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Religion nach der Religionskritik

Herausgegeben von
Ludwig Nagl
INHALT

LUDWIG NAGL
Einleitung: Religion nach der Religionskritik.
Erkundungen einer „nichtidentischen Wiederkehr” . . . . . 7

1. AUFTAKT

HILARY PUTNAM
Plädoyer für die Verabschiedung des Begriffs „Idolatrie” . . 49

2. NACH DER RELIGIONSKRITIK

Zur Denktopologie der zeitgenössischen Religionsphilosophie

CHARLES TAYLOR
Die immanente Gegenaufklärung: Christentum und Moral . 60

ONORA O’NEILL
Vernünftige Hoffnung.
Tanner Lecture 1 über Kants Religionsphilosophie . . . . . 86

ROBERT SPAEMANN
Gottesbeweise nach Nietzsche . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 111

3. UNTERSCHIEDLICHE NEUE ZUGÄNGE

(Spät)analytische, pragmatische und auf die Kritische Theorie bezogene Lektüren

WINFRIED LOFFLER
Externalistische Erkenntnistheorie oder theologische
Anthropologie? Anmerkungen zur Reformed Epistemology 123

FRIEDO RICKEN
Charles Sanders Peirce: Religion und Wissenschaft . . . . 148

HANS JULIUS SCHNEIDER
Das Placebo-Argument . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . 177
an experience, we might say, is a longing for a kind of presence. This is one of the larger themes that inextricably links the histories of theology (positive and negative) and aesthetics in the West. But the complete realization of presence in a life otherwise defined, as all real-world lives are, by various polarities and tensions (like that, most fundamentally, between self and not-self or subject and object) is of course not something that happens in a human life. It's a limiting condition of life, a condition whose full attainment would by definition be tantamount to death.

These last thoughts invite us to playfully imagine a genre of satiric French novels, all possessing a common plot structure, with each drawing its specific premises from one or another of these scenarios of longing-and-anxiety. In each such novel, as I imagine it, a character or group dedicated to debunking some far-reaching doctrine about human values is seized by fear and trembling when faced with the possibility that the doctrine might turn out after all to be true. Recent readers of Derrida as a post-secular thinker have now, it seems, all but written the deconstructionist installment in the series with Derrida himself as the protagonist. In the aesthetic installment, the role of the French Society of Casuists would be taken over by some other national Society for Aesthetics whose officials come into possession of an anonymous and universally compelling theory of art, a theory whose publication threatens to unravel their profession and much else in the larger culture. Whether or not these novels would sell, they would, if ever written, exemplify one way in which we might envision the histories of theology and aesthetics as driven by a deep and ancient human ambivalence about allowing our most final forms of reflection, and of longing for sublime objects, to achieve closure. So formulated, this thought has a psychoanalytic ring. But mightn't it also be transposed back into the idiom of philosophy enough to further inform our understanding of the moods and attitudes that complicate the "turn to religion" in philosophy today? I hope that it could, and welcome its further interpretation.20

1 Hent de Vries begann seine Antwort auf die Kommentare zu seinem Buch mit folgenden einleitenden Worten: "Let me begin by thanking Professors Wolterstorff and Haskins for their detailed and incisive comments. I would also like to thank Professor Margolis, who was so kind to moderate our discussion and whose observations during the ensuing conversation – part of which are expressed in the afterword included below – has made me rethink some of the premises and conclusions of our debate. Needless to say, I shall not be able to respond to all of their pertinent questions, elegant objections, and far-reaching suggestions and must therefore limit myself to addressing only a few."

Später ergänzte er: "Thanks also to Dr. Monique Roelofs for taking the initiative to organize this book panel, and to Professor Ludwig Nagl for welcoming the complete dossier in the present publication."


20 I thank Nina Straus for her critical comments on an earlier version of this essay.
more decisive and executed by many more than is the case in
continental philosophy” depends in part on what one takes that
turn to be. What counts as “decisive” and who, exactly, forms part
of this recent canon should be a matter of debate. In the analytic
turn, for example, do we count acknowledged “theists” alone? On
the continental axis, do we include only those who expressly
use the concept or name “God”? Nothing is less certain if the
intellectual and cultural phenomenon of post-theism informs and
orients our analysis as a potentially dominant – a promising and
threatening, that is to say, deeply ambivalent – feature of our age.³
This is an oblique part of my argument: the present-day pluraliza-
tion or dissemination of the notion of God into “gods” (hence the
references to Cicero), “divine places” (to cite Jean-Luc Nancy),
and the like.

Again, I acknowledge that “analytic” philosophy is underrep-
resented in the book and that my references, here and there, to
Wittgenstein and Cavell, Davidson and Kripke, Searle and Flew,
hardly suffice to change that. I would also agree that precisely
here – in the confrontation between deconstruction and analytic
philosophy – lies an important avenue of research, upon which only
a few have so far embarked successfully. Samuel C. Wheeler III,
in his Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy (recently published by
Stanford UP) is among them. To my knowledge, no comparable
study in the philosophy of religion exists.

Nonetheless, I believe that the general thesis of my book – the
observation that there is a paradoxical and even self-contradictory
turn to religion in modern philosophy that does not necessarily take
the form of a philosophy of religion, a theology, or an onto-the-
ology, but should be thought otherwise – could, in principle, function
as a working hypothesis, to be tested and corroborated by further
study of other authors and other schools of thought (not least the
more analytic ones). Indeed, strange as it may seem, given its
two hundred odd pages, I never intended this book – or, for that
matter, its immediate predecessor, Theology in Pianissimo, and its
sequel, Religion and Violence – to be more than a series of extended
prolegomena to work remaining to be done⁴; anti-prolegomena,

³ See Henri Krop, Arie L. Molendijk, and Hent de Vries, eds., Posttheism:

⁴ See my Theology in Pianissimo: The Actuality of Theodor W. Adorno
and Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Geoffrey Hae, with a new Introduction and
Epilogue, forthcoming from The Johns Hopkins University Press; and Religion
and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida (Baltimore and
questions,” that it is “deeply questionable – questionable in what that rejection takes idolatry to be, questionable in its nominalistic understanding of the nature and role of concepts, questionable in its rejection of universalia in re, etc.” What it leaves us with, he surmises, is a religion that merely “writes its confession, acclaims the goodness deep down things, calls for Elijah to come and undo all that must not be, and proceeds to discourse philosophically.” This, if I understand him, is what he takes Derrida’s “Circumfession” to be.

But how does this line of thought differ – in its structure and its content – from the discourse we find in Anselm, which, as Professor Wolterstorff points out, is in yet another sense “confession philosophically articulated, religion couched in philosophical conceptuality”? If we assume for a moment that his portrayal of Derrida’s turn to religion is correct, concesso non dato, its difference from Anselm’s unum argumentum is far from obvious. Nor does the sympathetic interpretation Professor Wolterstorff gives of it help to distinguish it from the aporetic mode of reasoning that I find in the Derridean – and, more precisely, Levinasian – logic of the à Dieu/adieu.

When Anselm postulates a concept – “O Thou who art the most excellent conceivable” – only to add that one cannot, on one’s own terms, grasp it conceptually (for he writes, “I do not endeavor, O Lord to penetrate thy sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that”) – he is hardly giving a clear-cut (or even intelligible?) concept of his “way of identifying divine transcendence, and correspondingly of his way of identifying idolatry and blasphemy.” He offers no more than a “glimpse.” Consequently, does his way have “[n]othing to do with concepts, their nature, their role, their limits,” as Professor Wolterstorff claims? Or is his employment of concepts and understanding – and hence also of the very concept of concept – simply more paradoxical than is often assumed? Also, is not any kataphatic theology, thus defined, aporetic, that is to say: a thinking that thinks more than it thinks, in the very way Levinas has attributed to metaphysical desire as expressed in Descartes’s formula of the idea of the Infinite? A thinking, moreover, that Levinas himself rethinks as a logic of infinitition, of the “totally other” (no “icons” here) – in the final analysis, as that of the à Dieu/adieu? Of this logic, we have nothing but “glimpses.” The in principle endless series of hints and divine Winke,

as Hölderlin and in his trace Heidegger call them, divine topoi, as Nancy adds, will have to do.5

These observations have, indeed, some pertinence for recent controversies concerning modern or modernist art, as Michael Fried aptly demonstrates in his retrospective introduction to Art and Objecthood. Most intriguing are his considerations regarding the “presentness” of the aesthetic and its specific temporal modes (an immense problem that I cannot go into here but that interests me deeply in my next book project for Stanford UP, entitled Instances, the aesthetic supplement, if you like, to Philosophy and the Turn to Religion). That the experience of the work of art “has no duration,” that “at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest,” that it is characterized by “a kind of instantaneousness,” and that this insight escapes the cruder philosophies of the present and their deconstruction, seems to me to confirm – and refine – the analysis I have propounded so far. Fried links this notion to that of perpetual creation (in Jonathan Edwards and others). A whole field of further study opens up here, which one should confront with parallel and alternative inquiries into the “saturated phenomenon” (of which Jean-Luc Marion speaks, referring incidentally to Cubism); the elliptical remarks made by Lyotard on Barnett Newman and the instant; the motif of the ‘entretemps’ (or “meanwhile”) developed by Levinas in an early essay on the aesthetic, and so on.6 But let me close this parenthesis.

Anselm, Professor Wolterstorff claims, begins with a “performative,” with a prayer in which he “identifies [but how, exactly?] the one to whom he prays.” But so does Derrida’s “Circumfession,” which invokes Elijah much less than the god of Saint Augustine. If at this point one were to object that, “as to the ontology he [Anselm] employs, he sits for more lightly on it than does Derrida on différence,” this would no doubt be true, but what would it mean? One cannot say of deconstruction, as one can of Anselm’s thought, that it “emerges out of prayer,” or that it “begins and carries on


with prayer.” But is the alternative to kataphatic theology either “speculative metaphysics” or “deconstructivism”? And do these two, unlike Anselm, wrongly assume the existence and workings of a “deep-down structure” – in the case of Derrida, a “deep-down structure of all but of différence itself” (or, which comes down to the same, a quasi-simili- or ultra-transcendental structure, of sorts)? Is there, in the final analysis, no distinction between “the presence of the identical” and the differing deferral of différence as the “fundamental condition” of all? That is hard to believe.

Yet the assumption behind this critical observation is not totally false. Différance has neither the last word nor the first. “It” is just the name – not the concept – of an in principle infinite series of non-synonymous substitutions for the Infinite (the central referent of onto-theology), and of everything that steps into its place, including différence itself. That may sound odd, but it is a logical consequence that Derrida has drawn starting in his earliest writings: the trace – différence – traces and effaces itself. It cannot but produce – or avoid “producing” – its supposed opposite, its mirror-image and counterpart: metaphysics, onto-theology, and, indeed, the kataphatic concept of ‘God.’ As Derrida writes in Of Grammatology: “The theological forms a determining moment in the total movement of the trace.”

I wouldn’t say that Derrida could “just as well have affirmed apophatic theology – or even kataphatic,” as Professor Woltersdorff surmises; yet the similarity between his writing and that of these traditions (the most heterodox and the most orthodox included) can never be fully excluded. In this sense, deconstruction is “never ‘merely’ negative.” There is not just “flux” (as in Heidegger’s possibilist metaphysics), but also, inevitably, an always provisional fixation – indeed, an idée fixe – of meaning. Speaking of God can be nothing “other than speaking of some unity constituted from the flux,” unless one identifies God with the “flux” itself. And, if none of this can be God, as Professor Woltersdorff states, then there is none. More precisely, the statement that God truly exists, albeit beyond (or before or outside of) the flux and its effects, cannot be meaningfully said or thought or acted upon. It is the “impossible” par excellence and yet – paradoxically – the very figure for all that matters. There is nothing “cryptic” about this. Varying Kant, we could say that we do not comprehend this “unconditioned necessity” (or necessary postulate) – which is also the source from which all moral imperative and our very freedom stems – but do comprehend its incomprehensibility. And, as Kant says: “This is all that can fairly be asked of a philosophy which presses forward in its principles to the very limit of human reason.” These are the concluding words of the Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten (Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals).

In a novel way, this view does enable us to “glimpse,” if not to “identify,” so-called “divine transcendence,” and “correspondingly” also “idolatry and blasphemy.” How so? Visual, conceptual and, if you like, auditory idolatry does not stem from falsely addressing (identifying) a referent or from not addressing (identifying) the Referent at all. What was traditionally (and rightfully) attacked in idolatry was not the supposed object or thematic content but the inadequate or inappropriate modality, gesture or, indeed, performativity with which that reference (or lack thereof) was leveled (introduced, accompanied, or accomplished) in the first place. Seen in this light, the term ‘religion’ (or religio) could better be understood as “a modifier than as a substantive,” as Professor Woltersdorff remarks, even though I remain skeptical as to whether the driving force behind this modifying stance and its several instances, discussed in my book, is that of “compulsion” (albeit “the compulsion to exclaim ‘Yes, Yes,’ the compulsion to call Elijah’s place to come, wherever and whoever Elijah may be, and the determination to keep Elijah’s place at the table forever empty”). Why should we need to refer to “symptomatically convoluted remarks,” to some psychoanalytic originary scene, as Professor Haskins does, when – phenomenologically and argumentatively speaking – all psychological characterizations, including the reference to some “fundamental anxiety” and “ambivalence,” seem slightly off the mark?

Again, everything depends on how we define our terms here. There is of course a way in which a psychoanalytically informed (though hardly Lacanian) concept of trauma and Anankè lies at the source of Derrida’s texts (most explicitly Archive Fever), just as a certain in-determination or indeterminacy – neither of which equals a simple lack of determination – holds sway over his most incisive formulations. These extremes – necessity and singular indeterminacy – are similar in structure, not in some psycho-biographical content. Again, their modality is what counts here.

Professor Woltersdorff suggests as much when he classifies Derrida’s “way of being religious” (but we should be careful: Is
that the subject of my book? Is it an exercise in, say, intellectual biography?) as being

"no more apophatic than kataphatic – this in spite of the fact that from the very beginning listeners and readers have thought they discerned significant similarity between the philosophy of différencé and negative theology – but rather apocalyptic ... Or better yet, messianic."

I would agree that Derrida’s analysis of “religion” as a “modifier” rather than a “substantive” distances him as much from the apophatic as from the kataphatic way, but would be hesitant to agree that this implies that his conception of religio is above all apocalyptic or messianic. Mutatis mutandis, the very same reservations about the via negativa et eminenciae formulated in “How to Avoid Speaking” also hold for the apocalyptic and the messianic. Some of these reservations I spell out in detail, especially in the last chapter of my book.

I do agree with Professor Wolterstorff’s suggestion that what “prevents Derrida from being theistically religious [though, again, not necessarily, biographically or existentially speaking: who knows? And, who cares? Hdv] is ... his philosophical convictions.” Why there is an “irony” in this, as Professor Wolterstorff notes, I fail to see. Religion is – analytically and, more broadly, philosophically speaking – not “what’s deepest.” This is only consistent. I admit that I call attention, not to “Derrida’s philosophy of religion – if such there be – but Derrida’s religion.” The title Philosophy and the Turn to Religion bespeaks neither a turn of philosophy to a philosophy of religion, nor a turn to a religion that, as a historical and empirical, collective or psychological phenomenon, somehow comes first, as the – un- or rediscovered – ground and foundation of it all.1 In consequence, the distinction between theism and atheism – the question seemingly so important for contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, let alone the question whether Derrida himself is “theistically” or “atheistically religious” – is just not relevant. What takes its place?

In answering this question, it will not do to take the analytic philosophy of religion to task for being “yet one more example of metaphysics rearing its ugly head in the form of ontotheology.” Nor will it help to exclaim that it hasn’t gotten the news that “Metaphysics is dead! Wounded by Kant and Nietzsche, killed by Heidegger!” I agree that that “conclusion” or that “suspicion” would be “seriously off-target.” Openness to the other, here to analytic philosophy of religion – or, from its perspective, to the deconstructive turn of philosophy to religion – would imply not reducing the interlocutor to a position he or she simply doesn’t hold. To realize this would be to acknowledge that differences are often not where we thought they were.

Thus, though it is undoubtedly true to say that “analytic philosophy of religion tends to be kataphatic in its theology [in its philosophical theology, that is, Hdv] – which does not conflict with its also being in some cases messianic,” it can be shown, as I indicated earlier, that the deconstructive approach has its kataphatic, positively conceptual and predicative, “moment” too. It simply cannot avoid it! Perhaps this is what the title Philosophy and the Turn to Religion is all about: a philosophically informed – Adorno would have said, “immanent” – critique of philosophy, of first philosophy and onto-theology, that explicitly acknowledges the intellectual (i.e., semantic, argumentative, figural, and imaginative) resources of whatever it is we, rightly or wrongly, call “religion.”

and William James; but these have never been of the greatest philosophical interest. And certainly, art might turn to the would-be truths of theology, as in accord with Roger Bacon’s Opus Maius; but this has always devolved into the representation of religious beliefs.” Again, the insistent reference, in my book, to “trades,” “figures,” and “rhetorical features” attempts to undercut these very distinctions. Indeed, such motifs “serve equivocally,” in a paradoxical and even self-contradictory way. They are neither theological claims nor religious beliefs but cannot not be formalized or secularized in the strict sense of these terms. Undecided between the “endless forms of religion” and the “endless forms of the profane,” they are as much possibilities as impossibilities of so-called “belief” and the theologies built upon it.

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1 Nor does my book defend a philosophical (reflection on) theology of sorts. By putting all emphasis on a “turn” and on “turns of phrase,” it seeks precisely to escape the alternatives and division of labor that Professor Margolis sketches in his illuminating opening paragraph: “A reasonable intuition suggests that philosophy has turned to theology more than to religion, in the sense of being open to sources of truth that science and canonical philosophy ordinarily exclude from their ken; and that the arts have found inspiration and resources in religious belief quite apart from any philosophical or theological confirmation of the truth of particular claims about a Supreme Being – God or the Creator. Of course, philosophy might turn to consider religious belief and experience, as in the rather abstract phenomenologies offered by Rudolf Otto.
Professor Wolterstorff’s point, of course, is that kataphatic theology – which, again, he identifies with the via eminenciae – “need not be onto-theology” or “first philosophy,” that is to say, need not be “inherently, intrinsically,” metaphysical and hence deconstructible. Metaphysics, he seems to suppose, can and should be deconstructed or, rather, is that which deconstructors hold to be eminently deconstructible. True enough, but what does that mean? Deconstructing metaphysics, Derrida would say, is an interminable undertaking. What is more, metaphysics is always already – again, interminably – in the process of deconstructing itself. There is no such thing as a simple, identifiable “beyond” of metaphysics, neither for “us” nor from a God’s eye point of view (Dieu déjà se contredit, “God contradicts himself already,” Derrida says; God, Rodolphe Gasché adds, is a “necessarily idolatrous notion.”)

Further, in the context of the aesthetic and the work of art, it is only consistent for Derrida – unlike Jean-Luc Marion, as Professor Wolterstorff rightly notes – not to suppose that the non-verbal arts provide us with an access to the beyond that is denied to words and concepts – or to change the metaphor from access to light, that the non-verbal arts provide us with illuminations on the Beyond (Éclair sur l'au-delà), to quote a wonderful orchestral composition by Olivier Messiaen, of which words are incapable.”

No heterology is readily available, none is possible, and not just for us. Likewise, for Derrida there can be no question of “painting God in the sun,” as Van Gogh claimed to do in his letters to his brother Theo. Professor Wolterstorff’s examples are telling and, indeed, moving ones, yet they underscore a dramatic difference in approach and tonality, perhaps not between analytic and continental philosophy (including their respective philosophies of religion) in general, but between his interest in religion and art and that of Derrida as I read him.

Finally, if it is true that “religion now turns up in the academy without grounding,” then this founding of grounds affects the recently acclaimed “religious significance of recent avant-garde art” as well. Not only the concepts of the aesthetic and of the work of art are “ripe for deconstruction,” as Professor Wolterstorff claims, but a fortiori the concept of religious art is. Again, everything depends on how we understand the term “significance” when we speak of the “religious significance” of this or that. The significance in question cannot be, I believe, that art – more precisely, some works of art, in particular the avant-garde genre – carry religious weight, albeit unintentionally, while “exploring surface and gesture, not God, not the messiah,” directly. Art does not as such, qua art, express religious themes, or have motivational or inspirational value. Nothing does.

As I have indicated so far, I do not believe – nor do I believe that Derrida claims – there is an intellectual or artistic realm or space that one could call in any strict sense of the word post-metaphysical, post-secular, post-enlightened. There is no simply determinable beyond of onto-theology, no heterology that we could think, live, and act upon. Nor is it easy to determine what would count, in the strict sense of the word, as metaphysical, onto-theological, secular, or enlightened. While we need to distinguish these realms analytically, the difference between them is essentially unclear, historically and systematically speaking. They are mutually implicated, they contaminate each other, to the point of being virtually indistinguishable. Their lines of demarcation, their contours, become, as one says, undecidable. And they always were.

Mutatis mutandis, the same holds true for the relationship between the religious heritage and modern art, whether representational, non-representational, conceptual, or minimalist, visual or performing. Here as well it is difficult to determine what the post-secular is, to differentiate it from religion (in particular, Christianity) and to “glimpse” – or retrace – the other realm beyond (within or without). The consequence of this analysis seems clear: just as Derrida does not espouse atheism per se – nor a strictly “negative metaphysics” (Adorno), “negative political theology” (Jakob

8 Which is another way of saying that there is neither a beyond nor a here and now of nihilism, pure and simple. The philosophical coinage of the terminology of nihilism is often attributed to Nietzsche, but it is clear that the issue of nihilism dates back well before him. Nietzsche leaves no doubt that the basic, i.e., existential and argumentative, but also rhetorical thrust of nihilism finds its very origin in the Judeo-Christian tradition itself. Its ethics of self-denial and self-sacrifice, its radical inquiry into conscience and guilt are all driven, Nietzsche argues, by an ideal of compassion and integrity which all too easily turns into resentment. This is one of the central theses of Nietzsche’s Zur Genealogie der Moral (Genealogy of Morals). Nihilism, then, it would seem, is itself of religious, i.e., of Judeo-Christian origin.
Taubes), or negative anything whatsoever – his overall views on art
do not quite match “the negative aesthetics thesis,” as formulated
by Professor Haskins. Let me, in concluding, briefly indicate why I
believe this is so.

Professor Haskins surmises that “there is something like the
negative theological impulse detectable throughout the history of
philosophical inquiries into the beautiful, the sublime, and art.”
According to him, this means at least two things. First, that

“the impulse to believe in, or to haggle over the definition of, something
like God or divinity has informed the work, not only of bygone generations
of aestheticians like Kant ... but also of contemporary writers in the field
who affirm an expressly theological interest [the reference is to Professor
Wolterstorff] and even those who don’t [the reference is, among others, to
Professor Margolis].”

Second, this means that “the Western discourse of aesthetics is as
susceptible to abuse as is any religious discourse, and for some of
the same historical reasons.” Taken together, these two factors make
up the “displaced presence of religion in modern and postmodern
secular culture,” which is responsible for the fact that we increasingly
“inhabit a ‘post-secular’ culture.”

In his richly illustrated account, Professor Haskins observes that
“the idea of a secular mode of thought purified of all residues of
theology ... is and was always a myth, and that a proper recognition
of this fact might have transformative implications for how various
fields in the human studies view their subjects” – as a diagnosis
that, “reasonably enough,” captures the basic tendencies of our
culture. Yet this sympathetic assessment goes hand in hand with a
psychological thesis concerning a “truth about human beings” that
has philosophical valence and that “links the impulses in our culture
to theorize negatively about God and about art: namely philosophi-
cal definition is an object toward which we harbor as profound an
ambivalence as we have for anything in our lives.”

It would be worthwhile, I think, to explore this diagnosis along
lines laid down in Stanley Cavell’s The Claim of Reason, which, albeit
in a different mode, takes skepticism, not as primarily an episte-
ological problem, but as a principal feature of human existence
that, for good and for ill, cannot be dissolved. Yet another parallel
would, again, be Fried’s Art and Objecthood, which draws on the
later Wittgenstein (and, more indirectly, phenomenology) to tease

out the “deep need for convention” and makes much of the fact that
with “the depth that we see in the essence there corresponds the
deep need for the convention.” Such an insight strikes a cord with
questions I have been wrestling with in my inquiries into the persist-
ence of certain notions, call them theologemes, whose inflections,
I believe, affect the very conditions of our thought, moral intuitions,
and, no doubt, perceptions, and will continue to do so for some
time to come. That these are not timeless, transcendental structures
or real presences but responses to a historically overdetermined
societal and cultural condition, seems clear to me. This is what I take
transcendental historicity, onto-phenomenological modes of being,
and, indeed, Wittgensteinian grammar to mean. Like the analysis
of “presentness,” this avenue of inquiry circumvents the extremes of
naive realism and anti-realism, but does so at the price of an even
greater risk, namely, that of appealing to some anthropological
constant, to human nature or even “natural history,” as Wittgenstein
does at some point in the Philosophical Investigations.

Professor Haskins does not take this line. He suggests that we
are dealing with a thesis that expresses a

“fundamental anxiety that is arguably at the root of the negative theological
project: the anxiety that even if we possessed a true definition of God or
the sacred we wouldn’t know what to do with it, or worse, it would have the
effect of unraveling meaningful life as we know it.”

The need for a comprehension of incomprehensibility – the “cryptic”
motif of the “impossible,” which astonishes Professor Wolterstorff to
the point of unbelief – would give way here to a longing for either
the “ordinary” (hardly in the sense of Cavell, though) or for “the
human possession” of reliable meaning; a longing frustrated by
complicitous “establishments”:

“Just as it turns out to be the function of the theological establishment ... to deny that we possess a proof of God, so it is also the function of the
deconstructive establishment to keep us chasing the Trace of the Other
whenever we become too complacent about what some texts means. And
so too might one, in certain moods, think it the collective function of the
profession of philosophical aesthetics to deny that we possess an adequate
account of that field’s subject matter, as if the latter, like the Lacanian Real,
were something that we all understood would be as disastrous to formulate
as it is desirable.”

Maybe that is the “deep ambivalence” and tragedy – I would say
the paradox or aporia – of existence, and not of human existence
alone. But why regard it with suspicion, instead of affirming it, with prayers and tears, and occasional laughter too?

To do so is hardly a Nietzschean gesture. I find an interesting parallel in Kant, indeed, in his very dealing with the question of framing, the parerga, a motif appropriately introduced by Professor Haskins. If one turns to Kant’s Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft (Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason), one finds, on this reading, not so much a reinterpreted Reason Within the Bounds of Religion (a title of one of Professor Wolterstorff’s books) but the exact articulation of things that have concerned me above. Strictly speaking, Kant says, what could count as faith in moral religion is a pure intelligibility, a pure respect toward the law and the other. That is what could be philosophically justified or could account for our freedom. But it remains a postulate, whose intelligibility is only that its incomprehensibility can be comprehended as what one ought to believe and act upon.

Empirically speaking, moral religion, or faith, finds itself translated and betrayed in the so-called positive religions and their aesthetic modes of presentation that mark the history of Western civilization. Kant says that they are all attempts to translate that pure faith, that pure moral religion, by relying on empirical revelations or on documents, making faith and morality idolatrous. Kant further argues that there is a hierarchy within the pandemonium of religions, which seeks to approach the moral law and incarnate it. Christianity is closest to it. But when one reads the text carefully, it turns out that all the central Christian dogmas, such as the trinity or the incarnation, count as virtually beyond reason and hence irrational. So, although Christianity comes closest to what moral religion means, Kant makes a paradoxical argument: Only faith is philosophically justifiable and responsible, but the only things we have are belief systems and forms of idolatry. Let there be faith, so he seems to claim, but let no one claim that this here and now is faith or that faith is incarnated and expressed here and now.9

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9 For a more extensive analysis, see the opening chapter of my Religion and Violence: Philosophical Reflections from Kant to Derrida (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

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JOSEPH MARGOIS

A SMALL WORD ABOUT THE “TURN” TO RELIGION

One often hears these days of a “turn” to religion. No doubt it’s true.1 But what does it mean? What does it mean in particular to say that philosophy has turned to religion or that art has turned to religion? A reasonable intuition suggests that philosophy has turned to theology more than to religion, in the sense of being open to sources of truth that science and canonical philosophy ordinarily exclude from their ken; and that the arts have found inspiration and resources in religious belief quite apart from any philosophical or theological confirmation of the truth of particular claims about a Supreme Being – God or the Creator. Of course, philosophy might turn to consider religious belief and experience, as in the rather abstract phenomenologies offered by Rudolf Otto and William James; but these have never been of the greatest philosophical interest. And, certainly, art might turn to the would-be truths of theology, as in accord with Roger Bacon’s Opus Maius; but this has always devolved into the representation of religious beliefs.

Indeed, Hent de Vries reminds us of the turn to “religious and theological tropes.”2 He means this literally, I think. I applaud him for his tact and the precision it implies. For tropes, “figures of speech and thought,” the “rhetorical features” of religious and theological discourse (as de Vries’ careful wording has it) serve equivocally: on the one hand, a trope presents some determinable matter of fact or factual claim in a figurative way; on the other, it manifests an actual act or commitment or conviction the intentional import of which need not entail or even bear on the truth of what is actually said. (It might well be paradoxical, even self-contradictory, as de Vries

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1 See, for instance, Hent de Vries, Philosophy and the Turn to Religion (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

2 De Vries, Philosophy and the Turn to Religion, p. XII.