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GOD AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

The Ontological Turn and Human-Oriented Anthropology

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Abstract

The article aims to be theoretical, and to consider the impact of the word «ontology» in anthropology. I will start from an observation of religious worship, in which at least humans, various objects and a divinity are present, as well as actions, movements, statements, perceptions and various thoughts. I shall then try to use the word «ontology» on at least two different levels: on the one hand, to describe entities, the presence of which must be assumed if the situation is to remain consistent, and on the other hand, to focus on what really exists, beyond what people do and say. Finally, I will explore the advantage of this «realist» point of view

Keywords: *Ontology; Existence; Gods; Observation; Anthropology; Existential; Human; Catholicism*

«Minerva stood against the side of the entry, and revealed herself to Ulysses, but Telemachus could not see her, and knew not that she was there, for the gods do not let themselves be seen by everybody.»
(Homer, *The Odyssey*)

The situation is a scene of worship in a Catholic church in a French town. Present are around forty people, a divinity, chairs, a few typical objects associated with worship, various actions, gestures, words, thoughts and emotions. How can ontology help an anthropologist faced with such a scene? Through its etymology and also in part through its history, ontology can encourage a focus on beings. It would not be a matter of establishing an inventory of beings as if creating a catalogue, and it is of course difficult to see and describe each and every being at every instant during a moment of worship. Let us say that there are relevant beings that should be given priority, beings without which the situation would not take place – namely the «believers» and the divinity itself. The anthropologist's ontological work could then begin: observing and describing what must necessarily be postulated as entities present, and the modalities that give coherence to everything we see in a so-called situation. In this article, I will try to use the word «ontology» on one hand, to understand the presence of such entities, and on the other hand, to focus on what *really* exists, beyond what people do and say. Finally, I will look into the advantage of such a «realist» perspective, with a view to developing a «human-oriented» anthropology, and towards maintaining a certain sense of wonder at the «human condition»[1].

[1] This text has been translated by Matthew Cunningham. I thank the anonymous reviewer, as well as Frédéric Keck for their reading and suggestions.

The ontological requirement

The concept of ontology has been very much in demand in the social sciences in recent years. In particular, I see two leading approaches in the ontological turn of social anthropology. First, an ontology can result from the attribution of qualities by humans to other entities, and very often, although these may be non-human entities, the aim is to understand human modes of mental and / or material categorization (Descola 2013). There is a second, quite different meaning, which associates ontology with entities included in a conceptual system, for example a scientific discipline (thus one speaks of scholarly ontologies) but also entities in ordinary or «naive» ontologies, those of regular people, or even ontologies of systems of thought, such as those of religion. This orientation consists above all in examining the ontologies underlying everything, that is to say underlying the entities and the operations they mobilize, and considering how these ontologies divide up the world (Viveiros de Castro 2014).

The most common themes in this ontological turn, as it has been theorized in social anthropology thus far, especially from these two approaches, are (of course in varying proportions depending on the particular anthropologist): cultural cosmologies, conceptual systems (particularly non-European ones), narratives rather than situations, non-human beings rather than humans, the differences of «worlds», or even relations between entities instead of the entities themselves. About this debate, Paleček and Risjord wrote the following: «An ontology, in the sense that these anthropological theorists are using the word, is the product of such human-non-human interactions» (Paleček and Risjord 2013: 12). Despite the possibilities offered by a more radical ontological orientation, social anthropology seems to be preserving its pet themes (differences in culture, language and relations) and pays much less attention to individuals present in a situation. So how does one get the ontological turn to turn more radically?

There is indeed another strong orientation – absent in the ontological turn – of ontology. It consists in thinking that an external reality exists (or does not exist), with its characteristics, independent from conceptual and perceptual schemes (Ferraris 2014). These schemes can be those made by the people observed and by the anthropologists as well. This implies that people, and anthropologists too, can make mistakes. Anthropology would thus have to describe «the» reality, the only one that exists, focusing on the truth of what is happening. To say it briefly, what is present for people does not necessarily exist in reality. We thus return to the old ambition of ontology, recalled by Lalande: the «study and knowledge of the nature of things in themselves» (Lalande 1926).

When ontology is considered as the study of what really exists (what I consider to be the sole reality in a specific situation), we leave what could be called an ethno-ontology (as we say ethnobotany or ethnomedecine) for a study of the concrete reality. Ethno-ontology is transformed into a realistic ontology of beings. It is not the study of beings in discourses, the beings of the discourse, the beings for people, but the study of real beings. As for divinities, it is necessary, as I have indicated, to postulate their presence in order to contemplate the coherence of what is happening in a worship situation. But I would follow as well the third meaning of ontology, since it will at the same time be a matter of considering what really and concretely exists. Moreover, instead of radical differences between cultural worlds, I prefer to emphasize individuals and situations, as well as the fluidity and intermixing of these. It seems to me that it is relevant to ask or repeat questions about the complexity of present human individuals and about the truth of the situation – about what really exists. It is also a matter of recalling ontology's essential direction, as we have just seen.

It thus results in a few theoretical or methodological principles – different from the options of the ontological turn – according to what could be called a methodological and also realist ontism:

1. Ontology thus suggests an ontography[2] of human and non-human beings in their present complexity – beings in a situation – rather than focusing on speech, narratives, and conceptual systems (Piette 2011). In my view then, ontology indicates a theoretical and empirical orientation that consists of observing, describing and comparing beings, presences, individuals, and existences in and through their constantly changing, various and diverse situations. Therefore, as I interpret it, ontology is not an anthropological object, but an anthropological way of seeing things. It is therefore opposed to the idea of emphasizing cultural alterity and difference and conceiving anthropology only as a science of others – of other ontologies and metaphysics.

2. Ontology therefore serves as a critical guarantee that keeps the focus on singular beings and prevents their absorption into various constructed, relational sociocultural groups. «At the present time», according to Varzi (2010: 85),

[2] Martin Holbraad uses the notion of ontography in a different sense (see Holbraad 2012: 255-256).

«many philosophers believe it is possible to get rid of categories with the help of a solid ontology of concrete individual entities». This implies, on one hand, avoiding to slip the beings present too quickly into such groups (cultures or relations), thus risking to eclipse them, and on the other hand, it means considering their existence, in any case questioning their existence or their reality outside of the position of the researcher and also, when studying non-humans, outside of the position of people.

3. Moreover, from this perspective, ontology cannot work primarily and solely on the basis of human linguistic expressions. Particularly when it is linked with analyses of narratives (myths for example) outside any specific situation, there is a risk that language will be substituted for the world, that it will make us forget that things are really happening, that people are really suffering, are really happy, are really having a certain thought at a particular moment, in a situation. This realist option also applies to non-human entities, and this implies not stopping at the attribution of properties, for example those of agency, but also describing the real properties of the entities in question. Such would be the ontological requirement of anthropology.

I shall distinguish two (chronological) steps in my work: the first one is associated with what I have called the methodological theism (Piette 1999) and the second one, more recent, consists of a realist atheism. In particular the latter is necessary in order to attempt reaching the ontological ambition, as I have just defined it.

Methodological theism

So what is methodological theism? A situation is a scene which occurs in a specific space, at a specific time. A dominical mass in a French village is a situation. In such a scene of worship there are of course human beings and objects: they are individual, concrete, palpable; these are visible beings. But the analysis is not limited to objects that are directly perceived and perceptible by the anthropologist. It also includes the analysis of divinities. If not, in our case, we would not understand anything of the situation and of what people are doing. It is necessary to rigorously observe the situation, and in this case, the impact of the divinity and its modes of presence. The comparative observation of different dominical cults makes it possible to deduce from what is going on, what is visible, a few of the divinity's modalities of presence, somehow as if I deduced what an interlocutor (whom I don't hear) would say on the phone to a friend whom I hear answering.

Pushing methodological theism to its limit implies – as far as possible – going beyond human modes of expression in order to focus on describing the god with different ontographic characteristics. This is of course easier with a living being, like an animal, than with an invisible entity. Even in the case of divinities, it is difficult not to begin with the language of human beings. But if one sticks too exclusively to analyzing linguistic forms, one risks missing the most important element of the situation: God's modes of presence and action. At this stage, it is a matter of admitting that in a situation there are beings present that are both visible and invisible, human and non-human, living and not living, and therefore of recognizing the need to find appropriate methods for pinpointing, observing and describing each type of them. There is a difficult compromise to handle here because the observation of divinities (as invisible entities) is of course dependent on human actions and behaviors. Even though they will be unavoidably pinpointed according to the perceptions, gestures and linguistic utterances of a human directing his attention to an invisible entity, the challenge is also to circumvent – particularly through ontographic comparisons – the «endless harping on about sinking into an ontology of ‹objects of a consciousness» by assuming that every being, whether existent or not, denoted in a situation by an utterance, is endowed with a certain «ontological independence» (Piette 2011: beginning page 157, see also Nef 2009: 311-313). This point of course recalls our worship situation, in which people address a divinity, already present prior to their arrival, endowed with diverse characteristics, and which will stay after their departure.

In what follows, I summarize a collection of ontographic descriptions of dominical masses, which the reader can find in more details in *La religion de près* (Piette 1999)[3]. What is then observed about the divinity? It is the divinity, which causes these people to come together – people who would not come if the divinity were not there somehow – and which indicates specific attitudes during the ceremony. In such celebrations, Catholics treat God's presence as a boundary-setting situational dimension, placing certain constraints on the exchanges that take place, or implying reference points that determine how men and women coordinate with each other. It is therefore up to individuals to either feel that they are under God's ascendency or keep a certain distance, or to relate to him, through the attention the believer invests in the details of the

[3] At that moment I was explicitly referring to the work of Bruno Latour (2010 [1996]).

exchanges. From this deductive ontography, I observe that God is one of those beings that can be present in an inconspicuous way, without constantly being addressed directly. Because it is also within lexical and gestural details that God comes, circulates, claims extra attention and becomes newly engaged in the situation. When he seems to have left, it is not a permanent departure. He withdraws as quickly as he arrived, returning to oblivion for a few moments before re-emerging, perhaps more distinctly. Liturgical sequences also make it apparent that God is circulating, with different appearances and faces. His mode of existence in them is particularly ambiguous and fluid. From the beginning of these masses, his presence is wished for, and then this wish is repeated, particularly in Eucharistic prayer («May God be with you»). But at the same time he was already there, not only scattered through the church itself, but also stabilized in various objects placed on (and beside) the altar. He is even substantivized in the hosts, and there is also the possibility that he could speak himself through the reading of the gospels. And at the same time, it is repeatedly said that his coming is expected. All of this occurs in a short sequence, during which he assumes various forms: that of Christ or the Spirit. Furthermore, parishioners appeal to the divine being by means of various utterances: chants, prayers or other formulations, which either address him directly or evoke him without any direct exchange, or which may imitate Jesus' words (and gestures), for example at the last supper with his disciples. In these words we also hear praise of the qualities and actions of God and Christ, presenting him either as a powerful and creative Father, or as a benevolent and merciful love. After a series of requests for intervention for the benefit of the church, for people in general, or for people in particular, thanks are expressed. As these appeals for actions are being addressed to God, I can deduce that these actions are being performed. In any case, that is what the development of the scene invites us to think, according to the principle of methodological theism. Thus, in this liturgy, God summons the parishioners, forgives them, delivers them from «evil», sanctifies them, blesses them, turns offerings into the body and blood of Christ, unites those assembled, helps the dead sharing in his «light» and helps the living to hope for another, «eternal» life. Sometimes he also makes parishioners shed tears, inspires them to sing with more pathos, to find an inner happiness, a feeling of hope, and he even encourages them to briefly see him in front of them.

Emotion is not the most important thing. It is not even necessary, and if it arises, it is only isolated and not widespread. Beyond a few powerful moments experienced only by a few people, the divinity's presence – if one really thinks about it – is never very demanding. The descriptions show a divinity which seems to advance and then to withdraw immediately afterwards. Thus, he constitutes a completely particular presence, to the point that the concepts of interactionism do not apply. For example, the divinity is a «non-person» to use Goffman's term (1959: 151-153), like a taxi driver or maid who is treated as if he or she were not there, sometimes to the point of being subject to a lack of consideration. But in the worship situation, for the sake of its coherence, the divinity is present and individuals behave as if it were there and as if it were not there, but without any lack of respect and without people strategically showing that they are ignoring it. Is this God a «ratified hearer» (Goffman 1981: 132) who hears, participates and can be spoken to? Does he hear? In any case, to requests uttered by humans he seems to respond with action. But he does not respond every time. Does he participate? I have no doubt he does, since he is said to be present, though he does not always participate actively and directly. Does one speak to God? Yes, but without expecting direct responses, as one does when speaking to a human. The co-presence of human beings and gods is ultimately very amazing, quite asymmetrical in any case.

Should we stop the analysis at this reading of methodological theism? I think on the contrary that the ontological aim should be pursued, as I have mentioned at the beginning of the article. It implies leaving the sole coherence of the situation for the people and describing the concrete reality of what is happening.

Realist atheism

There are certainly many ways to pursue the analysis. It would of course be possible to continue describing precisely the divinity's modes of action and presence. I could also take a serious look at worship objects and the terms that designate them, allowing myself to be guided by the things and their meanings. It would be possible to interpret this type of situation as that of a «world» in which wine is blood, bread is the body, as Martin Holbraad (2012) does when he draws an equivalence between powder and power in Cuban divinatory cosmology. But in this regard, I prefer Evan Killick's comments on certain interpretations of the ontological turn, specifically on Holbraad's analysis, an analysis of conceptual systems without people, which omit interactions and modes of believing, and trigger an over-intellectualized over-interpretation of what is going on. «Holbraad's methodology and writing can be more broadly accused of both essentializing and exoticizing Ifá ontology. In the first place by distilling one particular aspect of it, making the search for and understanding of its point of ultimate alterity so precious that nothing else matters. In the second place by reifying and fixing this understanding in place as if

it is stable and shared uniformly. And finally by emphasizing the radical alterity of the concept, such that it can only apparently be understood by others through the creation of new and newly-shared concepts» (Killick 2014). Holbraad's analysis risks missing what is happening: reinforcing cultural differences through this idea of multiple ontologies, generating new forms of exoticization; also the risk of missing or obliterating the day-to-day complexity of reality.

Today, several years after my fieldwork in Catholic parishes, and given such conclusions about the ontological turn, it seems to me that the ontography of God would not be complete without considering another question: are the descriptions I offered of the situation true? Is there an entity that blessed and forgave, that was represented through various mediations? «You are ontologically serious», wrote John Heil, «if you are guided by the thought that the ontological implications of a philosophical claim [I would add: ethnographic descriptions] are paramount. The attitude most naturally expresses itself in an allegiance to a truth-maker principle: when an assertion about the world is true, something about the world makes it true» (Heil 2003: VII-VIII). Thus the requirements of ontology enable the anthropologist to step outside of the worship situation. From such an ontological perspective, the anthropologist can assume that the divinity's presence is not the effect of any being existing in another world, «a spiritual world», as the believers say. Readers might see this as an overly radical assertion; they can interpret it simply as an assumption that would apply to all supernatural entities[4]. Realist atheism, therefore, does not replace methodological theism, it complements it.

Either God is real as an existent, and the ontographic description above tells us a few things about an invisible existent of this kind; or the anthropologist ponders the question (this would be the great merit of ontological reflection) and thinks that if he possessed a complete film of the history of humanity and religion, he would find situated moments when each divinity, supernatural spirit, ancestor, etc., was invented and gradually constructed. From now on, this is my position, which moves from a methodological theism towards a realist atheism (Piette 2013). There is no reason why what anthropologists assume with regard to other supernatural entities cannot be transposed to the three contemporary monotheisms. In anthropology, and especially in the ontological turn, it is curiously uncommon to declare that a supernatural spirit, divinity, or ghost is nonexistent, and to attribute their existence to an historical oversight, to a thinking error, that of believing the divinity existed in this spiritual world before being created and built, or to a perceptual error, that of believing the supernatural entity exists because it is perceived and felt. It seems to me that the anthropological gain in truth would be twofold if one responded that the divinity does not exist, is nothing outside of presence effects. This brings into play first the truth on the ontological reality of the situation, as well as a more precise characterization of human beings.

Existence or presence

A first benefit would be to distinguish different forms of entities present in a situation, and thus to curb the use of the notions «existent» / «existence». I make the hypothesis that three categories can be defined, each divided into sub-categories:

— existents, that is to say «concrete persons» or «individuals» recognizable as such: humans, animals, plants, objects or any other tangible, perceptible element in human environments.

— the real effects of entities that are intangible, imperceptible, even nonexistent and only represented by incarnations resulting from social and historical constructs, for example a divinity. «Effect» can also be considered in two senses, as the consequence and continuation of a series of mediations, but also as a particular phenomenon generating this «impression» of presence. In my view, these effects are indeed the effects of something that does not exist. To assign a reality to such an existence results in what is called a religious belief (I will come back later on this point), which is in fact a thinking or perceptual error in regards to the sole concrete reality. These effects can also result from shared conventions, accepted as such, and of which people recognize the development and the arbitrariness, as in the case of the State; or from fictions (Tintin or Alice in Wonderland) that are acknowledged as such, and are attributed no real existence. It can also be the effects of the presence of existents that are dead and gone.

— situated presences. These entities are real but I would not say that they are existents. They consist of prominent, perceptible, tangible presences that can be followed and observed from situation to situation. In this category I would include

[4] In *L'origine de la croyance*, I present a genealogical analysis of the ability to invent contradictory statements, to accept not verifying them and thus believing in them (Piette 2013).

not only aggregates of existents, for example a group perceptible by a teacher when he is speaking to his students, but also properties and components of existents: a smile, an emotion, a statement. This form would also encompass abstract and diffuse presences, or what could be called virtual presences, like rules, laws and reasons for acting.

This type of classification would certainly need to be clarified and refined based on an empirical comparison between various forms of presence, on comparative ontographies and ontologies of non-humans (I prefer the expression «para-human» to designate these entities present *alongside* humans), which humans encounter during different moments of the day.

For instance, it is possible to specify the case of collective entities, like «society» for instance, or various other institutions that remain little explored in theirs forms and modes of presence in a situation (I insist on this term a lot). Society can indeed be associated with a form of presence. This implies giving a heuristic scope to Durkheim's propositions, with two changes: first, placing society (or the State, culture, etc.) in a situation, describing and analyzing it as a specific effect of presence alongside individuals and not – or at least not only – within them (as the internalization process implies); second, not thinking of this presence of «society» or other institutions as a force, command or constraint that implies obedience, but defining its presence and that of the individual as a co-presence that can certainly – but only occasionally – be experienced as a constraint. Through interposed supports in the form of individuals, objects or rules, collective beings possess diverse expressions of presence alongside human beings, in the course of a day's actions, and these are perceived as a detail, experienced as an object of attention, and used as a reference point or value (Piette 2011)[5].

The relations could be also considered as a being. They of course constitute one stratum among others that make up a human being acting in a situation, but they can themselves also constitute a situated being, as perceived by an individual who sees the relation between X and Y, for example between two lovers, Mary and Paul. In many of Paul's acts I can observe effects, traces of this being (in this case, the loving relationship or the couple). It is therefore appropriate to observe and describe Paul in the process of living through his activities, his modalities of presence (distracted, happy, seductive towards other women, etc.) and to observe the presence of love, as a situated presence when he is either with or without Mary. The couple is of course dependent on two concrete individuals. But the couple is also a situated presence. Anyone can see the couple walking or watch the two individuals kissing, and this is not an error of perception. When the man is added to the woman, this forms a couple that could be followed like a virtual presence; one could then observe the man or the woman together or separately in the course of their situations. The couple and their love exist independently of anyone's perception. But I would like this relation to remain a situated presence to avoid the risk that relations will consume all attention as an abstract object removed from the humans who constitute and / or perceive it in a situation. I could continue with similar examples: the «social», the «culture», the «reasons for acting», etc. This would certainly entail difficult observations of their modes of presence in a situation, but I think they are very important.

It is interesting to notice that, when animals are involved, the anthropologist faces a similar ontographic requirement, which implies a description giving equal weight to the animal and human modes of presence, but not merely treating them as objects of enunciation or categorization, or as objects of interaction. Having a set of heterogeneous characteristics and properties, the animal exists, and it also has a life outside of its co-presence with human beings. It is this singularity with or without humans that the anthropologist would need to understand and then compare with human modes of existence. The ontographic (or in this case zoographic) focus is directed not just at the attribution of various properties, intentions, agency, and their modes of relation with humans, but also at singular ways of existing and being present found in these para-humans (when they are interacting with them and also when they are without humans). But for the anthropologist facing these different modes of existence, human beings remain the center and the standard reference of comparison[6].

The presence of human beings

The second gain concerns a more precise, more complete description of human beings. It is the challenge of a human-oriented anthropology (Piette 2015a). In the analysis of the realist atheism, humans are not presented as attributors and constructors of existences. They are attributors of false existences, and are above all co-present with these, forgetting that others «invented» these existences and thinking that the exist-

[5] See also an essay of comparison between the divinities' presence and the institutions' presence (Piette 2010).

[6] In the context of multispecies ethnography, and only for the example of dogs, these are two different perspectives offered by Eduardo Kohn (2007) and Marion Vicart (2014).

ences existed before this «invention». The mystery of this co-presence is intensifying! We are obliged to interrogate ourselves on the modes of presence of these humans: who are these people to «believe» in these divinities that they invented and that they believe existed previously? This is different from the case of bacteria, which scholars discovered and which did indeed previously exist for a long time, having claimed many victims. According to the atheistic (or one might say naturalistic or historical) hypothesis, divinity is an invention and not a discovery, one that has been attributed an existence prior to its invention. The explicit hypothesis of the inexistent divinity makes the situation more amazing. It raises two possibilities: either human beings are «ontological idiots» (Kaufmann 2001), incapable of noticing that they forgot they invented the divinity[7]; or human beings hesitate, with a certain awareness of their uncertainty. This is what is called believing. It is worth noting that the act of believing – here presented as a mental state – is a theme that is little investigated within the «ontological turn»[8]. Diminishing the weight of the divinity forces one to question human modes of presence more strenuously.

And it is in this sense that individual variations are very important and the detailed observation of singular individuals necessary, as I have suggested at the beginning of the article. Humans hesitate, as a phenomenographic[9] observation can attest. This is what one can notice when observing believers closely: believing «but no more than that» in the divinity's existence; believing anyway; knowing, but still believing; not believing truly, believing now but doubting a bit later, forgetting having believed, etc. Variations in belief intensity, like mental states, are numerous. These seem to me to be central when faced with the risk of an almost literalist analysis, that is very focused on the conceptual systems of indigenous metaphysics, and that circumvents the complexity of human presences[10]. It is then vital to re-specify the modalities of individual presence, engagement and disengagement. This shifts the focus of observation directly onto modalities of presence and mental states, and makes it possible to move away from what is relevant in interactions, to observe the ambiguous and ambivalent presence of persons, to identify the human ability to circulate from one situation to another, without going all the way in their engagement and their distance, or even in their critical attitude towards the divinity. What this opens to the researcher is a vast field of «not really», which characterizes the believer's behavior: what I have called the minor mode (Piette 2015b).

Let us review the descriptions of the scene, going from an ontography in the situation to a realist ontology of the entities present:

0. People attribute to God the ability to forgive.

1. God forgives people.

Without being completely false, description 0 seems to me to be very far from the reality of what happens in our worship scene. Description 1, which I formulated in *La religion de près*, is certainly an ontography in the situation, linked with a pragmatic or interactionist interpretation. This consists in taking utterances and attitudes like: «God, forgive me», and the subsequent «Thank you for your forgiveness», and concluding from these that the divinity is a forgiving being, among other characteristics. That is description 1. But the transformation of methodological theism into a realist atheism opens the door to another interpretation, which allows to insist on the special, nearly fantastic, co-presence of the human being and the divinity:

2. There is no forgiving God.

3. An effect of presence cannot hear a request for forgiveness and forgive.

4. People can feel «comforted, consoled and serene» during the ritual.

5. People believe that God forgives them, but without really believing it.

6. God, who is inexistent, forgives.

[7] On this point see Willerslev (2013) debating Viveiros de Castro's position.

[8] Holbraad (2012) rejects the notion of belief in his analysis of divination in Cuba. Paleček et Rijsord (2013) place much emphasis on the anti-representationalist aspect of the ontological turn: «The ontological turn is thus a turn away from the idea that human difference can be captured by differences in representational states» (op. cit. 2013: 4).

[9] To designate this work focusing on individual details, I prefer the notion of phenomenography to that of ethnography. On the details of this analysis, *cf.* Piette (2015b).

[10] See also the critique by Heywood (2012).

Descriptions 2 to 6 seem more realistic than description 1 and especially more realistic than description 0. They enable the reintroduction of mental states and the act of believing (points 4 and 5), while keeping the divinity, that is to say its modes of presence (point 6). It would certainly be a returning to not taking into account the modes and effects of presence of this inexistent reality. But, for the second benefit, this type of interpretation helps stress the distance and modulation of the human presence, something that is necessary to avoid over-interpreting what is happening. Various forms of laterality can be observed or confirmed in the cults: evasive eyes, isolated distractions, wandering thoughts, anticipating moments to come, remembering moments past. There is a sense of negative reserve, as some believers report. This «not really» is found not only in the engagement of belief that is always in the process of modalizing, hesitating, lapsing into «withdrawal» if it goes too far in its credulity, but also, in the re-engagement of belief if it goes too far in its indifference and criticism. The concrete presence of existent individuals is not reducible to that which is uttered in systems of thought, such as those of religion. With its distance and flexible modes of engagement, this presence enables human beings to participate in various activities, sometimes simultaneously, in any case in a fluid succession.

The continuity of present entities is also particularly important to understand this co-presence. There are two continuities. The first is that of the divinity which is linked to the Church's history and which is already there, prepared by the priest and parishioners (who do not reinvent or reconstruct the divinity every time, but recall it and render it present). Second, there is the individual's continuity, which is itself at least twofold. On one hand, it is associated with a longstanding knowledge of the catechism, the individual having been more or less socialized in the beliefs of Catholicism; on the other hand, it is associated with the moments of the day that convey him to the church, for example from his work to his family reunion to his Sunday jog, without any explicit will or intention. This continuity generates some passivity, which is necessary in this co-presence of human beings and gods. The passivity implies all the more tenacity insofar as it allows itself to be penetrated by the various forms of laterality mentioned above. Such a co-presence also requires a certain suspension of the ability to wonder about the divinity's origins. This form of distance is no doubt necessary so that the effect of serenity is possible.

Why favor the notion of co-presence over that of interaction, which is more thoroughly anchored and developed in the social sciences? First, according to a paradigm developed by the Chicago School, the notion of interaction encourages a focus on interactional elements insofar as they are meaningful and relevant in verbal and non-verbal expression, and insofar as they thus constitute the foundation of the necessary mutual acceptance. Interactionism is interested much more in shared and exchanged signs than in the beings present. On one hand, this underlies a specific anthropology, that of an individual face-to-face encounter with others, actively mobilizing mental and gestural resources to maintain order in the interaction, applying the principles of management, strategy and rationality – in short, the principles of «ceremonial labor» (Goffman 1967: 85) that constitutes the agreement and the interactional order. Thus, co-presence, by orienting the focus towards entities present instead of links and relations (regardless of whether these contribute to the interaction's central exchange), makes it possible to examine the singularity of each person's presence rather than solely concentrating on the dimension which is interactionally relevant. At every moment in a situation, the volume of being is much more important than its interactional modality[11]. It therefore reveals activity and passivity, engagement or disengagement, presence or withdrawal. It implies not only a minimality of presence and perception, that of the individual, but also something «beyond» the presence of the other being, that object which became a trace of God. It is precisely beneath presence that an extra is attributed, a beyond that is outside its visibility. This is the dual ability of human beings to not think but at the same time inject something more, an extra. Theologians might say that it is in the availability of blunted presence that the extra meaning appears. Withdrawal enables – goes hand in hand with – the object's extra, unlike obsessive thinking which limits, fixes and has no leftover.

People believe that God forgives without really believing it and God, who is inexistent, forgives: this type of description is not really interactionist or pragmatic. The methodological and theoretical difficulty consists in not forgetting the other element of human presence or divine presence, whatever it is: present and absent, absent and present. This co-presence therefore involves some vagueness, with elements that are negative, or at least restrictive. Thus, the encounter between the human being and the divinity implies an impossible choice between two alternatives, the choice of one not destroying the possibility of the other. It is a paradoxical co-presence that almost necessarily gives rise to a set of hesitations in the relationship between human beings and gods, which are very incomplete and unachieved relationships. Because how can one not react with a certain indifference – what could be called a minor mode and a good, dif-

[11] For a critique of the relationist position, see Piette (2015 c).

fuse reflexivity – in an interaction that is as uncertain as that which presents a divine being simultaneously asserting its presence and absence?

The second aim of my analysis would be to focus on the modalities of human presence again, which had been lost in the ontological turn. I thus wish to end this article with that perspective.

Anthropology of minimality

What is this individual X, of the *Sapiens* species? A detailed focus on humans, on their mode of presence and absence, draws attention to the importance of «minimality». It characterizes a human way of existing in the minor mode, in the presence-absence (Piette 2015a; 2015b). Because what does a human being do when he is with others alongside the presences of gods and institutions? Ultimately, not much: he is there doing what is necessary, without much mental or physical effort, out of habit, with parsimonious perception (that of everyday life's habits), varying according to the situation of course. Most human actions develop like this in a situation, without requiring more from the people who are there: only minimal integrative behavior, I would say. These are expected behaviors that often reflect not so much their ongoing performance but rather an earlier intention or decision to perform them. At the same time, this intention or decision is self-evident, reflecting other prior situations. Very visible externally, the stratum of minimal integrative behavior often intrudes little upon the immediate presence experienced by the person. These minimal behaviors correspond to an interactional effort associated with social challenges, but are executed all the more easily insofar as they are routines, linked to known rules or co-present objects and resource-persons.

To the shared minimum is added – in the individual's volume of being and presence – a variable set of remainders. And these, insofar as they are additional to the shared, social minimum, are themselves realized in a minimal way, since they do not jeopardize the collective element of the situation. Think of the worshipper and the situation posited at the beginning of this article: they are gestures peripheral to the expected action, thoughts heterogeneous to it, the absence of an inner state, the occasional feeling that an experience is unfulfilling, or even an impression of constraint, or a brief critical doubt about what is happening. The expected behaviors can be (though they are not always) less present in inner experiences than remainders, some of which are strongly self-perceived and felt in the course of the action, though not enough to jeopardize the successful development of the situation. Thus, the integration behavior is minimal, but the remainder is minimal as well, because it cannot go too far without risking altering the situation through an excess of lethargic indifference, or an excess of critical doubt.

There is still another minimum, linked to the presence, alongside human presence, of practically inexhaustible, always revivifying supports. They consist of reference points, signs and rules. They are individuals or objects, spatiotemporal indicators in a situation's foreground or background. It is another minimum, a few support remainders that are always there. It can precisely concern the divinity – also minimally there – in various forms, including as a backdrop. One must therefore not think that the divine presence depends on human beings' total, unrestricted engagement. Rather, it is the contrary: Gods' effect of presence defuses that of individual beings. In the case of Catholicism, disengagement is all the more manifest insofar as the individual can repose on a divine presence already established by others. In any case, the nonexistent God inspires the anthropologist to reflect upon the presence of human beings. Ontology, when it designates a local system of thought, is itself a support, a flexible presence. When is it present? Actively, in the background, or not at all? For a few minutes in the day of the native. It is in these supports that the divinity, society and culture are re-presented, as well as ontologies.

Minimality lies at the heart of the lives of human beings and needs to be explored in order to best describe the reality of presences and existences. A mine of new observations is opening for anthropologists, particularly concerning forms of co-presence between humans and para-humans. It is not realist ontology's most insignificant merits that it stresses this part of human presence, which necessarily provides a perspective that is different from that which is usually implied by the «ontological turn».

Between the cognitivist explanation and the constructivist point of view, anthropocentric anthropology – which I call existential anthropology – has a role to play. It focuses on the existence of existents, whereas much research focuses on existents without their existence, their life, or modes of existence without concrete existents. In this aim of describing human singularities, I cannot restrict myself to individuals as results of neuronal and physiological operations, effecting a reduction analogous to that of the divinity. Because this is anthropology, and human beings with their existents' singularities remain the theme of reference. By making comparisons with other beings, the objective is also to consider the singularity of human beings as they cross situations, and to examine what really exists, and according to which modali-

ties it exists, regardless of what people say. This perspective tends towards an ontology of individuals, taken separately, with a view to avoiding the danger that relata, that is to say beings and especially human beings, will be suspended in favor of the interactionally relevant, with individuals only being seen as fit for consideration when they express, when they communicate, when they identify, when they perceive as X, and when they are perceived as Y, when they are in a relation (Piette 2015c). This means keeping the complex reality of volumes of being, with their multiple, changeable actions – actions that are more or less implicatory, and sometimes non-implicatory. Getting close to the individual makes it possible to better observe not only this volume of being both engaged in relations as well as removed from them, but also the always-variable modalities and intensities of presence and absence, engagement and disengagement.

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