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Occupying the Ontological Penumbra: Towards a Postsecular and Theologically Minded Anthropology

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Abstract: In the wake of the postsecular turn, we propose to reappraise both the religious as studied in anthropology and how anthropologists who have religious or spiritual interests can contribute to an emerging postsecular anthropology. Such an anthropology recognizes the failure of secularization theory to dissolve the dichotomy between the religious and the secular. We propose that as anthropologists we consciously occupy the ontological penumbra, an ambiguous and plural space in which we engage with various counterparts, both human and nonhuman. This means that we have to be open to the real possibility of the existence of gods, spirits, and other nonhuman entities. These should not only be treated as subjects of study, but also recognized as valid counterparts with whom we can engage in the ethnographic encounter. While this necessitates relinquishing the former privileged position of secular and Western epistemology, it opens up the discipline to a potentially unprecedented ethnographic productivity that is epistemologically and ontologically innovative. Without neglecting its secular heritage, such a theologically minded postsecular anthropology places anthropology in a better position to explore what it is to be human, especially in terms of understanding religious and spiritual experiences.

Keywords: secularism; religion; postsecularism; anthropology; theology; ontology; method

1. Introduction

As secularly trained professional anthropologists working for an international faith-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), we often find ourselves caught between the proverbial rock of religious theology and the hard place of secular anthropology. Together with other anthropologists who have spiritual interests, we sometimes face skepticism and animosity from various colleagues of both secular and religious perspectives and disciplines, including anthropology and theology.

Some anthropologists have questioned our suitability and ability to engage in anthropology. Coming from British Baptist and Swiss Reformed backgrounds, our “Christian” bias is sometimes seen by default as imposing, prescriptive, and intolerant, especially due to its perceived genealogical links with the modern project of Western Christendom and its colonial past. Several of our colleagues who are anthropologists with religious or spiritual interests, most notably American Christians, have either had to keep quiet about their religious life, certainly in writing, or face opposition to the extent that some feel part of “a persecuted minority within the discipline” ([1], p. 268; see also [2], pp. 12–13; [3], p. 262). We have been involved in debates where some colleagues have argued that it is not possible to be a Christian and an anthropologist. Such a position inevitably leads to secular anthropologists doubting our ability to conduct research, engage in appropriate analysis, and come to valid conclusions.

On the other hand, anthropologists with spiritual interests have also been accused from within the religious camp as being either heretics or having succumbed to secularism ([4], pp. 37–38). Christian friends, including theologians and missionaries, sometimes struggle with our findings and writings as being too secular and critical to the extent that we feel they question our spiritual identity and sincerity. On one occasion, a missionary friend shared his concern with us that we had been seen by other Christians attending sacrifices. He was worried about our exposure to demonic activities and our personal integrity as Christians, how our actions would appear to the Christian community in general, and how this would reflect on the NGO we work with.

Such confrontations may not always be pleasant, but they have pushed us to reflect on our backgrounds and secular and religious identities as we attempt to explain and justify our perspective to both camps. Consequently, we have gained first-hand experience of the inherently problematic nature of anthropology—and of theology to a lesser degree—as academic disciplines and of their practitioners’ different perspectives in terms of both the secular and the religious. While we find ourselves in a challenging and sometimes uncomfortable position, it is also exciting and enriching. Drawing on this experience and various aspects of current anthropology, we seek to overcome the religious/secular dichotomy that has plagued anthropology as a discipline and has significantly contributed towards its “awkward relationship” [5] with theology. In order to achieve this, we propose that as anthropologists we consciously occupy what we call the ontological penumbra where we engage with various counterparts, both human and nonhuman, as part of the ethnographic encounter.

The ontological penumbra is a space where the self and the other, ignorance and certainty, as well as the secular and the religious, meet, overlap, and intertwine. It is a reflexive space of dialogue, encounter and engagement, which is also marked by ambiguity and plurality, as well as creativity and productivity where “the other” includes both human and nonhuman entities who, in turn, need to be recognized as our counterparts. We suggest that by occupying the ontological penumbra with our whole being, we are well positioned to contribute towards the formation of a postsecular anthropology. Such an anthropology overcomes the secular/religious dichotomy by allowing the religious to join the secular as part of an interdependent dynamic. In doing so, we propose that the religious needs to be addressed and taken seriously in its own right, rather than reducing it to a secular function. This means that postsecular anthropology has to be open to the real possibility of the existence of gods, spirits, and other nonhuman entities. These should not only be treated as subjects of study and research, but also accepted as valid counterparts with whom we can engage in the ethnographic encounter of the ontological penumbra.

Returning the religious to anthropology puts the discipline into an uncomfortable position that it has never had to face in this way before. We suggest that theology in its various orientations could assist anthropologists to fill their discipline’s religious gaps as they reflect on their secular and religious identities, as well as those of their counterparts. Thus, the religious—as reflected on theologically and engaged with in the ethnographic encounter—becomes more accessible, meaningful, and above all, theoretically relevant for anthropology.

Our goal is not to propose a religious anthropology as opposed to a secular one, but an inclusive postsecular anthropology that brings the religious back into its midst by joining the secular. Maybe most importantly, we argue that such a postsecular perspective places anthropology in a better position to explore what it is to be human without leaving the religious and spiritual interests of anthropologists and their various counterparts out of the equation. We thus accept both the secular and the religious as part of human experience and expression.

Before we discuss the central argument of this essay, however, we first present the position of religion and secularism in anthropology’s history and how anthropologists with religious commitments have so far addressed and reacted to anthropology’s explicit secular stance.

2. Religion and Secularism in Anthropology

Religion, especially from a Judeo-Christian perspective, has been an integral part of anthropology since its academic beginning. It has been instrumental in shaping the discipline, first with theology providing a basis from which anthropology could flourish and break away, then by contributing to the formation of secularism, which anthropology embraced. Furthermore, many early anthropologists came either from Jewish or Christian backgrounds, which they often left behind—or tried to—in favor of secular anthropology [6]. Their critical stance towards religion did not hinder them from retaining it as a fascinating topic of research, and anthropologists have continued to study it ever since.

Although secularization theory proposed that religion—and by extension magic—would eventually become a redundant part of humanity's past, it remained an observable phenomenon that was interesting and serious enough to study. Maybe more importantly, looking at religion as a human phenomenon largely called for a secular explanation. With its roots in secular science, anthropology restricted religion to a religious other, which then allowed it to be studied as part of the discipline. This is why it became more or less a requirement for anthropologists who wanted to study religion to subscribe to a strictly secular approach. Following the French tradition of Durkheim, religion had a social relevance and function, while the British intellectualist tradition following Tylor saw it more as an illusion: "Religion is superstition to be explained by anthropologists, not something an anthropologist, or indeed any rational person, could himself believe in" ([4], p. 36). Both traditions led to a reductionist approach that could not take religion and related phenomena at face value, but consistently explained it as standing for something else.

A fairly recent and often critiqued example of such reductionism comes from the study of African witchcraft, a notion that has proved notoriously difficult to explain in anthropology and theology. While Evans-Pritchard [7] masterfully rationalized witchcraft from a secular perspective, he denied its existence in line with the British intellectualist tradition [8]. More recently, building on functionalist approaches, the Comaroffs [9] and their followers analyzed witchcraft as standing for an argument about modernity, reducing the witch largely to a metaphorical icon of local-global interactions and processes. Such conclusions make the religious conform and subject to secular analysis. For example, they deny the religious aspect of witchcraft, which is also rooted in people's experience of everyday life, and the possibility that it can exist in its own right ([10], p. 114; [11], pp. 22–25).

Secularism has been so strong in anthropology that at times those within the discipline exhibit manifestly anti-religious traits and have largely distanced themselves from other disciplines that deal more explicitly with the religious ([1], p. 267; [2,4,12,13]). When faced with anthropologists who admit to religious interests, some secular anthropologists have expressed their contempt and have frowned upon their colleagues' religious orientations or conversion, as Larsen ([14], see also [15]) has documented for E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor and Edith Turner, who were all established anthropologists when they converted to Catholicism.

Sometimes even the mere possibility of religious conversion can put anthropologists on guard. Harding ([16], p. 58; see also [17], p. 4), for example, recounts how her colleagues expressed their apprehension of her possible conversion when she announced that she wanted to research those she calls American Protestant fundamentalists. Christianity—and religion in a wider sense—thus becomes a "problem of the repugnant cultural other" [18], something that has to be feared and kept at bay, since it has the potential, and even threatens, to infiltrate and corrupt the secular self. At the same time, however, religion still merits and necessitates scholarly attention, at least if it is duly approached and problematized, and especially by othering it in spite of its sociocultural proximity [16].

Such a methodological and theoretical separation of religion from secularism to the extent of their incommensurability [12,19] provided the paradigm that allowed anthropologists to embrace an exclusively secular perspective—dare we say with religious devotion?—in order to engage in the discipline. By dichotomizing religion as an external phenomenon and secularism as an internal approach, anthropology could define and patrol its boundaries in order to legitimate itself as a valid discipline. Anthropology could thus claim the secular ethnographic description and analysis of

fieldwork data as its core activity and distinctive feature, while excluding and discrediting the more religious and experiential works as unscientific.

Secularism became so deeply enshrined in anthropology that Lambek thinks that “the relationship between religion and secularism is intrinsic to the discipline, [and] that religion/secularism stands, like nature/culture in Lévi-Strauss’s model of myth, as the irresolvable opposition around which anthropological thought builds itself” [12]. Lambek’s statement is in line with Asad’s discussion of the secular, which “works through a series of particular oppositions” ([20], p. 25). This structuralist relic of embracing the secular at the expense of the religious seems so deeply rooted in anthropology that, despite the efforts of numerous anthropologists, its subliminal ubiquity continues to manifest itself. One consequence is that all things religious continue to be antagonized and marginalized by others within the discipline.

Secularism has been so strong in anthropology that it was of little help that some of the more prominent anthropologists, such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Mary Douglas, or Victor and Edith Turner are known to be religious practitioners and publicly professed Catholics [14,15]. Consequently, their need to maneuver between the fronts of secularism and religion is evident in their writings. Evans-Pritchard [4] in his 1959 Aquinas Lecture, for example, historically analyzed the anti-religious roots of anthropology by presenting it as an apologetic of his own faith. Similarly, Douglas tried to counter the dichotomization of secularism and religion by claiming that “we moderns have it as an article of faith that somewhere there are, or could be, adequate scientific explanations for anything that puzzles us. This trust in science is held to be antithetical to religious faith” ([21], p. 468). She concludes that “[t]he argument that modern science is incompatible with religion is a nineteenth-century relic that depends on religion being set up as an alternative authority to science” ([21], p. 469).

More generally, these anthropologists were conscious of their religious backgrounds and the influence this had on their professional work. They tried to exploit and instrumentalize their religious identity in order to address the tensions created by anthropology’s internal secular approach that externalizes the religious. For Engelke, it is clear that: “Religious conviction became a tool in their anthropological projects, a way of bridging the distance between themselves and ‘the other’” ([15], p. 8; see also [22]).

Similarly, but at a different level, Turner [23], presented a provocative plea in favor of recognizing the existence of spirits, taking a more phenomenological and autobiographical approach that had entered anthropology in the form of ethnographic novels. This kind of experiential ethnography was a clear precursor to reflexivity in anthropology and could shed some light on how the religious manifested itself in fieldwork. Various accounts, mainly by secular anthropologists, discuss how religious phenomena encountered in field situations also infiltrated the secular self, especially by describing their direct experiences of the religious [24–28].

Due to the secular approach of much of anthropology, such arguments and accounts of taking the religious more seriously in various ways, but especially methodologically and theoretically, largely fell on deaf ears. Often, they were either simply ignored or tolerated as a minor and marginal occurrence at the fringes of anthropology. At times, however, such approaches were actively discredited as a breach of the secular and scientific approach, which did not qualify as a proper work of anthropology, thereby threatening such anthropologists’ credibility, as Wiegele [28] recently testified.

3. Standpoints and Reflexivity

Anthropology had become a fairly secure and unified discipline until the postmodern crisis of representation in the 1980s. The typical anthropologist was a secular white heterosexual male whose standpoint was largely accepted as normative. Consequently, secular anthropologists did not need to articulate, elaborate, and justify their specific positions and backgrounds, since they were largely given. Evans-Pritchard’s secular approach to witchcraft, for example, in spite of his religious leanings, was endorsed by his peers unquestionably, especially when he stated that witchcraft “is imaginary and a man cannot possibly be a witch” ([7], p. 119).

Through the influence of literary criticism and the slow diversification of anthropologists' ethnic, sexual, religious, and other backgrounds, reflexivity became an increasingly important topic in the discipline, especially during the 1990s. Anthropologists now needed to be self-reflexive as well as studying the other. Clearly identifiable minorities of anthropologists became more vocal and claimed specific subject positions or standpoints that they recognized as influencing their research and writings and that helped them to articulate better their perspectives within the discipline of anthropology. This included Christian anthropologists, who started to justify and defend their own position by elaborating their own standpoint [13,22,29]. In view of the bewildering varieties of Christianity [17,30], however, a Christian standpoint needed to be broad enough to be sufficiently inclusive. Consequently, the resulting standpoint is rather vague, recognizing that human beings have a spiritual dimension ([31], p. 5) and affirming that there is "an agency of divinity" ([22], p. 384; see also [32]). A general Christian standpoint, then, cannot realistically go much beyond claiming an essentially religious position, unless such a standpoint is pluralized along the various genealogical lines of Christianity itself, thereby defying the benefits of standpoints.

Experimenting in specifically religious standpoints has certainly helped Christian anthropologists to become more reflexive and to problematize the religious within the boundaries of a secular discipline. It has also participated in the general trend of diversifying anthropology by contributing towards the plurality of potential perspectives on which anthropologists can draw, and to soften the strict boundaries between the religious as an external phenomenon and the secular as an internal approach by raising the question of the religious identity of anthropologists.

Where we find standpoint theory wanting, especially in its Christian application, is its inability to move beyond instrumentalizing the religious in a way similar to that of earlier Christian anthropologists. The problem with standpoints more generally is that while they seek to foster understanding across positional limits, they also reinforce existing boundaries, which allows for an essentialization of specific standpoints. This, in turn, is particularly accentuated for explicitly Christian and other religious standpoints that have often been elaborated with defensive undertones and defy at least parts of secular anthropology. Rather than contributing to constructive dialogue, such standpoints can be perceived as attempts of the religious other to infiltrate and corrupt the secular discipline. If anything, this heightens the danger that religious standpoints are pushed aside and neglected. This hampers a constructive reflexive engagement and merely reinforces what Larsen has called "the warfare model of the relationship between religion and science" ([14], p. 25; see also [3]).

A standpoint approach, then, is inadequate for dealing with the religious in anthropology more generally, and an anthropologist's religious identity more specifically, as questions about the religious are also rooted in what makes anthropology a legitimate academic discipline. Consequently, in order to uphold their respective standpoints, both religious and secular anthropologists sometimes behave like two dogs snarling at each other as they fight over the same bone, in the hope of being heard and taken seriously. We admit that we have been guilty, together with other Christian anthropologists, of accusing our secular counterparts of being elitist and prescriptive, and of occupying "the moral high ground" ([13], p. 89), while from a secular perspective we and other Christian anthropologists have been discredited and held responsible for the deficiencies and faults of Western Christendom's excesses merely on the basis of calling ourselves "Christian." Although there are usually kernels of truth in such broad accusations, it seems ironic that anthropologists are less ready to be anthropologically minded towards others within the discipline with whom they have a bone to pick. After all, anthropology has developed tools, methods, and approaches that allow us to observe, listen to, and analyze counterparts on their own terms, and most contemporary anthropologists, regardless of their secular or religious identity, are ready to accept the diversity and plurality of human experience and expression (at least to some degree) of those we study.

Some anthropologists do recognize a plurality of anthropological perspectives, in various secular and religious manifestations, while acknowledging that these perspectives are deficient and thus problematic, but have nonetheless the potential to contribute valid insights, both descriptively and

theoretically. Reflexivity remains key for anthropologists at large, both for those who claim a religious standpoint and those conducting research with others who have religious convictions. It is becoming increasingly acceptable for anthropologists to write about their secular and religious identities and to position themselves reflexively with regard to the secular and the religious, as well as belief and unbelief. Accordingly, it is no longer uncommon that anthropologists express their acceptance or rejection of the existence of various religious phenomena and manifestations, as well as their experiences that go beyond the empirical and scientifically provable. Kahn, for example, admits that he becomes “distinctly uncomfortable” ([33], p. 78) when faced with religious issues during fieldwork. He continues by acknowledging: “[I] squirm when I encounter those who profess religious faith” ([33], p. 78). Such recognitions and assertions help to diffuse the lingering religious/secular dichotomy and to contribute to the current shift in anthropology towards taking the religious more seriously and engaging with it more thoroughly, both as a topic of research and as part of the anthropological approach [19].

While such personal reflexivity is vital for the credibility of the discipline, we also need to take the discussion to a different level. Bielo recognizes that “[h]ow religious identity shapes fieldwork is one of the *most* valuable questions in the ethnography of religion. Period” ([34], p. 1, emphasis in original). If we accept this, then we need to extend reflexivity so that it is no longer a personal activity of the individual, but is applied to the discipline as a whole. By reflecting on the discipline’s secular and religious traits, we can begin to address the dichotomy between the religious and the secular more seriously and more systematically. One way to do this is for anthropologists to join the debate about the postsecular turn or postsecularism.

4. Towards a Reflexive Postsecularism

Recent works by sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists indicate that the secular and the religious may not be as separate as the Weberian notion of disenchantment and other unilineal theories of secularization have usually implied, and that secularization theory may never have been applicable to non-Western societies [3,35–38]. When it comes to Africa, for example, politics, which have been at the heart of the secularization debate in the West, “stubbornly resist the distinction between sacred and secular” ([11], p. 3). In the West, too, its validity has been debased, since it is now generally acknowledged that the religious is unlikely to disappear as predicted in secularization theory. On the contrary, we can observe a general and global resurgence of the religious or the spiritual. Spirituality has become established as an alternative to institutional forms of religion and has been recognized in the West as an acceptable way to express the religious ([3], p. 508; [38], pp. 36–38).

The prophetic failure of secularization theory has led theologians, sociologists, and philosophers to talk in terms of postsecularism or the postsecular turn [39–41] and to a general problematization of secularism, which Taylor [3] has most prominently addressed. The resulting distancing of scholars to the political doctrine of secularism has also facilitated anthropologists to take a closer look at secularism, especially from an Islamic and postcolonial perspective [20,35,38,42,43]. Asad has argued that the very notion of religion “as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent” ([44], p. 41) is not a universal phenomenon but rather a Western historical development with genealogical roots in Christianity. As a result, the analytical value of the notion of religion, too, is being increasingly investigated and questioned [45].

It is certainly no coincidence that both Asad [20,44] and Cannell [17,35] have taken an interest in the seemingly opposed notions of secularism and religion, mainly in the form of Christianity, given that these notions are part of Europe and America’s Judeo-Christian heritage ([3]; [46], p. 1063; [47]) and thus share the same genealogy and similar histories. In his cultural approach to secularism, Asad ([20], p. 21; see also [46]) makes the distinction between secularism as a political doctrine and the secular as an epistemology and an ontology. For Asad the secular conceptually precedes secularism and is a historically shifting notion that “brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life” ([20], p. 25; see also [35], p. 86). In its most basic sense a secular perspective values

rationality and critical thinking, and focuses on what is observable and empirically accessible in this world, thereby providing the basis for science, including anthropology. Complementarily, a religious perspective has come to stand for belief, imagination and a preference for the immaterial and transcendent, thereby having more affinity with experiential and relational parts of life.

The secular and the religious, however, should not be equated with secularism and religion, nor can they be seen as mutually exclusive categories. Van der Veer starts from “the theoretical premise that the secular and the religious are produced simultaneously” ([38], p. 151); they are both part of human experience and expression. For this reason, they directly depend on each other, with the secular being differentiated from the religious by degrees ([12,42]; [48], p. 238). For example, Gellner ([49], p. 338) rightly calls most contemporary European Christians “secular.” Although we readily identify with this characterization, other Christians may struggle with it. Similarly, for Stambach, contemporary conservative American missionaries in Kenya—epitomes of Western religious activism—“come across sounding like the ultimate secular modernists” ([50], p. 139). Mahmood [43] argues that such apparently contradicting statements are in fact possible, since secularism itself tries to reshape religion by secularizing it and by rendering it into abstracted beliefs and doctrines that do not contradict the secular. In the words of van der Veer: “Secularism *frames* religion” ([38], p. 144, emphasis in original).

While the very idea of religion was thus secularized and rationalized, but nonetheless kept apart from secularism, nonsecular aspects of religion were considered despicable and fading traits of the other that should be discarded ([38], pp. 115–19). Magic, for example, was split from religion as superstitious and irrational, or as false or failed science. Through such strategies, secularism became an ideology that has its own “teleology of religious decline and can function as a self-fulfilling prophecy” ([38], p. 144) that can even adopt a distinctly theological agenda. In the efforts to fight terrorism and fundamentalism, for instance, the United States tries to promote the secularization of Islamic societies through historicizing the Quran as part of a “moderate Islam.” Neither is secularism nonreligious since it has become prescriptive and even missionary in a sense, most notably by advocating and enforcing democracy and the universality of human rights in an attempt to redeem the world ([20], pp. 59–62, 127–48; [30], p. 196).

Even though the religious and the secular have been used to dichotomize religion and secularism, these examples demonstrate that they form a nonexclusive dynamic, or a symbiosis, which we propose to be a central trait of postsecularism. The postsecular turn, then, means that the religious is brought back to the secular not as a substitute, but as a necessary component. This provides both a basis and an explanation for the current trends in anthropology in which the religious has started to re-infiltrate the secular. Even though it is worthwhile to continue to differentiate between the secular and the religious, the two notions are also overlapping and interdependent.

The identity of both anthropologists and their counterparts, then, from a postsecular perspective, can neither be religious *nor* secular; it is always the product of the interplay between the secular *and* the religious, with both aspects present to varying degrees. Especially in anthropology, however, postsecularism has not yet received much attention, perhaps because questioning secularism as a crucial part of the discipline’s heritage also challenges its intellectual and epistemological foundation. Furthermore, since secularism is essentially a notion developed for, and applied to, Europe and to a lesser extent North America, it has not always been evident how it could also be relevant to other parts of the world.

Shifting the attention from the secularism/religion dichotomy to the dynamics of the religious and the secular, however, allows the two notions to be extended beyond the West, as Bangstad [42] and Casanova [36] advocate. More concretely, van der Veer [38] demonstrates for China and India [35], and Merz [37] for Benin, that studying secular and religious dynamics can be a fruitful endeavor beyond the West. Accordingly, the secular as relating to the religious can be employed for unraveling various processes of change in different parts of the world as the transnational flows and contra-flows of globalization affect most parts of today’s world. Secularization, then, when approached from a

postsecular perspective, cannot be viewed as a shift from the religious to the secular, but rather as an increasing differentiation between these two notions that can be lived out in the most varied ways in different places at different times ([3], p. 21).

Postsecularism, which takes the basic secularism/religion dichotomy to task, has thus the potential to motivate anthropologists regardless of their secular or religious perspective to be reflexive not only about their own position, but also about anthropology as a discipline. Fountain [2] proposes that engaging in and with theology could help anthropologists move towards a postsecular anthropology. This may not be as easy as it sounds, since anthropology's relationship with theology has, at best, been "awkward," with the result that theology's contributions to anthropology hardly goes beyond providing data [5]. Morton [48] argues that while anthropology rejected religiously inspired theology at an early stage as part of its dedication to secularism, it never actually managed to leave it behind. In spite of this, theology, even in its secular academic orientation, retained a religious and often Christian flavor and was thus largely ignored or frowned upon by secular anthropology. Since the postsecular turn brings the religious back to the secular, both Christian and secular anthropologists have become interested again in turning toward Christian theology, albeit with different objectives [2,5,13,48,51]. While in principle such a move may be valuable, we believe that it is important to engage with theology critically, since the discipline also shares the same Judeo-Christian heritage as anthropology, and thus has a distinctly Western and Christian intellectual and epistemological tradition. Van Binsbergen ([27], pp. 336–37), for example, lamented the almost total lack of African theology, especially in its non-Christian forms, a situation that does not seem to have changed considerably since he wrote. Even the recent postsecular orientation in theology as pioneered by Blond [39] retains a Christian and Western focus.

We suggest that pursuing the relationship between anthropology and theology at this point needs to be done with caution. Simply tagging theology as the religious counterpart back to secular anthropology neither leads to postsecular anthropology nor to postsecular theology, especially as both disciplines share the same genealogical roots. Rather, as Jenkins puts it, "new formations of thought are called for both in theology *and* in anthropology" ([51], p. 474, emphasis ours). For the relationship between anthropology and theology to flourish, the two disciplines need to dialogue more intentionally and in a reflexive manner. For example, anthropology's focus on humanity and its interest in studying what it is to be human in all its diversity could assure a better representation of both non-Western and non-Christian theologies.

Without forgetting theology, we return to our own discipline of anthropology and the need to intertwine the religious reflexively with the secular at various levels and in ways that would not have been possible before postsecularism. In order to do so, we need to think about epistemology and ontology by discussing how both the secular and the religious contribute towards the production of ethnographic data, knowledge and experience. We do so by opening up a space we call the penumbra, which, following Hicks [52], brings seemingly incommensurable dichotomies, such as spirit and matter, together in a locus characterized by its inherent ambiguity.

5. Epistemology and Ontology of the Penumbra

Anthropologists have recognized that the ambiguous space where they meet "the other," where ethnography happens, as a space of "being in between" ([34], p. 5), "the territory between cultures" ([24], p. 11) or, as Harding puts it more straightforwardly, the "space of ethnography" ([16], p. 58). Ewing, based on her fieldwork experience, characterizes it more pointedly as an "epistemological abyss" ([25], p. 571) and Hutchinson calls it a "cultural limbo" ([53], p. 45). While we agree that this space can be treacherous, unpredictable, and above all problematic, as especially Ewing or Hutchinson imply, we also experience it as fruitful and exciting. First and foremost, we affirm with all the above-named anthropologists that this is a dynamic space of inherent ambiguity and plurality. Drawing on Hicks [52], we propose to label this ambiguous space the penumbra, while extending it beyond a substance or domain. For us the penumbra is where ethnographic data is produced and

where some things blur and even vanish while others take shape or come into focus as we reflect on ourselves while engaging with different counterparts.

Anthropologists occupy the penumbra by the means of a common humanity in order to expose themselves both ethnographically and experientially to difference and change. The penumbra is first of all an area where the self and the other, belief and disbelief, ignorance and certainty, possibility and impossibility, as well as the secular and the religious, meet, overlap and intertwine, sometimes to the extent of conflation [33]. For example, during her research in Benin in 2010, Sharon found a small plastic bag that contained an assortment of condiments in the middle of our walled-in yard. Its presence there was truly puzzling. The bag was too heavy to have blown in and it did not belong to anyone who had visited us recently. Friends and neighbors were convinced that bush beings called *siyawesi* had left the bag there for Sharon. They explained that this was typical *siyawesi* behavior when they want to demonstrate that they like someone. Sharon had been conducting research into the *siyawesi* and their role in divination. Being confronted with different religious ideas, and alterity more broadly, had already taken Sharon into the penumbra. While her research allowed her to reach the point where she could accept the *siyawesi*'s reality for the people around her, she could neither deny nor accept their existence for herself.

A good year later, while deepening her research, a diviner in a different village mentioned that the *siyawesi* were interested in Sharon and offered to formalize her relationship with them. This made her feel increasingly implicated in her research, especially on a personal level, thus raising ontological questions. Here was an opportunity for her to encounter the *siyawesi*, but she balked at the idea. To be initiated as a diviner took her beyond what she was prepared to do, both as an anthropologist and as a Christian. How would it affect her life in various ways? How would she explain such a move to the Christian community, and how would she be perceived if successfully initiated? What if it failed? How could she justify the *siyawesi*'s existence for others if she did not encounter them for herself? The diviner is still keen to initiate her and there have been other events that affirm that the *siyawesi* continue to be interested in her. Although Sharon has not yet encountered them personally—and still does not feel ready to do so—her engagement in the penumbra means she no longer doubts their existence [54]. As part of occupying the penumbra, she had to learn to question her own spirituality, and her secular and religious identities in view of what she learned from our research counterparts.

Johannes has faced similar penumbral issues in his research on witchcraft. One question he faced was that many of his research counterparts understand Jesus as a “witch” and that Christians, too, can be “witches,” even through the Holy Spirit [55]. While at first sight this appeared to be theologically improbable, he came to terms with the situation both through his openness to difference and his willingness to question himself, thus consciously occupying the penumbra. The resulting analysis has proved controversial, especially among missionaries and some Christian students and scholars. While his analysis stresses the importance of the religious, some find it objectionable and even offensive, since it challenges their preconceived ideas that “witchcraft” is inherently and irrevocably evil. Occupying the penumbra beyond the ethnographic encounter allows Johannes to deal with and benefit from such challenges.

The notion of the penumbra thus helps us deal with various questions of difference, plurality, change, ambiguity, and doubt, as we engage with various seemingly contrary counterparts during research, subsequent analysis, and when we make our results and thoughts accessible to a wider public. As a space of encounter and dialogue, as well as reflexivity and creativity, the penumbra has a strong epistemological component, since it is where ethnographic knowledge takes shape as a basis for anthropology as an academic discipline. For Fountain, “critical reflection on the ways secularity shapes the production of knowledge within the discipline” ([2], p. 311) could constitute “[t]he starting point for a post-secular anthropology” ([2], p. 311). By extending this idea to an epistemological space of ethnography, the penumbra becomes the locus in which, and from which, we can reflect on the formation of a postsecular anthropology. While critical engagement with the secular is certainly essential, we also need to bring the religious into the equation. This then leads to reassessing the

discipline's epistemology in discussing how the dynamics of the religious and the secular contribute to the penumbra and shape the data that result from it.

Looking at questions of epistemology in current fieldwork through the underlying dynamics of the secular and the religious, we notice that current research paradigms already provide us with a solid epistemological basis for engaging in postsecular anthropology. For Banks, for example, "[s]ocial research is an engagement, not an exercise in data collection" ([56], p. 179). This clearly shifts the epistemological basis of social research from a purely secular and empirical activity to an experiential, relational and interpretive one in which reflexivity becomes vital. This is especially pertinent when the religious identity of either the researchers or their counterparts are part of fieldwork ([34], p. 462; [51]). Anthropology, then, becomes "a form of human relationship [. . .] a social art form" ([24], p. 12). The more researchers invest and engage in relationships during fieldwork, the better they gain access to data whose quality directly depends on the quality of their relationships that they explore and develop as part of the penumbra.

Building and maintaining relationships is a complex activity of balancing empathy and power play, give and take, and understanding and misunderstanding, and thus of constant and unpredictable negotiations that go well beyond the empiricism of early secular anthropology. As relationships are experiential and interpretive, they always draw on the religious as well. Relationships in all their ambiguities and plurality are an essential part of the penumbra and necessary for it to be productive.

This does not exclude a continued secular preoccupation with the veracity and accuracy of ethnographic data, especially in terms of a "phenomenological validity" ([57], p. 2). The secular, it needs to be remembered, has been part of anthropology's heritage and has been crucial in shaping the discipline from its beginning to the present postsecular turn. This is why we need to affirm, together with Gellner, that a "minimal secularism" ([49], p. 339) and critical skepticism continue to be required for an academic commitment to anthropology ([41], p. 4). On the other hand, ethnographic data is always problematic and ambiguous, since it also relies on various religious parameters. As far as possible, such data should be an expression of the relationships in which it has been produced and remain within its confines. Most notably these relationships are defined by the anthropologists' interactions with various counterparts, whether they provide primary or secondary data, arguments and analysis.

The epistemology of anthropology as an experiential, relational, and interpretive process of data production needs to be framed by reflexivity, a certain level of consensus of counterparts, and peer review as measures for assessing and ensuring its reliability and acceptability. Ethnographic data gained through fieldwork is thus simultaneously generated by and entangled in the relational, experiential, and reflexive activities of anthropologists vis-à-vis their counterparts as they engage in the religious and secular ambiguities and plurality of the penumbra.

As we have already indicated above, then, the penumbra is not merely an epistemological and intellectual space of ethnographic knowledge production in which we apply our own epistemology to try to understand "the other." Occupying the penumbra means that we need to engage with counterparts beyond epistemological questions by reaching into its ontological core. Such a move from the epistemological fringes of the penumbra into its ontological center suggests that we need to deal with our own epistemological preoccupations in a reflexive manner in order to let our ontological involvement of the ethnographic encounter guide and inform our analysis beyond a merely descriptive level, as proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology have advocated [58]. This being the case, we propose that we call this space the "ontological penumbra."

Scott recognizes that bringing the religious back to secular anthropology as an ontological manifestation—thereby "seek[ing] to obviate the religion-science dichotomy altogether" ([59], p. 860)—is a direct consequence of moving from epistemology towards ontology. Even before anthropologists started to shift their interest to ontology by building on Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism [60,61], there have been a few who advocated the study of the religious at face value based on the ontological terms of those they studied. Malinowski may have been the first to suggest this

idea ([62], p. 42), while others, such as Harner [63] and Turner [23] followed suit. Other anthropologists took a more autobiographical approach to address how they experienced the religious during their fieldwork and wrote ethnographic novels, as this subgenre of ethnography came to be known [24,26].

The recent anthropology of ontology picks up on these ideas and develops them by expressing a clear dissatisfaction with representational practices, which pose an epistemological obstacle to understanding others on their own ontological terms [58]. By “put[ing] epistemological questions to rest” ([61], p. 484), the ontological turn diverges from postsecularism by advocating radical alterity and favoring religious ontology at the expense of secular epistemology. The resulting incommensurable multiple ontologies increase the possibility of essentializing ontology at the cost of an epistemologically and methodologically shared commonality, which is needed for doing anthropology successfully. Vigh and Sausdal argue that this also leads to “discard[ing] the notion of shared humanity” ([64], p. 54) and puts the possibility and validity of an ethnographic encounter—and thus anthropology as a discipline—at stake: “How the proponents of the ontological turn are able to connect to incommensurable worlds, and translate them into understandable anthropological text, remains a mystery” ([64], p. 57).

In picking up ontological questions on an epistemological basis within postsecularism, the anthropology of ontology as “the investigation and theorization of diverse experiences and understandings of the nature of being itself” ([59], p. 859) can become part of the core of anthropology’s penumbra. It is here that our epistemological preoccupations are challenged by the recognition that we occupy the ontological penumbra not only intellectually, but as whole beings with our emotions, religious and secular identities, and not least our physical co-presence with our counterparts. The ethnographic encounter is thus moved to the ontological penumbra as a locus of the full engagement of the whole person. In this way we invariably are confirmed as our own instruments in the ethnographic encounter and its creative production ([65], p. 17), which, in turn, radiates to the epistemological fringes of the ontological penumbra by altering and affecting the way we engage in ethnography and anthropology.

6. Occupying the Ontological Penumbra of Postsecular Anthropology

The ontological penumbra is a challenging position to occupy since it is in constant flux and subject to plurality and ambiguity. It is also potentially productive, as it provides the opportunity to engage fully with our counterparts. In order to occupy the ontological penumbra, we reflexively need to put our views, backgrounds and whole beings into question, at least to the same extent as we question our counterparts. We may feel that we lose parts of ourselves as the ethnographic encounter affects and changes us, but we should equally deepen our ontological knowledge and expertise, which provides the basis for our anthropological productivity in return. This process of ontological engagement is riddled with mystery, uncertainty, skepticism, doubt, incredulity, contradiction, paradoxes, tension, and constant negotiation, occasionally presenting itself even as threatening, sometimes leading to acute anxiety. At the same time, the ontological penumbra is full of wonder, excitement, joy, hilarity, fulfillment, and revelation, as we experience and explore with our very being what it is to be human in its full diversity, experience and expression, not only epistemologically, but also ontologically and thus existentially. This is why anthropologists should claim the ontological penumbra as the prime locus of their discipline and seek to occupy it consciously and reflexively.

In occupying the ontological penumbra, anthropologists need to open themselves to their various counterparts’ epistemological and ontological ideas, including their secular and religious perspectives. While this necessitates relinquishing the former privileged position of secular and Western epistemology, it opens up the discipline to a potentially unprecedented ethnographic productivity that is epistemologically and ontologically innovative [37,41,58,66].

When it comes to counterparts for whom a joint secular and religious identity is important, the former anti-religious bias of anthropology needs to be put to rest in favor of a greater openness towards the spiritual and other religious phenomena. Kahn argues that even methodological or

strategic agnosticism—a secular strategy to deal with the religious more gently—easily comes over as “condescending and insulting by those whose beliefs are thereby rendered tolerable” ([33], p. 81). Indeed, a growing number of scholars share the concerns highlighted by the anthropology of ontology by advocating that we need to “take [. . .] religious faith seriously” ([11], p. 3), even to the extent of “accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous” ([26], p. 229; see also [10,25,32]). If anthropology continues to deny religious and spiritual experience and expression by negating it or dismissing it as irrational, it will “by implication [. . .] render the humanities and social sciences as a whole null and void,” as Mills ([8], p. 31) has recently suggested.

We propose that postsecular anthropology can achieve taking the religious seriously by accepting the real possibility that gods, spirits, ancestors, witchcraft, and other religious phenomena, as well as experiences that go beyond the purely empirical, exist. The crucial point here is to facilitate a deeper understanding of human experience and expression with regard to religious and secular experience. Postsecular anthropology cannot push the existence of the religious and spirits per se, since some secular and religious identities question and sometimes deny their existence. Neither can postsecular anthropology contest their existence as part of human experience. Postsecular anthropology should rather seek an ambiguous position in which secular and religious identity is taken seriously in all its variety and remain open to ethnographic encounters with various counterparts in the ontological penumbra.

As part of this move, anthropology’s counterparts should no longer be limited to what used to be called the ethnographic other, but should comprise both human and nonhuman entities encountered in the ontological penumbra. Vigh and Sausdal point out that, despite our differences, humans are “basically all creators of culture, all thoughtful human beings . . . [and our] *shared being* [is] central to lived life” ([64], p. 67, emphasis in original). Even those who recognize the need to go beyond humans suggest that it is via a shared humanity that we can encounter nonhuman entities. Viveiros de Castro, for example, explains that following Amerindian thought, animals started as humans and that “animals have a human, sociocultural inner aspect that is ‘disguised’ by an ostensibly bestial bodily form” ([61], p. 465).

Although the study of humanity in its widest sense continues to be central to anthropology, including people from one’s own sociocultural backgrounds and even the self, it is also by engaging in relationships with nonhuman counterparts that we can define what it is to be human. Nonhuman counterparts, such as animals or material things, thus become an essential part of our ethnographic encounters and need to be studied accordingly. There are now several anthropological studies, especially those with ontological orientations, that recognize and incorporate animals as counterparts and engage in multispecies ethnography [67–69]. Povinelli [70] further shifts this focus on multispecies human and nonhuman life to include nonlife, such as Australian rocks and creeks that are thought to be part of life, thereby questioning the distinction between life and nonlife. For Povinelli, the idea of ontology, or more precisely biontology, needs to be extended to geontology, which then includes rocks and other geological and material entities as part of ethnography. Such anthropologists seek to break free from the strictures of humanity by including nonhumans and nonlife in their ethnographies and thus contribute to widening our ethnographic experience.

Although anthropologists have always studied how humans relate to gods, spirits, other nonhuman entities, and the religious more generally with a secular approach, they have, so far, largely rejected and even resisted the potential that such entities may exist. As part of an emerging postsecular anthropology, we advocate that including nonhuman counterparts in the ethnographic encounter should also be extended to such entities. By taking them seriously in anthropology, we need to study them not only as sociocultural—and thus essentially human—manifestations, but equally accept them as suitable ontological counterparts of the ethnographic encounter. Just as anthrozoologists are encouraged to engage with animals as direct counterparts, and geontological anthropologists with nonlife, so anthropologists studying religious and secular identity should at least be permitted to

pursue their own religious interests by engaging with gods, spirits, and other typically religious phenomena as part of the ethnographic encounter. When other such nonhuman entities exist for our human counterparts, and form relationships with them in various ways, then anthropologists also need to be ready to engage with them as valid counterparts of the (ge)ontological penumbra.

In accepting gods, spirits, and other nonhuman entities as valid counterparts of the ontological penumbra, anthropology is faced with an area that it has never really addressed before (see [71]). Following the already well established tradition in anthropology of drawing on other academic disciplines when a topic requires it, we propose that it is here that theology could help various more explicitly religious ideas join and interact with existing secular ones within the discipline. In this way, theology is not just tagged on to anthropology as its religious counterpart, but is called upon to address a central problem for which anthropology seems out of its depth. For the moment, it has been largely up to individual anthropologists with specific secular and religious identities, as well as their interests and concerns, to engage with nonhuman counterparts ethnographically. While so far this has been part of general reflexivity in anthropology, we propose that theology could guide such reflection, thereby justifying and analyzing religious experience in terms of another academic discipline.

Given theology's shared genealogy with anthropology, this needs to be a theology that combines its religious expertise with an openness to plurality and dialogue. In this way, theology could help anthropologists to engage with gods, spirits, witchcraft, and other religious phenomena as valid counterparts of the ontological penumbra. Furthermore, it could help anthropologists make sense of their encounters and thereby inform anthropological theory. We certainly do not—and cannot—stipulate a theological contribution to anthropology, but we advocate that the discipline considers this as a real possibility. Such a religiously informed and theologically minded anthropology could significantly contribute to the formation of postsecular anthropology, which, in turn would be well positioned to dissolve the secular/religious dichotomy.

7. Conclusions

Stewart already recognized in 2001 that secular anthropology should be open to contributions from anthropologists who experience the religious and spiritual in their lives. He wrote, “At the moment we assume that people with strong religious convictions must lose these before they can properly do anthropology. It might be, however, that we could learn much from the studies of committed Christians, Muslims, Hindus or even Wiccans. A rejection of the constraints of secularism might be just what anthropology needs” ([47], p. 328).

Consequently, it seems clear that anthropologists who value the religious of whatever orientation, whether Jewish, Muslim, Christian, for example, could—and should—play a key role in advancing anthropology especially in its postsecular orientation. The religious together with theological reflection, then, becomes more than instrumental in the ethnographic encounter; it joins the secular in defining anthropology by productively contributing to it both epistemologically and ontologically.

Secularly trained anthropologists with religious and spiritual interests have needed to navigate pressures from both the secular and the religious side. Since they have already been dealing with the differentiation and the dynamics of the secular and the religious at a personal and existential level, they are in a unique position to occupy the ontological penumbra with all its human and nonhuman counterparts by engaging and developing this line of postsecular anthropology while drawing on theology. In fact, we can hardly think of any other anthropologists who would be better suited to bring the experience of the religious back to secular anthropology while at the same time maintaining the merits of the discipline's secular tradition ([13], p. 84).

From its academic beginnings, anthropology claimed secularism as its overarching paradigm and ideology. In doing so, it distanced itself from theology and actively pushed the religious to the discipline's fringes and beyond as something essentially other that would disappear through secularization. Despite this, religion still retained an important place in anthropology as a topic of research, albeit in secular reductionist terms.

Especially with the more recent turn to reflexivity, anthropologists with religious commitments have become more vocal in the hope that their standpoints will be taken seriously. While their efforts have contributed towards discussing the problems of a dichotomy between the discipline's secular internal approach that treats religion as an external phenomenon, their work remains entangled in what they seek to break free from. Similarly, looking toward theology in view of addressing the religious as part of anthropology has been fraught with the same issues.

We suggest that a possible solution lies in the postsecular turn, to which anthropologists have not yet given much attention. Postsecularism rejects secularization theories as invalid and recognizes that the religious and the spiritual are still very much with us and continue to exist alongside the secular. The religious and the secular, then, need to be recognized as interdependent and coexisting to varying degrees. This means that anthropology can no longer escape or ignore the religious, even in its midst, but should rather seek to bring it back actively as part of the secular and religious dynamics of postsecularism.

In drawing on the anthropology of ontology, we propose that the postsecular critique can best be addressed by occupying what we call the ontological penumbra. In this locus, anthropologists engage as whole beings in the ethnographic encounter. The penumbra is an ambiguous and pluralistic area where the self and the other, as well as the secular and the religious, meet, overlap and intertwine. In this space, "the other" needs to be broadened to include both human and nonhuman entities, who, in turn need to be recognized as our counterparts. In this way, "the other" can be released from the former secular restrictions of Western epistemology.

We propose that in taking the religious seriously alongside the secular, anthropology not only needs to accept religious experiences and expressions of their counterparts as valid, but also recognize the possibility that gods, spirits, ancestors, and other religious and spiritual phenomena are real entities that can be engaged with in ethnographic encounters. In this sense, the ontological penumbra shakes the secular foundations of the discipline by opening it up to the hitherto largely excluded and ignored notions of the religious in its various manifestations, both of anthropologists themselves and their counterparts.

While anthropology has little expertise in addressing religious issues beyond its general move to reflexivity, we suggest that drawing on theology may help fill this gap. Theology can thus provide established and widely accepted contributions from within its discipline beyond the idiosyncratic potential of individual anthropologists' reflexivity. By helping anthropologists to engage with nonhuman counterparts—and make sense of these engagements—theology can also help contribute to anthropological theory.

Anthropologists from the most varied backgrounds, interests, and perspectives should be encouraged to enter and shape the ontological penumbra in their endeavor to move the idea of a postsecular anthropology forward. We suggest that those anthropologists who have direct experience of the discipline's secular background and who have personal spiritual or religious interests are particularly suited for such an endeavor. The religious thus becomes more accessible and meaningful within anthropology, which can lead to a deeper understanding of the phenomena studied. We are sure that bringing back the religious to secular anthropology would also help many of our counterparts to feel more at ease about sharing their religious ideas. Maybe, more importantly, it has the potential to maximize our own ethnographic productivity while providing richer and more detailed data that will contribute towards a much-needed epistemological and ontological creativity as part of an emerging postsecular anthropology.

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