RESPONSE

Faith in anthropology

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Response to rejoinders to Willerslev, Rane, and Christian Suhr. 2018 "Is there a place for faith in anthropology? Religion, reason, and the ethnographer's divine revelation." HAU: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (1/2): 65–78.

What is the relation between religious faith and the kinds of knowledge that anthropologists produce? We began writing our article more than four years ago as an attempt to find possible answers to this question. We shared an urge to deal theoretically with somewhat strange experiences of a religious or spiritual nature that had occurred during our fieldworks and that have had significant impact on our ways of thinking, yet were hard to come to grips with or conceptually contain. Initially the so-called "ontological turn" offered an invitation to take such experiences seriously and not to simply turn away from them as matter out of place. Yet eventually "ontologizing" such encounters with intractable otherness—what we in our article have called the divine—was unsatisfying, in the end appearing to be just another way of conceptually taming it.

We began by scrutinizing the anthropological literature, which is saturated with examples of anthropologists who have had their ways of understanding the world altered in epistemic, existential, ontological, or moral terms through such encounters (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1970; Stoller 1984; E. Turner 2006). As pointed out by Jacob Copeman and John Hagström, our article might indeed be seen as a contribution to what Andrew Apter (2017) has adequately called the "ethnographic X-files."

After submitting a first version of the article in 2014, we received supportive reviews as well as criticisms, the latter arguing that what we had presented was in fact directly antithetical to the project of anthropology. After several revisions, we arrived at the current version. The comments that we have now received appear to be divided between (1) Copeman and Hagström's request for us to moderate the scope of our argument by taking into account the experiences of anthropologists who encounter, not the divine, but the absence of the divine during fieldwork, or for whom the divine is not at all relevant; and (2) Michael Scott and Tanya Luhrmann's requests for us to make an even stronger argument by considering how the confrontation with disruptive experiences of otherness might crucially alter and enable a renewed sense of moral purpose and hope. We are grateful for these comments and for the opportunity to have this conversation. It lies in the continuation of old anthropological and theological debates, which surely will not come to a conclusion in any foreseeable future.

Let us first address the question raised by Copeman and Hagström. In our article we have limited ourselves to a number of anthropologists for whom the encounter with strange phenomena that might be encapsulated as divine left them in doubt about their own previous convictions. For the anthropologists discussed by Copeman and Hagström who felt unable to take on what they believed to be the convictions of their informants, we would still argue that the unsettling effect of these encounters appears to have been profound. Our article is not about

whether one decides to "go native" (E. Turner 2006), convert to Catholicism (Evans-Pritchard 1970), or embrace atheism. What we are concerned with is the impact of such moments of disruption on the creation of anthropological knowledge: moments that might leave the fieldworker in deep doubt, astonishment, and wonder (see also Taussig 2011; da Col 2013; Scott 2013). Attempting to understand how other people inhabit the world, to analyze and write about it in the face of such unsettling encounters with otherness, makes anthropological thinking akin to religious faith. Hence, we argue, along with a number of recent contributions (e.g., Robbins 2006; Larsen 2014; Bielo 2018; Bialecki, in press), that the relationship between theology and anthropology might be closer than is usually acknowledged.

From our fieldwork we could have recounted a number of experiences of being unable to connect with the apparent convictions and religious practices of the people we have worked with, moments that might indeed be described with Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic's (2015: 129) concept of "dispositional atheism." During recent fieldwork in northern Uganda, Willerslev and his colleague Lotte Meinert observed with great skepticism two healers removing shells from the back of a patient (see also Lévi-Strauss [1963] 1993). The two anthropologists, although they tried to take the ritual actions seriously, simply saw it as trickery, while the local participants apparently experienced a healing. Equally skeptical, Suhr on several occasions attempted to oppose the transgressive exorcisms of patients, urging them instead to seek psychiatric help. Discussing his inability to adequately perceive and understand the workings of religious practices of healing, he was referred to a saying by Abu Bakr—the Prophet's father-in-law—namely that "the incapacity to attain perception is itself perception."

The saying points to a possible shared ground between so-called "people of faith" and people who we might think do not have faith (see also Suhr 2015; Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2017). In the anthropological literature, religious faith is sometimes understood as a mode of epistemic certainty. Our argument is based on the observation that (1) such certainties are often obstacles to religious experience rather than part of it, and that (2) such certainties are sometimes obstacles to anthropological knowledge as well.

In our article we reference a number of anthropologists—some self-identifying converts, some not—who all seem to share unsettling experiences that shook their certainties and opened them up to a different perception of reality. We have tried to make sense of this peculiar and fragile foundation of anthropological knowledge through Søren Kierkegaard's ([1843] 2005: 51–55) concept of faith—a mode of knowing that involves two movements. First, there is the resignation from what one thinks one knows, and from what Scott conceptualizes as self-willed intentional agency. And secondly, there is the leap in which the anthropologist or the religious believer steps back into the world, acts in it, tries to understand it, perhaps even writes about it, yet does so in acute awareness of the impossibility of fully knowing and effectively acting in the world. As Luhrmann points out, faith in this sense involves recognizing the unknowable and unreliable character of the world, while at the same time trying to experience and address the world as it could or should be.

As both Luhrmann and Scott point out, there are moral and ethical implications to this argument. For Emmanuel Levinas ([1961] 1979), the face-to-face encounter with the inaccessible and irreducible otherness of another human being also has an existential dimension. The face of the other reveals our vulnerability and our powerlessness. This is made clear by Levinas in his description of the ethical impossibility of murdering alterity: "The Other . . . marks the end of powers. If I can no longer have power over him it is because he overflows absolutely every idea I can have of him" (87). In the mutual recognition of otherness, anthropologists and those with whom they work might also find themselves in a situation akin to what Victor Turner (1967: 95) has described as *communitas*, sharing the mysterious experiences of another Other that encompasses them both and through which, as Luhrmann points out, "the purpose of life itself can be imagined differently" (80; see also Mittermaier 2012).

What we have done is point to an affinity between the ways in which anthropological insights and religious faith may emerge. Even if we have specifically focused on anthropologists who have studied a range of religious, magical, or spiritual practices, we argue that such unsettling experiences may be equally important to anthropological studies of other aspects of human life.

Copeman and Hagström finish their rejoinder by observing how a "return to theology" would entail more than just theoretical elaboration, but also a personal commitment to existential transformation, including the cultivation of sensibilities and dispositions that would allow an openness toward the possibility of such a relationship between anthropology and theology. Yet they add: "The

undertaking of such a project is unlikely to ameliorate the absence of the divine" (89). While we agree with their first point, we do not find the second point to be the most pressing concern for our discipline, which, as Luhrmann points out, still has great difficulties relating to God, the divine, and what she defines as "the most radically other of radical otherness" (80).

The work of scholars such as Talal Asad (2003), Charles Hirschkind (2011), and the late Saba Mahmood (2015) is relevant to consider in this regard. In her last book, Mahmood (2015: 11) examined how political secularism by no means can be taken as the solution to religious strife. In the context of Egypt, Mahmood demonstrated how, on the contrary, secularism has intensified religious difference and contributed to a worsening of interreligious tensions. Building upon these insights, we have pointed out that despite the ways in which religion has come to be understood in opposition to the secular and to science, and despite the ways in which different religious traditions are often and perhaps increasingly understood in opposition to one another, many of these distinctions are founded on weak essentialized notions of difference. However, these ideas of difference may be difficult to escape, as Scott makes clear in relation to Bruno Latour's distinction between so-called "Moderns" and "other collectives." We agree with Scott that a problem with Latour's analysis of "the beings of metamorphosis" and "the beings of religion" is that it risks reproducing the very dichotomy that it attempts to destabilize. The same is the case for Latour's (2002: 17) distinction between so-called "idol-haters" and "friends of interpretable objects."

Our coreading of experiences and encounters among neo-orthodox Danish Muslims, Egyptian Sufis, Siberian animists, Protestant theologians, and anthropologists and philosophers of various religious or nonreligious convictions does not fit within these distinctions. The differences and similarities between shamans in Siberia and Muslim exorcists in Denmark are as pronounced and relevant as those between what might be conceptualized as Moderns and non-Moderns, Westerners and non-Westerners, idol-haters and idol-makers.

The Muslim community with whom Suhr conducted his research is in Danish media stamped as a hub of blind believers and radical Islamists. Yet as described in the article, for these people doubt was crucial as the condition for submission in faith to the healing of God. A similar pattern was seen in the utmost care that psychiatrists and nurses took in tying psychotropic agents to medical procedures and psychoeducation that for many Muslim patients were experienced as highly disruptive, but which according to the psychiatrists would eventually ensure compliance with the psychotropic treatments and enhance the placebo effect (see also Harrington 2000; van der Geest 2005). In a world in which people, including anthropologists, often appear to reify the boundaries between diverse religious and cultural identities, there is value in highlighting how certain concerns and experiences do appear to be shared across religious, nonreligious, secular, and scholarly traditions.

In our article we have attempted to show how the disruption of what Scott encapsulates as self-willed intentional agency—the moment at which anthropologists lose their analytical grip in the encounter with the otherness of the world—is of crucial importance to the development of anthropological knowledge. Yet a question we have not discussed so far is whether our representational formats are adequate for communicating such insights, which in our view are akin to religious faith. In previous work we have explored the use of montage in anthropological film, exhibition-making, and nonlinear modes of writing that allow for a loosening of the anthropologist's authorial control and the perseverance of irreducible otherness at the heart of analysis (Suhr and Willerslev 2012, 2013). As Oustinova-Stjepanovic (2017: 350) points out, much anthropological scholarship is inadvertently privileging specific ideals of "action-orientated agency" that "postulates human lives in linear terms of cause and effect, impact and outcome." The question is whether this understanding of what goes on in human lives is also a result of the particular modalities of academic writing—of the aesthetics of how anthropologists may assert themselves as authors—along with the accompanying demands for autonomy and intellectual mastery that leave little room for the kind of enigmatic otherness that we in our article have referred to as the divine.

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