

Tests of a Posthumanist (Franciscan) Religion: The Case of Michel Serres

Orsola Rignani

University of Florence, Florence, Italy

Starting from the question of whether there is still a space for religious experience in posthumanist reflection, and if so, how this space can be configured, the contribution first examines nerve nodes/junctions, such as body/nudity, bonds/intersections, Biogea/Sciences of Life and Earth, in which the thought of Michel Serres, at the same time, is intertwined, so to speak, with the posthumanist one, and develops its Franciscanism. Through this analysis, the contribution opens itself the possibility of identifying/proposing, in an idea of religion (*religio*) as etymologically understood by Serres in the sense of bond/relationship/universal binder of livings (*religare*), humans and things, the space/justification of religious experience in and for the posthumanism. Mysticism of immanence within the Posthumanism? Maybe... But even further: the way is in fact that of bonding, inclusion, synthesis.

Keywords: Michel Serres, posthumanism, body, intersections, Biogea, Franciscanism, religion

Still Talking About Religion Even in Posthumanism?

If the significant increase in studies and contributions in the last two decades has favored the identification of the general coordinates of the still fluid and becoming posthumanist constellation (I am referring here to posthumanism, since transhumanism is a whole other story!) in the overcoming of humanism (characterized by the idea of centrality of the male, white, Western, cultured man), in anthropocentrism, and in the overcoming of dualisms¹, the religious/religion, in the process of outlining/thinking this new human condition, has probably so far not raised much of a problem, or has not done enough of it..., perhaps out of repression, perhaps out of prejudices, simplism, presumption of obviousness (incompatibility, radical divergence, etc.) ... However, as the posthumanist archipelago becomes precisely more and more “philosophically credible”, detailed, and articulated, the discountedness and omissions become more and more peregrine; and dealing with “something” (i.e., religious experience) that, like it or not, has not yet disappeared, seems increasingly essential.

In this regard, it must be premised that any encounter/comparison, as we well know from posthumanism itself, is a source of novelty, and that the *third*, as Michel Serres says, is beyond one and the other (Serres, 1991), so that we should get used to a sort of elasticization of the idea of *proprium* of religion: talking about a posthumanist religion/religious experience is in any case talking about something new.

Orsola Rignani, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, University of Florence, Florence, Italy. Research fields: (history of) philosophical anthropology, philosophy of the posthuman, philosophy of the body.

¹ For an overview of the various orientations within the posthumanism, I refer to some recent manual and glossary contributions as well as to the bibliographic references contained therein: Braidotti & Hlavajova, 2018; Rosendahl Thomsen & Wamberg, 2020; Baioni, Cuadrado Pareyas, Macelloni, 2021; in addition, a synthesis of all these topics is provided by Ferrando, 2019.

A mysticism of bonds? A kind of religion from *religio/religare*, a religion having to do with bond, relationship, synthesis, inclusion...?

The fact is that we need to (re)talk about religion within posthumanism and that Serres seems a particularly suitable interlocutor. Before proceeding, however, it is inevitable questioning on the links between Serres himself and posthumanism, or rather on the assessment of Serres's posthumanism or not; and one cannot help but observe that this same assessment is probably not very fruitful from the heuristic point of view, especially considered the fluidity of posthumanism and Serres's intellectual independence, which, in any case, does not prevent us from identifying isomorphisms in them: their conceptions of the human, of the world, and human-world interface². With these premises, trying to see what the space of religion in Serres is, could be precisely a way of sketching a possible face of religion in posthumanism.

If the direction is this, it may be useful, at this point, to take as focus of the investigation the same isomorphisms, which, if we turn our attention to Serres, are characterized/specified as body/nudity, bonds/intersection, Biogea/Life and Earth Sciences. These, in fact, are the topics (inter-implicated) in which the Serresian reflection is "intertwined" with the posthumanist one, and at the same time expresses and develops its Franciscanism, i.e., its adhesion to Francesco d'Assisi.

From Michel Serres to Posthumanism via Francesco d'Assisi: Tests of Religious Experience

We come therefore to the first of these junctions, the body/nudity, which, although it is one of the red threads of Serresian thought, stands out in a particularly icastic way in a passage from *Le Gaucher boiteux* (Serres, 2015, p. 33), in which Serres expresses his anthropodecentric vision of the human considering it in temporal continuity with evolution and topological with the universe: thanks, and through the body.

By means of an approach of opposition by generalization whereby specific themes and ideas are considered particular cases of a broader context which does not deny but encompasses them by completing (Watkin, 2020), Serres therefore intends history, namely the one that begins with the invention of writing and is centered on rivalries, wars, political enterprises, a series of forgetfulness (of cultures enable to write, of the environment, of evolution), inter-implicated with Eurocentrism, speciesism, anthropocentric visions proper to the old narcissistic and acosmist humanism. A history that, precisely by means of the opposition by generalization, reveals itself only a moment of a much longer temporality dating back to the Big Bang and called by Serres the Great Story, namely, the story of a chronopedia written in the language of all sciences (human and exact) and involving animate and inanimate beings, the world, things and living beings. The Great Story therefore expresses a new humanism, still under construction, according to which the human, its practices, its collectivities, and thought are immersed in the living and things. Within a relationship of co-belonging whereby the sciences finally rediscover the world, the things, and the living, from which the men who make the same sciences proceed; in a way in which the sciences become finally truly human, and, humbler, men become human again (Serres, 2016).

Otherwise said, if men discovered and/or invented the sciences of the universe, of the earth and of life, such disciplines, in exchange, taught them, in and through the Great Story, that the universe, the world and life invented them: men produced a knowledge whose objects produced them.

² I have developed these positions specifically in Rignani, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022. As regards the themes of this contribution, I also recommend on Serres Moser, 2016; Dolphijn (Ed.), 2019; Watkin, 2020; Aa, V. V., 2020.

This is the way in which Serres expresses his idea of a universal, vital, primordial, connected (*reli é*) process, i.e., literally *religious*, of metamorphosis, according to which thinking does not concern only the neurons of the brain nor only the human endowed with language, and concepts go back, ultimately, to the impulses of the Great cosmic Story (Serres, 2019). And, moreover, he expresses the cogency to “remember” the universe, life, the body, the need to get rid of the idea that we are alone in the world and extraneous to the cycles of constellations, seasons, and species, as well as the need to abandon the idea of eliminating all other existence that is not ours, of living only in cities and of limiting ourselves to political and social sciences having to do only with the human (Serres, 2015).

In short, between the human, the universe, and the evolution he grasps and highlights the aforementioned topological and temporal continuity, whose nerve joint is precisely the body: a sort of sum of the cosmic genesis, a cosmogonic flow bearing in itself the universal time, composed of atoms analogous to those of stones, seas, and rivers, in correspondence with all things and beings of the world, moved by the universe and like it inventive (*ivi*).

It should be emphasized here that the body is one of the *foci* around which Serres, in assonance with posthumanism, conducts his rethinking of the human and of anthropocentric humanism. In fact, distancing himself from the humanistic tradition which tended to consider it an instrument or even an impediment, he, like posthumanism, conceives the body as a psycho-physical space of hybridization and exchange, and thus as a relational-anthropo-poietic dimension. The idea is in fact that of a body psycho-physical, sensitive, metamorphic, toti-potential, white with possibilities (white is the origin and condition of all colors), i.e., of a body that, in *sensibly* (*thanks to and through the senses*) interrelating with the world, deforms/transforms, following world’s metamorphosis of forms and picking up its inventive gesture, to finally invent itself (Serres, 1985, 1999, 2003, 2015).

All this, according to a metamorphism and a flexibility that is capacity to do, to be, and to become, totipotence, incandescence (as an *inchoatio*, beginning as well as nonbelonging, marking the readiness for transformation), limit possibility, condition, opposite extreme, resolution of every differentiation and specialization. In other words, the body, according to Serres, has the possibility and the freedom to assume any shape without fixing itself in any, it is reversibly metamorphic, returning toti-potent, amorphous, undifferentiated, de-specialized, potential towards any shape, differentiation, and specialization; it is space of sym-poietic, metamorphic, and generative interrelation with reality, and of experience, invention, knowledge, and culture (Serres, 2003).

Within the interrelation processes, in fact, the body so to speak *makes body and makes the world*: on the one hand, through nourishment, imitation, learning etc., it subjectivizes things and movements, and, on the other, it objectivizes, inventively produces, empties its organs of their forms and functions pouring them out into objects and tools, thus producing culture, and returning toti-potential. It is thus that in being crossed by things and in exchange with them, body, possible in the possibility, builds itself and so doing it builds the human (*ivi*).

So here we are with the body/nudity and the Franciscan reference, which in the aforementioned Serresian passage of *Le Gaucher boiteux* sounds more or less like this: naked in the public square, to the scandal of his merchant father, Francesco leaves the city, leaves trade and politics aside, frequents wild places, wanders the streets and, on this side of history, speaks to the birds, sings the praise of flowers, converses peacefully with his

wolf brother (Serres, 2015, p. 33). The elements that recur here and are made to react to each other are all crucial; in addition, of course, to nudity, such elements are the city, politics/commerce, rural places, wandering, history and placing oneself on this side of it, talking to birds, praise of nature, brotherhood with ferocious animals. And, in a game of correspondences, nudity so to speak matches the countryside/uncultivated places, birds, wolf, flowers, and placing oneself on this side of history, while city so to speak matches politics/commerce and history.

It should be noted here that all this is not intended by Serres in the sense of a dialectical opposition, but precisely according to the figure of opposition by generalization, for which city, politics/commerce, and history are only a particular aspect of the general context represented by nudity, things, and livings. City, politics/commerce, and history are in fact human, and as such, they are only a part of a composite reality made up of human and other-than-human, that is, the Biogea, the universal union of the earth and the living (Serres, 2010): beyond the limited space of the city there is the rural space, beyond the exclusively human relationships on which politics and commerce are built and focused there are relationships between living beings, things, and the world, which are represented and theorized by the Life and Earth Sciences, beyond the story that begins with writing there is the Great Story of the universe.

In the Serresian perspective, therefore, Francesco d'Assisi is one who, with an ancestral gesture, immerses his naked body among things, plants, and animals and in doing so anticipates and announces contemporary thought, that is the new federative humanism, of which Serres feels so to speak the midwife. At this point we can grasp that Franciscanism for Serres, who claims to have never ceased to feel Franciscan (Serres, 2015), is primarily a process of rediscovery/restoration of an already-always-been relational human condition, substantiated by a relational ontology: the immersion of the naked body among things, plants, and animals is the rediscovery/restoration of a literally humble (in an etymological game between *humus*, *homo*, and *humilis*) continuity (Serres, 2011a), and of a hybridizing and generative relationality within which the encounter, the alterity, and the exchange are added values and sources of novelty, borders and barriers become thresholds of permeability, fixity gives way to possibility, so that we are all in this together but we are not one and the same (Braidotti, 2019).

All this precisely takes place a psycho-physical body, terrain, in transformation, of exchange, transformation, hybridization, and as such dimension of the human. The naked body is therefore the body that passes through and is crossed by things, that is transformed into the other-with-itself, that porously mixes, remains open in the possibility, adheres plastically and unconditionally to the world and its bifurcations, and receives and gathers world's push, impetus, resources, teaching, to finally discover and elevate itself in turn (Serres, 2015).

Francesco d'Assisi, therefore, as I think, marks overall, for Serres, the rediscovery of relationships/ties (with the body, with plants, animals, things) as well as of the inescapable singularities which by relationships themselves are substantiated and in them are co-belonging. But ultimately what Francesco marks is none other than the so called "already-always-been" that anthropocentric and dualist humanism has removed, forgotten, or denied.

Naked Francesco, who, abandoning the city and its too human interests, wanders in uncultivated places, speaks to the birds, sings the praise of flowers, converses with the wolf, expresses, as I think, what Serres considers the authentic humanism. That is the federative humanism (Serres, 2001) based literally on the *foedus*,

on the pact, on the *contrat* from the Latin *contractus*, that Serres articulates in *con-tractus*, with the meaning of the stretch that pulls and binds; the humanism truly such, insofar as, unlike what is claimed to be such but in reality makes the human collapse on man, considers the human a hybrid fruit constituting itself within and through the relationality with the alterities (Serres, 1990).

In other words, Francesco d'Assisi represents for Serres the humanism of Biogea and of the Life and Earth Sciences, the humanism according to which human is not such without hybrid relations with the other-from-itself (which is precisely other-with-itself) within the Biogea, and the truly human sciences are the Sciences of Life and Earth, expressions of Biogea itself (Serres, 2009).

At this point one could go so far to say that what Francesco represents for Serres is a *religious humanism*, that is, “etymologically”, a humanism of ties, of those bonds that re-emerge thanks to the process of liberation and redemption of things and living beings that Francesco himself put in place (Serres, 2011b).

To free and to tie (i.e., to make the bonds re-emerge), in this perspective, reveal an equivalence; and in this process/effort Serres feels in continuity with Francesco: just as Francesco tried to emancipate things and living beings from the subordination in which his religious tradition had kept them, so does Serres from the humanistic dualistic acosmist philosophical and scientific tradition.

The body with its psycho-physical flexibility, plants, animals, and the world finally, thanks to Francesco and Serres, manage to get rid of the blanket of oblivion and mortification that a religious tradition privileging the man-image of God and an anthropo-logo-centric, exclusivist philosophy had spread over them, and re-emerge in their irreducible singularity, as well as in their inter-implication and agency.

After All, Even in Posthumanism It Is Difficult Not to Talk About Religion

So, what about a “supplement of religious”, a project of integration, a work on interactions/bonds/relationships between human and the world, the parts and the whole?

If to cut is ultimately to destroy, if anthropocentric/phallogocentric, dualist, exclusivist humanism has had its time—and pandemics, wars, mass extinctions, climatic catastrophes are proof of it—why not collect the Serresian suggestion of a religious taken in the “radical/literal” meaning of bond, for (try/keep on) talking about religion in posthumanism for its part already so engaged on the front of ties? As said, therefore, for Serres the religious designates the relationship as such, it is the universal binder, it has a matrix and synthesis function, it connects/rebinds, builds, and precisely in a federative perspective protects the world. Religion binds the human to the Great Story, matches universal and singular, binds to the world and to others (Serres, 1987), so that the world is in me, and I am the world (Serres, 2019).

Regardless of the fact that Serres considers Christianity to be the religion that most closely fits his idea of religious, that he reads the Incarnation as a spring from the earth, i.e., from the *humus* that is a pendant with *humility*, and that somewhere he winks at the Spinozian *Deus sive natura* making it a *natura sive Deus*, the general message that passes in any case is that talking about religion is primarily talking about bonds (Serres, 2019).

In conclusion, if both Serres and posthumanism have made the obsolescence of dualisms and their era evident, if both have pointed to the beginning of an age of synthesis and networks as well as to a future of ties, if both have shown the transversality of contemporary problems, and if ultimately, obviously *mutatis mutandis*, of the religious it is difficult to avoid speaking, Serres's Franciscanism and “mysticism of the bonds” could be a way or at least a challenge to approach the religious question within posthumanism.

References

- Aa, V. V. (2020). *Michel Serres. Hommage à 50 voix*. Paris: Le Pommier.
- Baioni, E., Cuadrado Pereyas, L. M., & Macelloni, M. (Eds.). (2021). *Abbecedario del Postumanismo*. Milan: Mimesis.
- Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman knowledge*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R., & Hlavajova, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Posthuman glossary*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Dolphijn, R. (Ed.). (2019). *Michel Serres and the crises of the contemporary*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ferrando, F. (2019). *Philosophical posthumanism*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Moser, K. (2016). *The encyclopedic philosophy of Michel Serres. Writing the modern world and anticipating the future*. Augusta, GE: Anaphora Literary Press.
- Rignani, O. (2012). *Umano? Una domanda per Italo Calvino e Michel Serres*. Fidenza (Pr): Mattioli 1885.
- Rignani, O. (2014). *Emergenze "post-umaniste" dell'umano. Prove di analisi storico-comparativa dal presente al passato e ritorno*. Milan: Mimesis.
- Rignani, O. (2016). *Emergenze "post-umaniste" del corpo. Una prova di analisi "orizzontale" via Michel Serres*. Milan: Mimesis.
- Rignani, O. (2018). *Metafore del corpo post-umanista: Michel Serres*. Milan: Mimesis.
- Rignani, O. (2019). Toward a posthuman humanism: Serresian federative humanism between natural contract and political ecology. *Philosophy International Journal*, 2, 1-6.
- Rignani, O. (2020). The relevance of Michel Serres's idea of bodily hominescence for a convergence of posthumanism and transhumanism: A trans/posthuman body. *Philosophy Study*, 10(2), 119-126.
- Rignani, O. (2021). The virus in serresian-posthumanist sauce: A hopeful monster parasite. *Philosophy Study*, 11(11), 820-825.
- Rignani, O. (2022). *Umani di nuovo. Con il postumano e Michel Serres*. Milan: Mimesis.
- Rödel, P. (2016). *Michel Serres, la sage-femme du monde*. Paris: Le Pommier.
- Rosendahl, T. M., & Wamberg, J. (Eds.). (2020). *The Bloomsbury handbook of posthumanism*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Serres, M. (1985). *Les Cinq Sens. Philosophie des corps mêlés-1 (The five senses. A philosophy of mingled bodies (I))*. (M. Sankey & P. Cowley, Trans.). London, New York: Continuum.
- Serres, M. (1987). *Statues. Le second livre de fondations (Statues: The second book of foundations)*. (R. Burks, Trans.). London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Serres, M. (1990). *Le Contrat naturel (The natural contract)*. (E. Macarthur & W. Paulson, Trans.). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Serres, M. (1991). *Le tiers-instruit*. Paris: François Bourin.
- Serres, M. (1999). *Variations sur le corps (Variations on the body)*. (R. Burks, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.
- Serres, M. (2001). *Hominescence (Hominescence)*. (R. Burks, Trans.). London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Serres, M. (2003). *L'Incandescent (The incandescent)*. (R. Burks, Trans.). London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Serres, M. (2009). *Temps des crises (Times of crisis. What the financial crisis revealed and how to reinvent our lives and future)*. (A.-M. Feenberg-Dibon, Trans.). London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Serres, M. (2010). *Biogé (Biogea)*. (R. Burks, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: Univocal.
- Serres, M. (2011a). *Habiter*. Paris: Le Pommier.
- Serres, M. (2011b). *Musique*. Paris: Le Pommier.
- Serres, M. (2015). *Le Gaucher boiteux. Puissance de la pensée*. Paris: Le Pommier.
- Serres, M. (2016). *Darwin, Bonaparte et le samaritain. Une philosophie de l'histoire*. Paris: Le Pommier.
- Serres, M. (2019). *Relire le relié (Religion. Rereading what is bound together)*. (M. Debevoise, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Watkin, C. (2020). *Michel Serres. Figures of thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.