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DERRIDA AND THE RETURN OF RELIGION:
RELIGIOUS THEORY AFTER POSTMODERNISM

AFTER POSTMODERNISM WHAT DO WE SAY ABOUT THE "RELIGIOUS"? Do we have a "religion without religion," as John Caputo has suggested, or a distinctively "Derridean" religiosity—as well as a theology—that is manifesting in some quarters.[1] Or is something quite unanticipated—perhaps "unthought"—en route?

As a surfeit of scholarship has reminded us in recent years, the "postmodern turn" that began a quarter century ago has opened wide the question of "religion" in ways that were inconceivable a generation ago. As the prophet of postmodernism Jacques Derrida himself has spoken profusely, if not delphically, about the "return" of religion, as if the religious and the philosophical constituted some strange sort of subintelligible economy that has through the unyielding pressure of textual "deconstruction" slithered forth into the light of theory. The *religious* in Derrida turns out to be its own kind of supplement—not the supplement of writing, but the supplement of "Latinity."

What does Derrida mean by the "Latin" as a metonym for the "religious?" According to Derrida, the "Latin" is the word for the West. The Latin is what overreaches with its sumptuous signatures of power and meaning; it is a perfection of the organizational, a vast economy of codings as well as a "re-territorialized"—in Gilles Deleuze's sense—system of administration necessary for the expansion of a planetary socio-political apparatus. To be "religious" is to participate in an impersonal and invisible strategy of "pacification," toward which the Roman empire with its brutal politics of deportation and detribalization always strove. Today this detribalization proceeds not so much by the tramp of legions and the force of arms as by commerce, exchange, and communications technology. "Politics" depends on the mobilization of innum-

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[1] See, for example, Mark Dooley (ed.), *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2003) and Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (eds.), *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (London: Routledge, 2004).

erable, private aspirations and patterns of consumer behavior through a manufacture of "virtual" values and identities which, as Baudrillard tells us, are just as "real" and motivating as the old order of ideals.

In his essay "Faith and Knowledge" Derrida refers to this "postmodern" world historical movement as "globalatinization," the new "war of religion." "The field of this war or of this pacification is henceforth without limit: all the religions, their centers of authority, their religious cultures, states, nations or ethnic groups that they represent have unequal access, to be sure, but often one that is immediate and potentially without limit, to the same world market."[2] The "production" of religion goes hand in hand with "the pledge of faith, the guarantee of trustworthiness," that is necessary to underwrite the "fiduciary experience presupposed by all production of shared knowledge, the testimonial performativity engaged in all technoscientific performance as in the entire capitalistic economy indissociable from it."[3] As in Old Rome the notion of "religion" functions as an aggregate signifier for the "re-binding" (*re-ligio*) together of previously profuse and dissociated particularities of faith and devotion with their own indigenous, or "territorial," characteristics into a grand ideology of "unity in diversity," where the principle of integration is the divinization of the political—"emperor worship." If the term "postmodern" originally meant, as it did for Charles Jencks, the wild eclecticism and hybridization of architectural styles, it now connotes a market-driven syncretism on a global scale of religious simulacra that have long been stripped of their content, of their original "civic" implications.

But what is the agency that "rebinds" the simulacra of the gods in our New Rome, our post-Enlightenment imperium of techno-scientific rationality in which the religious returns?

According to Derrida, "religion today allies itself with tele-technoscience, to which it reacts with all its forces. It is, on the one hand, globalization; it produces, weds, exploits, the capital and knowledge of tele-mediatization; neither the trips and global spectacularizing of the Pope, nor the interstate dimensions of the "Rushdie affair," nor planetary terrorism would otherwise be possible, at this rhythm—and we could multiply such indications ad infinitum." But at the same time religion declares "war against that which gives it this new power only at the cost of dislodging it from all its proper places, *in truth from place itself*, from the *taking place* of its truth."[4] The new "war of religion" is between the "Enlightenment" force of globalization and "telemediatization" on the one hand

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[2] Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), 79.
[3] Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 79.
[4] Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 82.

and the "reactive" force of faith, which is a singularity and has its own "place of truth."

The new war of religion is a profound struggle between "faith" and "reason," but not in the classic sense at all. While the classic scuffle was between a doctrinal formulation of religious intuitions and revelations that could not be reconciled with either philosophical or "plain" experience, the new battle is between the techno-rationalizing "war machine" (Deleuze's phrase) that "de-territorializes" all significations of faith in the service of a global consumer *regnum* and the faith's own reactive violence. Faith defends its own, particular "situation" against the encroachments of this *regnum* by fighting for the purity and sanctity of its language and authority—a process that has come to be termed "fundamentalism." When these fundamentalisms, which have resisted encroachment—sometimes for generations—by carving out enclaves of belief and practice with entry signs that read "do not disturb," suddenly come under the constant and mounting pressure of "globalatinzation," they turn militant and aggressive. This kind of "reactivity" has proven especially potent in the "fundamentalization" of Islam, inasmuch as Islam historically, far more than the Church with its ideal of "Christendom", has opposed all "empires" with its own opposing *regnum*, the *dar al-islam,* or "house of Islam." Although Derrida for whatever reasons seems to avoid using the word "fundamentalism," he is without question assessing much the same phenomenon. "This peculiar 'religiosity' is obliged to ally the reactivity of the primitive and archaic return…*both* to obscurantist dogmatism *and* to hypercritical vigilance. The machines it combats by striving to appropriate them are also machines for destroying historical tradition. They can displace the traditional structures of national citizenship, they tend to efface both the borders of the state and the distinctive properties of languages."[5] They are "global" in their universalistic and anti-historical reach without any "Latin" tendency to assimilate and incorporate. Instead they become contrarian "war machines" of their own, riding roughshod over all historicity and cultural multiplicity and subtlety. The fundamentalist war machine is quintessentially a *jihad* of de-territorialized faith-nomads exploding, like the Islamic armies after the death of Mohammed, across the vast and crumbling empire of technoscientific rationality.

But what causes this war to happen in the first place? What sets off the fundamentalist-nomad explosion? Derrida answers the question by reviving Henri Bergson, whom we are beginning increasingly to identify as the "deep source" of postmodernism. In his *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Bergson traces the problem to the dichotomy within the experience of time itself, the

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[5] Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 92.

spatio-mechanistic, calculable sense of "clock time" (*temps*) and the "mystical", undivided movement of interior consciousness (*duree*). Although Derrida is highly elliptical and frequently confusing in his allusions to Bergson, his citation of *Two Sources* along with Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason* Alone as the two works that allow us to still "think religion in the daylight of today without breaking with the philosophical tradition" is extremely instructive. Both books are incidental reflections—much like Derrida's own essay on faith and knowledge—by seminal philosophers in the mature phase of their careers on the matter of the "religious."

More importantly, they are prospectuses on how to "think" the religious. The return of the religious is the occasion to think the religious. But the "phenomenon" of religion—that which *appears* as a conundrum for thinking—is invariably schizoid; it is a "double stratum" because of its "double source." The religious reveals itself as a "quasi-spontaneous automaticity, as irreflective as a reflex." It "repeats again and again the double movement of abstraction and attraction that *at the same time detaches and reattaches* to the country, the idiom, the literal or to everything confusedly collected today under the terms 'identity' or 'identitarian;' in two words, that which at the same time ex-propriates and re-appropriates, de-racinates and re-enracinates, *ex-appropriates* according to a logic that we will … have to formalize."[6]

Derrida's strangely "un-Derridean" discourse in this "inaugural" essay on faith is slyly recrafted, if not directly lifted, from Deleuze, who has bequeathed to us a "nomadological" analysis of philosophical change and the evolution of concepts derived from a metaphorized history of the millennial conflict between sedentary civilizations and wandering pastoral peoples. The "logic" Derrida references here is the same Deleuze unfolds in *A Thousand Plateaus.* Religion "returns" only because it is "rhizomic;" it is a constant pressure beneath the surface of the deep; its double sourcing becomes the *double sentencing* of what Deleuze understands as "territorialized" self-identity and "de-territorialized"—mobile or "nomadic"-signifiers that are in "flight" toward uncharted destinations in the history of thought. De-territorialization is what Derrida characterizes as "de-racination." The modern era of "Enlightenment" constitutes a progressive deterritorialization of the existential "situation" of faith, beginning with the eighteenth century critique of Christianity but enlarging itself through the colonial predations of Europe during the nineteenth century and culminating in the grand subsumption of all the world's "sacred" texts and traditions under the rubric of the "scientific," or theoretical, study of religion.

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6 Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 78.

The compression of "religiosity" within the "limits of reason alone" generates a reactivity that Kant himself grasped, but did not think through, as "radical evil." Radical evil, for Derrida as well as for Kant, is the pure disclosure of difference within the Enlightenment project. Yet this disclosure is only made possible by the "de-recination" of the faith-act of signification, by its "re-territorialization" as a conceptual item for analysis and comparison, or as a datum for "global theology." All "interfaith" initiatives, or global theological agendas, are efforts to smooth over the sharp edges of religious difference, to domesticate them and make them susceptible to techno-rational intervention. Our so-called "fundamentalisms" thus are not conservative, but genuinely revolutionary in their intention and thrust; altogether they constitute something much more than a collective, quasi-Freudian "return of the repressed" within the economy of global consciousness. All "fundamentalisms" are anathema to the partisans of Enlightenment because they connote a "de-territorialization" of those faith codings that had already been re-territorialized as the general concept of the "religious." They disclose the differencing that is ineradicable for the situation of faith. Their de-territorialization" is also a *de-Latinization,* a barbarian incursion across borders, a breaching of the *limina*.

A "postmodern theory" of religion is impossible, because the theory of the postmodern is impossible. As Hans Bertrens in his "history" of the postmodern has shown, the phrase has a broad extension. In effect, there are multiple "postmodernisms." Postmodernism, he argues, "is several things at once." In fact, Bertrens distinguishes as many as four "postmodernisms." It refers, first of all, to a complex of anti-modernist artistic strategies which emerged in the 1950s and developed momentum in the course of the 1960s."[7] These developments and strategies are confusing enough. But "at a second level of conceptualization we find similar confusions. Here postmodernism has been defined as the 'attitude' of the 'new sensibility' of the 1960s social and artistic avant-garde," a sensibility that is "eclectic" and "radically democratic," rejecting "the exclusivist and repressive character of liberal humanism and the institutions with which it identifes that humanism." According to Bertens, we may identify this phenomenon as a type of "political" postmodernism that was first identified in the mid-1960s by literary critic Leslie Fiedler.[8] Then in the 1970s postmodernism was absorbed into the stream of French post-structuralism. Bertrens names this movement "poststructuralist postmodernism," which in itself has two phases. The first "derives from Barthes and Derrida and is linguistic, that is, textual in its orientation," concentrating an attack on "foundationalist notions of language,

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[7]   Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.
[8]   Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 5.

representation, and the subject."[9]

The second "moment" in poststructuralist postmodernism "derives from Foucault and, to a much lesser, extent, Lacan. It belongs to the 1980s rather than to the 1970s, although it is difficult to pinpoint in appearance."[10] The focus of the second phase was on the "workings of power" and its relationship to the production and maintenance of knowledge. At this level much of the neo-Marxist or "cultural Marxist" rhetoric of political postmodernism in the 1960s, particularly its critique or unmasking of ideological postures and formations, became fused with the more "theoretical" innovations of French conceptual postmodernism. The long-standing domestic partnership between Marxist activism and the French intelligentsia contributed strongly to this trend. "Postmodernism," Bertens writes, "means and has meant different things to different people at different conceptual levels, rising from humble literary-critical origins in the 1950s to a level of global conceptualization in the 1980s."[11]

But if a postmodern theory of religion is impossible, a theory of religion after postmodernism is altogether conceivable. After postmodernism? Have we not reached the apogee of the postmodern turn? Has not the whole world turned "postmodern?" Since the expression "postmodern" connotes less a moment than a departure—a "line of flight" in Deleuze's sense—the sense of the "post-" or the "after" remains problematic. Since postmodernism itself can be considered an immanent sort of eschatology, proclaiming the "end" of all that went before it, a declaration about what comes "after" postmodernism is curious, to say the least. However, it is only "after postmodernism" that religious theory can be imagined, even if a prospectus for such a theory will take many generations to survey and tease out. Religious theory itself requires the "end" of postmodernism, because what has come to be regarded as "postmodernist theory" has not been able to emancipate itself from the Enlightenment project which both spawned and spurned it.

In many respects the era of postmodernism can be seen not as a new dawn or new era but as a shimmering and multi-hued sunset of the modernist period. Bertens ends his searching and detailed account of the emergence of the postmodernist theme by epitomizing it as the full manifestation of the deeper "contradictory" impulses of the Enlightenment. The spirit of the Enlightenment was always both "universalistic" and "anti-representational," according to Bertens. The universalistic thrust centered on advancing the radical ideals of democracy—"liberty, equality, and fraternity" (or sorority). Political

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[9]   Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 6.
[10] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 7.
[11] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 10.

postmodernism, therefore, leveraged this agenda in a multitude of ways, attempting "to make the Enlightenment live up to its promises."[12] A wide swath of ideological critiques with their own "revisionist" histories—feminism, ethnic historography, gay and lesbian studies, "post-colonial" writing *inter alia*—served to foster a theoretical framework for social and political "emancipation." Inherent in this method of ideological analysis was a powerful distrust of the classical theory of representation, which political thought after Marx instinctively understood as saturated with the "interests" of particular classes, groups, or "social formations."

Anti-representationalism or "deconstructionism", therefore, was born of the very "hermeneutics of suspicion" which the Enlightenment in its self-reflexive approach to philosophy, inaugurated by Descartes, had engendered. Anti-representationalism was motivated by the emancipatory ideal of the eighteenth century. Yet it came to be a two-edged sword that also undercut the universalistic claims of reason on which emancipatory politics was originally founded. The result was a politics of pure differentiation that could not brook any "theoretical" perspective that might somehow comprise a subtle hegemonic intrusion of one interest-driven party into the "cultural" sphere of the other. In the language of Levinas, the sign of same could under no circumstances be drawn across the face of the other. If the universalism of the Enlightenment had already been exposed in numerous instances as "false consciousness," the rough particularism that was the teleological outcome of the insuperable postmodernist *differend* was even more devastating. Postmodern theory, notes Bertens, "became myopically concerned with fragmentation,"[13] and the emancipatory function of postmodernist thought became self-limiting.

The impossibility of religious theory in the "postmodern" epoch is well-nigh self-evident. The anti-representational critique of all "grand theory" made its initial impact in the 1960s as the secession of "religious" from theological studies. While the separation was also propelled by an increasing tension between the "academic," as opposed to the "sectarian," approach to religion, the presumed universalism of the Christian faith, on which theology was based, met with increasingly militant skepticism. However, theology has always carried, and in some fashion continues to bear, the "theoretical" burden of religious studies. While philosophical, psychological, sociological, and anthropological research have all trafficked with the concept of the religious, it is theology alone that has internalized the aim of what was one termed the "science" of religion, even if its agenda was always preservationist or "apologetic" to varying degrees, seeking to

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[12] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 244.
[13] Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, 245.

uphold the primacy of a specific "discursive formation" that might at the same time be "confessionally" sound and "objectively" coherent. It is no accident that Kantianism, with its idea of the "synthetic a priori," which the neo-Kantians construed as implying a "religious a priori," mapped out the fundamental theoretical matrix in the nineteenth century for the academic study of religion. Religious theory at the outset was not easily distinguishable from theological thinking. With its notion of the "concrete universal," Hegelianism later gave impetus to the elaboration of both a non-dogmatic theological program that extended well into the twentieth century as well as the more comprehensive program of *Religionswissenschaf*t, which served as the framework for the theoretical analysis of religion.

The crisis of theory, on the other hand, can be traced to the collapse of the universalistic construct—and thus the pretension of *Wissenschaft*—under the pressures of de-colonialization. The proximity between the evolution of the "religious sciences" and the ideological reach of the European colonial administrations has been identified and discussed by an assortment of recent writers.[14] Charles Long has located the crisis historically with the rise and fall of the "Aryan myth," upon which we are finding the justification of colonialism to be far more dependent than the theology of Christian dominion. So much of religious "theory" harks back to the work of Max Müller, who by Long's reckoning developed an intricate "avowal of the Aryan myth" while pushing "his claims concerning the prestige of Sanskrit in general and…the Indo-European languages in particular," all the while attempting "to understand myth through an analysis of the history and evolution of language" and his "editing of non-Western 'sacred books.'"[15] The formalization of the principle of religious alterity through the writing of a "history of religions" over against Christian *Heilsgeschichte,* a position which the "postmodernist" takes as a given rather than a dilemma, actually has its origins in the "colonial" intention of discovering a racial and linguistic "depth grammar" for religious statements that can be considered either non-theological, or opaquely proto-theological. As Long points out, the earliest forays into the nascent field of "religious studies" were concentrated on philology. The discovery of a *root* language for Europeans led to the premise that beneath the basal syntax of the multifarious Indo-Aryan "dialects" lurked a hidden ethno-spirituality. The "Romantic *sensus communis* of language and style" ultimately led "to a *sensus numinous.*"[16]

At its parturition religious studies signaled, therefore, an "Aryanization" of the universalistic theology of Kant and the *Aufklärung*, which in Long's view

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[14] J. Z. Smith, etc.
[15] Charles H. Long, *Significations* (Aurora CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 1999), 85.
[16] Long, *Significations*, 22.

represented a counterblow of German Romanticism against the Enlightenment. German culture had been marginalized in eighteenth century letters, according to Long, and the "Aryan" innovation proved to be a comeuppance. German thought in the nineteenth century transformed Kantian "pure reason" into the historicist, perspectivalist, and ethno-particularist forms of "critical" rationality that are nowadays the benchmarks of stereotypical "postmodernism." Kant's "transcendental categories" become Weber's "ideal types"—empirical constructs regarding religious practices, traditions, and institutions as well as textual corpuses—that seem to differentiate the colonial experience of "cultural diversity" while more covertly managing to subsume them in their entirety as a concealed unity. This unity was not theological so much as it was *gnosiological*, and it gradually became codified in the deference of the Teutonophiles to the ancient Vedas, composed in the mother Aryan language of Sanskrit. The Vedas were believed to contain the cultural secrets of not only Nietzsche's nomadic "blonde beasts," but of religion as a pre-linguistic and archaic pressure within the economy of "civilized" signification, the "strangeness" (*unheimlichkeit*) that had been dispossessed, repressed, and expatriated by the Enlightenment, only to "return"—as Freud and Derrida would later tell us—in some indwelling, yet strictly eschatological or "messianic" sense. The Aryan mystique was popularized and "spiritualized," along with the corollary myth of Vedic profundity, of course, through the theosophical movement, which has generated its own long-held "anxiety of influence" for religious studies. The "Vedic" sign of the aboriginal and its imminent "return" is more than what Foucault would term an artifact of cultural *archaeology*. It is a sign of what Slavoj Žižek, borrowing from Lacan, terms "the real," or of the real "overflowing reality."

The return of the real is the key to what we "phenomenologically" envision as the "religious," because it is the fullness of half-forgotten and "repressed" remembrance as well as "ancestral" consciousness. Ancestral worship has multivalent significations, according to Žižek. Although Žižek is not very interested in the "religious" qua "religious," his effort to operationalize Lacan through a psycho-semiotic rendering of popular culture draws us intimately into the sphere of what theologically-derived theory understands as "religion." Žižek speaks not of religion, but of the "real." In a curious fashion fashion, the "real" is rendered as the "religious" through its formation in the Lacanian model as an overdetermined and excessive apparition of the signified. "The ambiguity of the Lacanian real," Žižek remarks, "is not merely a nonsymbolized kernel that makes a sudden appearance in the symbolic order, in the form of traumatic 'returns' and 'answers.' The real is at the same time contained in the very symbolic form: the real is *immediately rendered* by this form." Žižek says that in his seminar *Encore* Lacan "surprisingly *rehabilitates the notion of the sign,* of the sign conceived precisely in its opposition to the signifier, i.e., as preserving the

continuity with the real."[17] The articulation of signifiers reveals the impossibility of condensing the "real" into that order of articulation. Signifier coalesces into the "sign" which was heretofore "prediscursive" and its own form of transcendence, a pure *jouissance*, but now transumuted into "materialized enjoyment." The sign, as opposed to the hyperbolic, Zarathustrean dance of signification, and the "real" are conjugate in this sense with each other. The sign is neither "apophatic" nor "apophantic." It is a sudden "unveiling" (though in a quite ordinary manner), an *apocalypsis*. The Derridean "play" of signifiers are in truth merely an elaborate *foreplay* to the desperate consummation of desire in the sighting—or citing—of something bizarre, and completely "non-eidetic," that counts as "phenomenon." For Žižek, the difference between "modernism" and "postmodernism" is that the former preserves the modesty of philosophy. From Kant onward it refuses to reveal the "thing." "The lesson of modernism is that the structure, the intersubjective machine, works as well if the Thing is lacking, if the machine revolves around an emptiness, the postmodernist reversal shows *the Thing itself as the incarnated, materialized emptiness*." [18] The thing is the "black hole" in the cosmos of signification, always shadowing and ultimately swallowing up the symbolized "objects" of desire. *Das Ding* is always a "nondialecticizable, inert presence." It has always been there, but has remained barely noticed, chiefly because the "unconscious" has not properly formatted it. If we are to think "theologically" in a strained, Žižekian fashion, we will realize quickly that the "religious" with all our God-talk and ontological, or "me-ontological", patter is what we truly desire. But for Žižek that means a "secularization" of religious theory.

In Lacan the "real" returns not as it did for Freud, as the expression of hydraulically repressed instinct, nor as it seems to do for Derrida, as an "auto-immune" mechanism of pacifying, or "globo-Latinizing," the chaos of virulent archaisms. For Lacan the real returns as a syncopated rhythm involving the neo-natal and linguistic—or "symbolic"—registers. As was the case with Peirce, there can be no "thought," even in the psychoanalytical sense, without the triadic dynamism that we call signification. Lacan never developed, or attempted to develop, a "theory" of religion. Nor does Žižek, taken as a "cultural-theoretical" mouthpiece for Lacan, make such inaugural gestures.

Yet in blazing this trail we can begin with the Lacanian premise that all our theorizing must flow out of the movement of signifying praxis when language

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[17] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991), 39.

[18] *Looking Awry*, 144. For Žižek's investigation of this theme in terms of concrete, cultural analysis, see his chapter "The Wound is Healed Only by the Spear" in *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 165-99.

begins to reveal what filters through the screen of language, when the "negative" is disclosed not as Derrida's formalized "absent presence," but as the rupture of the real by the semiotic process. In this revealing rupture the real continues to "return" as the symbolic codes that overflow the logic of discourse, that immanently and interminably continue to *signify*. André Patsalides points out that by drawing on the Freudian rule of "free association" Lacanian analysis allows the unconscious to be structured progressively as an intricate and eminently fruitful language. "The more we speak inconsistently, the more we express and reveal our own desire."[19] Lacanian analysis is in reality a form of couch semiotics, an intersubjective eliciting of the signifying relationships, including the dyads, polarities, symmetries, axes, and "paradigmatic" as well as "syntagmatic" transformations that make the unconscious "objective" to both analyst and analysand. Both structuralism and post-structuralism have rightly recognized that meaning lies in the production of difference, in the generation of a negative logical space that becomes the occasion for the play of theory that is never totalizing, but always open-textured. Such a redistribution of logical values is analogous to the "dissemination" of esthetic values, especially luminosity, which began with Rembrandt and gave impetus to modernism in painting. It is the crucial project behind what Derrida later named "deconstruction." But structural analysis—or even the kind of radical historicization and temporalization of structural analysis that characterizes the post-structuralist movement—comes up short when we are confronted with the task of religious theory. The reason is simple. Religious theory on the grander scale we envision requires a de-textualization of religion, a departure from the "grammatological" model which Derridism ironically has engraved with invisible ink and to which the classic theological and hermeneutical disciplines have always been joined at the hip. Negative theology remains theology, because even the search for dark windows positioned throughout the text cannot be separated from the text.

What would a de-textualization of the "concepts" of religion involve? By no means can it amount to a return to the social sciences, particularly the sorts of "anthropological," or typological studies, that sprung up in the late nineteenth century as a way of coding the bureaucratic information and intelligence data of Europe's colonial empires and that finally reached a critical mass, jump-starting the growth of the field of "religious studies" over a generation ago. The tension between the empiricism and sociological positivism of the so-called "human sciences" and the self-regarding and in many respects *self-referential* tendencies of theological inquiry must be overcome, although few have attempted to confront, let alone, take on the challenge. The custom of dismissing "theology" out of hand

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[19] `André Patsalides and Kareen Ror Malone, "Jouissance in the Cure," in *The Subject of Lacan: A Lacanian Reader for Psychologists* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 130.

by specialized scholars of religion has never had the consequences intended. Instead of promoting a habit of theoretical inquiry, it has reinforced a methodological naiveté as well as an extreme crazy-quilt of subdisciplinary priorities and topics with hardly any consciousness of the broader and more momentous question of religion in this era of "globo-Latinzation." One of the major problems with a balkanized field of religious studies is that it proves to be powerless in the face of a planetary "return of religion" in a globo-political sense. In all fairness to Derrida, his efforts to raise the more encompassing "religious" question cannot be construed as any kind of preface to theory. The Capri conversations have been overemphasized by many theological admirers of Derrida starved for some set of cues that will carry them into the realm of religious discourse in a more concrete manner than John D. Caputo offered in his ground-breaking work on Derrida's "spirituality"—what the former felicitously dubbed "religion without religion."

Like Deleuze before him and a majority of French post-structuralists, Derrida has, and acknowledges, a serious debt to Bergson. Derrida makes the point about Bergson as a starting point in asking what it would mean to "think religion." "To hold that religion is properly thinkable, and even thinking is neither seeing, nor knowing, nor conceiving, is still to hold it in advance in respect; thus, over short or long, the affair is decided."[20] Derrida goes on to say that his project for "thinking religion" is drawn from the "famous conclusion of the *Two Sources*," the memorable words that "the essential function of the universe…is a machine for the making of gods."[21] In his advancement of the metaphor of the religious "machine," Derrida is of course playing on Bergson's intuition of a mystical machine that would overcome all techno-scientific mechanism and defeat all forms of modernist materialism, including dialectical materialism. He is also transposing into the post-structuralist idiom the early Heidegger's dictum that in an age of alienation and "dehumanization" along with the absorption of metaphysics by the techno-scientific attitude "only a god can save us." And he is building on Deleuze and Guittari's metaphor of the "desiring machine" that they introduce in the post-structuralist assault on Oedipus as a metonym for the techno-logico-materialist repression of the richness of the imaginal. Contra Deleuze and Guitarri, it is not the instinctual but the religious that implies the ultimate desiring machine. Religion is inherently "machinic," as the phenom-enon of a technology-driven, worldwide resurgence of fundamentalism indicates. A machinelike reactivity to the machine is as "automatic (and thus machinal) as life itself. Such an internal splitting, which opens distance, is also peculiar or 'proper' to religion, appropriate religion for the 'proper' …

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[20] Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 77.
[21] Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 77.

appropriating religious indemnification to all forms of property, from the linguistic idiom in its 'letter,' to blood and soil, to family and the nation."[22]

The Capri conversations are maddeningly disjointed and "errant", and they underscore Derrida's attempt to struggle with a subject that in many ways is more daunting than previous efforts to "deconstruct" the discursivity of Western philosophy. He is, in effect, reviving the late Heideggerian project of rethinking the destiny of Being through technology, but in this context the question of ontology becomes the question of religion. Religion's "resurgence" in the world (*déferlement*), Derrida insists, is bound up with the technological transformation and convergence of societies, cultures, nations and tokens of communication and exchange. It is like a wave that builds and gathers momentum from its resistance. "Religion today allies itself with tele-technoscience, to which it reacts with all its forces. It is, on the one hand, globalizaton; it produces, weds, exploits the capital and knowledge of tele-mediation."[23] The "resurgence" of religion, therefore, is not the same as *retour*, or recurrence. It is neither an archaic revival nor a counterpraxis to the trend toward "secularization." It amounts to a formidable synergy between the power of the "real" in the deeper Lacanian sense and a "globo-Latinized" communications and control system which Derrida described somewhat unfelicitiously as "tele-mediation." This tele-mediated religiosity is what social theorists have misnamed religious "fundamentalism." The historical notion of fundamentalism implies a preoccupation with the literality of the sacred text, a concern that only arose in the West from the Enlightenment onward because of the epistemological conflicts generated by the struggle between natural philosophy and dogmatic supernaturalism. As historians of religion are beginning to notice, the *fundamentalisms* that are now springing up in other faith traditions have less to do with their Christian counterparts than meets the eye. Although Derrida's discourse has scant historicist subtlety, it strikes right into the solar plexus of religious theory, inasmuch as it identifies the anomalous affinity of postmodern religiosity for networks and rhizomes of communicative action surpassing the purely textual. For that reason the Capri conversations point toward a whole new *modus vivendi* for religious theory that is neither textualist nor crypto-textualist. It is ironic that the gestation of this approach would come out of Derridean textualism. In putting forth the trope of "resurgence," Derrida is acknowledging the severe limitations of his previous "khoric" meditations as well as the ultimate inconsequentiality of his own theologically popular program of postmodernist apophaticism.

The Capri conversations can, of course, be compared with Derrida's meditations

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[22] Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 81.
[23] Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 82.

on religion in *The Gift of Death*. While the Capri conversations plot out the curious reciprocity of the symbolical and the real in the genesis of the religious, *The Gift of Death* underscores the incommensurability of finite and infinite through the concept of faith as *responsibility,* a uniquely "European" innovation constituting a tradition "that consists of proposing a nondogmatic doublet of dogma, a philosophical and metaphysical doublet, in any case a *thinking* that 'repeats' the possibility of religion without religion."[24] The origin of such a "religion without religion", which Caputo assigns to Derrida's own distinctive "postmodern" religiosity,[25] is Kierkegaard's "knight of faith," who bears the infinite demand of the *tout autre* to sacrifice his only son, the heir to the promise, in contravention of the ethical universal. The well-known Kierkegaardian leap of faith as a gesture of pure singularity in "fear and trembling"—and hence by Derrida's reckoning as the threshold of categorical responsibility to both God as *mysterium tremendum* and the genuine non-Kantian, and non-Hegelian, "ethical" relationship to the other in Levinas' sense—is at the same time without mediation of any type, including the meditation of history. It is the "logic" of pure interiority, the "secret truth of faith as absolute responsibility and as absolute passion."[26] The "secret" of faith—an instrinsically "European" innovation as far as Derrida is concerned—contrasts with the pagan mysteries, with orgiastic absorption and rapture, as well as with the "Platonic" codes of representation and their dialectical assize. It is the Christian cipher to what messianically calls us beyond the traditions of theology and philosophy. The unspoken in Western thinking is not the unthought thought of Being, as it is for Heidegger, but what can be adduced by considering the sign of Moriah, Abraham in his inarticulate and unaccountable trek up the mountain. All attempts at deconstructing the texts of Western thought converge upon this sign. The uniquely theological supplement for all these texts does not inhere in a sort of open-ended grammatological intervention or operation, as it does for the early Derrida, but in the *crux* of all representations, in the moment of sacrifice, in the "gift of death" that Nietzsche understood as the reversal, if not the transversal, of the orgiastic—what Derrida terms the "Christian 'repression.'" What Nietzschean and all other overdetermined readings of Christian history miss, according to Derrida, is the recognition that the all-too-familiar metanararative that might be termed the "history of the faith" is not so much a symptomatology of impotence and rage, or *ressentiment*, as it is a meteor impact creating a grand instability within the grand economy of signs that we call Western religion and metaphysics. The so-called "death of God" is really this gift of death, the gift of the Cross as a sign that the infinite gift cannot be exchanged or *idolized*.

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[24] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), 49.

[25] See John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1997).

[26] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 80.

What Derrida has actually discovered in broad compass, if not at a "globo-theoretical" level, is the pervasive role of the *paradoxical* quality, in Kiekergaard's sense, of faith as the de-constituting sign, as the grand *de-sign* within the economy of all "world religions." In other words, through his deconstruction of the texts of religion as the interiority of faith, Derrida introduces the power of the "semiotic" into any future religious theorizing. Derrida's *khora* is a transitional term in the movement from the "negative theology" deconstructionism to a full-fledged semiotics of religion. Lacanian semiotics was always limited by its self-defined psychoanalytical application. And Žižek's cultural Lacanianism has always been tethered to a not-so-concealed political as well as polemical agenda.

After postmodernism, religious theory must turn the strategy of difference into a global analysis of sign-distinctions, sign-functions, sign-dynamics, sign-relations, and full-scale sign-movements and sign-transpositions. The semiotic enterprise is not at all new. In the context of cultural theory it has reached a kind of impasse because of its inability to disclose the fecundity and mobility of the signifying complexes and domains of culture with the same precision and consistency which, starting with Peirce and evolving through Saussure and Hjelmslev, it translated formal or mathematical logic into syntactical substitutions and correlations. But the semiotic imperative can, and must, gain new life with the opening of the new "territory" of religious theory. Religious theory in the future will be viewed in deference to "religious studies" and "religious thought" as what psychoanalysis in the twentieth century was to philosophical psychology and earlier genres of empirical psychology. In short, it will chart a topography of metaphors, terms, paradigms, and syntagms that include broad-scale codings of written tradition and observed moral, ritual, and other symbolic practices as well as the interpenetration of these singular tokens by cultural wave forms that can be identified and schematized, if not ultimately resolved conceptually. The "postmodern condition" is not really a form of historicity; it is but a colorful carnival of multi-cultural and polymodal ways of rhetorically scoping and visualizing the virtual interplay of transient, global artifactualities and viralities, of media and communications, and of their distinctive signifying processes and intensities with accelerating events around the planet. In his cumbersome, yet trenchant survey of the history of philosophy, John Deely describes the slow and incremental emergence of a distinctively "semiotic" postmodernism. "For postmodern times and the immediate future of philosophy, the clear and central task is to come to terms with a 'universe perfused with signs' [Peirce], if not composed exclusively of them."[27]

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[27] John Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2001), 742.

After postmodernism, and after Derrida, religious theory must begin to move in the same direction.

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