A Non-Philosophical Approach to the Sociology of Religious Pluralism

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Abstract

This paper follows Francois Laruelle's non-philosophy and his non-religion and non-theology to suggest a non-philosophical approach to the sociology of religious pluralism. The entanglements of experiences of the religious end-user are analysed vis-a-vis Laruelle's thought and a dogma free inclusive approach to religion is enivisaged.

Keywords

Francois Laruelle, Swami Vivekananda, Non-philosophy, non-religion, non-theology, Katerina Kolozova, Anthony Paul Smith, Religious Pluralism, Sociology of Religion.

Main Paper

Suppose you see a person sitting on a bench in a park. What do you see? You see a person in a particular dress, of a particular age, seated in a particular manner, and you come to conclusions about the culture, nationality, and ethnicity of this person. If this person's dress has religious overtones, you surmise the religion and your subsequent behaviour vis-a-vis this person will be based on your perception of the religion you have perceived to be that of this person. You have already arrived at a 'decision' about the religious belief of this person, whom you do not even know. This mistaken attitude lies at the root of all misunderstandings of religions.

Through this paper, we will try to examine why such an entanglement with the unknown happens and what could be possible ways to transcend such a situation. This we will attempt to do with the help of Francois Laruelle's non-philosophy. We will adapt the principles of non-philosophy to the sociology of religious pluralism.

The Non-Philosophy of Francois Laruelle

Francois Laruelle's non-philosophy is an attempt to do philosophy without getting entangled into it and without losing the joy of practising philosophy. This non-philosophy is different from the standpoint denoted by the same term by many earlier philosophers that meant a stance opposed to or outside philosophy. According to Laruelle, non-philosophy is very much philosophy proper, only it

> entails putting an end to the spontaneous and naive practice of philosophy, incapable of a real critique of itself. This is not, however, a second order thought, a meta-philosophy. It is a unique usage or a transcendental thought *for* philosophy and equally for science, ethics, art or any other region of objects. Nothing here, then, signifies a superior capacity of philosophy (2013: 19).

Laruelle seeks, through non-philosophy, to transcend a Philosophical Decision that the process of philosophy leads to and gets stuck with. The philosophical dualities generated in this process have to be obviated according to Laruelle:

> Transcendence as constitutive process of the force-(of)-thought only serves here to transport and revert this causality to all the levels of the Philosophical Decision. No structure, however constituting, of the Philosophical Decision can come to blend with transcendental causality, but can only offer itself for its

purposes and consequently serve as 'support' or 'occasion', one of these supports—pure transcendence—being first and more fundamental than the others (2013: 185–6).

Laruelle maintains that the world is in confusion about the Real. He feels that no philosophy has sufficiently tackled the Real:

Claiming to be sufficient to the Real, it represents the Real for another philosophy, and consequently it is equally sufficient to other philosophies. This Principle of Sufficient Philosophy includes a modality under which a philosophy presents itself as meta-science or absolute science (real and authentic) of the 'positive' and 'ontic' sciences.

Laruelle maintains that according to the Principle of Sufficient Philosophy, everything is philosophisable. Anthony Smith succinctly summarises it:

The posture or style of thought that Laruelle's non-philosophy engages in is thinking from or *according to* immanence, rather than *of* immanence. Thus it is radical immanence because it begins from the only actual experience—this one (2010: 289).

Katerina Kolozova explains Laruelle's treatment of the Real:

Non-philosophy proposes a form of thought that is void of any pretension to (re)claiming the real. By way of abandoning its autoreferential obsession (by way of self-situating with respect to the real), thought performs a gesture of self-suspension. This is an act of self-positioning of the thinking subject that is based on the (f)actual giving way to the primacy of the real. There is no pretension of thought to controlling the real. Thought's desire to exercise absolute control over the real transposed into the phantasm of 'being the real' is the origin of the founding and unavoidable split in what is called philosophical thinking. In non-philosophy, the difference between thought and the real exists only on the plane of transcendence, since the immanent is indifferent to difference (2014: 110–1).

Laruelle maintains that human sciences have not sufficiently done a scientific study of the human being. He underlines the relation of the Real to thought:

The Real expects nothing from thought but it liberates it all the more in its specific work of givenness and of position (2013: 192).

According to Smith

Laruelle's radical immanence creates a unified theory of these two errant forms of immanence describing itself as radical immanence … but real and not transcendental (2010: 289).

Laruelle maintains that non-philosophy's appeal to radical immanence

no longer concerns philosophically changing metaphysics but changing our view or our 'vision' of it (2010: 185).

It is such a changing of view that this paper proposes in the sociology of religious pluralism. Laruelle's treatment of the Real is educative and could easily be applied to the treatment of the religious experience of religion's end-user.

The Problem of Religion

Religion is supposed to function as an antidote to suffering and a means of social bonding. However, we find it becoming a shelter for oppressors and a major cause of violence and unrest. Swami Vivekananda's words are worth mention here:

We find that though there is nothing that has brought to man more blessings than religion, yet at the same time, there is nothing that has brought more horror than religion. Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion. Nothing has made the brotherhood of man more tangible than religion; nothing has bred more bitter enmity between man and man than religion. Nothing has built more charitable institutions, more hospitals for men, and even for animals, than religion; nothing has deluged the world with more blood than religion (2.360).

So, religion is a two-edged sword and has equal number of votaries and adversaries. For the number of believers in religion, we have an equal number of atheists, agnostics, and those who are 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR).

For a member of society practising religion two standpoints emerge as choices: either protect or defend religion or eliminate or avoid religion. Both these extremes have their obvious pitfalls. While attempts to protect or defend religion might lead one to orthodoxy or fundamentalism, a complete avoidance or elimination of religion might deprive one of the solace that religion offers and the scope of bonding that it holds. Hence, what is paramount here is to change our 'vision' of religion, much like Laruelle ventures to change our 'vision' of metaphysics. Laruelle has started the work of redefining the very paradigm of religion through his non-philosophical analyses of religion. In the words of Smith

> To separate out the religious material from the philosophical, and to begin to locate the real identity of religious material ... [Laruelle] begins with the name of God and its amphibology in the philosophical Decision, for by locating the real identity of this name Laruelle will then be able to unravel the whole philosophical and theological apparatus founded both by theological and philosophical claims to self-sufficiency (2011: 12).

Laruelle attempts to separate the religious from the philosophical, and find the real religion. He points out to the error in all human sciences:

> Man-in-person is neither above his beginning nor above his end. The subject alone, that which we call 'Future Christ', ceases not to begin or end in the immanence of its beginning, but it is not the holder of that immanence, it is only a function of the World under the condition of that immanence. It is by the elimination of 'human nature' and its 'real essences' that one has attempted to unitarily include men in 'humanity' and in some other fetishes, in the World. The title *Future Christ* demands a correct comprehension of its ultimate future character. And certain distinctions on the style of relations of struggle that are here possible (2010: 2).

Laruelle proposes to humanise religion by enabling a true rebellion that focuses on the human in the final instance of a religious identity:

> Rather than the unity of a multiplicity of revolts or a comprehensive condemnation, rebellion must, in order to be effective, be the duality of a struggle proceeding in double (religious and philosophical, combining faith from one and from the other transcending) and from its determination as real or human-in-the-final-identity. It can only receive its sense of self by a sort of auto-negation or even from an auto-affirmation (2010: 11).

Laruelle aims at a unified theory and philosophy of religion that is away from all divergences. He argues for such a position using Christianity's instance:

> The historically dominant Christianity, the one which has given place to a *Principle of Sufficient Church*—from here it will become a question under this name, not of the gnosis which accompanies it—is a system of representations and dogmas, of practices and powers [*pouvoirs*].

Like every system, it is traversed by means of a great organizational division out of the edges from which it grows and develops. There is a difference here from philosophical systems that are partitioned according to the dominant (but not unique) axes of truth and appearance (or illusion from the point of view of that has the theory of that partition as an object), for a religion has as its principle or dominant difference that of orthodoxy's division, from the rigour of orthology (as the policing of opinions or dogmas) and heresy, that it sometimes mixes [*se mélange*] with the philosophical that it anyhow cuts again.

On the basis of the human Real which reduces the sufficiency of religion, and accordingly in addition to the historico-religious arguments, a theorem may be formulated. *In-Man is the radical past which in-the-last-identity determines the Christian and the Gnostic, and every man-of-this-World, as Future Christ.* This is the theorem that demonstrates future life as that of the Christ-man or, again, the Messiah. Because the Lived is without purpose or ecstasy as regards the World, he determines a subject and that subject is for-the-World and Time without being inscribed, even as 'future', in the Time-world (2010: 26–9).

Such theory should be based on religious practice. Laruelle encapsulates a non-philosophical religious identity and also a non-theology. He tries to derive a religion that is a construction of forces pointing to a real human cause of religious practices through appropriating and adapting religion to humanity. His project is to philosophise heresy to humanise religion. He considers heresy a potent tool to achieve an understanding of plurality:

The problem concerns the plurality of universals and *a capacity* [puissance] *of thought that would admit their plurality, at the conflicting origin, without relativizing them by a relationship of one to the other, but rather extracting them from their warfare.* And yet heresy, more so than Judaism, can be the opportunity to pose this problem, the chance of freeing the universals from their competition. *The power* [puissance] *higher than the system of the universal and the particular to which it belongs is that of Identity and of the universal to which it belongs* (2010: 32).

Religions have become sites of authority and occasional causes for human struggles as minorities. Such authority figures, often guised as intellectuals, wield unreasonable power that is used against the heretics, who Laruelle considers are the most affected, more than the victims. Laruelle talks of the intellectuals' fruitless exercise of power:

If the intellectual subject is immediately engaged in conflict, as we have seen with our intellectuals who rush to their weapons, a little worn-out in their hands, then he is immediately taken up into a relationship of reciprocity, semblance, from hostage to hostage, so much so that the winner is neither this hostage nor that one, but philosophy, master of the double bind and the Gordian knot (2015: 105).

He situates the heretics' experience as more valuable:

Not in annoyance at the philosopher and their hatred of the victim, the heretics have been those men from whom we learn precisely that memory is not the essence of man or the final justification of history (2010: 33).

He holds that heretics, who are true victims, have been ignored by philosophers:

The forgetting of the One by the philosophy-world is in-the-last identity the radical impossibility of forgetting it. Heresy is on the one hand a definitively lost model of thought (there is not a 'question of heresy', while there is a 'Jewish question'), a hopeless thought and so the 'holocaust' has been consummated for a long time, perhaps always. It is a Western outside-memory, a loss without possible return, an immemorial paradigm. On the other hand it is not so lost because it is the essence of thought's non-consistency (2010: 42–3).

In his heretical project to analyse Christianity and envisage a non-religion, Laruelle concentrates on the Gnostics. In the Indian context, could we not take the case of various tribal religious forms and juxtapose them with mainstream religions? That would be a fruitful exercise and could lead to an Indian heretical project to study the validity of religions in the last instance of human suffering.

Religious identity in the last instance determined by the struggling heretic, not the victim is Laruelle's focus. He develops a non-philosophical unilateral thinking of the subject-in-struggle in the last instance that is free from philosophy of religion and theology. He shows that non-philosophy can answer both transcendental and singular questions and posits scientific unified theories. Envisioning the ideal of a universal non-religion, he says:

> We call 'non-religion' in general every theory that is unified, not spontaneously but in-the-last-identity, of a religion or confession with philosophy. As we have seen in the case of Christianity, this kind of theory, universal by its cause, has an interest in universalizing that religion, also from the point of view of material, by the means of another principle or by bordering ones, for example Gnostic ones. It is about destroying its particularism, the exclusivism of its believers, its fanaticism, reaching that which we do not dare to call a 'ecumenicalism-in-the-last-identity' (more so than in the first authority as Church and with some philosophers, like Leibniz), making from the church's authority a new use and freeing human beings from their religious servitude. In effect, we cannot universalize in a non-philosophical mode except by a cause-of-the-final-identity. This guards itself from believing that the extension, the synthetic multiplication of material-religions is sufficient for achieving that universality. Non-Christianity is not a religious syncretism, rather it is a radicalization of the identity of a religion that is from now on not exclusive. These religions-subjects or these Christs-subjects themselves opposed in every way to the authoritarian and anti-schismatic integration as to the debility of inter-religious 'dialogue'. Inversely in order to reach a universality which does not preserve the illusion of sufficiency proper to a religion or a confession, we will avoid attaching ourselves to a single particular doctrine, like 'the-gnosis', in order to balance the Roman Catholic doctrine, for example, both turn to mental and doctrinal imagery. It is impossible for non-philosophy not to work with these massive doctrines, it is a universal theory not of the axiomatic kind but making use of the axiomatization and which takes for its objects those already constituted bodies of knowledge called 'intuitive'. Still it must limit the illusions of sufficiency bound to solitude and doctrinal exclusivism. 'Faith and knowledge', Christianity and heresy, these are the minimal dualities that we can agree to without falling into syncretism (2010: 137–8).

The Solution

Laruelle's thought propels us to rethink the sociology of religion more from the position of the victim, of the sufferer, the one who is suffering the consequences of religion. This can be brought about only by a radical and unorthodox analysis of religion according to the functions and according to the end-user experience. Here, the experience in the last instance of the religious should be of final bearing. All stakeholders should be concerned only with the end-user and not with pseudo-authority figures, which are completely separated from the 'real' suffering of the religious.

In practice, it would be wise to cultivate the attitude proffered by Swami Vivekananda:

Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion. Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think that you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live. Is it not a blasphemy to think that you and I are allowing others to live? I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the

Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one. Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future. Is God's book finished? Or is it still a continuous revelation going on? It is a marvellous book—these spiritual revelations of the world. The Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it open for all of them. We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future. Salutation to all the prophets of the past, to all the great ones of the present, and to all that are to come in the future! (2. 373–4).

Let us all strive to inculcate this attitude and also to systematically develop a discourse supporting it. Let us then adopt a non-theological and a non-religious stance—which do not mean going against theology or religion—that would enable us to see a person seated on a park bench as just that: a person seated on a park bench. The religious identity of such a person would not come into being unless that person wilfully creates one.

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