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**Patron Information**

| Name: Hent de Vries |
| Username: Kdevrie1 |
| Status: Faculty |
| Department: Humanities |
| Email: hentdevries@jhu.edu |
| Delivery Method: Electronic Delivery |

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Of miracles and special effects

HENT DE VRIES

University of Amsterdam

Though the phenomenon of religion might seem to have become obsolete in the recent intellectual and political history of ‘secular’ modernity, in late twentieth and early twenty-first century liberal-democratic states and worldwide, it has resurfaced with an unprecedented – and unanticipated – force. This ‘return of the religious’ at a geopolitical scale conflicts with the self-interpretation of modern states and their citizens. The emergence of a supposedly enlightened and increasingly differentiated public sphere had gone hand in hand with the formulation of ideals of identity and self-determination, individual autonomy and universalist cosmopolitanism, both of which seem at odds with the heteronomy and particularism – the authoritarianism or even the violence – commonly ascribed to religious doctrine and its practices.

The uncontested and often self-congratulatory narrative of Western, ‘secularist’ modernity – whose hegemony has only been reinforced by current tendencies toward globalization and the almost unchallenged appeal of free market capitalism – has from the outset obscured the fact that, in most of its historical formations, the concept of the political had to some extent always been contingent, if not upon the authority or the explicit sanction of a dominant religion, then at least upon a plausible translation and renegotiation of the central categories of this religion’s historical beliefs, its central rituals, and their implicit politics. This was true for premodern times and during the first establishment of so-called nation-states. Mutatis mutandis, the same holds true for the so-called new geopolitics that follows in the wake of globalization and its medium, ‘informationalism’.

Most analytical and empirically informed studies on the recent transformations of the information based economy, society, and culture, on the one hand, and of the contemporary role of religion in the public sphere, on the other, have a common blind spot. What they fail to see is that it is precisely an intrinsic and structural relationship between the new media and the renewed manifestation of religion that enables a comprehension of the ways in which socio-cultural identity, diversity, a certain commonality and universality as well as adversity and violence, are constructed and, so to speak, diffused. Turning to a recent essay by Jacques Derrida will help me to address this relationship in a systematic, theoretical or philosophical.
mode. But concrete contemporary examples of it abound. A certain politics of the miracle, such as the one regularly deployed by the Vatican, is only one of them. By presenting a concrete example (confronting the ancient concept of the miracle and its present day counterpart, the special effect), this article sketches out the place and function of religion in relation to the new technological media. In the understanding of these relatively new phenomena contemporary comparative religious studies find their most daunting task.

Thus far not much has been done to bring these two revolutionary and unanticipated developments – the rise of the new media and the re-emergence of religion – into a single perspective. At a major Harvard conference some years ago, entitled The Internet and Society, no one raised the question of religion and even the most interesting studies in media and networks that originate in literary studies, hermeneutics and system theory pass over religion in silence.

Conversely, contemporary discussions in Religion and Contemporary Liberalism and Religion in Public Life, to cite just a few of the most compelling contributions to the question of democracy, pay little attention to the simultaneous rise of the new media technologies and the relation they may have to the phenomenon of religion and its return as a political factor of world importance. The renewed prominence of the religious and the proliferation of political theologies it entails, on the one hand, and the equally unanticipated revolution in information technologies, on the other, are analyzed as if we were dealing with two totally independent developments. And where a relationship between the phenomena is acknowledged at all, the assumed link is often that of an instrumentalization of the one by the other, as if media formed the mere vehicle of religion or as if the medium could ever succeed in creating religion in its own image. Yet the medium is not secondary, nor is the religious mere epiphenomenon. And this is precisely what even the most promising theorizations of the contemporary social and cultural world would seem to suggest.

The sole exception to this mutual blindness, it seems, is Derrida’s ‘Foi et savoir: Les deux sources de la “religion” aux limites de la simple raison’ (Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone), a text that be taken as a reevaluation of certain insights first formulated in the analysis of the postal system in La Carte postale (The Post Card), a text in which the reference to religion could have seemed virtually absent at first reading. In Derrida’s more recent analysis, the reassessment of the concept and the practice of ‘religion’ goes hand in hand with that of the new media of communication, the increasingly sophisticated form of teletechnology. The two cannot be separated; inquiry into the first forms an interpretative key to the latter, and vice versa. What is more, their intersection – and virtual interchangeability – have everything to do with a peculiar ‘artifactuality’ and ‘act virtuality’ that is characterized by a singular temporality, a ‘deconstructed actuality’, of sorts.

As his title indicates, Derrida’s whole analysis is driven by certain reticence concerning what seems to be central presupposition of the project of modernity and, perhaps, of the philosophical tradition in toto as it seeks to radically distinguish between mythos and logos, physis and nomos, doxa and episteme, faith and knowledge:

one would blind oneself to the phenomenon called ‘of religion’ or of the ‘return of the religious’ today if one continued to oppose so naïvely Reason and Religion, Critique or Science and Religion, technoscientific Modernity and Religion. Supposing that what was at stake was to understand, would one understand anything about ‘what’s-going-on-today-in-the-world-with-religion’ . . . if one continues to believe in this opposition, even in this incompatibility, which is to say, if one remains within a certain tradition of the Enlightenment, one of the many Enlightenments of the past three centuries (not of an Aufklärung, whose critical force is profoundly rooted in the Reformation), but yes, in this light of Lights, of the Lumière, which traverses like a single ray a certain critical and anti-religious vigilance, anti-Judaic-Christian-Islamic, a certain filiation ‘Voltaire-Feuerbach-Marx-Nietzsche-Freud—and even—Heidegger’? Beyond this opposition and its determinate heritage (no less represented on the other side, that of religious authority), perhaps we might be able to try to ‘understand’ how the imperturbable and irreducible difference between critical and technoscientific reason, far from opposing religion, bears, supports and supposes it.

There is, Derrida maintains, an intrinsic relationship between the mediatic and the religious. Translated into contemporary geo- and theo-political terms, this would mean that one cease to portray, for example, political Islam in an anachronistic way, as the epitome of fundamentism, ‘intégrisme’, and the like: the surge of ‘Islam’ [le déferlement ‘islamique’] will be neither understood nor answered . . . as long as one settles for an external explanation (interior to the history of faith, of religion, of languages or cultures as such), as long as one does not define the passageway between this interior and all the apparently exterior dimensions (technoscientific, tele-biotechnological, which is to say also political and socioeconomic etc.).
This interfacing between the interior and the exterior, to the point where the very distinction collapses (or is, at least, significantly displaced), must have held true for all times, even though the present day and age would seem to have witnessed a generalization and intensification beyond measure of the mode of communication and mediationization: the ‘mondialisation’ of the ‘nouvelles nouvelles’, as he has it, but one in whose expansion the sheer quantity of scale and pace reverses—once more almost, albeit it not necessarily dialectically (as Hegel and Adorno believed)—into a virtual qualitative change:

Like others before, the new ‘wars of religion’ are unleashed over the human earth... and struggle even today to control the sky with finger and eye: digital systems and virtually immediate panoptical visualization, ‘air space’, telecommunications satellites, information highways, concentration of capitalist-medical power— in three words: digital culture, jet, and TV without which there could be no religious manifestation today, for example no voyage or discourse of the Pope, no organized emanation [rayonnement] of Jewish, Christian or Muslim cults, whether ‘fundamentalist’ or not.16

Derrida observes that if religion had ever been dead and overcome, surely in its resurrected form it is less predictable than ever before, most manifestly in the ‘cyberspatialized or cyberspaced wars of religion [guerres de religion]’ or ‘war of religions [guerre des religions].’17 And these wars may take on all the forms of radical evil and atrocity and mask themselves behind the most enlightened and most universalist intentions. Indeed,

it is not certain that in addition to or in face of most spectacular and most barbarous crimes of certain ‘fundamentalisms’ (of the present or the past) other over-armed forces are not also leading ‘wars of religion’, albeit unavowed. Wars or military ‘interventions’, led by the Judeo-Christian West in the name of the best causes (of international law, democracy, the sovereignty of peoples, of nations or of states, even of humanitarian imperatives), are they not also, from a certain side, wars of religion? The hypothesis would not necessarily be defamatory, nor even very original, except in the eyes of those who hasten to believe [sic] that all these just causes are not only secular but pure of all religiosity.18

Never before has it been so clear that there can be no such thing as an ultimate—analytical, de iure, let alone de facto— neutrality of the public sphere. Attention to the new and persistent prominence of religion could counterbalance the phantom of a culturally homogeneous society. And yet, it would be false to identify religion with inevitable resistance with particu- laristic and idiomatic or even idiosyncratic views alone; religion has opposite, universalizing tendencies as well. What may be needed is a conceptual and empirical analysis of the multiple ways in which religion not only shapes the experience of possible tensions between collective and personal identities—and, perhaps, challenges the very concept of ‘identity’—but also affects the conditions under which conflicts can be addressed, worked through, and ‘resolved’. The relationship between religion and media sheds light on the question of how cultural identity and difference are constituted, as well as on how they relate to the aims of socio-political integration. Religion, thus interpreted, forms the condition of the possibility and the impossibility of the political. Derrida offers a simple ‘hypothesis’, whose implications are far-reaching:

with respect to all these forces of abstraction and of dissociation (deracination, delocalization, disincarnation, formalization, universalizing schematization, objectivation, telecommunication etc.), ‘religion’ is at the same time involved in reacting antagonistically and reaffirmatively outbidding itself. In this very place, knowledge and faith, technoscience (‘capitalist’ and fiduciary) and belief, credit, trustworthiness, the act of faith will always have made common cause, bound to one another by the band of their opposition.19

On the one hand, it is increasingly difficult to deny that hyper-text manifests itself in a quasi-religious manner, in ways that we have, perhaps, not yet begun to comprehend. Indeed, there seems to be both irony and a deep truth in the description of media-produced and media-dependent celebrities a ‘icons’ and ‘idols’.20 On the other hand, the return of the religious, Derrida points out, concerns a certain resistance toward the abstraction of technological in the name of language and of nation and be it in name of the lingua franca, the Latin, of the West:

if, today, the ‘question of religion’ actually appears in a new and different light, if there is an unprecedented resurgence, both global and planetary, of this ageless thing, then what is at stake is language, certainly—and more precisely the idiom, literality, writing, that forms the element of all revelation and of all belief, an element that ultimately is irreducible and untranslatable—but an idiom that above all is inseparable from the social nexus, from the political, familial, ethnic, communitarian nexus, from the nation and from the people: from autochthony, blood and soil, and from the ever more problematic relation to citizenship and to the state. In these times, language and nation form the historical body of all religious passion.21
Yet the force of abstraction around which religion revolves – reactively and productively – is at the same time a sine qua non for the universality (indeed, the messianicity) of what Derrida calls a ‘democracy-to-come’. The theologico-political seems to stand for an imperative and a mode of belonging no longer – or not yet – limited by the traditional and modern concepts of politicization and democratization modeled on the frontiers of the nation-state. In other words, the theologico-political – the ‘mystical foundation of authority’ that Derrida sees as the constitutive element of the political and legal order, indeed of any ‘force of law’ – enables us to ‘deterioralize’ the political; that is to say, it allows us to strip it of its preconceptions concerning self-determination and its concern with ascribed, ‘acquired’, or ‘natural’ citizenship, based on *jus solis* or *jus sanguinis*. In the wake of recent technological developments, this ‘imperative’ is ‘imposed on us concretely’; for these developments, Derrida hastens to add, constitute a ‘chance’ and a ‘menace’ at once; they permit us to entertain a different ‘politics of memory’ or to ‘politicize otherwise’. They enable us to think the political beyond (existing forms of) democracy or, conversely, to think the democracy-to-come beyond the political (as we know it). In both cases, we touch upon the limits of representation, in more than one sense of the word.

So far, I have attempted to situate the ‘return of the religious’ within the geopolitics of ‘secular’ modernity and its globalization. Religion ‘returns’ at the juncture in which the political of ‘secular’ modernity is recognized to be contingent upon the authority of a dominant religion, if not directly, at least by way of its renegotiation. Yet, it is the contradiction between the premises of a ‘secular’ modernity that promises autonomy and universalism and the heteronomous and particular nature of religious doctrine which marks a tension within this contingency. In other words, the reorientation of the political that is at work here is a ‘curvature of the social space’ (Levinas), a process of mediatization, and mediation, in which religion is both private and public.

In order to illustrate this interfacing of the religious and the medium, the theological and the technological, I would like to offer just one example, that of ‘miracles’ in their relation to ‘special effect’. Is a miracle a special effect? Does the special effect – or what is commonly described as such – enter into the tradition inaugurated or legitimized by the invocation of miracles? If so, how? Do special effects summon up the ‘wonder of all wonders’ (‘das Wunder aller Wunder’), in Heidegger’s words, ‘that beings are’ (das Seiendes ist) or, in monotheistic parlance, *creatio ex nihilo*, the fact that all of a sudden, through a sheer act of free divine will - there was something rather than nothing? Are miracles special effects in their very structure (that is to say, as event) or merely in the perceptual and then psychological effect they have on ‘us’? Is there a difference between these two interpretations? Or between the two phenomena? Do the ‘miracle’ and the ‘special effect’ resemble each other formally or, as it were, phenomenologically speaking?

Strictly speaking, in Webster’s definition, the special effect is nothing but ‘an often illusory effect introduced into a motion picture during the processing of the film’. What grounds, then, do we have for connecting this purely technical device to a tradition whose metaphysical presuppositions seem increasingly obsolete?

Confronted with these questions, two hypotheses impose themselves. The first is that we cannot understand the full range of possible meanings of the very phrase ‘special effect’ and its component elements – namely, reference both to some unanticipated or even non-natural (‘special’) occurrence and to a peculiar modality of causation (‘effect’) – without, however implicitly or indirectly, returning to the tradition called the religious. I hesitate to say the ‘theological’, since the designator ‘religious’ allows us to indicate a much wider field than that covered by the ‘Religions of the Book’, their natural or revealed theologies, their ontologies and onto-theologies. The miraculous and the magical – their difference remains a matter of debate – were never the prerogative of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam alone. Reference to the religious can include the most theatrical of its guises, for example, the *deus ex machina* in Greek literature. And in his work *Das Heilige (The Idea of the Holy)*, subtitled ‘Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen [An Inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational]’ – a book that influenced several generations of scholars of religion – Rudolf Otto does not hesitate to describe miracles and the miraculous as constitutive elements of the ‘numinous’.

To view the special effect against the foil of the miracle means invoking the concept of divine intervention. Here, the miraculous act – of God or his intermediaries – becomes the paradigmatic case of an event that stands out by its absolute character, its being uncaused or caused by an act of free Will, whose force forms the model for the acts of all finite beings, all of which are portrayed as being created out of nothing. This original scene supposedly determined all the creative acts – indeed, all special effects – that followed in its wake. The word *effect*, from the Latin *effectus*, the past participle of *efficere*, ‘to bring about, to accomplish, to effect, to perform’, would in effect (that is to say, virtually) come to stand for any event (and for any action) whose structure finds its prime model in the theological – perhaps even theistic – concept of God: the being that has no cause outside itself (hence the most metaphysical of God’s names, *causa sui*). On this reading, not even the most artificial special effect could be possible – that is to say, thought or
experienced — without some reference to (or conjuring up) of the miracle and everything for which it stands.

Conversely, my second hypothesis is that thinking the miracle was never possible without introducing a certain technicity and, quite literally, a manipulation of sorts. Human fabrication — or the rumor thereof, in false miracles and in magic — always went hand in hand with the seemingly sure signs and acts of the hand of God. Not only was God seen as the great engineer — the demiurge, as in Plato’s Timaeus, or the world architect (Weltbaumeister), known from all the physico-theological proofs of His existence — those who performed lesser miracles in his name (whether as impostors or not) drew on a certain technical skill. The apostles performed miracles — powerful acts (dynamis), signs and wonders (semaea and terata) — speaking in tongues, healing and exorcising, that accompanied their diffusion of the Word and the spreading of the Spirit and in so doing established its authority.

How should we understand the relationship between these two elements — or, as Derrida has it in ‘Faith and Knowledge’, the ‘two sources’ — of the miraculous, between their representation or presentation of a supposedly extraordinary event, on the one hand, and their artificiality and technicity, on the other? How do these two features form two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the same phenomenon, whose givenness — and, as it were, ‘saturation’ — we take for granted, as witnesses, spectators, or viewers? (Lest we forget, the word miracle comes from Latin miraculum and the verb mirari, which means ‘to wonder at’.)

In Religion and the Decline of Magic, arguably the most comprehensive study of ‘popular belief in sixteenth and seventeenth century England’ and one of the most influential studies on the subject of (Christian) religion and the supernatural, Keith Thomas reiterates an almost unchallenged consensus in modern historical scholarship. This opinion is based on the presupposition of linear modernization and secularization, differentiation and a logic of disenchchantment; and one that increasingly reveals its empirical and conceptual limits, especially when confronted with the technological and mediatonic innovations — the special effects — that interest us here. Thomas writes:

Nearly every primitive religion is regarded by its adherents as a medium for obtaining supernatural power. This does not prevent it from functioning as a system of explanation, a source of moral injunctions, a symbol of social order, or a route to immortality; but it does mean that it also offers the prospect of a supernatural means of control over man’s earthly environment. The history of early Christianity offers no exception to this rule. Conversions to the new religion, whether in the time of the primitive Church or under the auspices of the missionaries of more recent times, have frequently been assisted by the view of converts that they are

acquiring not just a means of other-worldly salvation, but a new and more powerful magic.27

Thomas shows that both the New Testament and Patristic literature stress the significance of miracles in ‘the work of conversion’; indeed, in the history of the church, the ‘ability to perform miracles soon became an indispensable test of sanctity’. The prophets and priests of the so-called Old Testament had similarly challenged their counterparts — the ‘devotees of Baal’ — to work supernatural acts. They did not in principle deny their opponents’ capacity to do such things, but merely asserted their own greater effectiveness in bringing about these special occurrences. By the same token, in the medieval church, Thomas continues, the ‘working of miracles’ was seen as ‘the most efficacious means of demonstrating its monopoly of the truth’. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Lives of the Saints had assumed a stereotyped pattern. They related the miraculous achievements of holy men, and stressed how they could prophesy the future, control the weather, provide protection against fire and flood, magically transport heavy objects, and bring relief to the sick.30

For Thomas, this ‘stereotyped pattern’ was the sedimentation of the desire — typical of all religions — to take control of the natural order by way of the supernatual and vice versa. Magic, astrology, witchcraft, the belief in ghosts and fairies, are all forms of the desire to negotiate with the transcendent, a desire that would soon undergo successive onslaughts of demystification from the Reformation and the increasing mechanization of early modern views of the cosmos. Both attempted and, Thomas believes, succeeded in taking the magic out of religion.

True, there have been times when official religion or its greatest minds considered the miracle to be something of the past or mere superstition, pertaining only to popular, unsophisticated belief. Though in 1870 the Roman Catholic Church could still maintain, during the third Session of the First Vatican Council, that ‘If anyone shall say, that miracles cannot happen, or that the divine origin of the Christian religion cannot properly be proved by them: let him be anathema’ (Denziger, par. 1813), by then the battle for the historical evidence of Christian faith had long been lost.

As Thomas points out, the eventual condemnation of the miraculous had its roots in early Protestant orthodoxy:

For those Protestants who believed that the age of Christian miracles was over, all supernatural effects necessarily sprang from either fraudulent illusion or the workings of the Devil. Satan, it was believed, was well acquainted with the secrets of nature and might counterfeit an effect when he could not reproduce it directly. Those persons who sought to
use objects for purposes which nature could not justify were guilty of idolatry, superstition, and at least implicitly of soliciting the aid of the Devil.31

But David Hume's critique of authentication by miracles, undertaken in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, The Natural History of Religion, and An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, was especially devastating.32 The traditional argument ran:

Granted that both the power of performing miracles (i.e., bringing about events impossible with the natural order) could only be conferred upon a man by God, and that God would not confer such a power upon those misrepresenting him, then any man who performed miracles gave evidence in so doing that he had authority from God to deliver a revelation, and hence that the revelation was true.33

Hume's riposte, in section X of the Enquiry, entitled 'Of Miracles', consisted simply in raising the suspicion that 'it is more probable that the historical records are in some way inaccurate than that the miracles they relate actually took place'.34 This argument – like the one propounded by Spinoza in Chapter 6 of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, entitled 'De miraculis' – anticipated the textual criticism that, from the nineteenth century onward, would treat the Bible as a historical document like any other. In consequence, the prophecies of the Old Testament and the miracles of the New Testament, as a commentator claimed in 1776, would from now on have to 'depend for much of their credibility on the truth of that religion whose credibility they were first intended to support'.35

And yet all attempts to undo the continuing significance of the miraculous – hence all effort to set it apart from the essence or the nature of religion, whether natural or rational, and also from reason and knowledge, science and technology – have hardly led to its demise. The miracle has continued to appear unannounced, even where it does not do so as miracle, on its own account. But perhaps this self-effacement had always belonged to the structure of the miraculous – and hence, the magical and the religious – as such. The logic of its exception, the saturation – the self-sufficiency and, as it were, in-difference – of its phenomenon, was never that of empirical truth or manifest fact – that is to say, out there, for all to see. The mode of its appearance was always unique, comparable only to its functional equivalents – its paradigm and its remainders – such as revelation, epiphany, iconicity, the liturgical, the sacramental, and so on.

No one has analyzed the uniqueness of this event of absoluteness – the absolutive of experience or, at least, of the conditions and limitations of its possibility – better than Jean-Luc Marion in Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoméologie de la donation. Marion elaborates the possibility – not the reality or 'effectivity!' – of revelation in terms of a paradoxical form of donation whose structure resembles the irruption of the miracle. Speaking of the general structure of the event, he notes that it remains 'undecidable' with respect to the situation – and situatedness – of its occurrence and thus 'without an adequate cause'.36 In consequence, we could now infer, it occupies the same space (conceptually and ontologically speaking) as the 'illusory effect' introduced into the course of action during the 'processing' of history. Analytically, there is no observable difference between true and false miracles, between the icon and the idol, between prayer for the divine name and blasphemy.

In sum, there are not only empirical, historical, and technological but also systematic reasons to doubt that magic and the miraculous could ever be (or have ever been) taken out of religion, just as there are reasons to suspect that religion was never fully taken out of reason, secularization, mechanization, technization, mediatization, virtualization, and so on.

Although there have been various semi-popular discussions of links between religious imagery and technological development (with titles such as The Religion of Technology or 'God in the Computer'),37 to the best of my knowledge Derrida was the first to insist on the opposite need: to re-conceptualize the notion of 'religion' in light of the current development of the newest 'media', especially the multifaceted relationship – or, more precisely, interface – between them. We should no longer reflect exclusively on the meaning, historically and in the present, of religion – of faith and belief and their supposed opposites such as knowledge and technology – but concentrate on the significance of the processes of mediation and mediatization without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place. In contradistinction to Heidegger's analysis, mediatization and the technology it entails form the condition of possibility of all revelation – of its revelability, so to speak. An element of technicity belongs to the realm of the 'transcendental', and vice versa.38

This all too oblique reference brings us back to the two hypotheses with which I started out, namely, the suspicion that the special effect should be understood against the backdrop of the religious tradition, in particular, the miracle, and that the miracle has always been characterized by a certain 'mechanicity' or technicity. To speak of special effects in terms of miracles means at least two things. First, it implies that one generalize the applicability of the world of religion – its concept and imaginary, its semantic and figural archive – to include almost everything that, at one time or another, had set itself apart from religion (or from which religion had sought to distance itself,
in turn). The magical and the technological thus come to occupy the same space, obey the same regime and the same logic.

Second, to speak of miracles in terms of special effects means to trivialize the meaning and scope not only of religion but also of its supposed counterparts (magic, technology). What good could such a strategy do? For one thing, it would complicate matters, correcting a simplistic opposition between realms we only wish could be kept apart. Doing away with the last and most pernicious of all binary oppositions – indeed, with the very matrix of the binary as such – all this would, perhaps, not work wonders. But it might very well have a salutary effect.

Notes

1. Excerpted from the introduction to Religion and Media, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, forthcoming from Stanford University Press. Used with the permission of the publishers. Copyright by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University.

2. See my Philosophy and the Turn to Religion (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University, 1999).


4. See, for example, Francis Fukuyama, ‘10 Years After The End of History Its Author Takes on His Critics’, in the International Herald Tribune, July 6, 1999.


6. In Religion and Violence, the sequel to my Philosophy and the Turn to Religion, I argue that violence inevitably shadows our ethical-political engagements and decisions, including our understandings of identity, whether collective or individual. Violence, I suggest, entails and exceeds any force, justified or illegitimate, exerted by one entity on another. Thus defined, it finds its prime model in key elements of the religious tradition. It is the very element of religion: no violence without (some) religion; no religion without (some) violence. Given this intrinsic relation to violence, I further claim, the recent turn to religion can best be studied by rethinking modern philosophical assumptions concerning ethical and political responsibility in light of what Kierkegaard, in Fear and Trembling’s reading of the sacrifice of Isaac, calls horror religious. This motif belongs to a chain of interrelated notions that must be studied in historical detail and that range from Kant’s discussion of radical evil to Eric Weil’s understanding of the other of discourse, Emmanuel Levinas’s evocation of the sordid neutrality of the ‘there is’, Walter Benjamin’s meditations on divine violence, and Michel de Certeau’s interpretation of divine anger, culminating in Jacques Derrida’s sensitivity to the ever-looming possibility of monstrosity, of the worst, of the proximity between hospitality and hostility. Questions that touch upon ethics and politics, I conclude here, can greatly benefit from being rephrased in terms borrowed from the arsenal of religious and theological figures, because the association of such figures with a certain violence keeps moralism, whether in the form of theism or humanism, at bay. Such an inquiry, then, could pioneer new modalities for systematic engagement with religion and philosophy alike.


11. Interesting exceptions can be found in Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wedady, eds., Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), and in Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., Religion and Popular Culture in America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). The study of the relationship between religion and popular culture and that of religion and media overlaps in part as is clear, for example, from the role played by religion in media-staged events such as American football. See Mark Singer, ‘God and Football: The Fight to Keep Prayer in the Stadium’, The New Yorker, September 25, 2000, 38–42.


by the same token, Levinas does not tire to describe the enigma of the responsibility in terms of the ‘miracle of the trace’, that is to say, as an non-phenomenologizable event that excides the very order experience or that, paradoxically, may signal the absolute empiricity or concretissimum of an ‘experience par excellence’. Not unlike the allegorical readings of all ages, both Barth and Levinas could be said to demythologize the miracle and to strip it of all of its supernatural and historical content. That is not to conclude that they simply spiritualize its meaning. A different logic is at work here.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid. As recent discussions in the analytical philosophy of religion have shown, Hume’s argument in ‘Of Miracles’ is not as invincible as it has always seemed. See David Johnson, Hume, Holism, and Miracles (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); and, from a different perspective, C.A.J. Coady, Testimony: A Philosophical Study (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), chapter 10 on ‘Astonishing Reports’.


37. In a critical review of David Noble, The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention, Keith Thomas argues that one must be careful in evaluating the apparent link between religious imagery and technological development. His article, which carries the ironic title ‘God in the Computer’, The New York Review of Books (December 17, 1998), 78–80, cites many examples to drive home this point. Especially for the twentieth century, which saw the advent and spread of the ‘special effect’, the claim that inventions are secretly religious by a theological program seems inaccurate.

38. No better example of this than the remarkable short narrative of Walter Benjamin’s, entitled ‘Rastelli erzählt . . .’ (Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser [Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1980], vol. IV-2, pp. 777–780; ‘Rastelli Narrates’, translated by Carol Jacobs, in idem, The Dissimulating Harmony: The Image of Interpretation in Nietzsche, Rilke, Artaud, and Benjamin [Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978], pp. 117–119). This narration recounts the remarkable story of a juggler whose artful performance with a magic ball was — seemingly — dependant on the active support of an unseen helper, a dwarf inside the ball who made this ball move in miraculous ways. The juggler’s career culminates when in the most important and final performance of his life at the court of the Sultan of Constantinopel he unwittingly brings about the unusual acrobatics but now apparently in the physical absence of his invisible assistant, who has fallen ill and has been able to notify his master only after the ‘fact’. The special effect of the dancing ball, made possible, quite literally, by a manipulation and thus a certain craftsmanship, artificiality and technicity, takes from here on a miraculous quality of its own, and not just in the eyes of the uniformed spectators. Whether the magician operates with and without his invisible helper, there is no observable difference between the fabricated and the, so to speak, genuinely or autonomously performed act. It would almost seem as if the magician’s creative force had unwittingly absorbed and internalized his assistant’s technique to the point of no longer needing it in the magical object as such. Or, perhaps, the dwarf merely mimicked his master’s telekinetic gestures all along? The story leaves the question open. It just suggests that the miraculous presupposes a certain technicity.
even when the latter actually withholds its support. Moreover, that in both cases — in the presence and the absence of the dwarf — technicity on its turn relies on a certain structure of belief, namely the perception of the spectators.

It is impossible not to be reminded here of that of another unseen helper, the little dwarf in the automaton of historical materialism, that Benjamin evokes in the first of his ‘Theses on the Concept of History’, which open with a very similar narrative: ‘The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and wit a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened [klein] and has to keep out of sight’ (Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 1.2, p. 693; Illuminations, edited and with and introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn [London: Fontana Press, 1992], p. 245). The machine, which is ‘transparent’ from all sides, must function as if it does without any further manipulation, that is to say, without the invisible efficacy of the invincible dwarf (the almost supra-natural and oblique support of the theological, operating as a silent and oblique force). Yet it is far from certain that if it were to do without the support (of the dwarf, of the theological), it would not continue to make the same moves and follow the same schemes. The fully operative automaton, like the fully internalized technicity of the magician’s act, is no less mysterious and no less miraculous than the dual structure of the two-natured cooperation. In a sense, it is its very culmination: its demise and fulfillment. Impossible to tell which is which.

Address for correspondence: Professor Dr Hent de Vries, Department of Philosophy, Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Doelenstraat 15, 1012 CP Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Phone: +20-525-4500; Fax: +20-525-4503

Religious diversity and religious toleration

PHILIP L. QUINN
University of Notre Dame

Awareness of religious diversity is nothing new under the sun. The early Christian martyrs were doubtless aware that others in the Roman Empire did not share their religious beliefs. Yet it is arguable that awareness of religious diversity has recently assumed qualitatively new forms. Among the factors that might account for this transformation is the increased contact people now have with religions other than their own. Modern technologies of travel and communication foster interchanges between adherents of different religions. Modern scholarship has made available translations of and commentaries on texts from a variety of religious traditions, and cultural anthropologists have recorded fascinating thick descriptions of the practices of many such traditions. People who live in religiously pluralistic democracies have ample opportunities to acquire personal familiarity with religions other than their own without leaving home. It now is therefore harder than it once was to hang onto negative stereotypes of or rationalize hostile reactions to the practitioners of religions other than one’s own. But many people succeed in doing so; increased contact often enough produces greater friction. News media have bombarded us with the sights and sounds of religious conflict in Belfast, Beirut and Bosnia. In Africa Muslims clash with animists, in India Hindus and Muslims struggle bitterly, and in Europe Catholic Croats go to war with Orthodox Serbs. The city of Jerusalem remains a focal point for religious quarrels among Jews, Christians and Muslims. In the eighteenth century, Kant complained that the history of Christianity could justify Lucretius’s exclamation, tantum religio potuit suadere malorum! At the beginning of the twenty-first century, support for Lucretius comes from several religions and many parts of the world. The religions of the world may be able to understand one another better now than ever before, but their ability to live together in peace still has not yet been secured.

Recent philosophical work that is responsive to the contemporary challenge of religious diversity has centered in the areas of epistemology and political philosophy. In epistemology, the main issue has been whether or not, given what we now know about religious diversity, exclusivism remains a defensible position. Exclusivism is the view that one religion is basically correct and all the others go astray in one or more ways. It has several dimen-