

Detachment, hesitation, indifference: An anthropology of the religious being

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sr**Albert Piette** 

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Abstract

In this article, the author attempts to retrace his various explorations of religious experience: rituals in Belgium, Catholic parishes in France, and his own experiences of belief. A common theme emerges: a negation that is found in the modes of human presence and that has various expressions. During rituals, it primarily concerns modes of detachment and distraction; during parish meetings, it involves modes of oscillation to deal with the obscurity of religious statements. It also includes a sort of reserve or hesitation, which the author has observed in his own belief. The article hypothesizes that these modes of hesitation originate from the very first act of believing, which may date back 100,000 years. Specifically, the author identifies that moment as the starting point of a mode of human presence that is characterized by presence-absence and indifference. A section of this article consists of a critical debate between the author's own concepts and the ontological turn in anthropology.

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur tente de retracer ses différentes explorations de l'expérience religieuse : les rituels en Belgique, les paroisses catholiques en France, et ses propres expériences de croyance. Un thème commun se dégage : une négation qui se retrouve dans les modes de présence humaine et ont diverses expressions. Lors des rituels, il s'agit avant tout de modes de détachement et de distraction ; lors des réunions paroissiales, il s'agit de modes d'oscillation pour faire face à l'obscurité des énoncés religieux. Il s'agit aussi d'une sorte de réserve ou d'hésitation, que l'auteur a pu observer dans sa propre croyance. L'article fait l'hypothèse que ces modes d'hésitation trouvent leur origine dans le tout premier acte de croire, qui remonterait à 100 000 ans. Plus précisément, l'auteur identifie ce moment comme le point de départ d'un mode de présence humaine caractérisé par la présence-absence et l'indifférence. Une partie de cet article consiste en un débat critique entre les concepts de l'auteur et le tournant ontologique de l'anthropologie.

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Mots-clés

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Introduction

This article is intended to give English readers an overview of my work, which for many years has focused on the religious sphere. I have constructed, developed and nuanced concepts and theory by working on secular and religious rituals, Catholicism and the origin of belief. My fieldwork was conducted in Belgium and France in different ways: ethnographic exploration; photography during rituals and celebrations; detailed transcriptions of discussions and controversies in parish meetings; and attentive writing about my own acts of believing.

Throughout this research, there has been an overriding question: How do people feel and act when they are involved with religion, participate in rituals or are actively believing? Most of the observations point to similar attitudes: the detachment and distraction of participants during rituals; hesitation – doubt that involves believing a little, thinking something is possible but not really; and unsatisfactory conclusions to parish discussions about God or the Resurrection, with no worry or concern about this non-conclusion and endless disputes. I frame this restrictive aspect as being analogous to the ‘religious being’ – my term for someone who cares about religious things. The divinity itself is caught up in this back-and-forth action, manifesting itself, then quickly leaving again, present without actually being there. My own experience of belief is also replete with oscillation and doubt. And this is what would have happened to a *Homo sapiens* 100,000 years ago when placing an offering in a burial place while imagining the afterlife of the dead person: hesitating, doubting, wondering if it was possible, and finally accepting without trying to understand. Detachment, hesitation and also indifference are modes of being that can be explained or clarified by these facts of prehistory which at some point trigger diverse expressions of a new way of existing. I feel that it is heuristic to address the expressions of this restrictive aspect together in a single text. In this article, each point is presented succinctly, with bibliographic references to other works that discuss the point more thoroughly.

Continual displacement*The person who is detached from rituals*

This is the first expression of negation that I encountered in secular rituals and celebrations in Belgium. The theme I presented in the introduction, and the perspective it entails, cannot be separated from an attention to detail and, more particularly, to a certain form of

negation that intersects actions, words or emotions, as well as to ‘other’ elements or remnants after the main aspect is removed. Thus, the ‘minor mode of reality’ seems central to me when noticing relaxed attitudes in many photographs of rituals (Piette, 1992a; 1992b for religious rituals; see also Piette, 1996). By taking these attitudes seriously, I can observe in the laterality of gestures and in the low points a kind of simultaneous ‘double’ of the ideal storyline. Of course, this has consequences: it causes the performative dimension of the ritual to be nuanced. For example, the marriage ritual, meaning the whole ceremony, is no longer seen as an act of institution (Bourdieu, 1992). There is indeed the performative response of the couple getting married, which could be called the act of institution, but that it is not the whole ritual. The ritual also encompasses a context of ‘secondarization’. It makes secondary, and diminishes, but it does not institute anything. Only the celebrant’s action, which is performative, institutes something. Thus, at the moment it is taking place, the ritual distracts from the inherent tension of the situation. It allows a kind of masking to alleviate potential tension, transporting the human being into a state between awareness and unawareness – a sort of detachment.

Marriage is one example of such a ritual. Other examples include funerals; carnivals, with their local concerns; and mass as a celebration of the Last Supper. In this case, when saying, doing or performing is not really saying, doing or performing, the people participating in the ritual are not really participating; it is as if they are oscillating between an issue, an element of meaning or a value and the fiction into which the ritual draws them – hence the attitudes of hesitation and detachment that are so characteristic of human modes of presence during these ritual moments (Piette, 1992a, 2010). As an interstice in the space and an interval in time, the ritual creates in this in-between area a margin of ‘play’, generating laterality that is expressed by unimportant gestures and imitations. Interstice, interval, in-between, play, laterality – these are the words I gradually adopted, based on the work of Bateson, Turner, Schechner and Goffman, when I was trying to establish coherence in my ethnographic data. I was never able to separate myself from these concepts, even when I was later working with other data and rituals – other religious situations, beings or events as diverse as divinity or dogs, death and mourning – and, later still, the volume of the human being. This is because these minor modes of presence are indeed valid for all social life and life in general. Rituals exemplify and amplify, and prescribe a ‘be religious’, a ‘be in community’ or, more globally, a ‘live and exist’ perspective, to which the human being, an individual separated from other individuals, answers in a detached way – being present without really being present. Attitudes towards existence are not unlike the effect of a ‘double constraint’, which each person certainly reappropriates differently but in which there are always traces of detachment or of ‘lessereity’, as I would say today (Piette, 2019). In the 10, 20 or 40 collective situations they find themselves throughout the day, human beings are not unaware of the impossibility of the connection they have to demonstrate. Each is so intrinsically individual that they basically tell themselves with satisfaction or regret, ‘It’s collective, but we know that’s impossible’. Such is the presence of human beings.

Hesitation and postponement

With this idea in mind, my study of these attitudes had barely been completed when my life was struck by the death of my father and my ensuing grief. It was 1989. A fact

quickly became significant. The village priest had just come out of the bedroom of the deceased in our house. I followed him for a few steps and then called to him. We knew each other well, as fellow villagers. I asked him very literally what would happen next to my father. I saw that he was taken aback. I had to clarify: ‘His soul? What’s going to happen to it?’ He advised me to write, in order to remember. It was as if he could not answer my question. I did write, for four years. It became a journal of mourning and oblivion (Piette, 2003a). I thought so often about that reply from the priest that, one day, I decided to make an ethnography of the Catholic parishes in a French diocese. Would I find answers? What would the priests I intended to meet say to me on that subject? What would I learn during the meetings I was planning to attend over a period of several weeks?

There was at least one other reason for my quest, revolving around the fact that anthropologists showed little interest in monotheistic religious institutions in France, especially the Catholic Church. As I remarked in *La religion de près*:

Anthropology, which is still mainly interested in distant cultures, cannot help but find trivial the omnipresent cultural background of Christianity, of which Catholic parishes are probably the most obvious feature. Unlike religions of India or China, what Christianity lacks – as do Islam and Judaism – is the ability to relate to a world that seems far away. What is missing, rightly or wrongly, is that ‘radical alterity’ characteristic of ethnological projects as conceptualized by Durkheim: finding in ‘primitive’ societies (particularly in the totemism of Australian Aborigines) the ideal model of simplicity for understanding religious phenomena. ‘Being trapped by the constraints of the “very simple” model, the Durkheimian approach seems to concentrate exclusively on the very distant, because its radical alterity allows it to become an adequate object of knowledge’ (Colonna, 1995, pp. 236–237). In short, Christianity is too close to the western religious nucleus. It has insufficient ‘otherness’, and the two other ‘monotheisms’ resemble it too much. Understood from the perspective of its ordinary experience, it becomes a kind of ‘unattainable limit’, which contributed to establishing the field of Religious Studies. (Piette, 2022b: 26–27, my translation)

It is necessary to point out that ethnographic interest in Christianity is mainly directed at its non-western forms, or at least in sufficiently ‘exciting’ configurations – for example, conversions or the sociopolitical transformations they bring about. In this research, ethnography, which is often framed as criticism of western representations, actually deals with their foundation.

In this exploration, I face the same ‘temptation’ to retain the meaningful dimension of interactions and eliminate the rest. But again, as with rituals, placing nuances and negations in a series has allowed me to observe a specific mode of ‘shifting’ – the fact that an individual says ‘that’ is not the most important dimension because the same or another individual will quickly react by saying, ‘It’s not that, it’s this’, and so on. I think of Mary Catherine Bateson’s reflections:

It seems to me that part of what you keep implying about religion is that it necessarily has contradictions embedded in it – paradoxes – and these contradictions are protected from certain kinds of rationalizing knowledge to preserve them in tension . . . One thing that has always struck me about Islam is that it lies flat on the pages, while Christianity is just writhing

with contradictions, and maybe that is an important kind of difference. (Bateson and Bateson, 1988: 146)

Without launching into a comparative process here, as thrilling as that might be, this extract from a dialogue between Bateson and her father summarizes well what I observed in Catholic parishes in France.

La religion de près describes parish meetings and presents long excerpts from meeting records followed by analyses revolving around that main argument: the micromanagement of ‘contradictions’ using hesitation, oscillation, difficulty in deciding, postponement and shifting (Piette, 2022b). Parish debates thus present themselves in the form of ‘little scenes’, whose distinctive feature is that they never conclude, they never reach the end of themselves.¹ These are disputes that are repeated, starting over again the next day and yet again on the days that follow. More than just debates, I would say that what is thus observed involves household scenes, ‘scenes of love’, never-ending ‘scenes’ with the same arguments, as if they had been preformatted and made available to the parishioner. A trivializing effect is created by the non-systematization and repetition of arguments: parish discussions have an ‘air of nothingness’, not necessarily resembling the driving force of political assemblies or scientific seminars. God, community, love, the Eucharist, prayer – disagreements relate to themes or terms that can be translated or reappropriated according to the tenets of various arguments in such a way that their polysemic vagueness generates debate or compromise, while at the same time postponing and shifting it. Basically, parishioners know in advance which statements will be projected onto the scene, and are aware that no argument will force a conclusion. At worst, if tensions rise too sharply, an explicit appeal to God ‘appeases’ them. I have seen this happen many times: So, who is God? The community? No, it is not the community; it is the priest. No, it is not the priest; it is love. No, it is the ritual. No, it is the community, and so on – in accordance with that shifting which asserts, then denies; which questions the relevance of one viewpoint or another, then unites them or nuances them in their complementarity. In any case, from what I have observed, the cycle remains balanced without reaching total disagreement and rupture. It has God as a principle of coordination but lacks the ability to resolve contradictions.

Believing, but not completely

While working on this ethnography, I had not, of course, forgotten the question I asked my priest a few years earlier while in the throes of emotion, and I especially had not forgotten about the answer I am still seeking. Therefore, I conducted a test – a kind of experiment – by asking a few parishioners who were very involved in their parish group for ‘information’ about an important point of the catechism of the Catholic Church – the Resurrection: ‘The Christian Creed . . . culminates in the proclamation of the resurrection of the dead on the last day and in life everlasting’ (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993). I then observed another micro-displacement. One recurring characteristic of the way answers were expressed was mental restriction, which modalizes or even negates the trait that has just been stated: ‘I think there is something, maybe’; ‘I believe in the communion of saints, but no one has ever said

anything about it'. This modalizing capacity applies just as much to a metaphorical interpretation of the afterlife as it does to a literalist interpretation.

Then, what is the Resurrection? Each of the answers also forms part of the shifting movement already encountered – a movement of hesitation between various conceptions of the resurrection of the dead: It is literal. No, it is not literal; it is symbolic. No, it is not symbolic; it is something more. No, it is not literal, but is . . . , and so on. Thus, the various ways in which Catholics speak about death and the Resurrection illustrate the figure of hesitation, which is not all that uncomfortable, but is rather transformed into a kind of minor mode. So, there is certainly contortion but with a lot of minorization (see also Latour, 2013a).

Listening to these Catholics involved in parish life, I could not help but think of my own experience of belief, which I describe in *Le temps du deuil* (Piette, 2005). This book contains a summarized narrative about the various modalities of my mourning process: writing the journal; ethnographic fieldwork in the parishes; a search, through reading, for 'evidence' of the afterlife; and also a description of my own belief. Here is what I noticed:

The act of believing consists of an approbatory representation of an image or of a statement. Assent springs up promptly, saying 'yes' to the representation of the existence of the dead in another world. The idea comes to acquiesce, to approve. In an elusive way, it leaves behind the impression or sensation that it is not impossible for this other world to exist. In my case, it appears that my thoughts of such religious representations during celebrations are not necessarily accompanied by a clear movement of assent. . . . I am never, even for a moment, in radical acquiescence. A 'deficiency' always reminds me there is no objective guarantee of the existence of this afterlife, but is always surpassed by the hope of knowing more at a later time. To know that it is possible. . . . It is as if my desire to believe were colliding with a vagueness about what I would like to believe, and above all recognizing the unlikely probability of the Resurrection. I see myself as pursuing an endeavour that cannot be achieved, all without pretending. (Piette, 2005: 29; my translation)

Am I satisfied with this? In any case, I continued to write so I would not forget, to store memories of my father, as the priest had suggested.

Theoretically, it is not then a question of setting aside the topic of 'belief' – quite the contrary – or of considering it to be too Christian-centred. There is no sense in that. I cannot forget what Sperber (1985: 57) wrote: 'Anthropologists are vague as to what exactly is the attitude of the people to their beliefs, beyond its being one of commitment'. There are very few detailed answers, even though details and nuances are necessary. Nonetheless, I have been able to identify some aspects.

Firstly, there is a definition of the act of believing as a universal ability – a sort of approval or agreement that is to some extent conscious and to some extent automatic at moment *t*-, to the propositional content of the religious world in question. By this, I mean that such acts of believing exist or have the possibility of existing in all religious spheres where there are religious statements that are contradictory and impossible. Believing is an act that can manifest itself in various ways – as thoughts, emotions, feelings or a mental state, or even actions. These manifestations express a sort of 'yes' – for example, to the representation of a dead person's life in another world.

Secondly, the thought of such religious representations during liturgies, or in any other situation, is not accompanied by a clear movement of assent. Most often, it is actually the opposite, as has already been mentioned. What are the modalities of that assent and its withdrawal? One example is experiencing an intimate presence, such as when people weep while hearing the story of the Last Supper as if, according to their own interpretation and personal evocation, they were actually experiencing ‘transubstantiation’. Another instance is an occasional emotion when, persuaded that the ‘Last Judgment’ does not exist but also being aware of having committed a significant ‘sin’, the ‘believer’ is overcome by fear of their fate. A third example is the common gesture of slipping photographs into a coffin before it is closed, to accompany the deceased, all while being in tension with an awareness (which one does not want to be too strong) of the practical pointlessness of this gesture and also a sort of positive mental connection that makes it possible to hope briefly for a reunion beyond death. A fourth instance is addressing God automatically, in a routine way, without ‘thinking about it’. There are thus gradients: believing, believing anyway, really believing, not really believing and so on.

Furthermore, these occasional modes of belief correspond to specific mental states, which are important to decrypt, and they cannot be separated from the moments that follow them. This is the shift between the moment when the individual becomes aware of their act of believing and their drift into ordinary distraction and wandering thoughts. Among the modalities of shifting from the act of believing into other states of mind, the most common is probably indifference. Someone can have a mental flash or also a sort of approval while at church of the content about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, then forget that content a few minutes later. There is also the lethargic state of someone who keeps their representations below the level of awareness – a kind of minimal internalization that enables the management of contradictions and incompatibility. This does not exclude regular or irregular echoes and reverberations of this idea in thoughts or acts, which might translate into charitable gestures or pleasant moods. Sometimes, there is also critical doubt and a sceptical wink. Searching for proof is another way of ensuring a shift from the state of belief into another situation. This can be done by reading about the life of Jesus or visiting places that mark the history of the beginning of Christianity (for more details, see Piette, 2003b, 2005, 2015b).

People calculate because something is calculable, think because something is thinkable, and believe because something is unbelievable. This implies an inherent restriction in the act of believing. The believer is never far from remembering and knowing that what is believed is unbelievable. Thus, I return to the crux of this article: restriction, not going all in, hesitation. ‘To remain obscure’ is one of the points highlighted by Veyne (1990: 525) regarding religious activity. And without being too aware, ‘believers’ know that it is obscure, not really daring to say it, not daring to say that what they believe in is real without really being real. The act of believing is intrinsically a question of intensity and nuance. Studying belief and the act of believing without specifying the intensities at play is almost a logical error. One of the specificities of belief is that it propels a moment of emotion, then descends back into criticism or indifference; that it mitigates assent through doubt; and that it nuances doubt through a desire to assent. This happens to the point that the diminished intensity does not eliminate the position of the belief in the backdrop of everyday life.

This leads us in another methodological direction. Ideally, it involves going beyond classic types of interviews in order to get closer to the feelings and states of mind of the person who believes. Anthropology should be able to provide answers about modes of assent to this or that statement. To multiply this data for comparison across various religious spheres, observation of the progression of one individual at a time is essential, along with journal entries by that person about moments of belief or of shifting into other states. We can also use straightforward interviews that take seriously the ability people possess to describe what they experience and feel, and we can proceed methodically to achieve this objective (see, for example, Petitmengin, 2006). It is the anthropologist's task to encourage such detailed descriptions – for example, by using photographic images or videos as resources for asking people how they felt, and following the rhythm of situations and transitions between important phases.

Tracking shifts

One methodological approach involves shadowing a person and monitoring them over time, not just in a specific activity. This is what I did with a priest named Bernard for one week, from morning until evening; this experience resulted in a long chapter in *La religion de près* (Piette, 2022b).² Instead of ethnography with a broad focus, I have chosen the term 'phenomenography' to identify a focus on the progression of an individual.³ Of course, the observer may certainly be struck by the discontinuity or coherence of actions, their duration, how slowly or rapidly they transition between situations (time travelling by car, household activities), their regularity or the differences in repetition. However, it seemed to me that something else characterized that particular priest, and it relates to the idea of hesitation and shifting. Bernard is above all someone who moves from one point to another using various modes: oscillation, compromise, irony, humour, comparison, reprimand, nuance or the addition of meaning. Through the interplay of these negations, which establish gaps or supplements based on various connections, there is a superimposition of the different activities in which Bernard engages as a priest, prophet, theologian, preacher, teacher, militant or witness – to borrow and expand on Weber's ideal types (see also Willaime, 1997).

On the one hand, following and observing the priest for one week made me aware of the difference between the ideal type of the priest and his concrete activities. These are the first remnants: for example, for Bernard, mass is not just the objectified ritual of the priestly official; it also means connecting interpretation of the Gospels to everyday life – for example, by helping the poor. These are elements that are supplemental in relation to the ideal type of the 'priest', and they are repeated throughout situations. On the other hand, the observation also revealed another, narrower remnant: that which remains after the addition of data incorporated into the ideal types of priest, prophet, magician or other religious types. This makes it possible to see not only the importance of the negations the priest introduces into each situation, but also the shifting between different situations. Comparing a priest's day to an ideal-type series makes me see that the addition or juxtaposition of these ideal types or of these various actions in a situation is more relevant than associating the situation with a single concept. And this comparison especially makes me realize that even when I have tested this ideal-typical addition

or juxtaposition, there are always remnants, and these can make sense from situation to situation. When observing the flow of action, one of the points of a phenomenographic focus would therefore be the continuous shifting from one situation to another with (within each of them) a form of restriction, negation or distance. This brings us back to the points identified in regard to parish meetings and acts of believing. In this case, is not the priest indicating a continuous movement of existence? It is as if the fact of not stopping were implicitly present in every situation, and the remnants of the previous situation and parts of the following one facilitated the shifting. So, it is not a matter of perceiving the plurality of actions or the poly-relevance of meanings, the continuous 'shifting' of which an individual is capable, but rather identifying how such acts are permeated by nuance, irony and doubt.

Presence or absence of gods and the dead

There is another indispensable moment in observation and descriptive work: through watching a human being move, talk and perceive, the observer becomes an ontographer and decides to reflect on the modes of presence of the divinity as an invisible being whom the believer addresses throughout various encounters. What I call 'methodological theism' in *La religion de près* (Piette, 2022b) – being directly inspired by Latour's suggestions – makes it possible to describe what happens in a liturgy by giving coherence to human attitudes and then by describing the divinity's modes of presence, which are deduced from what humans are doing and saying. The divinity is also in a kind of back-and-forth movement.

Thus, human beings take part in a celebration because they think – without really reflecting on it – that God is also present. And at the same time, the only presence they expect is a vague one, through objects, people and various signs. This ambiguous presence of the divinity seems to combine concrete modes of being in a situation (a support, reference point, clue, focal point, detail, etc.). A wide arc emerges between the differences in the divinity's modes of presence. Sometimes, the divinity is a reference point for a gesture or statement by the believer and at other times a focal point for the same individual, but he also is quickly forgotten, returning to the background, but still able to be called upon. Yet, is this not the definition of 'presence'? It is more than a backdrop, which, by definition, is large. It is less noticeable than an unimportant detail that quickly springs up, quickly fades away and is quickly forgotten, being nothing more than a distraction. The presence of a being or of its trace can certainly re-enter the background, or crop up like that unimportant detail, but above all it is there, like a companion whom we ask simply to be there and who asks nothing of us. 'He is present', we might say about a dead person or a divinity, almost simultaneously referring to different modes of presence (a clue, reference point, fragment, detail), as if the 'presence' becomes blurred from combining everything, including the figure and the background. And outside of places of worship, many people act as if the divinity were not and has not been present.

God, divinities and other supernatural beings are often passive and free from issues related to human interaction. They are neutral in relation to the situation, not arousing humans' full attention. In this vein of thought, I have described the modes of presence of dogs (Piette, 2002). Whether they be gods or the dead – but more generally non-humans

– they are simply ‘there’, demanding nothing more. Due to their ‘alongside’ presence, they do not usually hold humans’ attention, except at specific times, and they are kept at a proper distance. These passive, unobtrusive, almost forgotten presences are all the more important insofar as they can re-emerge in various modes along with an issue. I feel that it is important to stress this ability of humans to minimize the presence of these various beings, rather than humans’ much-analysed ability to attribute intentions and ‘agency’ to them, and to be relationally engaged with them (see Gell, 1998). The ontographic identity card is therefore more extensive because it adds to the divinities’ actions that which is also deducible through what humans do not directly attribute to them. Based on the coherence of the situation with a human action or utterance, it is possible to say that divinities do not hear and see all the time, and that they come and go. Thus, the divinity forms a presence that is original, or at least specific, to the extent that concepts of interactionism are not applicable. For example, can a divinity be a ‘nonperson’, to use Goffman’s (1959: 151–153) term, similar to a taxi driver or servant or maid, whom others treat as if they were not there, sometimes even lacking consideration towards them? Of course, the divinity is there for the believer, who acts mainly as if he were there and yet not there, all without lacking respect and without strategically making a show of ignoring him. Is the divinity a ‘ratified hearer’ (Goffman, 1981: 132) who hears, participates and is addressed? Does he hear? From a situational point of view, he probably does, since he can act in response to the requests made by humans. However, he does not answer every time. Does he participate? Probably, since he is said to be present but not always participate actively and directly. Can a person address God? Yes, but without expecting direct answers like humans usually expect from each other. From his modes of presence and withdrawal, which are sometimes very sporadic, we thus find the characteristic hesitation I talk about in this article. This is also true of the modes of presence of the dead, as described in my book of mourning for my father (Piette, 2005).

An ultimately astonishing Homo religiosus

From all this emerges a modality of being – essentially that of all humans – which the religious universe reveals. It involves accepting without understanding everything, relaxing attention, postponing, not concluding, not thinking about something, and tolerating contradictions and incongruity. My hypothesis is that this modality of being, thus deployed in all human activities, comes from the religious modality of being, starting from the moment when a human began to believe. Such would be the difference between a period without belief and that of *Homo sapiens*, who has become a believer and conveys a new modality of being. I return to Minkowski’s (1970) description of the pathological states of people who are distressed by the movement of time, which is bringing death closer. He quotes one patient: ‘What is terrifying is that with each movement, each action, the distance that separates me from death becomes smaller . . . the idea that everything passes and that life becomes shorter makes me afraid’ (Minkowski, 1970: 301). A detour to pre-history allows for my hypothesis. Archaeologists have discovered *Homo sapiens* burial places (dating back 100,000 years) with articles interpreted as offerings, which would not necessarily have happened in Neanderthal burials preceding that time or in modern times (for more details, see Piette, 2013, 2015b). These *Homo sapiens* possessed a syntactic

language, allowing them to connect contradictory properties, such as life and death. A being would have begun to think that the dead person to whom these offerings were directed had the possibility of another life. They imagine it, reject it, doubt, hesitate and then allow themselves to believe it, with assents that do not self-conclude. In their newly found comfort, they soon accept the state of not being certain, of not wondering. They accept a lack of understanding, of seeing as normal the fact that improbability is not immediately presented as improbable. They have just agreed to become indifferent. I see in this a defining moment in the history of *Homo sapiens*, which consists in formulating such an idea, in thinking that its reality is possible without really following this thought to its conclusion. By relaxing, the human being learns semi-awareness and cognitive release – new skills that they will then progressively deploy in other fields of activity or thought. Thus, the ability – to accept indecision and to not take things literally, but also to not be lucid, to forget and to postpone – is spreading out, according to the evolutionary principle that what thrives will spread out. This is lessereity, a diffuse ability to lessen. It is a sort of indifference that will not resemble the previous mode of being. Another world has thus developed in all everyday situations, with humans who do not follow their statements through to a conclusion, especially those who accept not being able to understand, who believe in something without believing too much, who in the vagueness of their hesitation accept that something is so – humans whose presence during rituals lets some of this detachment show through.⁴ To imagine oneself as an incipient *Homo sapiens* compared to a Neanderthal – who would have remained ‘absolute’ in their thoughts, in their intensified awareness, particularly in relation to loss and death, and who would not have known such a relaxed and diminishing mode of being – is also to look at oneself, to remember various modes of attentiveness. This is a reason to speak of existential prehistory – to try to understand the human entity and to seek its states of mind and feelings, with the help of cognitive clues and archaeological or even anatomical data. As Minkowski (1970: 298) emphasizes: ‘In life, we turn our glance toward a new situation not because the present situation is satisfactorily settled from an objective point of view but because life pushes us on toward the future’. As for non-*Homo sapiens*, they were not able to settle situations and move forward because they were caught up in a feeling of lucidity and anxiety, which slowed down the development of their social life. Conversely, cognitive release allowed *Homo sapiens* to acquire some degree of tranquillity in the presence of others or in the face of events that occurred, and, in the context of this new capacity, to develop and support a complex world of social relations.

Crucial points from existential anthropology

From a critical viewpoint, I would now like to focus on two points. On the one hand, observing a person step by step in their daily moments and continuity, and discovering the nuances of their successive modes of presence, as I did with Bernard – that is to say, remaining at the scale of the human entity – is what I consider to be the basic principle of anthropology. Ethnography has strayed from this principle, but existential anthropology cannot escape from it; my experiment was conclusive in this regard. On the other hand, for the sake of lucidity with regard to the existence of entities, which raises the question of ‘the’ reality rather than ‘a’ reality, I now think that a description of a situation

and its coherence, which involves defining humans and divinities or other supernatural beings, cannot be an anthropologist's last word. This is what I consider to be the ontological requirement of an existential analysis focused on existents and the reality of the entities they constitute. The requirement of lucidity – that of the reality of beings – enables the observer to go outside of a religious situation in order to hypothesize that the situated presence of the divinity is not the effect of any real being that exists in another situation or another world (Piette, 2015c, 2022a).

Let us look more closely at this. Creating the first part of a description can, of course, consist in understanding a situation, conducting an ontography of it to emphasize the viewpoint of others, and also describing the world implied by their conceptions. This is the case when anthropologists claim to take seriously the objects and terms of religious spheres, to allow themselves to be guided by their meanings, and to describe and analyse a 'world' in which wine is blood and bread is the body, as suggested by Holbraad (2012). For quite some time, *La religion de près* has been an expression of that modality of working (Piette, 2022b). But this can only be the first step; the other step consists of critically questioning the accuracy of such descriptions. Anthropologists face a challenge: whether to describe the world of other people for them and to describe situations with the beings required for that world, as is the case in *La religion de près*, or to describe the reality of beings themselves. I feel that an ontography of a situation would not in fact be complete without addressing a new question: Is my proposed description of a situation true? Or, put another way, anthropology would need to supplement this first level of description by applying a new question to it: Is there a divine entity that blessed and forgave, or that was represented by such mediation? I would reply that, without this question, a description is not accurate, since there is no 'God' entity that, for example, comes and goes, or forgives.

It is as if a large segment of social science wanted to release the brake that was applied by the methodological atheism of yesterday, and has become relaxed, as today anthropology in its various expressions particularly makes it possible to give divinities and supernatural spirits a very strong analytical status. And this is done for the sake of respecting local discourse and the considerable space non-humans are taking up in social science, to the detriment of humans. Can this be associated with a resurgence of religion, even forms of fundamentalism and nationalism, as though this anthropological reading and this political and religious situation had a common matrix? Depending on the circumstances, the question is not devoid of interest, but I will set it aside for now. Finally, does not such a discourse forcefully continue what anthropologists have, to a certain extent, always claimed to be doing in a relativist spirit based on their explorations into religious spheres that are not similar to their own? But too much – is it not too much? Even though Latour (2013b) continues to ask social science researchers to speak the language of God, I am no longer able to speak it as clearly as I did 20 years ago.

I stress this point because, when it comes to existence, philosophers are also not without ambiguities. Gabriel (2015) effectively criticizes constructivism, according to which there is nothing in itself but something for X. There is, of course, something for X, but there first must be something (5–6). He explains that there are thoughts about X, and that there are facts these thoughts are based on. Up to this point, I agree. But I agree less when Gabriel suggests the concept of a 'field of sense' as a fundamental ontological unit, and

states that existence involves something that manifests itself in a field of sense (65). This would make the state, unicorns and God all exist. Of course, something can appear in a field of sense and be false, as he explains: 'Note: that something appears false (and thereby exists) does not mean that it is true' (66). Moreover, he admits that it is an erroneous idea that witches exist and that God exists when we leave his field of sense. I prefer to avoid the ambiguity of the concept of existence, and maintain that unicorns and divinities do not exist. I think ontology has to do more than simply show the plurality of fields of sense and their differences.

Making the shift from an ontography of a situation to an ontography of the entities themselves, and of their reality, presupposes expressing an opinion about the 'nature' of reality and not pretending not to know this reality. With this statement, I am opposing a basic principle of anthropology, which was recently clarified anew with regard to the ontological turn: 'In spite of its name, the ontological turn in anthropology is therefore decidedly *not* concerned with what the "really real" nature of the world is or any similar metaphysical quest' (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017: 4–5). My proposal does not concern a metaphysical quest and a step backward, but rather a descriptive accuracy at a certain stage in the research, particularly after such descriptions of situational logic. It is an important detail on the divinity's identity card: he is a fiction, without concrete existence. If anthropology focused its attention on the entity itself, it would be forced to incorporate this characteristic of non-existence. But what interests anthropology is words, relationships and groups of every kind. This leads to confusion between the effects of presence and existents, with whom I associate a certain consistency of being. I feel that a distinction should be made between (1) existents – that is to say 'concrete things' or 'individuals' identifiable as such: humans, animals, plants, objects, or any other tangible and perceptible element in human environments – and (2) the actual presence effects of entities that are intangible, imperceptible, even non-existent and only represented by incarnations resulting from social and historical constructions – for example, divinities. 'Effect' can be considered to have a double meaning: not only a consequence and result of a series of mediations, but also a specific phenomenon generating that impression of presence.

The confusion between existents and presence effects is also associated with the theoretical preference for 'modes' or 'modalities' to be seen as successive 'intermodes' or 'intermodalities', as if there were no concrete 'entities' with consistency and some stability. And honestly, this preference applies even more to beings that do not exist, and are therefore dependent on others. Focused mainly on human existents, existential anthropology cannot posit a thematic, methodological or ontological equality between them and other beings – between concrete individuals and presence effects.

Let us be clear: I accept the practice involving observation, description and analysis, and also the comparison of qualities, actions, and modes of human and non-human presence, which is intended to define distinctive characteristics, particularly of human entities. I therefore agree that description cannot be limited to what is directly perceived and perceptible by the anthropologist. It concerns all 'beings' – existents as well as non-existents relevant to the situation, whose presence-absence can be deduced. However, an essential feature of a 'human-oriented' anthropology is specifying that the latter have the status – a fundamental one – of non-existent, and also that human entities remain the

focus of the comparison. Is this a return to the idea that religious beliefs are false – an idea that was criticized and stigmatized by Latour (2010), who does not want to set false beliefs explained by sociocultural factors against knowledge that does not need these explanations? Yes and no. It is not just a matter of going back. We need (1) a description of the divinity's modes of presence in situations, but, I repeat, for the sake of accuracy we need to explicitly say that (2) these divine presences are not existences, so it is even more important to have (3) precise descriptions of assents or acts of believing with their variable nuances and intensities. This three-dimensional whole is characteristic of existential anthropology, and thus different from cognitive anthropology and the ontological turn.

As observation clearly shows, the concrete presence of humans cannot be reduced to what is set forth in systems of thought, and it cannot be set aside or placed on the same level as other entities, as previously mentioned – especially those that do not exist. Variations in intensities of belief as a mental state seem to be central, as long as they are meticulously described, to avoid the risk of an analysis focused on conceptual systems of Indigenous metaphysics, lacking the complexity of human modes of presence. In this way, reintroducing the non-existence of divinity and of supernatural beings in general requires restoring the full importance of the human entity and detailed observation of it. Who are these humans, and what causes them to 'believe' in those divinities, which they invented and they think existed before? Humans are not the attributors or constructors of existences. They are attributors of non-existent existences and are, above all, co-present with them, deliberately forgetful of the fact that others 'invented' those existences, and instead thinking they existed prior to that 'invention'. To return to the situations we are addressing here, detailed observation of humans is therefore called for, as previously mentioned, because of their capacity for negative reserve, distance and modulation, and because of the 'not really' aspect of their commitment to believe, which is constantly modalizing, hesitating and shifting into 'withdrawal' if it goes too far in credulity, or into recommitment if it goes too far in indifference or criticism, unless belief is abandoned. We find individual variations, with their diverse modes of distance and commitment, as well as hesitation. This takes us right into minimalist cosmology – in accordance with fundamental characteristics that should be incorporated into all possible descriptions – made up of humans who are there without being there and supernatural beings or invisible spirits, like those of the dead, that are not there while somewhat being there.

With a view to such analyses of human entities, observation of the continuity of one individual at a time, from situation to situation, from moment to moment, is a necessary methodology. This makes it possible to get away from the interactionally or relationally relevant, to focus on the complexity of the concrete presence of individual entities. I feel this is a crucial priority for the existential anthropology I have been championing for several years, which I consider to be the science of human beings (Piette, 2019). It has a specific purpose and method, and is characterized by a radical focus on the continuity of existences and by precise, nuanced descriptions of modes of presence – a goal served by deliberate lucidity with regard to the other entities surrounding them. As I have described, the exercise of shadowing and observing a priest for one week was crucial to my conviction of the importance of this methodology and of a stringent problematization of a science of human entities in themselves, as separate beings, in their intrinsic and singular

consistency, in the continuity of daily moments. Without a doubt, in the interest of understanding the intrinsic structuring modalities of human entities, today I would be more attentive to the priest himself, to his own stylistic modalities of doing what he does, rather than seeing him as an ‘example’ of religious activity or of the movement of existence. The observation of an individual’s continuity reveals much more than modes of assent; it shows an entirety, a volume of being, with stylistic repetitions whose singular expressions can be explored.

So, when I wanted to learn about the Resurrection, I heard a lot of hesitation and oscillation. I think that I was gradually disappointed. Did this disappointment contribute to supplementing the methodological theism of *La religion de près* (Piette, 2022b) with realistic atheism? I was a ‘literalist’ and the Catholics I met implicitly conveyed that they were not. I understood then that the ‘reality’ of another world is impossible. Thus, I do not feel comfortable with the view of Luhmann (2018), who stresses the anthropological importance of having the ability to open oneself to other worlds and to allow a possible change in the observer’s very world, realizing that life can be different. Luhmann (2018) writes: ‘The encounter with the radical otherness of divinity should be central to anthropology, because it encourages the anthropologist to imagine how his or her own world and own life could be fundamentally different’ (81). According to Luhmann, ‘the real ontological challenge’ is to allow our encounter with the radical other, which divinity can be, to change our understanding of possibility, morality and hope (81). Even though Luhmann emphasizes an encounter with faith and its ability to bring about change, I must say that my encounter with Catholics in Normandy, as well as the reading I have done to understand the origins of that act of assent, has caused me to transition from believer to non-believer. I realize that while the ethnographic survey is thus an element that complicates my ‘beliefs’, the descriptions of my father in my journal at the beginning of the mourning process were a crucial element for healing my sadness (Piette, 2003a).

Gregory Bateson was right: ‘It is important that the Ancient Mariner not tell himself that he is blessing the snakes, and especially that he not define a “purpose” of the act of blessing. He must bless them “unaware”’ (Bateson and Bateson, 1988: 79). This restrictive aspect indeed seems to be essential. So, what does *Homo religiosus* do? Representation and fiction, love and disputes, the management of invisible beings and the establishment of their presence – that is to say, a set of practices that can be found in other activities of social life. Where, then, would a specific dimension reside, if not in one or several of these elements? It would be in their stance together and being put in tension with one another as negation and reserve. Thus, a religious being finds himself in a permanent interzone. Humans, like divinities, oscillate and hesitate. This explains the reaction of the priest in my village, who encouraged me to write. There are many definitions of religion. I try to show that it is, first of all, a learning process of detachment and indifference.


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Notes

1. This argument was constructed in direct dialogue with Bruno Latour, using the conceptualization he had at the time. Our conversations were therefore crucial in carrying out this work.
2. See also the field notes of this ‘shadowing’ in *Existence in the Details* (Piette, 2015a).
3. Today, I prefer to talk about volumography (Piette, 2019).
4. In this regard, see Feneuil’s (2021) book on re-exploring, in a very heuristic way, these correlations between the act of believing with its restrictions, the data of prehistory and the tradition of Christian theology.

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