The absence of the divine

THE ABSENCE OF THE DIVINE

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Willerslev and Suhr's text is a renewed warrant for the methodological recognition that anthropologists of religion often experience revelatory, transformative, and disruptive events during fieldwork. A catalogue of mystical encounters—resembling what Apter has recently dubbed the "ethnographic X-files" (2017, 297)—is provided: for instance, Evans-Pritchard's unidentified night- time lights, Bubandt's disconcerting rooftop dog, Wille slev's prophetic dream, and Suhr's whispering djinn. It would be easy to list further examples (e.g., Desjarlais 1992; Young and Goulet 1994; Jacobs 2002), and it is clear that a widespread phenomenon is receiving systematic attention here. As privileged drivers for novel anthropological insights, these experiences suffuse the scholarly core of the discipline with remarkable and perhaps unique generative force. The primary deficit of Willerslev and Suhr's otherwise excellent article, we will show, is their omission of examples that testify to the absence of the divine, felt by both interlocutors and anthropologists.

In certain respects, as the authors point out, their arguments are indebted to earlier calls for a dismantling of the disciplinary taboo against a methodological posture of radical participation, self-effacement, and existential transformation—frequently glossed as "going native" (e.g., Turner 1993; Ewing 1994; Fabian 2000). However, they seize on the significant fact that encounters with the divine are often doubt-ridden or even incomprehensible, echoing recent critics of the ontological turn (e.g., Graeber 2015), and new anthropological scholarship on doubt (e.g., Blanes & Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015; Pelkmans 2013; Haynes forthcoming). In other words, the origin and meaning of disruptive experiences—whether in the form of prophetic dreams or manipulative whispers—are at times perceived by interlocutors as "inherently unknowable" (Graeber 2015, 28), foreclosing any recourse to the stable and coherent ontology implied by the problematic adage of the "native's point of view". The inexplicable nature of such events, Willerslev and Suhr contend, is an index of absolute Kierkegaardian paradoxes, provoking questions that "understanding cannot answer," and producing "a type of existential uncertainty that belongs neither to oneself nor to the ethnographic other, but subsumes them both."

Graeber has suggested that the ethnographic record is probably just as ripe with skepticism as it is with revelation, even if it is a kind of doubt that rarely breaks the game: "the aura of at least potential disbelief," as he puts it (2001, 243). Thus, specific hail charms and curers can be branded fraudulent, but such scrutiny tends to "leave the main belief in the prophetic and therapeutic powers of witch-doctors unimpaired" (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976, 107; see Lévi-Strauss 1963; Taussig [1998] 2016). Of course, there are also examples of more thoroughgoing disavowal and detachment (e.g., Radin 1927, 1953; Goody 1996). The skepticism that Graeber and others identify is, at least in part, tied to the potential for magical failure and ineptitude—as Bialecki puts it, the divine might exist "as much under erasure as it does as a presence ethnographically" (2014, 43). The analytical value of taking failure seriously is demonstrated by Oustinova-Stjepanovic's recent study of a Sufi order in Macedonia and the felt incapacity of its adherents, in spite of attempts at reflexive self-discipline, to experience spiritually charged rituals: "'Why are we so inept?' (Zashto nas ne biva?)," they ask themselves (2017, 338). There are many other examples of spiritual and

prophetic deficit (e.g., Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956; Kendall 1996; Laderman 1996; Lewis 2000; Kravel-Tovi 2009). In line with Graeber's contention that the critical skepticism of interlocutors is often "simply left out of ethnographic accounts" (2015, 11), Oustinova-Stjepanovic charts the default conjectures of anthropological theory that engender an analytical predilection to "discount failure and ineptitude as an 'aberration'" (2017, 339).

It seems only reasonable to expect that many anthropologists will share the trials and shortcomings of their informants. Stoller once proposed that anthropologists of shamanism are especially liable to "experience something so extraordinary that they find no reasonable explanation" (1984, 93), but it took one anthropologist- turned-practitioner eighteen years of San Pedro-fueled ceremonies to finally share the visions of her fellow adherents (Glass-Coffin 2010). Bialecki's insightful remarks are again helpful here: "There is a problematic aspect to any encounter with divinity; even a theist can acknowledge that contact with the divine is in no way guaranteed" (2017, 205).

In fact, there is now a modest body of confessional texts by anthropologists describing their own spiritual failures. Morton reflects on "two instances of [his] secular-rationalist embarrassment in the presence of divine revelation" (2013, 235): the first occurred during a lecture when a Cook Islander student had a vision of Morton being transformed into a venerable Aboriginal elder, and the second event took place during his fieldwork in New South Wales, when he was chased from a forbidden sacred site by an unseen creature (242). He found himself incapable of sharing the sense of mystical depth and revelation expressed by his student and informants, citing his "anthropological lack of grace" (245). Kahn, in a similar tone, describes himself as a "poster boy for modern secular selfhood," and reports feeling a visceral unease when his interlocutors detail personal incidents of telepathy, healing powers, rebirth, or palm-reading—phenomena that he calls "radically other to secular experience" (2011, 78). Blanes, reflecting on his fieldwork in Pentecostal churches in Lisbon and Madrid as "someone who was unwilling either to 'go native' or, on the other hand, conceal his atheism" (2006, 225), also describes feelings of anxiety and embarrassment when participating in intensive rituals (231). He writes: "In order to 'live in Christ' I had to be 'touched by God'—something that is felt in a bodily manner and not rationalised but . . . I had felt nothing so far. I hadn't been anointed by God's grace" (229). In Papua New Guinea, when an Urapmin informant suggested that Robbins was "starting to 'receive' the Holy Spirit," he strongly protested (2015, 124).

In contrast, Suhr describes an example of djinn pos- session in Denmark, and he reports hearing manipulative whispers. Oustinova-Stjepanovic, in a not too dissimilar case, was herself diagnosed with possession by a male Sufi dervish in Macedonia, which involved "being subjected to manhandling and physical scrutiny during the search for a djinn or spots where evil forces could have hit" (2015, 127). Her physical and emotional discomfort during the exorcism left little room for Willerslev and Suhr's appeal to "accept the impossibility of understanding the power of God in healing." Reflecting on her experience, she arrives at the crucial insight that what is at stake for many atheist anthropologists is not methodological atheism, a strategy she rejects (2015, 115–16). Instead, "dispositional atheism," deeply felt sensory aptitudes or sensibilities, sets the limits of her participation (129). This is a helpful way of thinking about the experiences reported by many atheist anthropologists, such as

Kahn, Morton, and Blanes—and all of them write against Berger's (1967) version of methodological atheism: for Kahn, it is a violent "ethnocentric exercise" (2011, 82); for Blanes, it is inimical to the recognition of spirits (Blanes and Espírito Santo 2014); Bialecki, who describes himself as "in effect an atheist," re-works it to frame God as an agent in the world (2014, 33); Morton (2013) favors the cross-pollination of anthropology and theology, and, perhaps surprisingly, reads Durkheim as theology; and the list goes on (see Apter 2017). These accounts give a far more accurate picture of how the anthropology of religion looks today compared to what Fortes once wrote about objectivity and reason (1980, vii). Willerslev and Suhr argue that Berger's variant of methodological atheism still occupies the position of a guarded doctrine, but it is obvious that there are considerable limits to that claim.

What might Willerslev and Suhr's article tell us about the "return of theology" in anthropology? Engelke's exposition of Philip Blond's theology is instructive here, not least given the fact that Blond was trained by Milbank, the lead advocate for Radical Orthodoxy and the author of that lauded title *Theology and Social Theory* (Milbank 1990), which Robbins (2006) introduced as an exemplar to showcase the productive potential of theology. "There is no such thing as a secular realm," writes Blond (1999, 235), "a part of the world that can be elevated above God and explained and investigated apart from Him." For all their qualms about the analytical cul-de-sac of humanist models of univocal sameness, post-secular theorists are often just as predictable: secularity is reimagined as a fraudulent Christian masquerade, reason is faith (or faith's end, or faith's origin—dealer's choice), and the notion of a nontheological reality is considered just as preposterous as a nonpolitical one (Engelke 2015, 136–37). Once the "secular episteme" is unmasked as "post-Christian paganism" (Milbank 1990, 280), a project of radical remaking is warranted: "The very language of politics, as well as that of culture— and thus the very terms of the secular in which they operate—have to be reconfigured at the ontological level" (Engelke 2010). This project is mirrored in Fountain's (2013) call for a remodeled anthropology, or "anthro-theology." But if, as we have shown, secularity is not reducible to intellectual precepts that are ostensibly indebted to Christian antecedents, but exists also in the form of dispositions and sensibilities, then the "return of theology" demands more than a reconfiguration of theoretical languages—it calls for the reconfiguration of selves, or what Willerslev and Suhr call a "personal commitment to existential transformation of the self." The undertaking of such a project is unlikely to ameliorate the absence of the divine.

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