cosmos, he says, can be seen as a preexisting state of ‘pure information’, a ‘set of ideas’ determining the physical conditions, which finally make intelligent life

possible. Lovelock also speculates about this information as being “an innate property of the universe” (Lovelock [2019] 2020, p. 26). He links this idea to his declared humanism and partial transhumanism: humanity has been chosen, as he says, by the cosmos in order to become conscious of itself (p. 27). It is not clear how literally to take Lovelock’s mysterious transhumanist claim that it is the purpose of the universe to reconvert “all of matter and radiation into information” (p. 75), but in such pronouncements, he clearly presupposes a transcendental realm of ideas preceding the objectivity of the world. The objection might be raised that this does not really make the appearance of the world any more intelligible. Why should pure information convert into a material universe to then return to a state of pure information again?

Conversely, Latour presupposes a new-materialist ontology, focusing, as we have seen, on networks that can be traced back to the rhizomatic connections of Deleuze and Guattari (1980), and to the dissipative structures of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers (Prigogine and Stengers 1984). This means that to him, whereas the concept of ‘inert matter’, coming from an old mechanistic paradigm, still dominates our everyday conception of the world (Latour 2017, p. 49), for one and a half centuries, science has been developing and deepening an image of matter that is much more ‘animated’. The quotation marks here are important since Latour is not reintroducing Bergson’s *élan vital*, but he certainly means more than mere quantitative reversibility of matter and energy because he draws a straight line through being, connecting human ‘intentionality’, biological ‘life’, and subatomic ‘inner motion’. These, he speculates, are instantiations of a phenomenon he calls ‘agency’. He is not thinking here of so-called ‘subjectivity’ as an inner predisposition of decision-making, although in the realm of biology, he uses quite an anthropomorphic language, speaking of ‘interests’ and describing ‘agency knots’ as self-piloting entities: he speaks of “agents, each of which is pursuing its own interest” (p. 142). Latour is not thinking of an Aristotelean entelechy or inner telos. Rather, in a more Nietzschean way, he takes an agency to be an ‘inner power to do things’. He defines it as a “capacity to establish more or less numerous relationships, and especially reciprocal ones” (p. 136). It becomes clear that in this relational ontology of Latour, both agency and force are defined as a capability of connection and pursued entanglement.

Latour stresses, however, that in a secondary or deviate sense—he means in a more religious or metaphysical language—this blind force, agency, or capability was called the ‘soul’ of things:

“It will then become clear that to say of an actor that he/she/it is inert—in the sense of having no agency—or, conversely, that he/she/it is animated—in the sense of ‘endowed with a soul’—is a secondary and derivative operation” (Latour 2017, p. 50).²

Characterizing this matter as being fundamentally permeated by agency, Latour follows two objectives related to the nullification of ambivalences mentioned above: to blur the object/subject or nature/culture divide on the one hand, and to neutralize the is/ought binary on the other hand. The first objective makes religious and, specifically, animistic perspectives on nature more digestible for modern secular people. As I said before, Latour is a Catholic with strong sympathies for indigenous wisdom (Latour 2010b, p. 99), and his new-materialistic perspective is a philosophical grounding of this ‘animistic view’. The second objective makes it possible to extend the domain of normativity, values, and morality beyond the realm of the human. This grounds the possibility of ecological politics, of a parliament of things, based on the idea that human and nonhuman entities all have an inner quality (agency) that makes them, to a certain extent, ‘equal’. Latour concludes: “the distinction between humans and nonhumans has no more meaning” (Latour 2017, p. 58). As we will see later, this does not amount to an anti-humanist position, on the contrary.

2.5. A World Animated by Inner Forces

Although, according to Latour, science itself is working towards a concept of matter imbued with agency, the modern average scientific perspective of the world still lives in an

old-materialist abstraction, a “phantom world” that presupposes an enchained and causally closed totality lacking any realism (Latour 2017, p. 71). This means that Latour’s new materialism also implies a new concept of ‘realism’. Modern science, especially physics, is still obsessed, he says, with *de-animating* the world while, at the same time, showing more and more ‘agents’ pullulating everywhere (p. 72). In fact, he says the idea of a de-animated world does not fit the current stand of science and is a remnant of the 17th century (p. 149). It was then that a counter-Renaissance took place in Europe, leaving no room for the manifoldness of worldviews and philosophies that still characterized the tolerance of Renaissance humanism and instead favoring a rigid and one-dimensional view of science. It was then that science saw itself to be able to univocally establish with mathematical certitude what the truth of ‘reality’ is (p. 188). Not without the support of Christianity, which, according to Latour, had incorporated devastating gnostic perspectives identifying matter with evil, the Cartesian concept of matter was definitively defined as being fully de-animated. In line with Prigogine, Latour claims that many so-called ‘rationalist’ positions in physics and in modern humanism still work with these classical abstractions, overlooking the agential historicity of things: “The great paradox of the ‘scientific worldview’ is that it has succeeded in withdrawing the historicity of the world” (p. 72). Latour sees these presuppositions as quasi-religious prejudices of modern physics, which, he feels, should be dismantled as soon as possible in order to obtain a *more realistic* type of materialism:

“Perhaps it might be of some use to offer, at last, a view of materiality that no longer (...) offers such a pathetically inexact vision of the sciences. We could then get away from any and every ‘religion of nature’. We would have a conception of materiality that is finally worldly, secular—yes, better still, earthbound” (Latour 2017, p. 72).³

Latour’s or new-materialist conception of matter considers particles as being moved from within. There is an inner force, which out of itself constitutes the structure of matter. Latour sees each and every thing in the cosmos not just as being moved by something else but also as being moved by itself. From the outside, matter may look inert and devoid of activity, but if we immerse ourselves in nature, we see activity everywhere (Latour 2017, p. 49). Whereas the classical Cartesian picture in physics sees matter as a passive entity submitted to the external laws of motion, Latour conceives it as being inherently active. This is also what constitutes the difference, he says, between Galilei and the new paradigm introduced by Lovelock. To Galilei, the Earth is a body moved by celestial mechanics, while for Lovelock the Earth is not just motion but ‘*e-motion*’, a movement coming from within that reacts to circumstances in a self-regulatory way (p. 79). To Latour, however, this is not a kind of Platonic principle preceding life, as in Lovelock’s ontological realism, but a kind of inner volition, a blind ‘force’. This ‘voluntarism’ fits quite well with his nominalist conception of Gaia. In fact, Latour extends the compositionist idea to the deepest interiority of matter in such a way as to see its ‘ultimate’ parts as being e-motive. ‘Ultimate’ must be read with quotation marks because, in Latour’s picture of matter, there is no reason to believe in ‘ultimate’ parts. Matter seems indefinitely and infinitely divisible, although there is no explicit pronouncement about this in Latour’s work as far as I can see.

We already saw that Latour remained critical of pantheist Spinozism. He counteracts this position, which to Deleuze was still an attractive idea, with a kind of naturalistic panpsychism. This means everything is animated not by ‘subjectivity’ but by a compound of forces that constitute an ‘inner agency’, an ‘actant’. The ‘soul’ of things is not some transcendental subjectivity, but a realm of natural forces constituting this e-motive layer of being. Now, we have to keep in mind that the concept of agency here is so large that not only particles fall under it but also any technical device, including future robots and cyborgs in the sense of Lovelock’s *Novocene*. When speaking of things ‘animated’, Latour in fact means things ‘pragmated’—that is, active and moved from within. To distinguish his position from classical pragmatism, which was mainly epistemological, I propose to call this ontology ‘pragmativism’ or ‘autopragsmatism’, pragmated from within.

So, to Latour, neither Earth nor matter is inert nor dead (Latour 2017, p. 70), but neither is an electronic Gaia nor a robotic Death Star. Unlike Lovelock, who glorifies self-consciousness, first appearing in humanity, as the apex of Gaia, for Latour, all things equally have a 'soul' and are 'animate', even when lacking a pip of consciousness. In fact, to Latour, nothing material can be inanimate. Thus, his parliament of things becomes a very crowded place indeed. Due to this extensity of animateness, in Latour's compositionism higher- and lower-level entities become counterparts mirroring each other: Gaia has its counterpart in the smallest perceivable particles of being since they are also 'relational entities', although moving on a different descriptive scale. In this sense, for Latour, macro- and microcosmos mirror each other: everywhere we find struggling and cooperating forces manifesting themselves in being.

3. Latour on Humanism and Religious Pluralism

As I tried to make clear before, the new materialism sketched above can be interpreted as an ontological layer grounding Latour's views on both religion and humanism. It is now time to have a closer look at Latour's humanism and his views on religion, especially his pragma-Catholicism, as I call it, his sympathies with indigenous wisdom, and his ideas on pluralism and ecumenism. This can explain, as we will see, why in the West, science, mainly in most positivist interpretations of humanism, is often taken to be the successor of religion. As Latour himself acknowledges, his Gifford lectures on 'natural religion' primarily headed towards a philosophy of the 'natural'. His major conception of an Earthly Christianity is still a project to be accomplished. In this respect, *Facing Gaia* and his earlier *On the Modern Cult of Factish Gods*, which also deals with religion, are only offering some—though important—prolegomena.

Latour compares the general structure of modern science with the structure of axial religions, especially Christianity, and comes to the conclusion that they have strong affinities. He already accomplished something similar in chapter one of *On the Modern Cult* (Latour 2010b, pp. 1–67), but I will refer mainly to the most recent version exposed in his Gaia book. It is important to see that for Latour, a new type of humanism, as an attitude and open worldview, that is epistemologically open to scientific and religious pluralism can function as an intermediary of science and religion. To Latour, humanism breaks through the dogmatic closeness of both science and religion and, as a practice of the free spirit, it is characterized, following Stephen Toulmin, by a discursive curiosity and tolerance based on the philosophical insight that there is no positive or scientific certainty in matters of worldviews; rather, it is all about speculation based on well-developed arguments. This does not at all mean that science offers no facts, but there is a step from facts to 'readings for usage': one thing is to determine the facts ('facticity'), and the other is to give scientific facts a certain interpretation to substantiate a worldview (a 'truth' in the sense of a 'true' story). Seemingly, opening to religious pluralism means that divine revelations may be possible, but these always function in certain situations and practices, and reading thereof must always take this practical and experienced context into account. This emphasis on experiences, usages, and practices constitutes Latour's pragmatism, and as we will see, especially his pragma-Catholicism. The version of new materialism exposed above is to be viewed as an ontology supporting this humanism, especially his eco-humanism and views on religion.

3.1. Towards a New Humanism

Humanism, in a deep Socratic way, cuts into pieces the presumptions of science and religion, but it does so without fully giving up the idea of truth as a signifier for meaning-making. In Latour's perspective, humanism tries to constitute a worldview that is supportive of this dialogical openness towards both science and religion, opening itself for possible 'worldview-truths' based on both of them. That is why plurality in science and in religion is so important: they are part of a dialogical world. So, 'truth' here does not mean a 'positive truth' in the sense of having a scientific or doctrinal certainty. Latour

is very explicit about this in his comparison between science and religion in *On Modern Cult*: both forbid “meaning to be carried in truth” and separate truth from a “cascade of mediations” between the opposites (Latour 2010b, pp. 122, 123). Rather, to Latour, truth means a dialogical and speculative endeavor that is limited and steered by the finitude of our own philosophical practices, which are discursive and based on continuous efforts of what Hegel called ‘*Vermittlungen*’ and Latour translates using the term ‘mediations’. There seems to be here an affinity between Latour on the one hand and American and German discursive pragmatism (Peirce, Apel, Habermas) on the other hand: truth seems to function as the regulative idea of communication and argumentation that ongoingly can be partially realized but that is never closed unless people stop thinking. This point of view definitively distinguishes Latour’s compositionism, which revives the creation of a new ontology from postmodernist deconstructivism, which only alludes to ontology, without elaborating one, and escapes grand narratives about the world. According to Latour, deconstructivism focuses on dismantling not just this or that specific truth by showing some inner contradiction or paradox, but it denies the idea of truth as mediation itself. Compositionism, on the contrary, wants to establish a new ontology. It heads towards a negation of deconstructivism, like in Hegel’s idea of a ‘negation of the negation’, and it only decomposes worldviews *in order to regain a well-argued narrative of the world*, especially a Gaian or Earthly one, representing a ‘unitary story of truth’ that is, however, based on epistemological uncertainty and on the ontological concept of an interconnected multitude.

It must be said, however, that this unifying narrative, especially the wholeness of Gaia, remains quite unattended in Latour’s nominalist approach and is certainly secondary compared to his focus on the existing multiplicity of bottom-up practices. Plurality, according to Latour, grounds oneness since, to him, as we have seen, there is no real whole irreducible to the sum of the relating parts. As I said before, this makes it difficult not only to justify holism on an ontological level but also to defend the idea of ‘transcendence’ on a theological level. As it is difficult for Latour to account for Gaia as a unity that is a totality, since he acknowledges no pre-existing law of unification that naturally strives towards an optimum for life, it is likewise difficult for him to account for a divinity both in the sense of a transcendent ‘totality’ out there and in the sense of a cosmic ‘totality’ pre-existing the order of things. Finally, this also inhibits, as I will try to show afterward, a philosophy of nature (in the sense of a *Naturphilosophie*), able to integrate positive facts of science into a normative worldview, and a religious ecumenism, able to include the Abrahamic traditions, which are monotheistic. Although compositionism, I think, clearly wants to move away from deconstructivism, Latour still hangs on the quite postmodernist position that philosophy cannot be guided by a higher unifying criterion: “there should have been an agreement”—he says—“not to come together under a common higher principle” (Latour 2017, p. 259). This also grounds his opposition to Spinozism, which parts from a unique substance, and his adhesion to a certain epistemological anarchism. He shows this adhesion by slightly varying the title of Louis Auguste Balanqui’s journal: “neither God nor Nature—and thus no Master!” (p. 259).

Seen from a pragmatic point of view, both science and religion take things in the world to be united by a common source—whether this is God or an initial singularity. Latour already emphasized this at the end of *On the Modern Cult*, where he sees both science and religion articulating an ‘invisibility’ (Latour 2010b, p. 122). Latour, however, sets us in the mid of a world of interrelating forces, leaving their common origin unexplained. But science, as Latour himself admits, cannot function without a unitary view of nature. And, likewise, a theology without an ultimate source, which religions seem to refer to, cannot ground ecumenism, which presupposes that there is something common ‘out there’ to believe in. The abovementioned idea that there is no higher unifying principle thus, I think, impedes Latour to mediate science and religion, thereby, accomplishing his humanistic mission. According to the analyses Latour gives of science and religion, a mediation between them needs an ontology that enables a unitary foundation of both.

3.2. A Comparative Cosmology

Although Latour declares that we have to accept that there is no higher common principle that we can use to decide about truth, he nevertheless sets out to develop a so-called ‘comparative cosmology’, in which he analyzes and compares the fundamental worldview aspects—the ‘metaphysics’—behind science and religion. He explicitly does not see this comparative effort as a philosophical method that enables a discussion on truth but as an ethno-anthropological approach, in which worldview aspects are just taken as cultural facts:

“These are in fact the sorts of questions that philosophers raise as a matter of course. But in the most recent Western tradition the tendency has been to turn rather toward anthropologists when we want to compare the various metaphysical schemas”. (Latour 2017, p. 37)

This quotation is consistent with his denial of a higher principle of truth that could be invoked to decide about worldview contents. But Latour does not want to succumb to cultural relativism. In *We have Never Been Modern* he already dealt with this very question (Latour 1991, p. 124). And, in *Facing Gaia*, he reiterates that we cannot escape from a certain perceptiveness, even though this is not relativism (Latour 2017, p. 37). In order to tackle this question, in his earlier work, he introduced a ‘symmetrical anthropology’, thereby meaning an epistemological mediation between different worldviews (Latour 1991, p. 142). But, contrary to what Latour admits, I think, also this mediation requires a criterion, and in his analysis of science and religion, it becomes very clear that he implicitly is using a major placeholder criterion underlying his comparative cosmology. This is whether a certain worldview aspect of religion or science *benefits* Gaia. In his comparative cosmology, the Gaia worldview is used as a higher touchstone for mediation between worldview positions. In *Facing Gaia*, Latour therefore clearly focuses on how much science and religion in their general structures and contents contribute to a Gaian perspective of the world. The picture of Gaia he has in mind is that of compositionism, of course, in which only the relational multiplicity has an ontological reality. But nevertheless, notwithstanding the fact that Latour distances himself from the idea of a unifying principle, it is clear that he implicitly presupposes one, which is the idea of Gaia as a relational multiplicity.

3.3. Toward a Gaian Spirituality

According to Latour, the concept of Gaia, therefore, has religious implications. But why involve religion? Latour’s answer is that Gaia is not only a biogeological structure but also a worldview affecting other worldviews, including those of science and religion. There is today, he states, in the mid of our age of scientific enlightenment, a curious but clear revival of religiousness, as shown not only by new fundamentalisms and New Age forms of spirituality (Latour 2017, p. 150) but also by eco-spiritual movements, which include Gaian animistic spirituality (p. 82). Although Latour is critical about what he labels ‘postmodern eco-spiritualities’, which invoke the divinity of Gaia (pp. 153/154), it is clear, from what has been said before about new materialism, that he also shares many sympathies with post-secular forms of animism.

However, his compositionist idea of Gaia raises doubts about all types of ‘*religions englobantes*’ (encompassing religions) (Latour 2015, p. 198; Latour 2017, p. 150), thereby also meaning science, which Latour characterizes as a kind of ‘religion of nature’. Latour portrays science as a cultural object that can be approached by anthropological and merely descriptive means, reconstructing the procedures, practices, and main worldview presuppositions of science, and setting aside its many specific claims of truth. If we look at these presumptions, he says, science simply appears as a specific religion of nature. In his ethnographic cosmology that compares science and religion, he focuses on five aspects: (1) the idea of a higher entity, (2) the organizational principle of the world connected to that idea, (3) the limits of the specific collective of persons dealing with that idea, (4) the lifeworld or space where this collective situates itself, and (5) the time or period in which the collective of actants find themselves (Latour 2017, p. 151). Much could be said about

the arbitrariness of Latour's taxonomy, but I prefer to focus here on his results, which I will now summarize.

It definitively is an expression of Latour's Burgundian wit when he calls this religion of science '*Cenosotone*'—an acronym for "*ce dont nous sommes tous nés*" (the place we all come from).⁴ Like religion, modern science presupposes a higher entity, a unitary source, seen as the original state of matter, and conceived as being inanimate. It includes the natural laws, which, according to Latour, can be seen as the religious dogmas of science (Latour 2017, p. 160). The lifeworld of scientists is global and universal. They are interested in atemporal truths, very much like other religions. Scientists take everything to be united in a structure of causality that can be traced back to one first cause or entity: the singularity that caused the Big Bang (p. 163). Scientists also belong to a cast of experts of truth, very much like priests (p. 165). They determine the 'credo' of science.

But to Latour, these contents of the 'religion of science' are not what science is really about. It is not the reality of scientific research, but only an ideal of science, in fact, its own ideological construction. Latour here again shows a nominalist understanding of things. Real about science is not the sedimented truths about the cosmos—these are, he thinks, just a temporary illusion; the reality about science is its practices: in its daily work, the world in science has no unity because scientists are each dealing with different disciplines and research subjects. In fact, they work in different 'fields of sense', as Markus Gabriel would say (Gabriel 2015, p. 318). In daily practice, they are neither dealing with an ultimate source, nor with causal connections to it, but only with a specific manifoldness in being (Latour 2017, p. 168).

Thus, Latour splits science into two camps: on the one hand, we have science as a unitary theory of the world—I call this the theoretical or 'ideal' side of science, but Latour prefers to call it an ideology or illusion. On the other hand, we have science-as-practice, 'pragma-science' so to speak, which he deems separable from the major truth claims endorsed by science. Here again, we see that Latour fully identifies the value of the whole with its connected parts, in this case, the scientific practices. It becomes apparent by now that *reducing* the whole to the sum of its relations is a basic characteristic of Latour's 'pragmativism'. And, as we have seen before, this nominalism also characterizes his compositionist interpretation of Gaia as well as his new-materialistic ontology.

A likewise playful subdivision is used in Latour's taxonomy of religion. The *Cenosotone*, he states, mirrors monotheistic religions, especially Christianity (Latour 2017, p. 169). Here, too, the doctrine is established by 'experts', now called 'priests', who seem to have special access to truth. This access in religion is not called 'research' but 'revelation' (p. 169). Like scientists, priests also see themselves as 'enlightened' people accessing and possessing the truth. They call their ultimate source 'God', an entity preceding the world, like the singularity of scientists, existing beyond space and time and, therefore, separable from the world (p. 170). The priests too think to be able to participate in a universal discourse or timeless lifeworld. The conceptual construction that we normally take to be religion, Latour, taking up an expression of Jan Assmann (2009), prefers to call an 'anti-religion' because it constitutes a particular ideology, a superstructure, built on top of what is the real part of religion: its practices and experiences (Latour 2017, pp. 176, 178).

So, in a similar nominalist and pragmativist way, Latour denies religious contents and doctrines to be legitimate expressions of what religiousness truly is. The reality of religion can only be found in 'pragma-religion', in the daily practices of religious people. The real part of religion are prayers, meditations, acts of fraternal and mutual assistance, signs of love and carefulness, sacrifices, rituals, missions, and so on. Whereas 'religion as an ideal', as a conceptual unity, is to him an 'anti-religion', the reality of religion itself can only be found in religious practices of daily life (Latour 2017, p. 178). In a sense, Latour thereby goes beyond Martin Luther, for whom the reality of religion was situated in 'inner faith'. To Latour, the reality of religion is the external activity of religious experience or inner faith, its expressiveness. He thereby, in a sense, overrides Reformation to come

back to Catholicism—a ‘pragma-Catholicism’ so to speak—which knows no doctrines and institutions, but finds its only reality in the acts of religious people (p. 181).

3.4. A Reinterpretation of Divinity

I think this suffices to delineate Latour’s Burgundian exposition of both science and religion. But an additional aspect of Latour’s interpretation of science and religions must be mentioned: he wants to ‘reinsert’ this pragmatism into the existing doctrines of both science and religion:

“The chimera that interests me involves imagining groups of people who (...) would no longer feel that they are living under a Globe, but (...) would share the need to protect each other against the temptation of unifying too quickly the world that they are exploring step by step”. (Latour 2017, pp. 181, 182)

For Latour, this comes to adapting the classical doctrines to his compositionist view on Gaia—he calls this ‘terrestrialization’. It is curious to see that Latour, in this context, never refers to the work of Primavesi (Primavesi 2000, 2003), who, as we saw before, already tried to reinterpret Christianity on the basis of the ideas of Lovelock. But Latour is more radical than the Irish feminist since he does not depart from Lovelock’s holism but from his own compositionism. Primavesi, for instance, still hung on the idea of a transcendent divinity, whose ‘gift’ to humanity was Gaia (Primavesi 2003, pp. 112–23), a step that Lovelock praised because this holism implied that the whole cannot be reduced to its relating parts, whereas Latour envisions a pragma-nominalist reinterpretation of the divine, where the whole is reducible to its inner relations.

To Latour, divinity is what happens when religious people act and come together—the divine is interconnectivity itself. We may see this horizontal definition of divinity as a very ‘sociological’ interpretation of religion indeed. In his fifth lecture, Latour still limits this interconnectivity to humans (Latour 2017, p. 147), but in view of his new materialism, there is no reason not to extend this picture to all existing actants. Divinity could then be identified with the entirety of existing connections in the universe. This, of course, would again bring in Spinozism since the interconnectedness of things itself would be the divine itself, with no divinity existing beyond this interconnection. However, as we saw before, Latour is very critical of Spinozism because the Dutch philosopher considered divinity to be a substantial unity, existing prior to multiplicity. If my interpretation is correct, then Latour sees divinity as the multiple presences of reality itself. Whereas Primavesi still emphasized God as being transcendent but incarnated—God’s gift is also Gaia’s gift and makes her sacred, she says (Primavesi 2000, pp. 168–80)—there is nothing, no principle or law, to be incarnated anymore in Latour’s theology. Divinity, as he explicitly says, is inseparable from temporality: “If the ends can be *achieved in time*, even though *the times go on*, and *thanks to time*, then everything in the meaning of history and the manner of occupying the Earth changes radically ” (Latour 2017, p. 175).

Needless to say, this large conception of the divine should also rejoin the scientific concept of singularity, which, seen from his new-materialist perspective, could never exist as such and would always be an interconnection of some subatomic animate matter. Latour nowhere develops a reinterpretation of the contents of science, but in terms of his thoughts on pragma-science, this could only mean that everything is in itself a firework of interrelating forces. A pragmatic reinterpretation of science in any case should rejoin Latour’s pragmatic interpretation of religions. To him, the task of humanism is precisely this: to bring about such a reinterpretation of science *and* religion and to create a *convergence* of these domains. Let’s have a closer look at this point.

3.5. Back to Latour’s Humanism

Latour’s humanism consists in establishing connections between ‘real’ science and ‘real’ religion. ‘Real’ science is based on a new-materialistic ontology. ‘Real’ religion is based on the interconnections of religious actants. Notwithstanding the diversity of religions in the world, it seems that Latour discerns a kind of pragma-Catholicism as the structural

basis of all religions—all religions consisting of a set of convergent practices and rituals, promoting *connectivity* and finally *love*, but he hardly elaborates on this in *Facing Gaia*. The effort of what Latour calls a new humanism is to invert the doctrinal contents of religions by reinterpreting them starting from this pragmatic basis of religiousness. Here, Latour implicitly uses the Marxian distinction between base and superstructure. The base is the religious practices themselves; in nature, the base is constituted by the forces *in matter*. The superstructure, on the other hand, is presented as a construction, but in an Earthly reinterpretation, this should be representing as much as possible the structures of the base. Latour calls this humanistic way of interpreting “diplomatic negotiations” (Latour 2017, p. 155), and it constitutes the basis of his pluralism. It implies considering a plurality of perspectives: all religions must be able to take part in the dialogue and must be taken into account. The work of humanism should in fact guarantee that religion and science are imbued with the ideals of pluralism and tolerance.

It must be said that Latour’s picture of humanism strongly leans on the works of Stephen Toulmin. This means that he does not want to reproduce the traditional so-called ‘Enlightened’ or positivistic views of modern humanism, which he deems to be too anthropocentric, atheist, and anti-religious. Toulmin’s idea of humanism recenters around Renaissance humanism, which pictured the world as a ‘cosmos’ and interpreted human-centeredness as a dialogical play with other religions and the universe. For Latour, humans are dialogical entities characterized by their openness and tolerance for different perspectives (Latour 2017, p. 186). According to Toulmin, there are no strict certainties in humanism, which means that a humanistic interpretation of science and religion will always remain *speculative* and open (Toulmin [1990] 1992, pp. 25, 29). In his latest work, *Return to Reason* (Toulmin 2003), Toulmin even states that *positive* science also has to return to a situation of openness, which implies accepting a fundamental uncertainty that paves a path for philosophical speculation. There should be much room, he says, for rational speculation because, in fact, science is not exact since there is always unpredictability and instability (Toulmin 2003, pp. 210, 214).

But to Latour, this dialogical attitude of new humanism should not just be centered on humanity. Along with Michel Serres, he also considers the Earth to be an agent ‘responding’ to what humans are doing (Latour 2017, pp. 59, 62). Serres does not shy away from anthropomorphic expressions when saying that the Earth ‘talks’ to us in terms of forces and interactions. This brings him to the idea of a *natural contract* similar to the *contrat sociale* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Serres 1990). Latour acknowledges that all these expressions of Serres are indeed metaphors, but the fact remains, he says, that the fundamental attitude of this new ecological humanism of Serres is one of dialogue, even with nature (Latour 2017, p. 64). Only if we understand nonhuman actants as emphatically ‘reacting against’ the interventions of humanity, or as ‘taking revenge’, as Lovelock puts it, we can, says Latour, complete humanism. It is this generalized dialogical attitude that also makes Latour’s ‘diplomatic negotiations’ vis-à-vis nonhuman entities meaningful. We could call this new type of humanism ‘eco-humanism’, although Latour does not use the term.

Latour’s rethinking of humanism is, in a certain way, a clear statement against modern positivist humanism that was obsessed with identifying truth with positive science. He presents this positivistic scientism as having dominated over humanism during the 19th and 20th centuries, thereby also making possible a connection between humanism, eurocentrism, and technological triumphalism. This positivist humanism produced “narratives boasting of the fabulous exploits of Mankind transforming the Earth the better to master it” (Latour 2017, p. 115). This modern humanism once served as a narrative to indiscriminately dominate the Earth. Latour seems to be thinking of Comte’s fully desacralized view of the Earth that combined atheistic humanism with an extractive attitude towards nature, as announced in the title of his unfinished work of 1822, *System of Positive Industry, or Treatise on the Total Action of Humanity on the Planet* (Bourdeau 2022, p. 16).

As Serge Audier also pointed out in later works (Audier 2017, 2019), in *Facing Gaia*, Latour already suggests that it was not humanity as a whole but, specifically, this Western

productivism and lifestyle promoted by modern humanism that caused our indiscriminate action on the planet (Latour 2017, p. 122). In the Renaissance, things were still different. In the mind of humanist philosophers, theologians, and scientists of the time, the idea was still accepted that science and religion could largely converge. Nature in the Renaissance still had a sacralized status. Latour here endorses Toulmin's interpretation of Renaissance humanism as the situating of man in a 'living cosmos'. Latour thereby recenters early modern humanism around the idea of Gaia. And in a future renewed humanism, he says, the human is again to be defined as being part of the composite called Earth (Latour 2017, p. 151). Humanism, he says, must become more 'realistic', by which he means that humans have to acknowledge their place in this composite structure called 'Gaia' (pp. 109/110). This 'eco-humanism' takes man as an Earthling, acknowledging that certain entitlements of humanity must be reversed and restored to nature (pp. 195/196). In fact, all human rights, which once were based on the specificity of the human 'soul', should again be reevaluated as having been made possible by Gaia and, in a deeper sense, by the cosmos.

3.6. Horizontality

Latour largely shares this position with Lovelock, who never disregarded religion and spirituality as bringing in important worldview aspects for the new Gaian way of thinking. Sure, Lovelock's works are strongly scientific, but he clearly states that intuitions and spirituality really do matter. Lovelock always emphasized that his Gaian perspective is neither dismissing religion nor humanism but changing them from within. In a certain sense Lovelock's critique of positivist scientism is taken up by Latour. But whereas Lovelock clearly tends towards a *vertical story* in which human-centeredness goes along an idea of a staircase or hierarchy of consciousness, since the human being is still the major moral actor in the world, Latour tends toward a *horizontal narrative*, in which human-centeredness is combined with the idea of a relational entanglement. Whereas Lovelock, in a quite Hegelian way, sees humans as the pinnacle of Gaia's self-consciousness, having to take up major responsibilities towards the planet, Latour always avoids such idealistic expressions and merely presents morality as a horizontalized responsibility towards fellow beings.

It should be clear by now that, also for Latour, this moral responsibility towards Gaia is a major reason to cling to a new form of humanism: "The actor still remains humanity. Humans are the ones who found, who measure", he says (Latour 2017, p. 250). But this humanism is always also 'posthuman', as understood by Rosi Braidotti (2013), and includes nonhuman entities in all its moral and political considerations. This is not that different from Lovelock, but to him, Gaia is mainly an 'ideal principle of nature'; therefore, he is more liable to abandon Gaia's organic shape. This explains Lovelock's curious jump toward transhumanism in his latest works, in which he envisions the bizarre possibility of substituting both humans and Gaia with electronic 'life' forms (Lovelock [2019] 2020, p. 95). Latour is less prone to such idiosyncrasies and is understandably critical of such shallow ideas about a technological evolution beyond humanity. He rightly sees this as a remnant of positivistic scientism and takes it as a "vast conspiracy on the part of scientists to 'naturalize' humanity" (Latour 2017, p. 118).

3.7. Back to Religious Pluralism

To Latour, a major effort on this new type of humanism should be to neutralize Christianity's implicit Gnosticism, by which he means the idea of an immediate knowledge (gnosis) about metaphysics, on the one hand, and of matter as being substantially evil on the other hand (Latour 2017, p. 186). This implicit Gnosticism explains, he says, the modern *desacralization* of the Earth, the particular indifference and negligence of modern science and technology vis-à-vis nature. Science took over its desacralized view of nature from these gnostic aspects in Christianity. But, whereas in Christianity, there is still an aspect of the sacredness of the Earth in the idea of divine creation, modern science hyperbolized the gnostic elements of Christianity by fully desacralizing matter. Latour therefore also sees it as a major task of new humanism to correct this inner tendency of modern science. In

fact, Latour's own new materialism is a contribution to this effort; it makes it possible to *resacralize* nature without relapsing in a simplistic romanticism (p. 142).

But a renewed humanism should also put straight another aspect of Gnosticism related to the identification of matter and evil. Latour means the idea of divinity's transcendence. Gnosticism radicalized Platonic or Jewish ideas of transcendence, which originally still allowed for some immanence of God in the world. Such dualistic ideas of total separateness automatically led to the view that matter is evil and fully disconnected from the divine. Latour combats these medieval perceptions by defining religion, and especially Christianity, as a set of practices within history and not as an immediate transcendental revelation. It is all about practices and not about beliefs. He says: "As belief in something, religion is of little interest" (Latour 2017, p. 194).

But the really toxic part of these gnostic elements of Christianity is the dualistic belief in a transcendent divinity existing beyond everything earthly. Although Latour also values the liberative power of transcendence (Latour 2017, p. 195), in its dualistic structure, it finally leads to an apocalyptic discourse, in which the Earth is reduced to a nonreality (p. 196). As he says, in the Abrahamic religions, especially in medieval Christianity, there is an 'overdose of transcendence' (p. 200). The task of humanism is to counter this tendency for the desacralization of the Earth that we find in both Western science and religion. I think all these ideas of Latour around religion also explain why he ends up construing a new type of materialism that cannot conceive prior laws of nature separated from matter anymore and sympathizes with a fully horizontalized spirituality that is ultimately contrary to transcendence.

The highest mission of humanism, in Latour's view, should be to safeguard pluralism, both in science and religion. He, therefore, variates the famous words of the poet: "Only a God can save us now!" could be reworded: "Only the assembly of all the gods can save us now" (Latour 2017, p. 288). By taking up this quote from Heidegger, Latour does not want to adhere to some old-fashioned polytheism, but he is, on the one hand, invoking pluralism as the guarantee for humanistic openness and tolerance to science and religion, and on the other hand, he invokes an ideal of ecumenism that not only includes different religions but also tries to reconcile religion with science. Here, his religiousness and new materialism converge: Latour advocates a modern new-materialist version of animism that is capable of integrating pieces of indigenous spirituality and Christian practices with a scientific concept of natural forces. He clearly tends to see divinity as a signifier for this natural interconnectedness of things, as a realm that is inseparable from the multiplicity of the voices in being.

4. Conclusions

The question guiding this paper was to what extent Latour's terrarism is capable of grounding an eco-humanist approach to religious pluralism. In my first section, I tried to delineate Latour's terrarism as being constituted by a new-materialist ontology, on the one hand, and a nonholistic concept of Gaia that Latour calls 'compositionism', on the other hand. This relational ontology of Latour constitutes a philosophical grounding for his declared advocacy for a new type of humanism and for religious pluralism. He believes, along with Toulmin, that humanism introduces a sense of dialogue that constantly breaks open the doctrines of science and religion. Therefore, humanism paves the path to ecumenism. This dialogue should be 'large': it includes nonhuman beings, which creates a bridge from humanism to 'eco-humanism'.

My initial question was whether Latour can contribute to grounding an eco-humanist approach to religious pluralism. In Section 3, we saw that although Latour takes a new form of humanism to be a guarantee of religious pluralism, there is also an aspect of creating a new Gaian worldview based on compositionism and new materialism in his work that wants to go beyond postmodernism by introducing a new Gaian narrative. A certain form of animism and vitalism, an 'animism of agency', pups up, but Latour does not manage to reinterpret the doctrinal basis of religiousness because, according to him,

religion is about the experiences and practices expressing a deep love for being. Latour does not engage with any religion in particular. Like science, he discerns a conceptual or doctrinal part of a religion that takes divinity to be a totality. In general Latour, on the basis of his compositionism, rejects a realist view of both science and religion because both presuppose unitary totalities. This goes along with his interpretation of Gaia, which is nonholistic and nominalist, as I have shown in my analysis of Lovelock's concept. Latour aligns both science and religion with his idea of 'religious practices' with his pragmatism. The existence of religious practices and experiences is to him fundamental, and it is on this basis that ecumenism must be searched. The possibility of engaging in deeper and more doctrinal questions, such as the existence of a transcendent divinity that pre-exists the totality of being is something his compositionism cannot deal with. His antirealism seems to make it impossible for Latour to enter into discussions about a deeper reality beyond nature or otherness that transcends this world of composites. His eco-humanistic mediation of science and religion, therefore, seems to be unable to offer an account for what constitutes the ultimate belief of most modern religions, the idea of a divinity that in a way is a pre-existing totality.

The question of whether Latour can contribute to grounding religious pluralism, in my view, therefore, remains open since it is not clear in what way Latour can discuss the possible reality of totalities like Gaia, God, and Truth. Although, it must be said that Latour sets an important step toward understanding the necessity of such a grounding. First of all, Latour opens our eyes to questions of philosophical grounding. Second, he clearly shows that such a grounding cannot be started from the presuppositions of modern humanism but requires a larger perspective of what can be called 'eco-humanism'. But, I think, it is still problematic that Latour cannot cope either with a holist conception of Gaia or with the realist idea of a transcending divinity because his nominalism denies any reality to totalities and ultimate unitary levels of being. He does not cope with the ultimate claims of, respectively, Gaia Theory and modern religions, which state that there is an ultimate totality pre-existing the composites. His philosophy, however, can be read as an engagement for a type of ecumenism and religious pluralism that departs from the level of the composites, which are in fact the daily experiences and practices of people of faith and goodwill. On this level, his nominalist approach provides a pragmatic theory in which in the first instance, science and religion can be set in dialogue.

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Notes

- ¹ We cannot enter here into a comparison of Latour's compositionism with other versions of new materialism like [Deleuze and Guattari's \(1980\)](#), [Barad's \(2007\)](#), [Bennett's \(2010\)](#), or [Braidotti's \(2002, 2013\)](#), to just give some names. A first inquiry into the matter can be found in the recent explorational work of Hartmut Rosa, Christoph Henning, and Arthur Bueno ([Rosa et al. 2021](#)).
- ² The French text is clearer and says: "Nous comprendrons alors que dire d'un acteur qu'il est inerte—au sens de n'avoir aucune puissance d'agir—ou qu'il est animé—au sens de 'doté d'une âme'—est une opération *seconde et dérivée*" ([Latour 2015](#), p. 68).
- ³ Translation of the English edition of 2017 (which speaks of anti-religion, whereas the French text does not) lightly changed by myself. The French says: "Peut-être ne serait-il pas inutile d'offrir enfin de la matérialité une version qui ne soit plus (...) si pathétiquement inexacte. On pourrait sortir alors de toute 'religion de la nature'. On aurait de la matérialité une conception enfin mondaine, séculière, oui, profane, ou mieux: terrestre" ([Latour 2015](#), p. 97).
- ⁴ The English text translates Cenosotone as 'Owwaab', 'Out-of-Which-We-Are-All-Born' ([Latour 2017](#), p. 160). The whole 'scientific underpinning' is lost in this translation.

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