

NOT THE BEGINNING OF A NEW RELIGION (RE-LIGIO) BUT ITS END (DE-LIGIO)?—A NEW- MATERIALIST READING OF PENTECOST

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READINGS: Poem No. XXII in “A Shropshire Lad” by [A. E. Housman](#)

From far, from eve and morning
And yon twelve-winded sky,
The stuff of life to knit me
Blew hither: here am I.

Now—for a breath I tarry
Nor yet disperse apart—
Take my hand quick and tell me,
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;
How shall I help you, say;
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters
I take my endless way.

NB:
The creating wind in Housman's poem is not "the Spirit of God" that "moved upon the face of the waters" as recounted in Genesis but, instead, a Lucretian breeze of folding, flowing and fielding matter which, now and then and here and there, temporarily comes together to form a living being before unfolding once again into those same folds, flows and fields of matter.

From "Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather" by Tim Ingold (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 13, Wind, Life, Health: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives, 2007, pp. S19-S38). Emphasis mine.

There could be no life in a world where medium and substance do not mix, or where the earth is locked inside and the sky locked out — of a solid sphere. Wherever there is life and habitation, the interfacial separation of substance and medium is disrupted to give way to mutual permeability and binding. For it is in the nature of living beings themselves that, by way of their own processes of respiration, of breathing in and out, they bind the medium with substances in forging their own growth and movement through the world. And in this growth and

movement they contribute to its ever-evolving weave. The land, we could say, is continually growing over, which is why archaeologists have to dig to recover the traces of past lives. And what holds it all together are the tangled and tangible life-lines of its inhabitants. The wind, too, mingles with substance as it blows through the land, leaving traces of its passing in tracks or trails. We could any of the wind that 'it winds', wending its way along twisted paths as do terrestrial travellers. These paths are often likened to ropes. There is an old tradition among Sami people [the Laplanders of northern Finland] that by tying the ropes into knots the wind may be stopped, and that by untying them they are once more unleashed. Thus the relation between land and weather does not cut across an impermeable interface between earth and sky but is rather one between the binding and unbinding of the world. In the open world the task of habitation is to bind the weather into substantial, living forms, and in that way to participate in weaving the texture of the land. But bindings are not boundaries, and they no more contain the world, or endow it, than does a knot contain the threads from which it is tied.

If life binds, then fire unbinds.

Rather than binding the medium with substance, in the smoke of the hearth we find the reverse transformation, a release of substance to the medium in volatile form. As it rises, smoke mingles with circulations of air in the weather-world, and can even condense into clouds.

Acts of the Apostles 2:1-13 (GNB) The Coming of the Holy Spirit:

When the day of Pentecost [i.e. the fiftieth day after Passover] had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent [lit: turbulent) wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

From [“Vibrant Matter” \(Duke University Press, 2010, p. 122\) by Jane Bennett \(b. 1957\)](#), the American political theorist, philosopher and Professor at the Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University School of Arts and Sciences (Baltimore, Maryland) and one of the most important new materialist thinkers around. She concludes her book with what she calls a “kind of Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists” (i.e. new materialists):

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities [i.e. differences] that are continually doing things. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is; expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests.

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ADDRESS

Not the beginning of a new religion (re-ligio) but its end (de-ligio)?—A new-materialist reading of Pentecost

I'd like to continue straight on from last week's address for two, interconnected reasons.

The first reason is that the strange (and for most of us, unbelievable) story of the Ascension — to which I tried to give a new-materialist reading last week — is immediately followed in the Book of Acts by the equally strange (and for most of us, unbelievable) story of Pentecost.

The second is that the paper by the British anthropologist [Tim Ingold](#), which played an important role in constructing my re-reading of the Ascension, also offers us a thought by which we might begin a radical re-reading of the story of Pentecost and give it, too, a *new-materialist* meaning.

But, before going on I realise it's about time I gave you a brief and introductory outline of what I mean about when I use the term "new materialism."

First of all, it is important to be clear that it is a wholly materialist position in that it doesn't require any external power/s whether named as God, Gaia, fate, life-force and so on. As [Jane Bennett](#) notes, this is to believe in something wholly immanent and natural, "one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen."

Naturally, in the open-hearted and open-minded spirit of this community I don't insist that you rule out the existence of an external power, but, having said this, I do think it is important to make it clear that there exists a way of being genuinely open and responsive to ideas about what

we have called the divine and the sacred which remains wholly naturalist and immanent.

However, a *new-materialist* stance

does not mean one cannot use certain anthropomorphisms poetically to help one articulate one's discoveries — a perfect example would be Lucretius' poetic use of the goddess Venus. Naturally, this kind of poetic anthropomorphism needs to be used, as Jane Bennett realises, very carefully, but done rightly it can help us see the immanent vitality of matter and usefully "chasten [our] fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is" as well as "expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests." As the contemporary new materialist philosopher Thomas Nail realises, in the hands of a great poet like Lucretius such poetic anthropomorphisms help us see that "[t]he mother of matter is the matter of the mother" and that this glorious natural world is "the process of matter's own process of materialization. Maternalization is materialization" ([*Lucretius 1: An ontology of motion*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p 24](#)).

To such a *new-materialist*,

because matter (our mater) is everything (materia) and is always flowing, folding, and forming temporary (if sometimes long and very long-lasting) fields and knotworks of matter, then there can no longer be any hard and fast dualistic boundaries between what we have been tempted to call the "natural" and "social" worlds. Looked at with new materialist eyes the natural and social worlds are all a matter of matter, all intertwined, all interconnected and all interpenetrating. Everything is mixed, everything is in motion. Again to quote [Thomas Nail](#), "There are only flows of flows, folds of folds, and fields of fields, all the way down" ([*Being and Motion*, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 153](#)).

Lastly,

I should say that for a new materialist it is only by exploring the relational character of all these flows, folds and fields that we can, it is hoped, better try to explain the continuities, fluxes and 'becomings' that are continually producing the complex world around us.

OK, with these, admittedly allusive, thoughts in mind let's begin to pick up on Ingold's observation that:

If life binds, then fire unbinds.

Remember

that last week I suggested the Ascension could be understood, not as a story about a God-Man who once walked on the earth disappearing up into some far off heaven to walk there but, instead, as an poetic encouragement to each of us to see how all humans are, in truth, always-already intimately mingled in the flows, folds and fields of the material world to which Ingold gives the lovely name of the "weather-world". Read this way the Ascension becomes, therefore, a story, not about life being in us but about us being in life. We don't need to go somewhere else to be fully alive, we only need to become more aware how we are always-already completely mingled ("taken-up", if you like) in the weather-world.

But one of the key

thoughts in this kind of thinking is that, as Lucretius observed two millennia ago, even though the material flows, folds and fields knot together now here and now there to make for a time ourselves and all things, eventually everything will dissolve back into the same material flows, folds and fields out of which they were made. This insight you heard expressed in one of Housman's poems from his "A Shropshire Lad" which poignantly and beautifully reminds us that everything dissolves even, as Stephen Hawking theorized back in 1974, what seem likely to be the longest lasting of all things, black holes.

To use

Ingold's words quoted earlier and arrive directly at a central image of Pentecost, we are aware that fire "[r]ather than binding the medium with substance, in the smoke of the hearth we find the reverse transformation, a release of substance to the medium in volatile form."

Now,
for two millennia we have been used to taking the myth of Pentecost as being about the mythical beginning of formal Christian religion, the moment when the disciples were first consciously bound together in the spirit. Remember here that, etymologically speaking, the word religion comes from the Latin word “religare” which means, literally, “to bind”.

But
what if the fire of Pentecost is, as Ingold’s words suggest, better understood, not as a moment of “re-ligio”, but as a moment of “de-ligio” — an unbinding? What if Pentecost were understood to be about the ****dissolution**** of religion in order to create the conditions which would allow a new and more volatile kind of dynamic spirituality to emerge?

From the point of view of formal Christianity
this is, of course, a piece of total nonsense and its supporters are liable to claim I am as full of “new wine” as some people in the story found in Acts thought were the disciples.

However, I
assure you I am not drunk and that some good and sound historical scholarship has strongly suggested — shocking though this maybe to some — that this dissolution of religion may well have been Jesus own intention. Indeed, the highly respected New Testament scholar and Heideggerian philosopher [Thomas Sheehan](#) is of the opinion that:

*The
content of Jesus’ message was not Jesus himself but this liberating presence of God among human beings and in their struggles. This meant the end of religion, because religion is a mediation between two distant parties. But with God present among his people that gap is filled. That was the passionate excitement of Jesus’ message — not that he preached a new religion or a different religion or the true and perfect religion, but the end of religion. No religion at all. ([Interview can be found at this link](#))*

If this is the case — and I take it to have been so — then Jesus seems to have been a person who saw, to repeat some words I quoted last week by the Italian new materialist philosopher [Emanuele Coccia](#), that “Everything that happens is a celestial event, everything that occurs is a divine fact. God is no longer elsewhere, he coincides with the reality of forms and accidents” ([The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture by Emanuele Coccia \(Polity, 2019, p. 94\)](#)).

The startling truth may well be that Jesus desired to put an end to religion in favour of seeing that we and all things — including what we used call “God” — are all always-already mingled in the same material flows, folds and fields of our world. The “kingdom of heaven”, although it once seemed that way, was never really “up there”, or glimpsed only in official temples, synagogues, churches, mosques and so on, but was only in, among and through us, our neighbour and all things. As Jesus memorably said in the Gospel of Luke:

The Kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to be seen. No one will say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’; because the Kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17:20-21 GNB).

Or, as it is even more explicitly expressed in the earlier text known as the [Gospel of Thomas](#), when Jesus’ disciples asked him, “When will the kingdom come?” he replied:

It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying ‘here it is’ or ‘there it is.’ Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it. (Saying: 113)

As far as Jesus was concerned it seems there was no other place to “see” God but spread throughout the world and heard in the call to justice and

charity we experience in our encounters with our neighbours and where, I think, the word neighbour is extended across the earth, even the cosmos, to include everything, sentient and non-sentient, everywhere.

So,
what if we were to entertain the thought that the fire of Pentecost should be read as message not to create yet another exclusive, closed-in re-ligio, but to form a volatile knotwork of diverse, an-archic, free-thinking people prepared to continue the process of unbinding, the de-ligio, that Jesus encouraged?

The Pentecost story could then be read as one about our release from the constraints of religion in order to return to the ever-flowing world in a freer and more volatile form — and where the word “volatile” is understood in its Middle English sense derived from “volare” meaning “to fly”. *Volatiles* in Middle English, remember, meant “birds, butterflies, and other winged creatures” (c. 1300) — i.e. the very kinds of creatures that so best illustrate what it is to live commingled in and among the windy fluxes and flows of the weather-world that is, perhaps, represented by the wind which sweeps through the room in the Pentecost story. I suggest that it is there called a violent (or turbulent) wind because Luke intuitively realised that this was a strong spirit which truly threatened the structural integrity of formal religion.

Where we able to truly to live like free-thinking, new-materialist *Volatiles*, might we not be able better to see that behind all human and non-human differences, for example those of language and culture — including across species boundaries — we are all entities which exist because we all endlessly and ceaselessly move and speak thanks to the common “language” of material flows, folds and fields? And would this insight not also serve to help change us into more compassionate and empathetic beings? I cannot but help to think this is so.

Of

course, some of you might be tempted to brush all this off as simply being metaphor, but let's take time to remember the etymology of this much abused word. *Metaphorá* means, quite literally, “to transfer, or carry over” — in other words metaphor is itself a motion (*Being and Motion, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 142*), it shares in the self-same motion I am saying we all share. Everything is *metaphorá*, everything is transference, a carrying over, a motion.

However,
it's clear we haven't yet come anywhere near succeeding to affect the kind of de-ligio Jesus may have hoped would occur. Given this, my prayer today is simply that the volatile spirit of Pentecost continues to course through us and succeed in unbinding our old religion (and ways of being religious) so that we may genuinely come to live in a new ways, ever more alert to the constantly moving, wholly natural, volatile, material flows, folds and fields which allow everything but everything, to be what it is.

A happy and volatile Pentecost to you all . . .