

Michel Serres, *Religion: Rereading What Is Bound Together*¹

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In an attempt to provide completion for Le Grand Récit, Michel Serres finally took religion as an explicit theme in his book *Religion: Rereading What Is Bound Together*. While the theme of religion was implicitly touched in his *Angels: A Modern Myth* and the *Foundations* trilogy,² Serres was yet to flesh out its fecund theoretical importance in developing further the narrative of the Earth and of humanity, specifically of how we come to exist in composition—of how we are bound together (e.g., tied together), oscillating between the context of the Roman Catholic tradition and of secular modernity. The book, however, is neither a theological treatise nor an apologia of religion, and Serres' comprehensive approach invokes some important insights from his theoretical enterprise as a philosopher of science: the dissipation of energy and dissemination of information, the anthropological dimension of sacrifice and violence, the critical-theoretical discourse of science, and the problem of evil—the last being titular for the work's concluding chapter.

Serres begins *Religion* with the conceptual assumption about the nature of religion and how its etymology articulates religion's contemporaneity, addressing why and how crucial it is in today's time.³

¹ trans. by Malcolm DeBevoise (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2022), 200pp.

² See Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. by Francis Cowper (Paris & New York: Flammarion, 1995); Michel Serres, *Rome: The First Book of Foundations*, trans. by Randolph Burks (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); Michel Serres, *Statues: The Second Book of Foundations*, trans. by Randolph Burks (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); and Michel Serres, *Geometry: The Third Book of Foundations*, trans. by Randolph Burks (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

³ The term *religion* could be radically derived from *relegare* ('to re-read'), *religare* ('to bind'), and *religiens* ('to take care') altogether. While the first root simply pertains to the ritualistic act of both celebrating and memorizing (e.g., honoring into a memory), and the third to the transformed orientation of religions from belief to concern (e.g., to orient ourselves in the secular age of the mundane by 'taking care'), Serres in this book is fundamentally concerned with the

Religion is capable of binding humans into communities, and Serres cites the biblical reference of Jesus reprimanding the whole community and the universality of the one “without sin” to cast the first stone at the woman accused of committing adultery.⁴ This tribunal, a sacrifice of an individual sinner or a pardoned victim, Serres claims, “may be said to have *bound together* the murderers,”⁵ and thus introducing violence—the original sin, if not the problem of evil—as a point of departure in the story of how societies come to exist and how violence is present at the heart of any social groups.⁶ Instead of providing arguments in justifying his claim, Serres turns to history, myth and science to expand this seemingly underappreciated view of our social origin. To accomplish this, he introduces the notion of “hot spots,” serving as an analogical *dispositif* to refer to cites of convergences, i.e., places where “another world manifests itself in ours, those concrete contact with another reality, be it virtual, intelligent, spiritual, inspirational—perhaps dangerous as well.”⁷ In bringing together both real and virtual, the sins of today (enabled by our scientific progress) is tied together with its historical/mythological past, as Serres argues, “We have long believed that the fires of science produce less violence than those of religion. We were mistaken.”⁸ Today, we are witnessing the violence as a ‘crisis of reason,’ the collapse of which signaled by

the flash of lightning at Hiroshima, and then at Nagasaki, where a science reputed to be wholly and uniquely good committed crimes against humanity, massacred innocents, in a tragically incendiary spot. Today, we are the survivors of this crisis and of this burning, where the energy expended was proportionate to the crime.⁹

The supposedly light of reason, which Serres originally locates in the quest of the Magi (three wise men) whose guidance they sought from the star of the Epiphany,¹⁰ and which we thought to guarantee truly progressive

second root for its thematic importance in articulating what religion exactly does: binding something together.

⁴ “Preface,” *Ibid.*, ix.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81. Serres explicitly provides a similar claim: “the guilty is society. In the face of physically contestable facts, there can be no doubt that violence is an ineradicably constant feature of human existence.” See *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19–21.

ideals during the Enlightenment period, has shined the brightest at a time of pure violence—a violence that fundamentally questioned our humanity *bound* as a whole.¹¹ Indeed, we find the same thoughtlessness, the same mark of our rational laziness, and the same murderous violent impulse in the biblical story of the casting of stones, wherein only when bound as a group or belonging to a collective (e.g., an angry mob perhaps) do we gain an authority to hold tribunals, and judge an individual’s innocence “in the name of society.”¹² Such is the same with another important biblical reference Serres re-interprets as a hot spot: Peter’s denial of Jesus. While Jesus was on trial in the court of the Sanhedrin, Peter experiences his own tribunal just outside the court. The servants who questioned Peter’s association with Jesus is revelatory of the nature and the origins of how courts of justice were constituted in the first place.¹³ What we consider justice in primitive societies is nothing but the grand spectacle of a society ready to search for any guilt. Laws too can be violent, only that they are veiled by the presumed innocence of society, whose judgments through its courts are cast like stones. While we can agree that Peter himself sinned, Serres further asks readers to re-think the human experience of an individual within a trial held by a murderous group. From here, two points may be considered.

First, Serres explicitly states that society, what is bound together, and not the individual, always bears the responsibility for evil.¹⁴ Serres resorts to theodicy in explaining this fact: When Voltaire (satirizing Leibniz) summoned God the Father, the creator, to appear before a tribunal that called into question the responsibility for evil, as His creation primordially causing the world’s worst environmental tragedies, the tribunal has found Him guilty. However, earthquakes are blind facts definitive to the natural order of the world, take for example the Loma Prieta earthquake in San Francisco bay and the one that happened in Haiti, the former achieving 7.2 in the Richter scale while the latter 7.0.¹⁵ Nature, perhaps even God, would say that that the .2 difference in the Richter scale may be insignificant. But perhaps the political life of both San Francisco and Haiti, the former being a rich city and the latter being a poor island, might have effectuated their two hundred-thousand-person difference in casualty, Haiti being at the worse end—a very great difference indeed. It is not nature, nor God the creator who is to bear

¹¹ Serres poses the question: “How can we be unaware of this original sin, this murderous impulse, written down, in all its darkness, in our souls and continually in our history?” *Ibid.*, 88.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

responsibility for this, but society and its ability to be well-adapted to calamities through its progressive sciences.¹⁶

The second point is related with the first, where Serres might unknowingly express a sincerity in the anthropological kind: While there might not be a general solution to the problem of evil and of violence, the binding force of religion can definitely bring together individuals who separate themselves and wash their hands, attempting to see themselves as innocent (therefore, morally pure and better than others). If we are to bear responsibility for evil and the violence of the world, the people must come to see themselves as a whole. Serres then would utilize a somewhat Heideggerian take on Jesus' words on the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."¹⁷ The "they," which is Heidegger's *Das Man*, the thoughtless entities, designates for Serres

any undifferentiated groups, any mass of individuals having no identity separate from membership in the group, that condemns an innocent person to death—in a word, society. Society does not know what it does. It is violent without knowing it. Or, if it does know this, it hides the fact from itself.¹⁸

Society, bound together, blameworthy as a whole, is itself a lacking justification for the monotonous repetition of humanity's violent crimes: war, murder, exploitation, cruelty, humiliation, etc.¹⁹ Even Serres could only imagine the possibility of salvation through an omnipotent God, whose infinite mercy could forgive us in spite of *us*. Who is this "they/them" in Jesus' words, who He asks God to forgive? Serres answers, "They are members of the human race. Christ died in order to wash away the sins of the world—the sins of all people. Of humanity."²⁰ Perhaps, what Serres here aims to share to his readers as a lasting insight is that, in the face of a violent crime or an evil committed by an individual, no human being should presume to be better than the rest. Only then can we ultimately accept the fact that all historical acts of violence, which we originally described as *inhuman*, are in fact truly *human*. Jesus could only bear all our sins for *us* if the sins are ours to bear at first.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁷ Luke 23:34. This is parenthetically quoted in *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁸ Serres, *Religion*, 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Of course, forgiveness is possible for individuals as Jesus Himself never condemned an individual, and Serres identifies the woman accused of adultery and the penitent thief at His side on the cross as examples of this religious pardon. See *Ibid.*, 87–88.

While there is more to say about the binding force of religion at work within our current different mundane ceremonies like funeral and marriage,²¹ Serres' most interesting claims in *Religion* about religion's relation to violence and to the narrative of the human are his explicit contributions to Le Grand Récit—literally The Great Story of humanity. Internal to his philosophical enterprise, *Religion* provides a comprehensive panorama of the nature of violence vis-à-vis the dynamics of social cohesion we develop as groups of these religious violence. One could simply recall that prior Christianity, the earlier non-Christian religions performed sacrifices that are important to their communal bond. Serres only shows to us how, at some point in our Christian history, violence came revelatory of our nature as human societies. Another important contribution perhaps is how Serres's idea of a hot spot paints the picture of religion's binding force vertically (as when religion binds together the real and the abstract, the immanent and the transcendent, God and human, etc.) and horizontally (as when religion binds together individual and society, the human and the Earth, the present from its past, etc.). Only by recognizing what religion truly means can we redeem ourselves as a community, realizing how and why we are bound to each other even beyond the violence we ought to overcome.

Of course, one cannot read the text without noticing Serres' treatment of Roman Catholicism in her singular totality,²² but somehow sweepingly *binds* different Christian churches and traditions altogether, and continues to refer to them as Christianity.²³ And Serres will never address this limitation anymore.²⁴ In this final work, specifically the final paragraph of the book, Serres could only offer us with a prayer: "God, deliver *us* from evil."²⁵

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References

Serres, Michel, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. by Francis Cowper (Paris & New York: Flammarion, 1995).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 99–102. See also *Ibid.*, 137–139.

²² Serres reminisces in his youthful years the Roman Catholic tradition as a "descendant of the Cathar tradition." *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ See *Ibid.*, 32, 44, and 107.

²⁴ Serres died the day after finishing the manuscript of *Religion* and therefore will not have the opportunity of proofing the whole manuscript further. See translator's note, *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 191. Emphasis original.

_____, *Geometry: The Third Book of Foundations*, trans. by Randolph Burks (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

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