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# Religious Materialism and Ecology

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Arguing against the assumption that religion and materialism are incompatible, this article develops a procedural "religious materialism" as an epistemic connector between religion and ecology in the Anthropocene. Distinguishing the material turn from the turn to immanence, I argue that transcendence can register and affirm materiality and thereby resist the charge that transcendence requires the humiliation of matter. Drawing on Raymond Williams and Sebastiano Timpanaro, I frame constituted—and reconstituted—materiality through embodiment, limitation, and vulnerability; with the help of a recent reading of Theodor Adorno, I approach materialism via the primacy of the subject; and I interrogate new materialisms and biological debates (e.g., organicism versus mechanism) to resist programmatic, reductive materialism. The result is a chastened, procedural method that treats religions as repositories of material commitments, offering an expansive (not restrictive) reductionism framed for ecological instability.

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## Religion, Ecology, Matter

In addressing climate change (among other ecological issues), religious traditions are developing their ecological credentials. This development may involve hermeneutical repair work, the retrieval of marginalized insights, or bolder reconstructive efforts. The interaction between religion and ecology is not abstract, however. It is taking place in a period of transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. "Anthropocene" is partly a misnomer here. The term correctly identifies the fearful power of a petro-carbon industrial society as the key driver in anthropogenic climate change. It succeeds less well, however, in capturing the negative feedback—the runaway climate change, the unstoppable warming climate, the unrecallable rises in sea levels—that are unleashed thereby. (For the science behind this claim, see IPCC 2023.) This transition to the Anthropocene provides the material conditions in which the interaction between religion and ecology takes place. Given this, it is no surprise that there should be a renewed interest in materialism, the study of matter.

In this article, I propose and defend what I call "religious materialism." Against the widely and strongly held view that religion and materialism are incompatible, I argue precisely the opposite. There are in my view important resonances between religion and materialism. Moreover, and doubling down on the compatibility, I argue for a positive and constructive relationship between matter and transcendence. In other words, I argue against a powerful tendency in the religious study of ecology that stresses immanence over against transcendence. This is the common view that ecological pressures force or require a turn to immanence in the religions. Instead, I argue that the turn to immanence and the material turn are not the same: these turns are related rather than identical moves. Understood procedurally (more on this later), religious materialism secures an interaction between religion and ecology in which both transcendence and ecology are articulated. In other words, the connector between religion and ecology is materialism. Yet for materialism to function well as the connector between religion and ecology, a specific interpretation of materialism is required, as we shall see.

In insisting on the relevance of the material turn, I refer to my opening claim that the engagement with materialism is an epistemological move: How do the material conditions of the Anthropocene inform the interaction between religion and ecology? An important misstep at this point is to focus too closely on which "sector" of matter should be the main starting point for thinking about matter—for example, biology or human psychology. This is in part an issue about disciplinary boundaries among the sciences. Such a presentation might suggest that materialism presents us with a set of theories about matter, and that these theories can be related to—and perhaps are in competition with—religions. The key areas of debate are likely to be cosmological or psychological, to follow the distinction made by Charles T. Wolfe (2016, 10–11) on differences

in materialism, that is, addressing either an ontological claim about matter as all there is or the issue of mind and brain. In order to make this conversation allegedly more productive, religions must then be reconstructed as religious cosmologies; or, if the focus is on anthropology, then with particular attention to what makes the human distinctive (or not). As such, the contrasting of cosmological and psychological theories of matter with religious cosmologies and psychologies is amenable to being inserted into a "religion and science" discussion, either as cosmological (value) or psychological (spirit/soul/mind/brain). In my view, however, it is important to stress that materialism is also *method*: materialism invites our attention to certain sorts of evidence, with the immediate proviso that a materialism also constructs, selects, and interprets such evidence. The provocation of materialism to religions therefore should not be assimilated too quickly to a religion and science discussion.

Although the term "materialism" is a reasonably recent arrival in English—the Oxford English Dictionary records its earliest use in 1678, by the English theologian Ralph Cudworth—there is some agreement that something we can without anachronism call materialism dates back at least to Democritus (460–370 BC). There has also, in the twenty-first century, been a renewed interest in materialism in Anglophone discussion (for materialism and religion, see Keller and Rubenstein 2017). In terms of cultural atmosphere, materialisms have tended to be understood as opposed to religion: the stress on matter resists spirit, the attention to nature undermines supernature, and so on. (Early modern arguments about materialism focused on the immateriality and immortality of the soul and whether the latter required the former [see Thomson 2008].) In its first reference in English however, Cudworth also offers an alternative term for materialism, what he calls Hylopathian Atheism. This alternative term already indicates the tangled history of materialism and religion; hylopathy refers to a power to affect matter. The recent material turn—sometimes called the "new materialisms"—seems partly to join with this older terminology of Hylopathian Atheism in that the orientation of the new materialisms resists the disenchantment of matter in favor of material powers.

Despite this rapprochement, there remain considerable difficulties in the religious engagement with materialism. First, as regards methodology, some proponents of materialism argue that it is a comprehensive theoretical approach that covers nature, society, and the human. (This issue has bedevilled Marxism almost since its inception: recall the contrast between historical materialism and dialectical materialism.) Should this comprehensive or programmatic approach be deployed for the human person and for human society as well as nature? Are the objects of knowledge of the natural sciences like the objects of knowledge of the human sciences? Must the procedures operative in the first be the ones applied in the study of the second? Or is such a reduction in fact a narrowing of what we might judge precisely as material? Indeed, as Simon Jarvis (2004, 80)

points out, it is hard to remove fully a "metaphysical" element in materialism: "Far from being in any straightforward way opposed to metaphysics, any thinking which starts out from the principle that 'only matter is real' is itself dependent on a metaphysical claim. It makes, that is, a claim about the nature of the world in advance of an assessment of the means by which knowledge of the world is to be secured." It is unlikely that a metaphysical or programmatic materialism of this sort will be a congenial connector in the interaction between religion and ecology. To develop the conversation, we shall need a different, chastened materialism. In turn, this suggests that a difference between nature and society, and between the natural sciences and the human sciences, will need to be maintained by such a chastened materialism.

Second, there are determined attempts to defend materialism as atheistic. Consider this: "The heart of materialism is the withholding of belief in the existence of certain kinds of entity and certain kinds of phenomena. There are, it claims, no gods and devils, no ghosts, no spirits. There is, also, no such thing as Providence, or luck or fate. Reality consists of material things and things that are wholly dependent for their existence on material things" (Brown and Ladyman 2019, 9). This would suggest that with the turn to materialism comes a particular account of immanence that is not easily digestible by religious traditions. Later, I argue that such exclusionary moves are not helpful. Critically, I maintain that a purported atheism is not the vital issue here.

My argument proceeds as follows: in the second section, I develop a specific interpretation of materialism that is both chastened and procedural. In the third section, I expand on the meaning of religious materialism—not least to affirm that religious materialism resists the humiliation of matter. In the fourth section, I distinguish between the material turn and the turn to immanence. I suggest that the material turn may be the more creative option in developing the relationship between religion and ecology. In the fifth section, I seek to show how religion may be developed in ecologically fresh ways by reference to this procedural materialism. Finally, in the sixth section, I comment further on the significance of materialism as a connector between religion and ecology. My argument thereby proceeds in a contrast between programmatic materialism and procedural materialism, that is, between materialism as a claim about the ontological nature of matter and materialism as a responsive approach to living within limitations and constraints.

## On Materialisms

To begin this inquiry on materialism as an epistemological connector between religion and ecology, I make several distinctions. Religious materialism is to be distinguished from material religion and materialist religion. Material religion in my analysis refers to the material artefacts in religious use, from buildings as sacred spaces to the utensils used in worship.[1] Materialist religion describes the

ways in which religious traditions construe issues of embodiment, contingency, ecological dependence, and the like. Suffering as a religious thematic is important here.

Although consonant with these two meanings, religious materialism is, by contrast, a normative argument. It claims, in line with materialist religion, that religious traditions are responses to materiality. Additionally, however, religious materialism argues that modalities of transcendence are always repositories of material responses. It is not that materiality curtails flights of transcendence. Instead, transcendence is precisely material insofar as it records the ungovernability of materiality; matter therefore confronts us with limitation. (As an aside, I consider that this position relates constructively to certain other meanings of transcendence, for example, matter as given and matter as being redeemed in that both these suggest that matter is not circumscribable by human action. On the other hand, meanings of transcendence that inform ideas of "gift" or teleological anthropocentrism are less assimilable to my position.) In my argument, transcendence operates as a way of identifying such constraint and of requiring a certain epistemic modesty in the face of these considerations in materiality. And more than this, reference to transcendence as a record of materiality may provide an affirmation of materiality. This is to say more than that religions are responses to materiality. It is also to argue that, in some cases, such religious responses rebut the humiliation of matter and affirm the limitations and constraints associated with matter. It is this claim of a procedural religious materialism I seek to expound and defend.

What emerges as significant at this point is that religions have materialist elements. That is, if all religions circle around the themes of suffering and responses to suffering—bodily, social, and political—as well as mortality, loss, and grief, then these themes may be understood materially as registering the unruliness and limitation of matter. All three relate to an understanding of the human as material: as requiring certain sorts of support, and as being exposed to illness and death, and reactions to that. (Following Arendt 1998, 8–9, I consider that, alongside mortality, natality is among the *conditions* of human action; however, Arendt argues that natality resources political action, and as political action is not my concern here, natality is not central to my argument.) The interpretations and practices that religions offer in consolation and interpretation may not always be materialist—but nonetheless we can understand these religious responses as identifying the vulnerable and contingent embodiment of human beings at various scales. This embodiment demands renewed attention in the unstable transition into the Anthropocene. Matter limits, we might say—and religions include interpretations of these limitations and responses to such limitations. We should not therefore be distracted by the link between materialism and atheism into drawing the false conclusion that religions are unrelated to materialism; indeed, religions are not

only to be understood as material in their practices, etc., but also as *responses to materiality*.

What sort of evidence does materialism collect and preserve? At the start of the opening chapter of volume 1 of *Prolegomena to any Future Materialism*, Adrian Johnston (2013, 13) writes of materialism:

> Materialism, the brute insistence that there is nothing alien to matter, appears to offer no place whatsoever to anything even vaguely intangible or spiritual. It denies that there are ineffable entities or forms set apart from the immanence of incarnate beings. … More specifically, materialist philosophies throughout history exhibit a common hostility towards religiosity insofar as the latter appeal to the supposed existence of some extra physical, immaterial dimension of transcendent (ultra-)being … A properly materialist ontology posits matter alone—nothing more, nothing less.

For present purposes, I note the programmatic nature of this affirmation: matter alone, and only matter alone. I think we should read this as identifying certain priorities in inquiry and a desire to create and preserve certain sorts of evidence. The point I am making here, adapting Terry Eagleton, is that on such a materialist view, matter does not need to be rescued from the humiliation of being matter.[2] As we shall see shortly, there remains also the question of whether religions by their constitution require, so to speak, the humiliation of matter. We also get our first glimpse of what will be a recurring theme: What is the relation between the material and the immanent? More on both points shortly.

In that it is opposed to the humiliation of matter, we may appreciate the appropriateness of the material turn. It directs attention to matter rather than beyond matter. Moreover, it raises questions about and against human exceptionalism. A glance at Julien Offray de La Mettrie's (1747, dated 1748) celebrated work *Machine Man* nicely illustrates the anti-exceptionalist point: "Therefore nature made us to be beneath the animals, or at least to show up all the better the miracles worked by education, which alone can remove us from that level and finally lift us above them" (La Mettrie 1996, 18). Nonetheless, we may note that as presented—matter alone; only matter is real (that is, no spirit[s])—this program of inquiry suggests a metaphysical theory. In terms of materialism as a method, this seems to suggest some a priori decision to treat any explanandum as "matter." What, however, is the basis of this decision?

It remains unclear whether the programmatic account of matter adverted to here requires a prevenient claim: that is, to treat all activity as only to be understood as some event in matter. Is not such an a priori methodological operation a sort of exceptionalism—a methodological decision made not from within matter but somehow having an independent view of the matter

on which a materialist methodology operates? We return to Jarvis's point that ridding materialism of all metaphysical elements is a hard task. In light of the foregoing discussion, we may now appreciate a certain difficulty. If the material turn is also an affirmation of the existence of only immanent matter, it is not clear if such an epistemological judgment is a materialist judgment or not. We can of course agree that the intention of the affirmation "only matter is real" is towards an affirmation of the reality of matter for religions and religious inquiry. Nonetheless, it seems to be an affirmation that escapes its own premises: the dyke between "meta" and "physics" is leaky.

Hence, in distinction, my recommendation of a *procedural* materialism. In other words, in this context it may be more compelling to understand materialism as procedural rather than programmatic.[3] Part of the defense of religious materialism requires that materialism be understood differently. Rejected are materialism's claims to epistemological sovereignty, its ontological monism, and its reductive procedures. In short, what is rejected is a programmatic materialism of the sort I describe as metaphysical. Instead, in my argument, materialism is to be understood as procedural: as producing, collecting, and preserving certain sorts of evidence of the ecological basis of human living. Further, this procedural materialism is a "weak" method. That is, its method does not require "the same procedures … [to be] followed to investigate different kinds of material" (Jarvis 2004, 80). Its rigor lies elsewhere: in its capacity for engaging with and responding to material limitations and constraints. When religious inquiry and procedural materialism are combined, my argument is that religious materialism is a style of procedural materialism in which, via its accounts of transcendence, materialist emphases around embodiment may be recorded and displayed. Above all, a procedural materialism is a way of recording certain sorts of evidence, and religions may make a positive and constructive contribution to this materialist recording.

## Materialism and Ecology

In this section, I advance the discussion regarding procedural materialism. At this point, we need to make some distinctions regarding contemporary materialisms. Materialism gives priority to matter, as we have seen. At its fullest, this is more than affirming "nature" preexists humanity in the important sense that humanity depends on nature, which does not apply in reverse: nature does not depend on humanity. For such a materialism—that is, an ontological materialism—such dependence is constitutive of the human.

Responding to Sebastiano Timpanaro's work on materialism, Raymond Williams commends the elaboration of such a materialism. What is required is a "constituted materiality" in which the themes of a "fundamental materialism" emerge, including "inherent physical conditions—a specific universe, a specific planet, a specific evolution, specific physical lives—from which all labour and

all consciousness must take their origins" (Williams 2005, 108). Williams notes further: "There are dimensions quite beyond us, or there are basic forces—the obvious examples are gravity and light—which have entered so deeply into our constituted existence that they are conditions of everything we are and do, over the whole range from the most passive to the most active modes" (Williams 2005, 108). One way of reading day six of creation in Genesis 1:26 (NRSV)—"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth"'—would be to identify such a presentation as in *active* mode. What is less developed within the text, despite the materialism of days one through five, is the constituted materiality of the human in *passive* modes. Moreover, Williams (2005, 113) counsels against treating human biology as a mere datum; instead, the analysis of sociohistorical activity must take into account the "relatively stable biological conditions which are at least elements of much human cultural activity." This is not reductionism as usually understood: it is not that humans are reducible to biological conditions but instead, as Williams argues, that humans are constituted by them. The task of a procedural materialism is to gather the evidence of this constitution.

In that procedural materialism is also a critical materialism, I make three points here about how we might consider this gathering of evidence. First, we might regard "relatively stable biological conditions" as too benign a reading as we transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. Given that ecology is an inquiry within biology, or at least closely related to it, our entry into a period of relatively *un*stable ecological conditions presents a challenge: How are we to comprehend our constituted materiality through such a transition?[4] Thereby, constituted materiality will need to engage with such ecological instability. Second, we may wish to expand Williams's fundamental materialism to record that humanity's planetary inheritance includes oil and coal and thus speak of a *re*constituted materiality. That is, as part of the epistemological movement of a reflexive materialism, the planetary inheritance contains material that can be used by humans as part of their repertoire of responses to constituted materiality. A reconstituted materiality stresses that materiality must always be considered historically. Moreover, we can treat this reconstituted materiality dialectically also: in their contribution to a warming climate, the material effects of these carbon products form part of a new constituted materiality, as is captured, for example, by the phrase "runaway climate change" and the high likelihood that global temperatures will not be restricted to 1.5° Celsius above preindustrial levels. Third, if the challenge of transition is recorded, and responded to, in human cultural activity, this has implications for the religions. Williams does not refer to religious traditions but instead to art and music. If, however, we include religious traditions as part of cultural activity, then the question of

how materialist religion will record this transition emerges. If, as we might say, the spirit is willing but the flesh is unstable, what are the implications of this for materialist religion? How might materialism function here as a connector between religion and ecology?

One way of furthering this analysis of a procedural materialism would be to focus on the body. To adopt such an approach once again calls into question the division of materialism into psychological and cosmological. In an epigraph in *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno (2020, 21) opines that "[l]ife does not live," and in his recent interpretation of Adorno's ethics of vulnerability, Peter Gordon (2023, 105) argues that Adorno's position can thereby be understood as materialist: "My claim is that Adorno can be understood as a materialist in a broad and nondoctrinal sense in so far as his philosophy identifies our this-worldly and sensuous being as the locus of all human fulfilment. In this respect, his philosophy draws inspiration from the Marxist principle that we cannot conceive of our satisfaction as human beings apart from our 'relationship to the sensuous external world.'" Or again: "This [sc. Adorno's] understanding of human flourishing is broadly materialist, in the sense that it involves what he calls an 'emphatic' concept of the human being as a sensual and embodied creature who holds fast to the possibility of our species-wide happiness" (Gordon 2023, xvii). Nor is Gordon alone in the presentation of Adorno as a materialist in this distinctive sense. Tom Whyman (2023, 1–18, especially 8–10) argues that Adorno's materialism is of an expansive rather than reductive kind and best understood as ethical rather than metaphysical. Whyman's conclusion connects nicely to the skeptical point I have been making about the relation between materialism and metaphysics. Such a materialism seems more limited in scope than some of the materialisms encountered already: it is less metaphysical, more attentive to human fulfilment, and thereby contributes to a chastened materialism.

Having said that, Adorno's materialist analysis of nature is deeply indebted to post-Kantian traditions embedded in the distinction between subject and object. Adorno writes then of the *priority* of the object and the *primacy* of the subject. In Gordon's analysis, Adorno is arguing that it is not possible simply to switch from subject to object, away from the individual towards the material. To do that is one way of "creating" the problem of mind: you switch your attention from mind to matter and then suddenly "mind" becomes a problem. Whereas before the perceiving subject confronts nature, now the switch to nature produces an "alienated" mind, which appears epiphenomenal and requires to be "explained" (Gordon 2023, 108). Adorno prefers a different route in which subjectivity is the starting point towards materiality. What needs to be explained is how the subject is dependent on the object—to repeat, the subject has primacy, but the object has priority—and the way to such an explanation is through subjectivity itself. As Gordon (2023, 110) puts the issue:

"[M]aterialism is best discovered not by simply abandoning the subject, but rather by interrogating the subject's ownmost domain in order to shatter the illusion of its authority." The theoretical implications of Adorno's position are interesting and demanding. As Deborah Cook (2006, 722) notes: "Not only do material objects make subjective experience possible, there is a substantively material dimension to the subjective experience as well." Materialism is not opposed to consciousness in any straightforward sense. Indeed, Adorno seems to be suggesting that materialism can only be properly established once it has received, so to speak, the critique based in the primacy of the subject. The terms of contrast with which Adorno works, given his philosophical heritage, are materialism and idealism. We do not need to follow him in that. Nonetheless, the philosophical tradition in which Adorno is working has often associated idealism with religion. An intriguing possibility now emerges: Would it be possible to approach materialism via the idealisms of religion?

There are links between this Adornian position and some contributions from the perspective of the new materialisms. Although the focus of the reception of some new materialisms has been on the entanglement of material worlds, including the human, together with an insistence on the agency—and sometimes the vitality—of matter, other contributions have questioned such approaches from the perspective of arguments within Marxist materialisms. For example, Pheng Cheah (2010, 70–91) draws on the writings of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze to critique the place of the human subject and a historical teleology in some Marxisms, thereby encouraging a move away from "organismic vitalism." Similarly, Jason Edwards (2010, 281–98) argues that any contemporary defense of historical materialism must be antihumanist and antihistoricist—thereby providing a point of contact with other authors in the new materialist tradition such as Karen Barad and Jane Bennett. Nonetheless, there remains a sustained caution about appeals to a materialist ontology understood as metaphysical—for reasons that overlap with the concerns presented in the earlier discussion on programmatic materialism.[5]

What sort of evidence does a procedural materialism generate and preserve? What pressures does it respond to? What sorts of answers does it provide? We can see that a range of interpretations of matter is available and changes over time. This invites the re-characterization of materialism as a *method*. What, then, is characteristic of materialism's method, if the account of matter can change? We should be cautious about explanations based only in one area of inquiry. Why? Because I am suggesting that in terms of method, the focus of a procedural materialism should be limitation and constraint. Limitation and constraint are vital in understanding the attraction of materialism. Materialism thereby insists on what Nicholas Lash (1981, 108) calls "the authority of the tragic" and "the burden of inescapable fact." This is the theme of limitation: the boundedness of human life through bodiliness and contingency. As Timpanaro

(1980, 34) notes, "We cannot … deny or evade the element of passivity in experience: the external situation which we do not create but which imposes itself on us." What of subjectivity, however? I raise this because limitation and constraint are always experienced from a standpoint: Whose experience is being recorded, and who is included in "us"? What might then be discussed is "whose subjectivity," which should always be tested by reference to the range of human responsiveness, including most emphatically the suffering of vulnerable bodies. Having said that, I think we should not give up on content in materialisms: Galileo's and Newton's mechanics are clearly a significant advance, and the consideration of human embodiment in this way may be helpful in some areas (medicine, for example) but not in others (politics, for example). In relation to ecology, the debates over whether adaptation occurs at the level of the gene or the organism might be responded to from the materiality of religious traditions themselves. Such a response is not ruled out by a procedural materialism.

Note, above all, that the focus on body, suffering, and limitation and the ways these are constitutive for human living and experience is not centrally concerned with the matter of immanence in a religious sense. To be sure, an ontological materialism is concerned with the immanent sphere: it is concerned with matter. Nonetheless, it is a further step to argue that this immanent sphere is in competition with transcendence; that is, to appeal to matter is to deny spirit.

## Disciplinary Materialisms and the Turn to Immanence

Williams discussed biology, as we have seen, but in a general sense. If, however, we now turn our attention to biology in a disciplinary sense, we encounter a different meaning of materialism. Here, the priority of matter is to be understood as working from a view of the world as independent of human knowing. Moreover, we encounter ecology too: James Justus (2021, vii) notes in his introduction to the philosophy of ecology "the indispensable contribution both ecology and evolutionary science make to understanding the biological world." In *The Metaphysics of Biology*, John Dupré works with a materialist view of the world. He affirms the specialness of life but declines to endorse vitalism and notes that his position is broadly materialist. I quote at length:

> Materialism itself, however, remains a much-disputed concept. The part of it that is not so much disputed is the thesis that there are no immaterial stuffs or things, where material is understood as the subject matter of chemistry and physics. Everything made of anything is made of electrons, quarks, etc., and if souls, Gods, or *élans vitales* purport to be made of non-physical stuff, they do not exist … It is a claim about what things are made of, and provides no more than weak constraints on what they may be like, how they may behave,

> or how their features and behaviour may be explained. And there are surely entities—numbers, places, perhaps fields (in the sense from physics)—that are not made of anything. But of course, even the narrow claim is not generally accepted: most people believe in souls, Gods, ghosts, or other entities that are not supposed to be material in this sense, but have the kind of substantial reality generally associated with material beings. (Dupré, 2021, 62)

This excerpt merits some comment. First, I think by its range of reference we may appreciate that the materialism being affirmed is an epistemological materialism. The claim being called narrow is an epistemological claim: knowledge of material entities is the theme. Second, the content is odd: "the material" does not need to be understood as only that which is presented in the subject matters of chemistry and physics; the move seems both reductionist and narrowing. Moreover, it seems to be an example of what C. S. Lewis (1960, 19–21) calls a "methodological idiom" in which matter has come to be understood by reference to what is studied in certain disciplines. Third, the immaterial in Dupré's presentation refers to two issues: the immateriality of numbers, places, and fields and the immateriality of souls and gods. Are these not, however, different sorts of immateriality, one of which is concerned with explanation, and the other not? A "field" in physics contributes towards an explanation of the force generated by electrically charged objects. Additionally, climate change may be described as immaterial in an epistemological sense: it is known through data gathered by global monitoring systems and interpreted through computational models. The instruments are material, but what is the status of the judgments drawn from their data? If weather and climate are not the same, is the scientific evidence for climate change immaterial in the sense intended by Dupré? Nonetheless such evidence provides an explanation of a warming climate. In contrast, is "soul" or "god" an *explanation* of anything? Are these terms best understood in any way as an explanation? About which $x$ is "soul" an explanation? When Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009, 187) opines that "[t]he human body is the best picture of the human soul," I do not think he is suggesting that the best explanation of the soul is the body (on explanation, see Staley 2025, 265–94). Such considerations suggest that there may be more than one sort of immateriality and that these sorts should not be too hastily combined.

After noting his limited agreement with materialism as a term, Dupré (2021, 63) specifies his preferred term: organicism. By organicism, he refers to two premises: "[F]irst, that biological theory starts with the organism, and second that the organism exhibits a mode of organisation very different form [sic] that of a machine" (Dupré 2021, 63). The contrast between machine and organism allows Dupré to insist that the stability of an organism needs to be understood as top-down as well as bottom-up: the behavior of some parts is an outcome

of the behavior of the whole. This draws on the case made earlier by Dupré (2021, 9) for downward causation: that is, "causation that acts from wholes on the parts of which they are composed." Moreover, notwithstanding Dupré's forceful argument, we should note that in the philosophy of biology, there are probably more votes for mechanism than organicism.

There are nonetheless theological contributions that also draw heavily from the organicist strain in biology and understand themselves as contributing to the debate from among the new materialisms. A contribution by Philip Clayton and Elizabeth Singleton offers "a theory of biological agency" that ranges from the unicellular organism to Gaia (Clayton and Singleton 2017, 136, 138). Alert to the charge of the "illicit projection" of human attributes (or anthropomorphism), Clayton and Singleton argue that all organisms value in some sense; they desire to succeed, that is, to feed and to reproduce. They readily concede that this value is not present to the cellular organism itself—not reflectively. It is therefore an awkward argument. We, as human observers, can appreciate that without nutrients the cell dies. In that sense, nutrition matters to the cell from an external perspective. If, however, it does not matter from an internal perspective—as Clayton and Singleton (2017, 140) concede, "simple organisms could not use this language themselves"—I wonder what the force—indeed, meaning—of the valuing language can be? Clearly, this is a discourse being stretched, as is suggested by their drawing on biosemiotics. Clayton and Singleton (2017, 142; emphasis added) write:

> One will expect to find *analogs* to many human functions in more simple organisms. Simple organisms perceive their environment, though without eyes; they know or are aware of features of their surroundings, though without conscious awareness. They act to fulfil goals, though without forming conscious intentions. In short, they are interpretive agents, agents of interpretation—which makes life a sort of hermeneutical agency.

Yet, *pace* Clayton and Singleton, this seems not to be analogical language—like and unlike—but more the use of metaphor. If successful, clearly such a metaphysical inquiry would establish all biological levels as agential and, in a certain sense, teleological. Moreover, such an approach is materialist in the sense of being non-dualistic. It seems, broadly speaking, to focus on immanent fields. Nonetheless, as Clayton and Singleton (2017, 149) argue, "An agent-centred biology invites theologians into an ancient-future space of reflection. There is no reason why God, having shed 'his' imperialistic trappings, cannot be invited back into this space of agential-life-lived-together." Again, the language seems strained: since when have gods been biddable? Moreover, are biddable gods not better known as idols? Above all, agency at this organic level must be defended by reference to more than metaphorical stretching and the collapsing of internal/external perspectives. Otherwise, reference to agency does not in

fact identify an agent. This has serious theological consequences: the invitation to God to return when an account of agency has not been secured renders God effectively lifeless, which once more suggests that this proposal is working within the turn to immanence.

Here, materialism is part of an argument over transcendence/immanence as contrastive. We may now see that religious efforts to affirm matter have tended to develop religious resources that emphasize immanence rather than transcendence.[6] The *Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Nature* provides an example: editors Laura Hobgood and Whitney Bauman argue for a shift of attention away from transcendence and towards immanence. The environment should not be understood, they argue, with reference to transcendent forces but instead to immanent causes. This turn to immanence also includes a critique of the "exceptional" human: on this immanentist view, the human does not mark a qualitative difference in nature; and common ways of identifying a difference—reason, soul, mind, language—unhappily suggest that human beings transcend nature. These common ways are found in philosophical worldviews and religious traditions and encourage human beings to misunderstand their relationship to the nonhuman in terms of, say, the superiority of the mental or the spiritual. In turn, the "inferior" world, as only immanent, is mere matter: dead or inert (Hobgood and Bauman 2018, 2).

I pick up here a question I flagged earlier: How are the turn to immanence and the turn to the material related? Are there any differences between them? On the turn to immanence, I note that such a turn is not meaningful unless the contrast with transcendence is at least implied. The turn to immanence just presented here—and many other examples could be found[7]—is agonistic: the more immanent, the less transcendent, and the opposite. What is proposed is a passage from the transcendent to the immanent, from the supernatural to the natural, from metaphysical to empirical, from otherworldly to this-worldly. In the background are the religions. The dynamic of the material turn is different, I argue: orientated in and towards matter, the turn seeks to avoid any exceeding of matter. In the background are the sciences. To call the material turn this-worldly in a sense goes too far—for there is no "other world" against which a "this world" might be established, even in negation.

What more, then, can be said about the relationship between the turn to immanence and the material turn? The turn to immanence sets up the issue in a particular way: the relation to matter of certain key concepts such as the divine, the sacred, and life. The core issue is whether reference to "beyond matter" devalues matter or secures its value. Is the "realness" of matter secured only truly from elsewhere—whether that elsewhere is construed theistically or pantheistically—or does any reference to "elsewhere" humiliate matter? For this focus, the energy travels between the two poles of immanence and transcendence, and materialism features as a proxy for immanence. A different way of proceeding, and the way I am developing here, would be to consider the

material turn as a provocation for the religions to display their own materiality, and to develop it. On this view, materialism is a proxy for materialism! This procedural materialism suggests that a religious approach that includes reference to transcendence contributes to the understanding of materiality. How does it do so?

## Materializing Religion and Ecology

To begin to answer this question, I return to the difference between the terms materialist religion and religious materialism. Materialist religion asserts that there are material elements in religion, mostly associated with human embodiment. Religious views on the care of the human corpse, despite their diversity, speak to this. Materialist elements in religion, however, are not themselves a contribution to a religious materialism. Can this work be extended from materialist religion to religious materialism? A procedural materialism of the sort I have been recommending seeks in an expansive way to record materiality, beginning from human materiality. This is the pressure on religions generated by the material turn. What seems to be required in response is the development of this materiality rather than a turn to immanence. The critical issue is not an agonistic struggle à outrance, so to speak, between matter and spirit—despite rhetoric on both sides. Instead, the question is: What, with reference to transcendence and cognates, does religious materialism offer to the consideration of matter? The issue here is not simply the reference to transcendence but whether in and through this reference something significant about materiality is preserved and communicated. This would be a matter of expansive reduction, with reference to religion—acknowledging always that construals of materiality are selections and interpretations.

Nonetheless, how is this a contribution to the understanding of materiality? Consider the following: Can the material turn affirm the religious commitment to the person while also insisting that full individuality is a social and historical task within a constituted materiality? For example, Nathmal Tatia (2002, 3) argues that in Jainism, "humanity is the most developed class of living beings, but … is not privileged in any sense. Human reality is not at the center of things." Yet, the "whole force of their religion [for Jains] is directed to the central truth in every religion that each person needs to remake himself or herself in the image of the divine ideal" (Tatia 2002, 5). A key question here is whether the ethical tension of such remaking can incorporate the passivity of experience to which Timpanaro directs our attention. This is a highly important question in the Anthropocene. In a survey for a research project[8] analyzing the theological views of Christian environmental activists and advocates, over 300 respondents were asked what they thought of the statement that the resurrection of the body refers to the recycling of human bodies back into the earth.[9] The statement scored low, meaning it was strongly disagreed with. How to interpret this result? Does it mean that as individuals even

Christians who are environmentalists do not wish to be constrained by matter—at least, not finally? Or does it mean that the religious commitment to the person is finally ineliminable—presumably, atheist materialists would cite this as evidence that it is not possible for religious people to give up on "the soul"—and so religious materialism is an oxymoron?

A different response—a response of a procedural materialism—would be to interpret such reluctance to understand resurrection as recycling as a way of hoping for the final incorporation of human bodies. In other words, it expresses the hope that our bodies *and* our sense of our bodies—a difference we feel especially at times of illness—might coincide (Eagleton 2016, 22). This interpretation addresses the key themes of a procedural materialism: limitation and subjectivity. Transcendence—here, the resurrection of the body—records a materialist desire for the incorporation of human bodies or a materialist desire for the establishing of the full sensuousness of the human body. Put in a different idiom, what is being suggested is that our bodies might communicate without reserve. Further, if as a constituted materiality the human body depends in a strong and comprehensive sense on the broader material body of the planet, a materialist reading extends this hope for full communicability to that broader body itself. That is, there is a material link between the incorporation of human bodies and other "bodies." This would be one example of the content of a procedural religious materialism. Moreover, this finding is significant for atheist materialism for it suggests that materialists—religious and secular—are participating in a common, if differentiated, project.

We can go further still. Let us assume that the distinctiveness of the human that is secured by the concept of *imago Dei*/imaging God is compatible with evolutionary science. Let us assume thereby that what is distinctive of the human may be secured by reference to ecological and evolutionary processes: that is, such distinctiveness must be emergent in some way in this planetary history. That would be to insist on the constitutive role of evolutionary development of this planet: no *this* animal without *this* planet. Could such a commitment then be deployed to criticize efforts to consider moving *Homo sapiens* off planet, so to speak? *Homo sapiens* images God not as an abstract form but as an ecological, biological, and evolutionary form emergent from this, and only this, processual planetary history. On such a view, a religious tradition carrying such an interpretation of *imago Dei* might be understood as recording, displaying, and performing a history that, if it is to continue, will require investment in this planet's material basis. Of course, it is not a given that *imago Dei* functions like this—mine is not an epistemological purism; this is an interpretation and an argument. Yet, the crucial point is not that *imago Dei* has some hidden material component that can suddenly be produced: look, a material rabbit from a spiritual hat! (Does the *imago Dei* interpreted as relational operate in this way?[10]) Instead, in its imaging

of transcendent action, there are important material commitments. Might religious materialisms be amplified along lines such as this? Moreover, might a broad range of materialists, although for different reasons, agree on such a material investment?

A caution. If religions are responses to material limitations and are repositories of such responses, we may ask: Are these responses always liberatory? At this point, we might note that some efforts—one thinks of Elon Musk—to escape the material limitation of this planet by planning to transfer to another planet present an unstable mix of secular and religious. "Secular" in the sense of its technological optimism and its refusal of limitation, but also secular in the sense of claiming that the resolution lies within human capability; "religious" in the sense of its implied exceptionalism, for such a planetary move declines to see the human embodied form as informed and constituted by this planet's evolutionary history, and so assumes that recognizably human life could continue under radically different planetary conditions. It is, paradoxically, as if on this account the human body is a ghost in the planetary machine, and available for transfer. As Hannah Arendt (1998, 10) has pointed out, however, it is not clear that we would be the same after transfer: "[A]n emigration of men [sic] from the earth to some other planet … would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the earth offers him … Yet even these hypothetical wanderers from the earth would still be human; but the only statement we make regarding their 'nature' is that they're still conditioned beings." This sense of human availability for transfer, and the differently artificial character of the conditions that humans would experience after transfer, suggest exceptionalism.

At this point, viewed through the insights of a procedural materialism, religions may be wiser than at first sight seems to be the case. Although I have associated religion with exceptionalism, there are also indications of materialism within religions that counter such exceptionalism. (Nonreligious materialists may welcome such a finding.) Consider, for example, the vision of a new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21:1–2 and the presentation of the river of life in Revelation 22:1–2, thus:

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband …
>
> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Part of the wisdom of the vision is its clear implication that in this new earth and new heaven, humans would not be as they now are. That, it seems to me, follows from the fantastical character of the presentation, precisely because the fantastical is to be understood materially: it records, in a fantastical register, the heavenly transformation of earthly conditions. At the point of reference to eschatological destiny—surely an unpromising place to look for evidence of materiality—we encounter evidence of limitation. To exceed these limits is to enter a different realm: a new heaven and a new earth. In the procedural interpretation of materialism I am advancing here, this is one of the meanings of transcendence.

## Conclusion

I have been arguing that one way of relating religion and ecology is by reference to a religious materialism, interpreted procedurally. Religious materialism is thereby identified as a method: as this planet enters the instabilities of the Anthropocene, my account of religious materialism proposes that religions function as repositories of materiality. Religions focus on embodiment, limitation, and responses to these. They are thereby part of a wider—that is, planetary—materialist effort. More than this, however, and in accordance with the procedural materialism being advocated here, the relation between transcendence and materiality may be one way of securing a material emphasis. It is not that religions are best understood as spiritual, but with material elements. The task of religious inquiry in the Anthropocene is not thereby an effort to maximize any material element—an approach, as we have seen, that is found in the turn to immanence. Instead, in and by their transcendence, religions record material commitments—and, moreover, may with reference to transcendence affirm these material commitments. For a procedural religious materialism, transcendence is not otherworldliness. Religions are repositories of materiality on account of, and not despite, transcendence.

In this regard, for a religious materialism, the association of materialism with atheism is a distraction—and this moreover is an important finding for atheists too. There is no doubting that the opinion that materialism is atheistic is strongly held. For example, in developing his own "transcendental materialism," Johnston (2013) argues that religious traces remain in contemporary materialism and must be extirpated. Robin Gordon Brown and James Ladyman (2019, 9) make the same point: "Materialism believes the vital psychological phenomena of our human and animal existence are wholly dependent on the material nature of our bodies. Though it remains obscure to human understanding, they emerge, in some way or other, from our material being." From here, as Brown and Ladyman (2019, 9) proceed to argue, atheism follows: "There is no soul independent of our bodies, let alone one that could survive the destruction of our bodies. There is no afterlife." At this point in my argument, I have collated

sufficient evidence to query whether in terms of its history this is an adequate account of materialism. The focus on its secular character, epistemology, and the reference to psychology are very specific interpretations. We might speculate—and this will be hard for some atheistic materialists to hear—that such hostility to religion should be understood as deflecting concern over the hard-to-eradicate "metaphysical" element in materialism: the rejection of religion discloses a concern over the non-materialist epistemological basis of programmatic materialism.

In another way, however, this atheistic summary is helpful in that it puts the question about the materiality of religion. My response has been to focus on religious materialism. That is, rather than respond directly to materialism's purported atheism, I demonstrate how religions in their reference to transcendence are also records of materiality. In that such materiality is materiality in transition into the Anthropocene, transcendence records instability, ecological dependence through limitation, and affirmation of matter. By deploying a procedural religious materialism as a connector between religion and ecology, I have tried to show how it does this. For a procedural religious materialism, the vital issue is the relation between transcendence *and matter*, and not the atheistic critique of the relation between transcendence *and immanence*. (Again, this has significant implications for the debate between religious and atheistic approaches in materialism.) As such, this suggests that the turn to immanence is concerned with atheism whereas a procedural religious materialism is concerned with transcendence. Indeed, more boldly: for a procedural religious materialism, transcendence resists the humiliation of matter and secures its affirmation. Transcendence makes matter matter—or, at least, it may do so.

Finally, I consider the objection of reductionism. I have argued that with reference to ecology, transcendence identifies both the inescapability of limits—there are ecological dependencies that cannot be "mastered" or surpassed—and desires for a more fully satisfying material life. Such procedural religious materialism should be understood as a specific form of expansive reductionism. That is, reductionism may be understood in restrictive and expansive ways. Physicalism, argued by some to be the successor of materialism in the area of mind/body, may be reductive in a restrictive fashion (Brown and Ladyman 2019, 88–94). In contrast, to refer human activity to its material conditions and limitations—a constituted materiality—is reductive, but expansively so. As such, it indicates the ecological conditions and limits about which institutions and societies, as well as religious traditions, must decide how to respond. Religious traditions emerge thereby as important repositories of such expansive reduction. Such repositories might be more fully developed ecologically, along the lines of a procedural religious materialism. This development, which has implications for all materialisms, will be the task of a religious materialism in the Anthropocene.

## Notes

[1] My use of the term material religion is in line with the account offered of the field by Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate (2010, 207–11).

[2] Eagleton (2016, 10), objecting to an aspect of the new materialisms: "Matter, in short, must be rescued from the humiliation of being matter."

[3] In my reading of what is admittedly a dense passage, Raymond Williams suggests an account of materialism along these lines: materialism is not committed to a system nor a set of conclusions; instead, it is concerned with attention to certain sorts of evidence and specific procedures (see Williams 2005, 103–4).

[4] See Thomas Nail (2021, 1): "Most people are accustomed to treating the earth as a relatively stable place they live on and move on. Today, however, this stable ground is becoming increasingly unstable--for some of us more than others."

[5] Cf. Alyson Cole (2018, 167–79). This subtle position is indirectly resisted by Eagleton (2016, 10–11), in which he calls the materialisms as presented in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (2010) "pagan."

[6] I acknowledge these are terms with a specific, mostly "Western," history.

[7] For example, Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2017, 1, 5): "disembodied transcendence" contributing to a "materiaphobia."

[8] Religion, Theology and Climate Change project (https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/projects/religion-theology-and-climate-change).

[9] For a detailed presentation of findings from the project's survey, see Finlay Malcolm and Peter M. Scott (2024, 167–89).

[10] For a discussion, see Marc Cortez (2010, 14–40).

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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