

ELIJAH PREWITT-DAVIS
Drew University

A book profile of Manuel A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 1+328 pp. \$99.95 (Hard) \$29.95; (Paper). ISBN 9780195188547

To turn toward religion as it is lived, experienced, and practiced by bodies—this is the aim of Manuel A. Vásquez's *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*. This means for him the development of what he calls a “non-reductive materialism” which focuses on the way embodied religious practices are shaped by, but also shape, the contexts they emerge from. While Vásquez impressively employs the materialism associated with both Marx and neurobiology, he resists their reductionism by stressing the “complex interplay of social, biological and psychological factors” (10). His theory is material in a realist sense insofar as it places the body prior to discourse, but it is non-reductive in the sense that this body (as self) has no natural essence or transcendental ground. Because of his commitment to being non-reductive, Vásquez allows his own materialist theory to emerge through an in depth genealogy of the epistemological paradigms that have been prominent in religious studies. Thus, while he outlines serious issues with Cartesianism, phenomenology, social constructivism, textualism, and deconstruction, to name but a few, Vásquez never reduces them to a zero sum. What marks Vásquez theory as different from others in the field is that he does not single out one epistemology as a starting point. Rather, *More Than Belief* unfolds as a genealogy of epistemologies—a sort of history of ideas as they relate to and conceive of materiality that allows the positive aspects of each to inform, and at times even be the building blocks of, his own non-reductive materialist epistemology.

Vásquez begins his epistemological genealogy through an explication and critique of Cartesian dualism, which he traces back to the Platonist separation of the world of being and the world of becoming. Descartes' conceptualization of the body as mere extension has led to a denigration of the body in the west. This denigration gets further inflected in the Reformation's appeal to Augustine and St. Paul, where the inner life of thinking subjects becomes the means to truth. As he rightly notes, it was Spinoza who first attempted to overcome the Cartesian mind/body dualism, but it was Nietzsche who first made the body the center of philosophy. He quotes Zarathustra to make his point: “Body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body” (quoted in Vásquez, 51). The body, for Nietzsche, is the self. This self is shaped by the will-to-power, not as an essence, but as an interaction and counteraction of forces that confront each other. As Vásquez writes: “The will to power is an ever-shifting concentration of forces, a protean field of differential, temporary quanta of energy that constitute the incessant unfolding of organic and inorganic processes... It is “Being” as pure becoming” (52). Thus, the body is a self that enters into practices with others and thus develops “certain skills, dispositions, tastes, and internalized boundaries” (53). When the body is restricted through these internalized boundaries, the will to power expresses itself in deleterious ways and attempts to flee the body through a search for grounded truth. Thus,

for Vásquez's Nietzsche, the objectivity of science engendered by Descartes turns out to be another search for an objective ground, another way to avoid facing the non-grounded chaos of the world. In contrast to this, Nietzsche suggests that all truth is perspectival, that is, dependent not on an abstract concept of "the body" but on the lived experience of specific bodies in time and space (57). Perhaps above all, it is Nietzsche who informs much of Vásquez's non-reductive materialism. As he writes: "Nietzsche forces us to ask the difficult question: can a non-foundational, perspectival materialism be reconciled with forms of materialism that presuppose some biological and ecological foundations? Perhaps the key lies in proposing open-ended 'foundations' that involve multiple and interacting levels of mediation and determination" (57).

For Vásquez, Husserl's phenomenology begins as an attempt to overcome the Cartesian split. By redeploying Cartesian doubt as the *epoché*, Husserl makes great strides in recentring the body. Vásquez explains, however, that Husserl's search for a "universal framework" and "ultimate grounds" founded on a transcendental idealism ultimately reinforces another version of Cartesian subjectivity (66). This has negative effects on the field of religious studies: religious studies employ phenomenology in its quest for *homo religiosus* which "contributes to the widespread failure to historicize and contextualize religious experience" (68, 103). This tendency is best represented for Vásquez by Eliade, who, "despite the claim that the sacred is always manifested in history and in material objects" asserts a transcendental subjectivity that leads away from history and materiality (103). Nevertheless, Vásquez asserts the importance of phenomenology for his project. By pointing to the use of phenomenology by Heidegger and his insistence on being-in-the-world, as well as Merleau-Ponty's keen attention to "flesh," he highlights the possibilities of a non-reductive material "phenomenology of embodiment" which would "explore how religious meanings are created and experienced by specific embodied individuals endowed with sensorimotor and cognitive capacities and limits, as they encounter the world praxically, as they shape and are shaped by the natural and social environments..."(84). Such a phenomenology contributes to his non-reductive materialism inasmuch as it pays close attention to the real lived world, thus avoiding some of the pitfalls of social constructivism.

For Vásquez, social constructivism is an "epistemological assumption that our experiences and practices are unavoidably shaped by the contexts that we collectively construct" (123). As Vásquez shows, social constructivism developed as a direct reaction to phenomenology. It is, for him, best represented by Michele Foucault and Judith Butler. For Foucault, building off Nietzsche, the body is shaped, molded and disfigured as it comes into contact with various points of power—a power that is "positive—in the sense that it operates not by directly suppressing, limiting, or denying, but by creating subjectivities" (137). In this sense, Foucault is able to denaturalize not only sex and sexualities, but also religion, by genealogically and archeologically uncovering the powers that shaped them. Significant for Vásquez's non-reductive materialism is Foucault's exposure of the way the phenomenologist's search for *homo religiosus* replays the Cartesian emphasis on the disembodied thinking thing—"how interiority and selfhood are connected to the search for origins and archetypes in religious studies" (139). For Vásquez, the genius of Foucault is that he is able to

denaturalize but still “leaves space for a reality prior to, or at least not exhausted by, discursive construction” (141). He contrasts this element of Foucault with the social constructivism of Butler—for whom the body is first signified and produced by discourse—as well as the deconstruction of Derrida and the ‘textualism’ of Richard Geertz. While Vásquez notes the importance of these latter, he fears that such insistence on intertextuality and discourse a.) becomes totalizing in its own right and b.) produces an “over linguistified materialism that relies on a domineering anthropocentric view that insists that whatever is, is discursive and whatever is discursive, is” (147). Textualism, deconstruction, and Butler’s radicalization of it, is thus not always helpful in understanding all forms of religious practices, for they might not all be semiotic (228). The body gets lost in the text.

We can see then, that Vásquez’s own non-reductive theory of religion (and by extension epistemology) builds off of each of these prior epistemologies, taking not only what is good from each, but also learning from what is insufficient. Succinctly, his non-reductive materialism is summed up nicely when he states: “reality is always mediated by our practices, but is not reducible to them” (129). While he realizes that religion is constructed, he nonetheless believes that there is what he calls “data” for religion. What this ‘data’ is in regards to specifically ‘religious’ practices as opposed to ‘cultural’ ones remains somewhat under developed in *More Than Belief*, and one feels that Vásquez would have hard time explaining what this specifically religious ‘data’ is exactly. One also feels that this is part of his point. Non-reductive materialism looks deeply at the way religious practices are shaped by the interaction between the cultural and geographical environment and the bodies that perform them, but also, how those practices in turn reflexively shape those bodies and the space they occupy. Through this interaction, selves and culture become material “in their own right.” Because social practices mediate our experience of the world in our own bodies, they “give selves and culture a material density, identities, and cultural artifacts also have causal efficacy. That is, they give rise to our life worlds through multilayered relations of reciprocal determination with our physical processes” (6). It is precisely this interaction, then, that allows his materialist theory to be non-reductive. These interactions are in no way linear or mechanical, but are rather reciprocal, and it is this radical reciprocity that allows him to assert that we can never arrive at a “totalizing understanding of what religion is” (10). In this sense, *More Than Belief* offers less a ‘theory’ of religion and more a method for approaching its continued cultural and bodily implications.

ELIJAH PREWITT-DAVIS is a Ph.D student in theological and philosophical studies at Drew University under the guidance of Catherine Keller. This past year, in between reading and writing philosophy, he was the student organizer for the conference *Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, Political Theology*. The proceedings from this conference will be published in a forthcoming book by Fordham University Press bearing the same title, as well as his own contribution “The Corporation and The Common Good: The Politics of Recognition After God.”

©Elijah Prewitt-Davis.

Prewitt-Davis, Elijah. “A book profile of Manuel A. Vásquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 13 no. 1 (Winter 2014): 167-169.