



ARTICLE

Religion in action

How Marian apparitions may become true

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According to Latour, religion and science have nothing in common. The two are successful (or failing) in quite different ways. Religiousness is not aimed at fact-making, but at presence-making, he says. To critically reconsider these ideas, I discuss the case study of Marian apparitions in Litmanová, Slovakia. The study suggests a more complicated picture by not focusing on pure and ready-made religion, but rather on religion in the making, a kind of “almost-religion.” It shows how the reality of apparitions, initially of quite unclear status, was becoming more and more religious. Fact-making and fact-checking clearly belonged to this trajectory and have never stopped being relevant. Nonetheless, together with how the apparition was progressively becoming truly religious (or religiously true), Latourian presence-making was gaining in importance.

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Bruno Latour’s works on religion (Latour 1988, 2001, 2005a, 2009, 2010, 2013b) have widely resonated in contemporary religious studies and theology (Bialecki 2014; Day 2010; Finch 2012; Miller 2013; Scott 2018). Advocating religion as a specific “mode of existence” (Latour 2013a), not comparable to other modes, especially science, Latour has become “one of the path-breaking thinkers in this field” (Meyer 2012: 21). In sharp contrast to scientific talk, Latour suggests, religion does not actually refer to mysterious, invisible, and distant objects, inviting us to firmly believe in their existence. On the contrary, Latour argues that “religious talk . . . cannot be about anything other than what is present” (Latour 2001: 232). It re-creates, again and again, the presence of God in this world. It turns our attention to what is here and now, to our neighbors.

To critically elaborate on the above outlined understanding of religion, I look for empirical support in an ethnographic case study of Marian apparitions in Litmanová (Eastern Slovakia, 1990–1995).¹ These apparitions

attracted massive public attention. Consequently, the place became a famous pilgrimage site, recognized by the Church (Greek-Catholic). I will confront this case with Latour’s thinking about the relationship between science and religion to show that Latour tends to focus on religion in its full-fledged, accomplished forms, while neglecting the ambivalent reality of phenomena only *becoming* truly and fully religious. Even so, his perspective on religion as a mode of existence does make sense.²

done together with Jan Paleček, my PhD student at the time. That is why, where I write about jointly conducted research interviews, I use the pronoun “we.”

1. The fieldwork was done in 2009–2010 and consisted of observations and research interviews with clerics, believers, and local people, as well as with one of the visionaries. We also gathered videorecordings, newspaper articles, and other related documents. Most of the fieldwork was

2. Bruno Latour is not interested in defining religion as a distinct domain (2013a: 29). Rather, his question is what it means to *act religiously*, in comparison to other ways. His typical framework is Catholicism, partly because it applies to him personally. But this framework also provides a particularly challenging framework for thinking about religion in the modernized world. By neglecting other religions, Latour has earned legitimate criticism (e.g., Fischer 2014: 341–42). In this paper, nonetheless, I remain within his Catholic framework, leaving the diversity of religion in various parts of the world (as well as the





Studying apparitions—understanding religion

Marian apparitions are among the most delicate and disputable issues for contemporary Catholic theology and pastoration.³ Catholics' relationship to apparitions is diversified and ambivalent. Many Catholics (and atheists, too) feel that serious talking about these things associates religiousness with folk superstition and irrationality. Only a tiny fraction of all Marian apparitions reported around the world become considered by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in Rome, the highest Catholic authority over the authenticity of similar events. The process of investigation starts at the level of local bishops and is very slow. The eventual "positive ecclesial evaluation of a prophetic revelation is nothing but a permission to believe that God has spoken, whereas the negative pronouncement is usually a strong advice not to accept its heavenly origin" (Hvidt 2007: 298).⁴ Still, modern Marian apparitions are an important part of modern popular piety and cannot be overlooked (Matter 2001: 13).

Why should such rare and controversial phenomena be taken as a basis for studying religiosity? Ann Taves has observed that

focusing our attention on "special things" [such as apparitions] takes our attention away from "religion" in the abstract and refocuses it on the component parts or building blocks that can be assembled in various ways to create more complex socio-cultural formations, some of which people characterize as "religions" or "spiritualities" or "paths." (Taves 2009: 162)

Others have suggested that apparitions are often related to analytically promising situations of radical uncertainty when Christian faith becomes contested and taken less for granted (Berryman 2005: 21; 2001). Related controversies, tensions, and breachings provide fruitful terrain for questioning taken-for-granted realities and for grasping the world that is always in-the-making. In

specificity of Greek Catholicism within the Catholic tradition) completely aside.

3. Robert Orsi has noted that the reality of Marian apparitions is "at fundamental odds with modern ways of knowing and interpreting the world" (2008: 13).
4. Amiotte-Suchet (2005) contrasts this Catholic prudence toward apparitions and miracles with a Pentecostalist approach, characterized by seeing miracles as the basis of individual conversions.

fact, ethnomethodologists, such as Berryman, reframe the way of asking social-scientific questions by reversing vectors of explanation: social order does not explain human behavior, behavior should rather be explained by detailed scrutiny of practical actions (Wright and Rawls 2005). Similar attitudes are shared also outside ethnomethodology, by researchers who focus on religion in terms of everyday practices, interactions, and material arrangements (e.g., Ammerman 2007; Claverie 2003; Luhrmann 2012; McGuire 2008; Morgan 2009; Piette 1999, 2003, 2014).

The ethnomethodological reframing as well as ethnographic inclinations are key characteristics also for contemporary science and technology studies, STS (Latour 1987, 2005b; Lynch 1993), Latour's principal field of research. Here too, investigations frequently take the form of practice-oriented studies of controversial cases. Scientific truths are not taken as something that explains, but rather as a problem to be explained. In addition, Latour (e.g., 2000) often insists that we should not try to explain science "socially." No wonder, then, that he has become a key voice in the growing reluctance toward sociological reductionism in the study of religion as well.

While some have argued that "every inquiry into religious matters that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based on a 'methodological atheism'" (Berger 1973: 106), Latour (2013a: 339) suggests that we need to *speak religiously* (rather than "about" religion). He writes:

sociologists easily convinced themselves that to explain rituals, faiths, apparitions or miracles, that is, transcendent objects to which the actors attribute the origin of some action, it was perfectly possible (if not always simple) to replace the contents of these objects by the functions of society which they were both hiding and impersonating. Those types of objects were called fetishes, that is, place-holders for something else. (Latour 2000: 109)

When we study phenomena such as Marian apparitions, the temptation to explain religion "socially" is especially strong. It is as if taking these extraordinary experiences more seriously would lead to some terrible destruction of the social sciences. Michael Carroll (1985: 58, emphasis added) once put it this way:

If we rule out *a priori* the possibility that Marian apparitions are actual instances of divine intervention (and



not to do this would bring us outside the bounds of social science), then these apparitions are almost certainly either “hallucinations” or “illusions.”

Contrary to such a view, an irreductionist approach toward religion⁵ might become crucial for a more diplomatic and less haughty social science discourse on religion. Instead of unmasking religion as an illusion or social force, we could study how religion, even in its most controversial or “nonmodern” manifestations such as miracles, eventually becomes real and true—in a way that is graspable and acceptable for both atheists and religious practitioners. If we succeed, it could help to overcome the gap between these two groups, full to the edge of misunderstandings or polite ignorance (see also Luhmann 2012: preface; 2020).

“Speaking well” (Latour 2013a: 355) and at the same time from within the social sciences about religion requires utmost delicacy and care. Misunderstandings lurk at every corner. One reason for confronting the case study of the Marian apparitions with Latour (among many other authors) and with his reflections on religion is the following quote. Here, he seems to warn against similar topics:

... if, when hearing about religion, you direct your attention to the far away, the above, the supernatural, the infinite, the distant, the transcendent, the mysterious, the misty, the sublime, the eternal, chances are that you have not even begun to be sensitive to what religious talk tries to involve you in. (Latour 2005b: 32)

This exhortation offers a challenging project. How to reconcile an understanding of religion that rejects the idea that being pious means to naively believe in the existence of some supernatural, distant, and invisible entities, with the story of how the Virgin Mary mysteriously appeared and disappeared on Zvir Mountain in Slovakia? Do we understand well the approach Latour is urging us to adopt? And is he clear and consistent enough in articulating his position?

The Virgin Mary from Litmanová

In the beginning, one summer day in 1990, three little children from Litmanová went out up to the hills to

5. See Claverie 2003, Orsi 2008, Berryman 2005: 16 and others for similar positions; and see Willerslev and Suhr 2018 for an attempt to treat religious faith even more “seriously” in anthropology.

play.⁶ There, they experienced an extraordinary encounter. Getting scared by crackling noises coming from the forest, they hid in an empty hut and started praying, “Mary, Our Mother, protect us under your mantle.” Subsequently they had a vision. They saw a woman appear inside the hut, in a glow. The woman was listening to them and looked like the Blessed Mother. The children made sure they all were having the same vision and escaped the hut. The Virgin Mary followed them and after they safely returned to the village she disappeared. The frightened children told their parents what happened. The parents thought the kids were making the story up. The mother of Ivetka, who would later become the main visionary, told her daughter sternly: “Take some pills and go sleep! And do not tell anybody about this. What would people in the village think of us!”

After some time, in 1992 and later, tens and even hundreds of thousands of pilgrims were visiting the place, praying, and worshipping. Month by month, Ivetka was passing them messages from the Virgin. In August 1995, at the fifth anniversary of the first apparition, the Blessed Mother announced that this revelation was her last one. The apparitions ended. Gatherings at the place continued, though. Monthly services are organized and well attended even now, in 2020. The case has already passed through the examination of the bishop’s Commission and is currently submitted for consideration by the highest authorities in Rome.

How did it happen that something that had originated as a fragile, private, and very personal spiritual experience turned into a widely recognized religious phenomenon? The question itself already indicates the strategy of answering. To understand the truth of the apparition, one should examine not so much intrinsic qualities of the historical moment or of the initiating subjective experience of the little children, but rather everything that came afterwards.⁷ “The fate of facts and machines is in later users’ hands; their qualities are thus a consequence,

6. Children as visionaries are characteristic of modern Marian apparitions (Claverie 2003; Hvidt 2007: 108; Orsi 2005). The Litmanová case is similar to other well-known apparitions in many other aspects too.

7. Eipper (2001: 21, emphasis added) “How, though, is a vision given voice? Visionaries must give an account of their experiences and *others must report upon what they have been told*, each telling tending to assume the shape of a story.” See also Orsi (2005: 74) writing about the processes by which the invisible is being made “visible and tangible.”



not a cause, of a collective action,” writes Latour (1987: 259), explaining how to study scientists and engineers through society. Analogically, if we want to understand the robustness and strength of the above-outlined moment when “the transcendent broke into time” (Orsi 2008: 12), we must study all its subsequent transformations and all “the trials of strength” (Latour 2005b: 53) that followed.⁸ The questions are: how did the Virgin Mary *become real* for the participants? How did the apparition *become religiously true*?

Pilgrim apparition work

The Virgin Mary from Litmanová did not become real overnight. It took weeks, months, and years and it required a lot of work. The emergent quality of the entire process is probably best seen in slowly increasing numbers of devotees coming to the site. At first, only children, and their mothers and aunts were visiting the hut. They went there rather hesitantly, pretending to go to collect blueberries and “accidentally” passing by the site. Men joined them only after some time and some say this was a key turn in the trajectory. As time went, more and more people were attending regular gatherings and Zvir Mountain gradually became a pilgrimage site, famous even beyond Slovak borders.

The high numbers of pilgrims played a decisive role in two declarations issued in 2004 and 2008 by the local bishopric. These authorizing documents, declaring the site of apparitions as a Place of Prayers and as an official Marian pilgrimage site, are key steps in establishing the Litmanová apparitions within official Church hierarchies.⁹ For instance, the decree of the Greek-Catholic episcopate from 2004 (no. 2527), signed by the bishop, says: “with respect to the persisting religious attention of godly people, taking into account numerous appeals of worshippers . . . , I decided. . . .”

It was not, however, just the sheer presence and persistence of pilgrims what was important. As noted by

Davis and Boles (2003), pilgrims should not be considered a passive audience, but rather as active participants co-creating the reality of apparitions. That is why these authors speak of “pilgrim apparition work.” This work consists mainly in symbolization, interpretation, and interaction, by means of which pilgrims collectively make sense of what is happening, negotiate cultural meanings, direct attention to what is important, and learn how to talk about miraculous things with due prudence, i.e., within an “economy of precaution” (Claverie 2003: 47).

This pilgrim apparition work is not confined to the social psychological level, emphasized by Davis and Boles. It is rather material, practical, and embodied (McGuire 2016); it literally transforms the place. The place on Zvir became populated by religious pictures, books, photographs, and signs as well as testimonies and words of thank you (see also Hazard 2013; Holloway 2013). In addition, pilgrim infrastructure was created over the years, partly on a self-help basis. It included a parking area, toilets, navigating signs, loudspeakers, confessors, liturgical space, and a vestry. During important gatherings, kiosks could be seen along the way up to the hill—partly providing pilgrims with necessary stuff, but also provoking the Church to take more control over the Sunday events. As a result, the entire site re-presents Mary, The Immaculate Purity, and her closeness. She became literally present on the mountain, visible and audible to all incomers. Her presence is, of course, a source for popular piety; but in an important sense, and first, it was constituted as a consequence rather than as the unquestionable basis of pilgrim activities.¹⁰

Church interventions and the Church Commission

The first reactions of Church representatives to the apparition were dismissive. As soon as the local priest learned of the incident, he asked the children and their families not to talk about it publicly and not to come back to the site. “This is not joking,” he warned the children. Only after some time, his parishioners made him frequent the site. He was initially coming as a “private person,” in civilian clothes. Much later, representatives

8. Such an approach is, in a way, complementary to psychologically inclined approaches focused on cognitive preconditions of experiencing a supernatural God as real in the everyday world, i.e., approaches aimed at understanding of what must be done and learned *before* the key event (Luhmann 2012).

9. Both documents are often understood by lay people as a kind of confirmation of the authenticity of the apparition (although the second decree explicitly warns against such an interpretation).

10. The fact that her presence has been collectively and practically enacted or made does not disqualify the religious value of the apparition. Piette (2003: 364) writes: “Humans busy themselves with mediations in which they construct the presence of God, but at the same time, God appears to exist, autonomously and independently.” And Latour (2010: 39): “We help to fabricate the beings in which we believe.”



of the Church began to officially participate. They felt it was their duty to accompany the believers, already arriving from other locations as well, to provide religious services, and also to take control over what was happening on the mountain.

The Church started investigations and tests both on-site and in the offices. The children had to pass double-blind questioning and medical examinations. Experiments related to their ecstatic states were organized, their sightings started to be carefully observed and recorded. Later on, the bishop decided to establish a special commission to assess the authenticity of the apparitions. An institutionalized procedure was started, the conclusion of which was necessary for submitting a request for reviewing the apparition to the CDF in Rome.¹¹

The bishop's Commission was a religious body, consisting of people of faith. Yet, the functioning of the Commission also resembled the work of a scientific body. Its members proceeded gradually and without haste.¹² They insisted on accurate translations and transcriptions of Mary's messages that had been collected.¹³ They archived all the relevant material, paying attention to data completeness and triangulation. The Commission also used solicited expertise from independent experts, such as a psychologist and medical doctors.¹⁴ It even organized its own "public opinion surveys" among pilgrims. In fact, however, the Commission proceeded in a mixed regime, considering *both* theological issues *and* scientific criteria, depending on the situation. The ultimate theological principle here was "you will know them by their fruit"

(Matthew 7:15–20).¹⁵ Much of the time was spent scrutinizing the apparition to prove its supernatural quality. To this end, as explained by one of the Commission members, it would have been best to find cases of miraculous healing related to the Virgin Mary from Litmanová and confirmed by independent medical doctors. For example, a case of cured cancer. Only during the subsequent discussion did the interviewed priest admit that recovery from alcoholism or saving a family from divorce, inspired by the religious conversion related to the apparition site, might have been considered as much "miraculous" as unexplainable "hard facts" of medicine . . . from his own religious perspective, he emphasized.

All these investigations went hand in hand with active participation of the Church in public gatherings. Indeed, providing religious services and controlling the course of events often involved the same activities as assessing the authenticity of the revelation. It was not typically perceived like that, though. Here is an excerpt from an interview with the chairman of the Commission:

We will make a complete list of all the messages, chronologically ordered, and the Commission will also make a statement whether these messages correspond with the doctrine or not. If they do, we will send the documents to Rome for further assessment . . . After we send it this entire agenda will be finished for us. Of course, *another agenda* will get on the table *by that moment*, namely cultivation of the pilgrimage site, so that pilgrims would be given the best care possible. (Research interview, April 2009; emphasis added)

It therefore looks like the Commission first wanted to make the inquiry and the assessment and only then would it eventually take care of the development and the promotion of the pilgrimage site. The former seems to be the precondition for the latter. But that was clearly not the case. We were told by other members of the Commission that, for instance, during the first few meetings in 2009, nothing but issues related to the cultivation of the site on Zvir were debated, especially new seats for

11. The criteria for assessment are briefly summarized by Horsfall (2000: 377) and Halemba (2018).
12. Dick Pels (2003) discusses lack of haste as a key part of the culture of science.
13. One of the crucial tasks was to compare the content of messages with the official religious doctrine. Virgin Mary from Litmanová talked to the children in local dialect (similarly in Medjugorje; see Claverie 2003), her messages spontaneously circulated in a number of varying transcriptions/translations. It was necessary to go to the original resources, dated and well documented. This would help to establish chains of reference pretty much in the same way as scientists do when they try to produce "objective" and verifiable accounts of reality, i.e., when they *inform* about the world.
14. According to a member of the Commission it was better to have an agnostic expert, a psychiatrist, for instance, rather than a believing person. The more critical the attitude, the better (research interview).

15. Let us note that this principle gets us close to the famous theorem from Thomas and Thomas (1928: 571–72): "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." It is also quite compatible with the above-mentioned Latour's (1987) rule that the truth is in later users' hands. Interestingly, one of the priests in Litmanová explicitly agreed with these parallels during an interview.



visitors and nomination of the new “spiritual curator” of the mountain. This curator, a priest who would be at the pilgrims’ disposal twenty-four hours a day, directly on site, nicely (and explicitly) fitted into the investigation plans of the Commission. It was he who was commissioned to do the “fieldwork research,” the aim of which was to *know better* what was happening at the site and what people thought. At the same time, such person was able to *take care* of the pilgrims and *control* (at least partly) activities taking place at the site, to try to prevent bad things from happening. The same duality was true also for other Church representatives during regular gatherings.

Church activities of control and care encouraged people to come (again) to the site, to pray, drink local (reportedly miraculous) water, enjoy celebrations, and get strength and vitality from such visits. All this was in turn registered by the Church and, quite justly, taken as evidence of the authenticity of the apparition. In fact, the Church Commission was investigating (and authorizing) what it itself was helping to establish. Its members were trying to assess the truthfulness of the phenomena they were simultaneously helping to create, stabilize, and promote. It would be unfair, however, to consider these activities as calculative manipulations from the start. Let us just recall the clearly hesitant attitude of the Church in the beginning of the entire story and the fact that the Church was *forced* to act by the local community.¹⁶ The concurrence of care, control, and investigation should therefore be understood as an emerging, not planned, effect of the Church’s doing things as usual. It could not proceed much differently.

The seers and the seen

The Church and the pilgrims, of course, could not do their work alone, without the visionaries, Ivetka and Katka,¹⁷ and without Mary. It was primarily through the visionaries that the Virgin Mary from Litmanová was seen, heard, and felt by the other people.¹⁸ Mary, thus en-

acted, could even act, namely do things and make others do things, mediated by the visionaries.¹⁹

For instance, a few months after the first apparition in 1990, it was Mary who suggested to move Sunday services from the village up to the mountain, the place of the apparitions. Ivetka, made stronger by the association with Mary, and the Blessed Mother herself, made present and audible by means of Ivetka’s action, somehow convinced the priest to agree. Certainly, they were not the only ones who ultimately made the priest decide. He had to have had in mind also his parishioners, some of whom were increasingly often missing during the Sunday services in the village sanctuary because they preferred going to Zvir . . . The action, as social scientists should always be prepared to acknowledge, was shared among several actors.

Ivetka was not and could not be a simple transmitter, a passive intermediary of Mary’s will. Her own role was crucial, complicated, and risky. Rather than an intermediary, she was closer to Latourian mediators, who “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour 2005b: 39). She was chosen, so she obviously seemed special to the Virgin. But she *became even more special* during the course of events. People say she was endowed with spiritual gifts from Mary. And you do not wonder at this: while she was eleven-to-sixteen years old, she was able to speak out, without the support of notes, in front of thousands and tens of thousands of gathered pilgrims, passing Mary’s messages to them, and even giving them meanings. She had to face both uncritical admiration and hostile suspicion. She was constantly watched and evaluated. She had to meet high expectations and to negotiate with church leaders (and her mother, too) who wanted to have control over what she was saying and doing.²⁰ Crowds of pilgrims wanted to talk to her personally and she had to cope with their frequent home visits. She had to face the mockery of teachers at school. Her

16. This is a rather characteristic attitude of the Church in such cases (see Halemba 2018).

17. Out of the two seeing girls, Ivetka turned out to be the key person, fully able to communicate with Mary.

18. As put by a pilgrim: “When we went to pray with Ivetka and Katka, when they were together, when they talked or prayed, well, you could feel her through them, as if the Virgin Mary was talking to you inside” (research interview).

19. See Bialecki (2014) or Finch (2012), following Latour, about social scientific approaches to gods and spiritual beings as actors. For most of the believers coming to Zvir, the Virgin was quite unproblematically the key actor. Local parishioners mentioned that they sometimes prayed to the Virgin Mary to give the Church Commission members enough strength to assess properly the authenticity of the apparitions and decide correctly.

20. Apparitions cannot be recognized as possibly true by the Church unless visionaries lead exemplary Christian lives.



friendship with Katka was put to a test, when it turned out that Katka was not able to talk to Mary in the way she was, and people speculated about the reasons. Ivetka was formed by all these occasions, by all these reactions, as much as she was increasingly able to shape the world around herself and get people to her side.

And she turned out to be very good at this. Sometimes she deserved even more credit than the Virgin. “I am not sure whether to believe in these apparitions, but I do believe in you, Ivetka,” wrote a Slovak Catholic intellectual commenting on the documentary about Ivetka made in 2008. At that time, this man referred to a young and pleasant-looking woman, who was able to talk openly, soberly, and thoughtfully about her apparitions and her entire life story, including a deep personal crisis after the apparitions ended, when she joined a new monastic community. People testify that Ivetka has always looked more mature than her peers. As an adult, however, she and her religious experience aroused respect even among nonbelievers.

“Be pure and simple, like children,” the Virgin Mary from Litmanová, Immaculate Purity, often said in her messages. She was saying this through thin voices of two kids. But how to “remain in the game” for these children, symbols of purity and innocence, while growing older and becoming adult? Their Blessed Mother helped them, in a way, when she decided to stop appearing in 1995. Her decision was announced during a ceremonial gathering of more than a hundred thousand participants. She/Ivetka said: “This is how I wanted it.” And people were encouraged, by this unexpected move,²¹ to turn their attention from ostentatiously miraculous events to deeper meanings in Mary’s messages. They did not need regular apparitions anymore to keep the spiritual connection to their Mother.

On a second plane, the Virgin’s decision attributed different roles to Ivetka and to Katka: it made them detached from what was (and would be) happening at the apparition site. Both continue being involved, attending Zvir at special occasions. But they ceased to participate in the daily life of the site. They both got married and became mothers, currently living and working abroad, independent of each other. The question of authenticity of the Litmanová apparitions came to be less dramatic (and more taken-for-granted for the visiting religious public). Above all, however, the question became less directly re-

lated to the visionaries themselves.²² Precisely this detachment probably allows Ivetka to speak about her apparitions with greater serenity, gentleness, and distance than ever before.

Transformation and information

Let us now go back to Latour’s understanding of religion (religiousness) and its relation to science (matter-of-fact-driven grasping the world). How does it fit the past and present events in Litmanová?

Latour on science and religion

According to Latour, a prominent sociologist of science, the nature of religious truth has absolutely nothing to do with how scientific knowing is constructed and assessed. The two, science and religion, produce different, incomparable effects. As a mode of existence, religion is authentic or true in its own way (Latour 2013a; see also Scott 2018).²³

What does Latour say? Above all, religious truth *does not inform* (Latour 2001: 225; 2013a: 319). “God is not the object of a belief-action” (Latour 2001: 231). Contrary to popular expectations, religion does not direct our attention to “the invisible world of beyond” (as science does), but to things that are “local, objective, visible, mundane, un-miraculous, repetitive, obstinate, and sturdy” (Latour 2010: 111). Talking about God therefore implies a completely different relationship to reality than, say, talking about global warming, economic crises, or prions. If the truth of religion is measured by the truth of science, as is too often the case in our modern days, we necessarily miss the point. Precisely to avoid

21. “One of the characteristics of religious beings is that neither their appearance nor their disappearance can be controlled” (Latour 2013a: 309).

22. In an extensive media interview from October 2019, Ivetka said that the Church Commission still exists and works, but that she has not seen its members for years (Ližičiar 2019).

23. Of course, Latour is hardly alone, and certainly not the first to point out that religion and science are incommensurable worlds. Let us just remember Malinowski’s *Magic, science and religion* (1948) or Schutz (1962) writing about multiple realities. If Latour, a prominent sociologist of science, is particularly interesting in this context, it is mainly because he has a thorough ethnographic knowledge of scientific practice and scientific controversies. Thanks to this he comes with an insight that what is at stake here is actually a *double* misconception, mutually related, about *both* science *and* religion (e.g., Latour 2013a: 321).



this misunderstanding of religion as a kind of second-class knowledge without evidence and proofs, Latour suggests that social scientists should look at religion more seriously, “religiously” (Latour 2009: 460).

If religious speech does not inform, what does it do? It *transforms*, Latour explains. It *performs* the other as present and close to us, in our neighborhood, here and now; it creates the other as a person, Latour says (2005a, 2013b). By means of this, we become available to each other for the present moment. That is why Latour compares religious speech to love talk (e.g., 2013b: 25). Religion draws our attention, again and again, to the divine *presence* in the world. “Religious talk . . . cannot be about anything other than what is present. It is about the present, not about the past nor about the future” (Latour 2001: 232).²⁴

Presence-making and transformation in Litmanová

Latour might be pleased in many respects by the empirical findings related to our case. In Litmanová, the focus was very much on what was happening, just then and there. For most visitors to the Zvir mountain, the Virgin Mary was simply there, close to them. One could virtually feel her presence, see and hear it, and draw strength out of it. There were her words, spoken, whispered, amplified, and written. Many pictures, brought to the place both permanently and temporarily, showed her kind smile. “Dear Children, how much I love you,” she says depicted on the welcome sign at the road entrance to Litmanová.²⁵

But not only the Virgin was there, present. To feel Our Lady’s presence, to fully appreciate the intimate bond, it was necessary for the believers, too, to appear on the spot, in person. They had to come to the place and become available to her. As noted by a local woman in an inter-

view: “People ask: Do you believe [it is real]? and I always tell: Just come and see.” Or, as told by a pilgrim: “And then I came to the place and immediately knew that the apparition was real, authentic.”

For five years, it was also crucial that the visionaries, Ivetka and Katka, were present. They could describe to the visitors how Mary was dressed, what her mood was, and what she said. They always said these things right after their ecstatic experiences—what she had *just* said. At that precise moment. At that particular place. The assembled people tried to get as close as possible and see the visionaries as best as they could—and when they did, they felt they too were closer to the Virgin.

When the Virgin Mary stopped appearing, her presence on the mountain did not actually diminish. On the contrary. She decided to stop appearing precisely to make people realize that she would always be with them. She said:

*I keep being present on this mountain . . . The time is coming, which is already here. Be like children.*²⁶

This explanation became widely accepted. A local woman told us:

People often say: “Wow, you are from Litmanová, the place where the Virgin Mary appeared!” And I always say: “Well, she is here even now, with you, when you start praying, she is with you. She is listening to everybody. Our mum, isn’t she?”²⁷

All in all, what we see here is religion as a mode of existence characteristic of constant renewal of being present to each other. Unlike science and its fact-making, religious action and arrangements focus on God’s living presence (and the presence of the Mother of God) in this world, with us.²⁸

24. Here, Latour (Catholic by faith) is close to authors such as Orsi (2005: 73): “Presence is central to the study of lived Catholic practice—the study of Catholicism in everyday life is about the mutual engagement of men, women, children, and holy figures present to each other.”

25. Note that she was not present in some abstract way, but in this particular place and moment. The Virgin Mary from Litmanová spoke local dialect. She repeatedly reflected the specific historical moment of early 1990s in Slovakia, after the fall of communism and during the first turbulent years of market economy. She chose the place of apparitions because of several reasons, the purity of the surrounding mountain nature being one of them.

26. Italics by ZK. From the last “farewell” message from the Virgin Mary in Litmanová, August 6, 1995. See: <http://www.litmanova.info/1995.htm> (last accessed August 21, 2021).

27. Cf. what Jean-Louis Chrétien (2000: 149) says about prayer: it “is the speech act by which the man praying stands in the presence of a being in which he believes but does not see and manifests himself to it.” See also Luhmann (2013: 394) on praying as a practice of making God’s presence real.

28. Let us not be mistaken and exaggerate the difference between science and religion. According to Latour (2013a),



Fact-making and information

We could see, however, quite different moments too: interrogation, verification, documentation, completion, doubt. The Virgin *was* here, evidently . . . or was she not? This happened. Or didn't it? And if it did, how exactly? Examining the apparition by scientific and quasi-scientific means was an important part of the Church Commission's activity. Plausible scientific explanations were taken as something that could falsify the hypothesis of miraculousness as a key quality of the genuine apparition.

The matter-of-fact perspective was crucial not only for the Commission, but also for ordinary believers. Such a perspective was not a dominant view, but it was applied selectively, as a "pragmatic resource" (Berryman 2005). The narration of the first encounter is told endlessly on Zvir and in Litmanová, again and again, and it often ends up with common emotional arousal, tears in eyes; often, however, curious questions follow. People want to make sure, along with praying. They want to feel the presence of Mary, but they are also full of doubt and uncertainty (Claverie and Fedele 2014: 490) and want to know details about how it all happened.²⁹

Visual representations of the initial event, with recognizable faces of the two girls, are all around on the site. Tags of thanksgiving can be seen everywhere. Yes, they do signal that Mary is here, with us, right now, helping and supporting. But at the same time, they often accurately describe who was helped with what and when, as if in a museum at a historical exposition. Accordingly, these tags are taken as *evidence*, even by the Commission. Visible signs of Ivetka's and Katka's ecstasy, closely watched and videotaped countless times, are taken as a *proof* of supernatural communication with the Blessed Mother, both by the Commission and by ordinary believers.

both scientific and religious practice entail series of meditations; both can be true or false, successful or failing, and more or less real; both can be studied by tracing their actor-networks. They "only" point in different directions, their beings differ, their truths and values are not the same.

29. In religion, the role of doubts and uncertainty seems crucial. One might think, for instance, that when people of faith doubt, it helps to make them feel more committed when they overcome their doubts. (Thanks to Tanya Luhrmann for pointing me to this.)

It was Ivetka who co-created, explained, and passionately defended the above outlined meaning of the apparition, which resonates with Latour's perspective so well. Yet, at the same time, she repeatedly felt the need to insist on the historical accuracy of her story. For instance, she once asked a local sculptor to remake his statue of Mary at the Calvary on Zvir. The reason was that the original statue did not respect in all details what the Virgin Mary looked like and what she was wearing when Ivetka had met her.

In short, information and fact-making flourish all around, hand in hand with spiritual contemplation. Priests as well as lay people routinely switch between various repertoires, between different "truths" of the apparition, depending on the context. Sometimes they say the apparition is unimportant as a historical fact. Other times they zealously bring up historical details and expert statements. "Matter-of-fact" and "presence-making" accounts are mixed without losing the religious value of the accounted object.³⁰

Religion in the making

Latour wants to defend and explain religion as something reasonable, understandable, and valuable. To achieve this, he needs to dissociate religion from science. Only when the two are understood as incommensurable and distinct modes of existence, are they saved from category mistakes of modernity (Latour 2013a), i.e., from principal misunderstandings about their nature.

The strange thing with Latour's accounts of religion is not that he works hard to defend the idea of "religion without belief" (Golinski 2010: 51). Many of his arguments about religion and science make sense. What is strange, however, is how purified his picture is. It simply does not fit our story, where the two modes seemed to be working *together*, and not independently of each other or even in opposing directions.

Latour seems blind to abundant evidence of referentiality and transcendence in religious speech. Other scholars have already criticized Latour for this (Golinski 2010: 60; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 264–71). Latour might object, of course, that religious people themselves often deepen the misunderstandings he wants to put right. He could take the work of the Church Commission in

30. After all, as noted by Pouillon (2016), the verb "to believe," *croire* in French, refers both to a conviction and doubt; it is the same in Czech or Slovak.



Litmanová as an example of how the Church itself has fallen into the trap of modern thinking about faith. The extent to which the Commission adopted (quasi-)scientific criteria could only validate the urgency of Latour's critique. Such objections would nonetheless put this author in tension with his own theoretical-methodological principles. Latour has repeatedly criticized social sciences of religion for ignoring "the explicit wordings and behavior of those they study" (Latour 2001: 230; 2000: 116).

Why then ignore a large portion of what has been done and said in Litmanová just to maintain the statement "There is no point of contact between the two [science and religion]" (Latour 2005a: 35)? Perhaps if Latour used as his empirical basis not pieces of well-established religious art (1988, 1998, 2013b), but ethnographic descriptions of specific religious events and practices, he might become more sensitive toward how those he talks about "object" (Latour 2000) against what he is saying. He might also become more sensitive toward religious faith as a "composite formation" (Taves 2009) or "polymorphous phenomenon" (Berryman 2005).

But perhaps, despite what has just been said, the Litmanová case does not completely falsify Latour's point. It is important to understand how and why.

To create the effect of a sharp contrast between science and religion, Latour often speaks of religion and science in a noncontroversial way. He considers the two in purified forms, as fully established and strong. Only then it seems clear what the two aspire to: grasping remote and invisible objects on the one hand and representing something which is close on the other. In other words, putting one against the other, Latour refers to *ready-made* faces of science and religion, each looking out in different directions. He pays little attention to his own notion of "science in action" (Latour 1987) on such occasions. And he only occasionally considers something we could analogically call *religion in action*.

Most importantly though, Latour does not, in this discussion, mention his own (and closely related) idea of science as a two-faced Janus (Latour 1987). The main charm of this concept consists in thematizing the *relationship* between the two faces of science, i.e., *ready-made* science and science in action. Latour urges us that we must accept their speaking at once, saying entirely different things and thus *together producing* the effects expected from scientific work. These faces cannot be understood separately, Latour insists. We must "learn to live with two contradictory voices" (Latour 1987: 13).

A similar sensitivity is missing in Latour's writings about religion. His religion is typically a full-fledged, accomplished, and well-established mode of existence. As clarified in his later works, it may cross with other modes, it may be mistaken for something else. Not everything in religion is religious, not everything in science is scientific, Latour (2013a: 29) clearly says. Modes of existence cooperate, coexist. Yet, Latour seems to have only little understanding for something like "almost-religion" (Piette 1999, cited in Finch 2012). He rarely reflects on flesh-and-blood religiosity "in the making," always somewhat uncertain, impure, and incomplete,³¹ and yet quite common all around. When we briefly revisit the case of Litmanová apparitions, we see the point. The crucial question is how "person-making" and "fact-making" are distributed along the temporal, case-development axis.

In the beginning, when the apparition was not more than a fragile "private" experience, when Ivetka's mother was sending her daughter to take pills and go to bed, as well as during subsequent days and weeks, the reality of the apparition as a historical event was intensely debated, defended, or doubted. People mostly took it as something distant and mysterious. It was an event the truth of which resembled the truth of a (wannabe) scientific fact. Accordingly, oral accounts of the initial encounters were characterized by an abundance of empirical details (who went where with whom) and, by necessity, partial matter-of-fact discrepancies. Suspicious parents and neighbors, dismissive and distrustful priests, church representatives undertaking parallel separated interrogations of the two young girls, stabbing them with a pin during their trance and observing reactions . . . all this strongly belonged to the beginnings of the case.

Later, however, when the mountain became populated both by people and religious artifacts, together with how the religiousness of the event was becoming beyond doubt, more and more emphasis was put on what was happening just then and there. When local parishioners, mother and daughter, explain how they started going to the apparition site *on a regular basis*, they said:

And *then*, you could clearly feel it, the presence. The peace, the love, you gave all this to the Virgin Mary, and she was helping, *more and more*. (research interview, emphasis added).

31. To admit, reflecting the heterogeneity of networks, that "religion is not made of religion" (Latour 2013a: 212) is not precisely the thing I have in mind.



When we interviewed the local priest in 2009 on the mountain meadow full of gathered praying people, he said:

You know, sometimes I think it does not matter at all whether the Virgin Mary really appeared to the two young girls . . . Just look at this holy place, literally imbued with prayers! (research interview)

He would not even think of saying similar words in 1991 or 1992. It is also characteristic that interviewed members of the Commission in 2009 already did not exactly remember the quasi-scientific expertise and experiments that occurred under the Church's supervision in the early 1990s. These activities simply became secondary after some time.³²

This temporal distribution of “fact-making” and “person-making” is similar when we consider the biographical dimension, i.e., how individual people approached the apparition. In the beginning, there was often one's curiosity, amazement, and wish to know whether things happened exactly as told by the visionaries. Such an approach was characteristic for newcomers to Litmanová. Ivetka was always patient and willing to retell her story to such people. She understood that such attitudes belong to germinating, hesitant faith. Only after such beginnings, people eventually start realizing that they have established a more intimate relationship with their “Mom.” They come back, again and again, to feel her presence, to be closer to her.

Conclusion

The case of Litmanová offers a more complicated picture of religiousness than the one offered by Latour. On the one hand, the apparition was enacted in many ways as *making* Blessed Mother *present*, here and now, to all the worshippers. On the other hand, equally frequently, the apparition was articulated, examined, and recalled as a *matter-of-fact historical event*, false or true according to quite different sets of criteria than those imagined for religion by Latour. The two modalities not only co-existed, but they did their fabricating work together.

Nonetheless, Latour's point about the unique nature of religion does hold—in a way: while matter-of-fact ar-

ticulations of the apparition were prevailing and decisive in the beginning, their urgency decreased as the religious authenticity of the apparition was becoming more certain and established. As the case evolved, Latourian qualities of performative religious speech³³ became increasingly important and frequent. They have never completely prevailed, though. Fact-making and person-making went always hand in hand, making space for each other.³⁴ Thus, Latour's characterization of religion makes sense not because of some purified essence of religiousness (as a mode of existence), but rather in relation to the direction of a gradual *movement* toward post-controversial, stabilized, and well-established religious truths and values.

We cannot see this movement (and its direction) if we overlook the turbulent and uncertain reality of religion in action. More specifically, we cannot observe it clearly enough if we focus, such as Piette (1999) and many others, on how religion is practiced in everyday life. Everyday time, as noted by many (e.g., Alheit 1994), is repetitive and cyclical. To appreciate the above-mentioned movement, we need to take a life-time perspective. We must follow the trajectory of a relatively coherent phenomena on the way to itself—quite similar to STS researchers trying to understand the sequential construction of a scientific fact. Analyzing the story of a fragile and uncertain subjective experience of two little girls *becoming*, step-by-step, truly religious and the widely acknowledged reality of Marian apparitions is an example of such an approach.

Latour's main import for STS was not that he simply introduced the notion of “science in action,” but rather that he showed how this aspect of science is constitutively related to ready-made science. Similar sensitivity seems weak in Latour's writings on religion. In these works, he warns that it is misleading to try to “reconcile” science and religion or to measure them against each other. This is an important lesson. But the way he puts his argument is misleading.

32. True, the lineup of the Commission had changed as well in the meantime. But that could also be part of this reorientation.

33. Again, Latour was not the only nor the first to point out the performativity of language in religious discourse. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss all of these connections.

34. As put by Piette (2014: 283): “Believers seem to be torn between literalist discourse of the kind that church discourse never really escapes . . . and their desire to be in God's presence.”



The point is probably more general, not exclusive to religion or religious studies.³⁵ Let us take Latour's recent philosophical treatise on modes of existence (Latour 2013a), religion being just one of them. He writes about how law cannot be measured by the logic of morality, how values of organizing things are different from the values of politics, or how religious faith is incomparable to scientific knowledge. The effort to demonstrate these modes of existence as clearly distinct from each other culminates with a systematic summarizing table at the end of the book. Sure, Latour speaks a lot about movements, translations, mediations, crossings, flows and actions—even in that book. He does admit that sometimes (or always?) modes of existence can be observed in “impure” or “mixed” forms. Yet, I am afraid that what ultimately sticks in the memory of most readers will probably be the final set of rows and columns. Regardless of what the author intended and what his previous lessons were, this marvelous table guides us to think about modes of existence “in table,” and not in action, making the world around us “inacted,” rather than enacted.

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35. After all, in some of his works, Latour transcends the narrow field of science studies (or other areas he has dealt with) with an ambition to rethink the very foundations of the social sciences (Latour 2005b). For me, the story of the apparitions in Litmanová is only an exemplary case for how we social scientists approach reality which might have been articulated purely theoretically. Nonetheless, one of the lessons I take very seriously from Latour is that it is always better to theorize with good empirical examples.

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