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ABSTRACT

This article, based on the author's fieldwork in a Catholic context, aims to theorise the dilemmas of taking seriously religious worlds at precisely those moments when they may be in tension with academic worldviews in terms of epistemology and ontology. The lived religion approach has emerged as a critical enterprise which serves as a corrective to more text-based or macro-sociological approaches, developing a form of radical non-reductionism and a preference for ethnographic approaches. This article aims to explore this critical edge of the lived religion approach further to address the modernist legacy in the study of religion. It will do so by bringing two anthropological approaches into the conversation that both challenge, albeit in different ways, the modernist underpinnings of studying religion within anthropology: phenomenological anthropology and what is called 'the ontological turn'. The second part of the article centres on the question whether critique is possible in the pursuit of a non-reductionist approach to studying lived religion, taking up the question 'is critique secular?' posed by Talal Asad et al. This article suggests ways to take the impossibility of critique forward by following up some directions within the anthropological approaches already presented and linking this with feminist thinking on the status and role of academic knowledge.

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Introduction

The chapel was full, with standing room only, while the Eucharist was celebrated, after a week of devotions and festivities, in honour of the saint associated with the chapel. It was the high point of the year for this place of pilgrimage. I was standing at the back among many other people, near the place where people usually light candles to this saint in private devotions.

On this occasion, rather than everyone forming a line to go forward and receive the host, as is usual during a Eucharist mass, several priests and helpers went into different parts of the congregation to offer Communion. It added to the liveliness of the gathering; the feeling was that everyone was partaking in a special occasion. Yet, when the priest offered me the host,

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I refused, mutely. My throat literally closed up and I shook my head. I imagined that the priest was surprised by my refusal, since he knew that I had participated in the Communion in more private settings. In fact, my refusal to participate surprised myself, although public occasions for taking Communion always put me off and paralysed me a little. I was not very clear about the reasons at that point: the vague discomfort caused by the fact that I am not a baptised Catholic? But why did this dread not extend to less public settings where I knew everyone?

In this article, I carefully explore the questions surrounding this incident to address a dilemma that I think is very important for the study of lived religion, as well as for the anthropology of religion, yet is not often addressed explicitly: the apparent impossibility to engage in a critique of religious worlds and practices without resorting to some form of reductionism. Both the study of lived religion and some strands within anthropology are committed to developing a radically non-reductionist approach to religious practice, thus taking up a very critical stance towards academic theories of religion. In brief, the aim is not to reduce religious practice to a social, psychological or cognitive function, but to approach it as it is lived, performed, and materialised. However, as ethnographers, we may also encounter religious practices with which we are in fundamental disagreement. How can we think about the possibility of engaging in a critique of religious practices, structures, and lifeworlds that we study while not retrenching to a reductionist, flattened, and objectifying mode of considering (religious) lifeworlds, reducing them to a form of 'false consciousness'? This question is a slightly different take on the question posed by Talal Asad et al. (2009) in the volume *Is Critique Secular?* In this article, I will explore this question through two possible explanations of my refusal to receive Communion, theorising the dilemmas of taking seriously religious worlds at precisely those moments when they are in tension with academic worldviews and one's own values and moral orientations.

At the time of my involuntary refusal, which took place around 2002, I was doing fieldwork in the south of the Netherlands. My approach was strictly ethnographic and non-reductionist: taking religion seriously as a lived practice, as an embodied experience, often including a cultivation of relationships with phenomena and worlds that may not be recognized by 'science', yet were nonetheless real to the people in my research. It was a region that I knew very well, since I had grown up there. The south of the Netherlands has been solidly Catholic and, despite de-churching, remains so. Although I was then not yet familiar with this literature, my approach could be characterised as a 'lived religion' approach. Rather than theorising the subject matter in advance, choosing what 'religion' to focus on, I took a location in the south of Limburg as a point of departure and from there discovered the different contexts in which people did things that they

themselves labelled ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ (Knibbe 2008, 2011, 2013). I conducted interviews with people of the pre-war generation, read widely on the history of Catholicism, and participated as much as possible in local religious contexts—except, as it turned out, when I was not able to do so.

My refusal to participate in the Communion could be read in several ways, of which I will highlight two: a protest against pretence, an ‘ontological’ disagreement, or an embodied critique of a ritual order that has historically harmed women in particular. Both readings raise very important issues for the study of lived religion more generally.

The first reading implies that I was unable to take seriously the Communion as a sacred rite; the refusal was that of an atheist or agnostic. My throat closed up in protest against the pretence. I was unable to believe, or even ‘pretend to believe’ for the sake of my research, that the piece of edible paper offered to me had any real significance. These are real dilemmas in the anthropology of religion: should one, as an academic studying the phenomenon, participate in spirit possession, sorcery, and witchcraft (Favret-Saada 1980; Stoller 1989; Knibbe and Droogers 2011; Knibbe and Versteeg 2008; Luhrmann 1989)? Should one, as Robert Orsi (2013, ch. 5) was challenged to do, pray to Saint Jude in order to understand religion as it is lived by those praying to this saint? How does one do that without compromising one’s own beliefs? What kind of honesty do we owe ourselves and others in participant observation? There is also a common pitfall among researchers of lived religion: do we not assume an intellectual agreement and transparency in the religious acts and behaviour of our research participants that are a bit too ‘Protestant’ and cerebral? Following this last point, I want to draw attention to what should precede any discussion of research ethics, namely an exploration of the relationships between academic thought and practice and religious thought and practice, including the assumed or real differences and epistemological power relationships between them.

This means that we need to examine the ways the implicit and explicit ontologies and epistemologies, from which we as academics operate, are challenged by the phenomena we study under the rubric of lived religion. Many of the pioneers of the lived religion approach came to develop this approach out of dissatisfaction with sociological approaches to religion being dominated by questions about the growth or decline of religion under the conditions of modernity. As several authors have pointed out, the relationship between sociology and religion has always been fraught: sociology by its very nature questions any kind of revealed or traditional sources of authority, thus *de facto* delegitimises religious cosmologies (Hervieu-Léger 2000, ch. 2). According to Manuel Vásquez, “to emerge as an autonomous scientific discipline, one totally committed to an immanentist view of human action, sociology constructed religion as its

epistemological ‘Other’ in time and space” (Vásquez 2012, 23). Or, as I sometimes summarise it, we tend to call phenomena ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ when they mess up the modern dualisms of matter and spirit, nature and culture, subject and object (cf. Whitehead 2020). Thus, Vásquez argues, religion became a ‘perennial problem’ to sociology, whose existence always had to be explained and whose existence, at least in Europe, was continuously expected to fade away or become negligible (Berger 1967; Wilson 1985; Bruce 2001). Furthermore, sociology is inextricably entwined with modernity as a project that aims to improve life, with secularisation as an inevitable corollary. Thus, to take religion seriously, we must attend to and develop ways to deal with the mess it makes of the modernist dualisms that underlie sociology and examine, as Vásquez puts it, the epistemological underpinnings of our approach to religion. Arguably, the lived religion approach as summarised by many of the authors discussed in the introduction of this special issue pioneers new directions in the sociology of religion, away from both macro-sociological theories and modernist accounts of social processes.

In this article, I aim to add to this enterprise by, firstly, bringing the non-reductionism of the lived religion approach into conversation with two anthropological approaches to religion that are strongly committed to a similar agenda and, secondly, addressing the question of the critique of religious practices and lifeworlds within a lived religion approach. The latter relates to the second possible interpretation of my involuntary refusal to receive Communion: as an embodied critique, a refusal to participate in a ritual order that had in the past been used to oppress women, force them to submit sexually within marriage and have more children than they wanted to have (Kerklaan 1987; Schoonheim 2005; Knibbe 2013). In the latter part of this article, I will refer to this second interpretation of my refusal of Communion, contextualising this incident within the Catholicism of the region and the ways I am myself entangled within the lived realities of Catholicism (although ‘officially’ not a Catholic) to think about the possibility of a kind of critique that does not flatten religious contexts or reduce them to modes of false consciousness.

Anthropological approaches to epistemological and ontological challenges

In form and method, the lived religion approach is very similar to anthropological research on religion: both employ participant observation as an important methodology, both result in monographs. Furthermore, anthropology has a long history of studying subjects that challenge Western scientific (and common-sense) ontologies or, as it is often abbreviated to, studying ‘alterity’. Do spirits exist? Can stones really have healing properties?

Do we all have the same bodies? Although the mainstream approaches and training within anthropology usually avoid addressing these dilemmas directly by applying a ‘suspension of disbelief’ that brackets these questions or relegates them to the domain of theology, there are several strands within anthropology that have not shied away from taking up the epistemological or even *ontological* challenge of phenomena such as witchcraft and other ‘counter-intuitive’ phenomena.

Curiously, scholars who take the lived religion approach do not devote much time to discussing these dilemmas, with the exception perhaps of Orsi, who does so in particular in his book *Between Heaven and Earth* (Orsi 2013). In chapter five, he discusses the dilemmas that emerged from the question some of his research participants, devotees of Saint Jude, raised: how can you hope to understand us if you do not pray to him yourself? While the reflections this question triggers provide a very rich contextualisation and historicisation of Orsi’s own position in relation to the saints, he does not really address the ontological and epistemological challenge inherent in this question. This is perhaps due to the different trajectory of the lived religion approach: within a field dominated by approaches such as the phenomenology of religion, the history of religion, and sociological theories informed by rational choice or modernisation theory, the urgent task that the lived religion approach carved out for itself was to attend to the ways religion is part of the everyday and can be studied as lived. In contrast, anthropology as a mostly qualitative study of human culture simply studies phenomena (which in the West may be coded as religious) as culture. From the latter background arises the question whether studying ‘religion’ and phenomena that challenge Western ontologies as culture is adequate, particularly in the light of anthropology divesting itself from its colonial legacy in which Western epistemologies are privileged as a matter of course.

These questions have been addressed quite extensively in two anthropological approaches that I wish to highlight here, namely phenomenological anthropology, as pioneered by Michael Jackson, Paul Stoller, Robert Desjarlais, and Thomas Csordas, and the more recent ‘ontological turn’, or perhaps ‘turns’, which has taken its cue from the work on perspectivism by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and the attempts to classify cultures in terms of ontologies by Philippe Descola (Jackson 1989, 1996, 1998; Csordas 1990, 1994, 1997; Desjarlais 1992; Stoller 1989, 1994; Stoller and Olkes 1987; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Descola 2014; Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014). These approaches have in common that they aim to be non-reductive and take materiality and embodiment seriously. Both phenomenological approaches in anthropology and the ontological turn have formulated fundamental critiques of the epistemological and ontological foundations of a social scientific approach to alterity that may throw light on to the ‘legacy of modernity’ within the sociology

of religion identified by Vásquez and may therefore be helpful in developing the lived religion approach.

Discussions of these issues were injected with new vigour following the publication of the edited volume *Thinking Through Things* (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). This publication led to what is now often called the ‘ontological’ or, more precisely, the ‘recursive ontological turn’ in anthropology (see Salmond 2014 for a description of the different strands within the ontological turn). The introduction to this book poses the issue quite radically:

If we are to take others seriously, instead of reducing their articulations to mere ‘cultural perspectives’ or ‘beliefs’ (i.e. ‘worldviews’), we can conceive them as enunciations of different ‘worlds’ or ‘natures’, without having to concede that this is just shorthand for ‘worldviews’. (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 12)

Elsewhere, Martin Holbraad puts it as follows:

[...] what makes the ontological approach to alterity not only pretty different from the culturalist one, but also rather better, is that it gets us out of the absurd position of thinking that what makes ethnographic subjects most interesting is that they get stuff wrong. (Holbraad as quoted in Carrithers et al. 2010, 184)

Interestingly, the concerns of these authors are very similar to the concerns addressed by anthropologists doing ethnographic work on ritual, sorcery, healing, and possession—namely phenomenological approaches in anthropology, although the authors championing the ontological turn nowhere refer to phenomenological anthropology. This is surprising, since in many cases, even the terms used seem to match (however, it would seem, unintentionally so). For example, in a book entitled *Things as They Are*, published in 1996, Michael Jackson opens with a quote by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “How can we understand someone else without sacrificing him to our logic, or it to him?” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 115, as quoted in Jackson 1996, 1). In the introduction, Jackson forcefully argues for an approach that takes ‘things as they are’ without reducing them to something else. In a similar vein, Amiria Henare, Holbraad, and Sari Wastell propose that

With purposeful naïveté, the aim of this method is to take ‘things’ encountered in the field as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 3).

However, whereas anthropologists inspired by phenomenology have been attentive to epistemological issues, the authors proclaiming the ontological turn state that they aim to go ‘beyond concerns with epistemology’. This claim, as well as the insistence on ontology and the suggestion that we should think in terms of a pluriverse, has led to many discussions, since it is not always entirely clear what the implications are. Does this mean that, in another universe, even so-called physical and biological laws might work

differently? That stones really have spirits and that a seal is really an ancestor? Or, to go back to the incidence of the Communion, that the piece of edible paper is really the physical body of Christ (and one should therefore not bite on it)?

To clarify what is meant by such claims, I found it useful to compare the project of the recursive ontological turn with that of phenomenological anthropology, although they are historically separate. Aside from the rhetorical similarity pointed out above, they have in common that they challenge exactly those modernist dualisms that are associated with what Vásquez calls the legacy of modernity. Both projects agree that the subject-object divide eventually leads to the crucial divide between nature and culture, which underpins much of the scientific endeavour as well as the destructive relationship of humanity to nature and the privileging of Western epistemologies. In fact, their respective analyses are quite similar. For example, in an article on political ontology, Mario Blaser explains the contradictions in the universalising cultural approach that is based on a Cartesian dichotomy of nature and culture: precisely because ‘we’ have the distinction between nature and culture and other cultures somehow get it wrong, ‘we’ can develop universal insights into culture as different representations of the same world (Blaser 2013). In contrast, anthropologists who follow the ontological turn argue for a recognition of the *enactment* of different worlds.

In *Thinking through Things*, the authors put forward the notion that ‘culture’ which, despite strong criticism, is still central to the discipline of anthropology, assumes that there are simply different ways of looking at the same world. This leaves intact Western common-sense understandings of the world that are thereby privileged. The authors therefore propose to speak of ontologies rather than cultures, a proposition that led to a very critical exchange reported in an issue of *Critique of Anthropology* (Carrithers et al. 2010). The discussion was framed by the notion that ‘ontology is just another word for culture’. One of the outcomes of this discussion was that it is in fact very unclear what is meant by ontology: as Matei Candea (Carrithers et al. 2010) points out, in many ways, the word ‘ontology’ performs the task of pointing out radical difference where culture had performed this task before, but has now become such a staple of societal debates that it is burdened and flattened into simply representing different worldviews. The question thus remains: what is actually intended by the claim to go beyond epistemology? How is this even possible in any academic enterprise?

In contrast, epistemology was a central concern within the writings of phenomenologically inspired anthropologists such as Jackson, Csordas, and Desjarlais. These authors turned towards phenomenology precisely because they did not want to assume that there is a ‘world out there’ that can

somehow be known through people receiving impulses through the senses. Drawing on phenomenological authors, they question the simplistic distinction between subject and object that underlies many epistemologies and ask how humans constitute the worlds they live in. For example, in *Things as They Are*, Jackson states that

The issue is not to decide which [discourse] accurately mirrors reality; rather, it is to refuse them all foundational status in order to critically evaluate the various realities they engender. [...] the question of freeing our discourse from misjudgement and error becomes transmuted into a question of freeing our discourse from misjudgement and error *that has harmful human consequences*. (Jackson, 1996, 7, emphasis in original)

Within phenomenological anthropology, knowledge is always seen as embodied and emerging out of the engagement with the material world. Thus, in ethnographic fieldwork, there is a very strong emphasis on researchers physically participating in this world. This anthropological development of phenomenological epistemology thus ends up in a very similar place as the ontological turn: positing different realities. One could say that, in both programmes, ontology and epistemology become conflated: knowing the world and performing/constituting the world are one and the same thing. This is also suggested by Blaser in his plea for departing from the possibility that other universes are possible. Rather than taking different ontologies to be radically different worlds, as some ‘recursive ontologists’ seem to imply, he understands them, following Bruno Latour (2012) and Donna Haraway (1988), as ways of ‘worlding’ (making worlds) and enacting reality where statements about the world cannot be separated from making this world (Blaser 2013, 553).

To return to my refusal of Communion, following the first interpretation, this event could be seen in terms of different (life)worlds colliding. In my own lifeworld, Communion simply represents a piece of edible paper which has no inherent significance. As an academic, I can be assumed to think about matter as inanimate, dead, not imbued with meaning or spirit. Academics are good at separating meaning from materiality. In contrast, in the world of local Catholicism, according to the formula spoken during the Eucharist, the piece of edible paper is bread and this bread is the body of Christ. Nevertheless, it is important not to take a simplistic ‘ontological’ approach to this. As David Graeber has pointed out in his critique of the ontological turn, simply taking what people say at face value (in this case, that the Communion wafer is the body of Christ) might be quite the wrong strategy and only lead to misunderstanding the subtle ways in which people themselves are uncertain about and trying to understand reality (Graeber 2015, 35).

Indeed, throughout my ethnographic fieldwork, I found that transubstantiation was only one way in which Communion was understood by Catholics. When it was raised, for example, during the Bible discussion groups in which I participated, it was usually repeated as an article of faith, taken on the authority of a priest, and inculcated during catechism in childhood. When it was discussed as a serious factual proposition, the literal meaning of the statement was quite emphatically not upheld as a common-sensical factual statement (Knibbe 2008). Rather, the fact that, as children, people had been forced to take this statement literally was discussed with a sense of betrayal: first they told us to take all this seriously and then, during the relaxation of the rules following Vatican II, it turned out that it was not that important any more (see especially Knibbe 2013, chs. 3, 6). Thus, the literal meaning of the sacrament of Communion was only one of the topics that might come up as an example within more general discussions of the ambivalent relationships people had to clerical authority (Knibbe 2008).

Nevertheless, the Communion was something much more important than one would be able to glean from a survey or from taking note how often people now attend Communion. The official mass was actually not well attended due to the unpopularity of the local priest. Because of his polarising influence, many villagers chose to pursue their interest in Catholicism through courses and discussion groups offered by the nearby pastoral centre. As part of my fieldwork, I participated mostly in groups and courses and only very rarely in official church events. Yet Communion loomed large: in most stories that involved it, its significance derived from the teaching that taking part in it somehow signified a state of grace and that one was right with God and, especially, from the fact that it could be withheld on moral grounds. The possibility to be refused Communion was a very present fear in people's minds. In relation to my own position in the field, this implied that most people thought that I should be able to participate, despite not being a baptised Catholic, rather than be excluded.

In the past, as I will discuss below, exclusion from Communion had been used as a powerful tool to enforce Catholic moral teachings concerning sexuality. Most people were not regular churchgoers any more; therefore, the issue mainly came up in relation to funerals, where one could expect many people to attend mass that were either divorced, in a relationship without being married or homosexual. The simple piece of edible paper was to many people quite an important thing and much more than just an inanimate, disenchanted object. Rather, it was a thing that, if withheld, could exclude one from a life where one is 'seen' by God and considered a valuable human being by the surrounding community, and even, in the event of death, from heaven. The significance of the object did not depend on the belief in transubstantiation, but on the submission to a ritual order

that comes into play at certain moments, giving the Church, as the institution charged with carrying out these rituals, an inordinate amount of power, even in 2002, despite the rapid de-churching that has taken place in this region since the 1960s.

The ontological challenge was thus not explicit but hidden and could only be discerned when one attended to conflicts about last rites, particular moments in people's biographies, stories about family secrets and shameful memories that were shared in the interviews, stories about 'bad priests' (priests who applied Catholic moral teachings very strictly to refuse Communion) and stories by priests themselves, who told me of occasions when family members tearfully insisted that Communion should be administered to someone, even after death. Gradually coming to understand the significance of Communion through fieldwork did indeed play a role in my ambivalence in participating, since I did not see Communion as the key to heaven and, indeed, I felt morally obliged to refuse to see it that way, even though my research participants did not share my perspective. This refusal was different, heavier, and more emotional than the refusal to engage with the ontological challenges that I encountered in another context where I was carrying out research at the time: a spiritual society, where people gathered to practise their skills in engaging with the supernatural or with, in spiritist terms, 'the other side'. While I did not find it problematic to practise the techniques involved (such as guided hypnosis, tarot card reading, dream interpretation, aura reading), I did disengage when several mediums told me that my grandmother had messages for me. While not ruling out the possibility that this might be the case, I consciously chose not to entertain this possibility and to ignore these messages. These were usually of a prosaic nature anyway: a medium once told me that she had received a message from my grandmother saying that I should regularly squat over a pot of boiling soup to prevent urinary tract infections. In life, my grandmother had never given me such advice.

Refusal as embodied critique

Looking back, however, it seemed my grandmother, or at least my identification with and growing understanding of her life, was very much part of my refusal of Communion. As noted in the introduction, at that particular moment, I surprised myself. I did not understand why I refused Communion, although I knew it had something to do with my anger at the ways Communion had been used to force women to submit sexually, to have as many children as possible, and the suffering (across generations) that this had caused (Knibbe 2013, chs. 2, 3; Kerklaan 1987). This policy was effective, as can be seen in the marked demographic rise in births during the time of pillarization. This period, often thought to have started after WWI and

lasted until the mid-1960s of the twentieth century, was characterised by the organisation of social life and public institutions in so-called ‘pillars’ as a way of managing the religious and ideological diversity of Dutch society. Thus, there were Protestant pillars, a socialist pillar and, the largest one, the Catholic pillar. Schools, universities, leisure activities, and even bakeries were linked to one of these pillars, thus achieving a remarkable homogeneity in daily life.

During this period, the Catholic Church intensified its grip on people’s daily religious lives and developed a focus on moral life that was mostly related to ‘living naturally’ (not using contraception) and preventing unmarried men and women from engaging in sexual activity. These policies were quite effective and affected the most intimate details of people’s lives, curtailing access to contraception (Knippenberg 1992; Schoonheim 2005). My own grandmother had nine children, while, according to family lore, she only intended to have four or five. Most older women I interviewed for my research indicated that the relaxation of the ban on contraception that followed the introduction of the contraceptive pill had been very welcome.

How then was Communion involved in this policy? Through historical research and interviews with women of the pre-war generation it became clear that clergy were trained to take confession in a very structured way, asking women if they had ‘regular’ sexual lives, that is, regular sex without protection or even the practice of withdrawal or abstention during the fertile time window. Any indication that women wanted to refuse sex or prevent pregnancy was seen as a grave sin and, unless women promised to submit sexually and not try any means of pregnancy prevention, they would not get absolution and could therefore not participate in Communion during Sunday mass. This form of biopolitics was arguably more extreme in the Netherlands due to the so-called ‘frontier mentality’ of Dutch Catholics pushing to become a majority again in a country dominated by Protestants.

Despite these findings, and the outrage and shame caused by the Church’s policies that were still quite alive among my research participants (Knibbe 2011), I did not thematise gender in my PhD thesis or develop a particularly feminist analysis. I was afraid that highlighting gender would pull the narratives too strongly into the direction of feminist debates on women as oppressed by patriarchal religion (cf. Gemzöe and Keinänen 2016, 9). I considered my anger an obstacle to my chosen method and thus tried as much as possible to ignore it. As Marilyn Strathern has pointed out, anthropology has a strained relationship to feminism and this seems only to be reinforced by the non-reductionist approaches outlined above (Strathern 1987). On the other hand, if one refuses to draw on explanations that go beyond the context in question, this seems to foreclose the possibility of critique as a tool to reveal power relations. If phenomenological

anthropology and the ontological turn do represent some extreme exercises in withholding judgement and refusing to privilege one's own epistemology/ontology, does this not also mean insulating people's ways of life or 'worldings' in rather conservative ways (cf. Graeber 2015, 34)? Rather than seeing my anger as an obstacle to good ethnography, as I saw it then, I want to explore here how the tension between the aims of non-reductionist approaches to lived religion and the critique I embodied in that moment of refusal can be made fruitful.

Is critique secular?

It is important to note that my critique was different from that of many of the research participants. There are numerous ways in which people themselves, also as religious practitioners, are critical or can be said to put forward a practical or implicit critique of hegemonic modes of religiosity. In the interviews with older women (and some men) I found that, rather than criticising the Church, they often blamed their husbands for 'not leaving them in peace' and getting their wives pregnant too often. Some also developed an antipathy towards individual priests. Many kept attending church using the motto 'I go because of God, not because of the priest'. Some women never dared to attend mass again after having been refused absolution, but would pray individually in a chapel. Focusing on these forms of critique and evasive practices, scholars may amplify them or even theologise them to change 'official' doctrines and theologies. For most of the people I spoke to, participation in Communion was not a problem; rather, the possibility of being excluded from it was seen as a potential threat and was furiously discussed when it actually occurred, leading to the circulation of what I have called 'bad priest stories'. So why did I refuse when the women actually affected by the Church's biopolitics did not? How could I articulate the critique that closed up my throat in a way that did not obstruct my view of what this ritual world means to others, nor diminish the strength and agency it might engender in the participants?

To answer this question, it is important to unpack what we might mean by critique; I will do so only very briefly given the space constraints here. Wendy Brown has provided a useful overview of the meaning of this term, especially related to religion, in the introduction to the volume *Is Critique Secular?* (Asad et al. 2009). She traces the modern use of the term 'critique' primarily back to Marx, who famously stated that it is not enough to unveil the error of religious thinking, but that critique needs to uncover the conditions that give rise to the need for religion (after all, his term 'opium' was not a condemnation of religion, but a metaphor for describing how religion may dull the pain of living in a world of exploitation and injustice). This notion of critique relies heavily on an

unquestioned notion of the capacity of reason to lead to truth and objectivity, which can never be a religious truth (Brown 2009, 12). Since Marx, notions such as truth and reality have become endlessly more complicated, particularly under the influence of constructivist and post-structuralist approaches and also in the two anthropological approaches discussed here.

What then could critique mean, given a less simplistic notion of truth? I propose a twofold answer to this question, firstly, by building on the approaches outlined above and, secondly, by referring to feminist theory on epistemology (Harding 2004). As may have become clear, the anthropological method implies moving between different worlds, not only 'playing' with the different conceptual orderings of the world but also embodying these different worlds in the sense of learning to perceive in accepted ways and becoming competent to act within these worlds. Building on an argument developed with my colleague Peter Versteeg, I would argue that this moving between worlds could be seen as a position from which to assess the different ways of not only being or life that are possible but also the power structures that engender people's options in these worlds (Knibbe and Versteeg 2008, 61). Echoing Jackson's statement on judging knowledge and discourses by their harmful human consequences, Blaser puts it this way:

[...] some ethnographic subjects (or stories/worldings/ontologies) can be wrong, not in the sense of a lack of coincidence with an external or ultimate reality, but in the sense that they perform wrong: they are/enact worlds in which or with which we do not want to live. (Blaser 2013, 552)

As a scholar I had developed a qualitatively different knowledge that identified links between Communion now and in the past, where others may not see those links. Thus, I saw, or rather felt, a direct link between the public occasion of participating in Communion and the (now no longer effective, although not entirely abandoned) policy of forcing women to produce children. As Roy Rappaport has argued in his work on ritual, while participating in ritual may mean many different things to participants, at the very least, it means accepting the public order that it communicates (Rappaport 1999, 119–120). The crucial difference in understanding my refusal turned out to be its public character: while I did not mind participating in a closed setting, where I knew all the participants and could count on them sharing, to some extent, my critical view of the role of the sacraments in women's lives, I could not bring myself to submit to the ritual order in a public setting, knowing that this ritual had played a key role in forcing women to have sex and babies against their will.

What use is this knowledge if religious practitioners themselves do not see these connections and indeed remain focused on not being excluded rather than actively refusing Communion? I see this knowledge as critical in

a relational sense, not as an ‘unveiling’ in the Marxist sense. I have no intention to urge people to denounce all their religious allegiances or suddenly ‘see’ the Catholic liturgical order as a sexist and oppressive structure. This would not only be reductionist in a way that is irresponsible and un insightful, but also claim a liberatory status of knowledge that is highly problematic and fails to reflect on its own premises (cf. Mahmood 2011; Abu-Lughod 2002). Rather, I posit this critique as a form of relational and situated knowledge that can be developed by departing from a feminist standpoint epistemology, navigating between objectivist and constructivist epistemological positions (Harding 2004). While objectivist knowledge privileges certain perspectives by hiding their situatedness, constructivist positions seem to relativise any kind of critique (Haraway 1988).

Following Haraway’s terminology (1988), I put forward this knowledge as a partial perspective that is not intended to invalidate the knowledge of others, but to add to it. Thus, it can be used to expand the already existing critical perspectives on the role of the Catholic Church in women’s lives. Furthermore, it might shift the debate from a concern with the possibility of clerical refusal of Communion, as was common among the villagers, to other questions, which could go in different directions. For example, one could ‘disenchant’ the power of the clergy, placing Communion in the hands of people (including women) who are ritually charged in a different way. Or one could disenchant Communion, by stating that it is just a piece of edible paper with no inherent significance.

Both these options surface in public discussions about the possibility of refusing Communion, but the second option is hardly ever suggested by people within the region. When I outlined my findings in an interview with the regional newspaper, this generated a lot of discussion, which led the newspaper to organise a well-attended public debate. Interestingly, most of the people in the audience took the first route, disenchanting the power of the clergy, rather than the second route (see Knibbe 2011, esp. 160–162, for a more detailed description of the discussions that this research generated). Indeed, this was the route taken within approaches inspired by ‘liberation theology’ in the pastoral centre. Disenchanting the power of the clergy thus implies a wholly different view of the moral order as embodied in the ritual order, a difference that has led to polarisation within Dutch Catholicism that has still not been resolved (Knibbe 2013, chs. 2, 6; Knibbe 2008). Within the official hierarchy of the Dutch Catholic Church, these perspectives have been marginalised through a policy of appointing theologically conservative bishops.

However, my primary aim is not to contribute to a theological debate. My positioning is post-secular, in the sense that I imagine that critical insights from a lived religion approach might contribute to several (including

theological) debates on how religion makes life (im)possible for women, without putting forward the implicit assumption that one needs to secularise—abandon one’s religious practice—in order to take this critique on board.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I aimed to show that it can be quite fruitful not to avoid the intellectual challenge of practices, concepts, and beliefs that ‘mess up’ the divide between subject and object and between nature and culture, which is often taken for granted in academia, by integrating anthropological approaches to these challenges in a discussion of the role of Communion in a particular region of the Netherlands. As Latour (2012) has pointed out, although moderns might think they have these distinctions sorted out neatly, we live in a world populated by hybrids, where statues become persons (Whitehead 2020), feathers can be both of an angel and just of a bird (Utriainen 2020), and a simple piece of edible paper may be the key to heaven. However, the commitment to developing non-reductionist approaches to lived religion should not come at the cost of overlooking and failing to develop critical feminist perspectives, from a relational and situated epistemology, on the ways in which forms of lived religion may produce and perpetuate suffering and oppressions. Furthermore, focusing on the ‘ontological challenges’ of religious practice could in fact lead away from a sound understanding of the significance of religious practices such as taking Communion. Through developing a situated, relational understanding of the practice of Communion, as informed by an historical perspective, my own family history, and insights into the ways Communion continues to function in underpinning structures of exclusion that cause anxiety and suffering, I have shown how a lived religion approach can go beyond the opposition of anti-reductionism and implicitly reductionist critique. Thus, critique is not necessarily secular, in the sense that it excludes, reduces or disenchants religious perspectives. While space and experience allowed only a brief discussion of the ways this critique could be developed, I propose that it is a challenge the lived religion approach needs to take up to position itself within the interdisciplinary field of studying religion, in particular to be able to connect to and engage in a critique of academic disciplines that sweep up ‘religion’ in their analysis in ways that tend to flatten and misunderstand the ways religion is lived rather than thought.

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