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THE DECONVERSION OF HENT DE VRIES

“... and if God was an *effect of the trace*?”

—Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*

A review of Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2002); ISBN: 0-8018-6768-1; 424 pp.; \$64.00 (cloth) / \$27.00 (paper); and *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005); ISBN: 0-8018-8017-3; 760 pp.; \$65.00 (cloth) / \$24.95 (paper).

HENT DE VRIES HAS BEEN AT WORK FOR SOME TIME on issues of religion in relation to contemporary philosophy. To date he has written three lengthy books and co-edited two volumes of essays on the topic.¹ After the events of September 11, 2001, the humanities and social sciences have witnessed a strong resurgence of the interest in contemporary and historical religious phenomena and theological debates. Thus, de Vries is certainly right when he writes in the preface to his study on *Religion and Violence*—published within months of the attacks that aimed, among other things, at Western secularism—that “religion is crucial to the reassessment of recent debates concerning identity and self-determination, the modern nation-state and multiculturalism, liberal democracy and immigration, globalization and the emergence of new media, the virtualization of reality and the renegotiation of the very concept of the ‘lifeworld,’ to say nothing of the technologies of ‘life’” (xi). Evidently, religious matters can no longer, and perhaps could never, be confined to designated religious practices or the scholarly discipline of theology. On the

¹ De Vries’s books are: *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999); *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002); and *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno & Levinas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005). An earlier version of *Minimal Theologies* was published in German as *Theologie im pianissimo: Zur Aktualität der Denkfiguren Adornos und Levinas* (Kampen, Neth.: J.H. Kok, 1989). Samuel Weber is the co-editor of the two essay collections *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) and *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001). The present essay responds to *Religion and Violence* and, to a lesser extent, *Minimal Theologies*.

contrary, as de Vries argues, “[t]his body of knowledge was always parasitic upon—and shot through with—notions that resonate with the larger culture” (ibid.). Of particular concern in this context are “incompletely secularized theologico-political elements” (ibid.) that remain effective in many seemingly secular institutions and policies.

However, as de Vries makes clear immediately, his project is not about ferreting out some pertinacious religious remainders in the deep recesses of contemporary society only to neutralize them once and for all and install the light of reason in these dark caves. Although he readily concedes that neither a naïve, “unreflecting faith ... nor onto-theology seems an option still available to ‘us,’” he insists on the need for a “turn to religion” (xii). Before examining de Vries’s alternative, one might want to consider for a moment to whom the “us” in scare quotes is meant to refer. What is held at bay here? Who is this “we” that is not, apparently, really a “we”? Are we to understand the use of the quotation marks as indicating an ironic intention? Are “we” to add a silent qualifier as “we” read this “us”? And what exactly is the qualification that would be imposed on the comprehensive and inclusive pronoun in the first person plural? In light of the fact that neither onto-theology nor pure faith seem to have lost their currency in the real world, are “we” to assume that de Vries directs his observations merely to “us” in the West or perhaps even more restrictively to “us” intellectuals in the academy, who know better? At the very least, the scare quotes indicate that there is no “we” that can be taken for granted when it comes to matters of religion. In spite of its etymology that stresses its inherent connectivity, religion, then, will have been a divisive power first and foremost.

Or are we to read de Vries’s “we” in the sense of a “we” *to come*? A community of those who will have left behind their investments in dogmatic faith and onto-theology and will have become ready for de Vries’s alternative? After all, as de Vries insists, a “plausible approach to religion” ought not “to transpose this topic to current debates in an unreflecting manner” (xiii). There lies a certain difficulty—even obscurity—in this phrase. It is not entirely clear whether such a transposition of the topic in question would actually concern merely the plausibility of the approach to religion or religion in its entirety. Of course, it may be generally true that transpositions executed “in an unreflecting manner” can at best be hit-or-miss affairs. Nevertheless, it is of some consequence whether de Vries means to put into question the idea that a plausible approach to religion makes for a suitable topic of current debates—that is, debates that take place in the public sphere and are thus open to virtually all comers—or whether he would like to exclude religion *tout court* from such debates. The former option would appear more intuitive: De Vries’s “plausible approach” surely would have to be measured against the standards of theology and philosophy. The latter option, by contrast, is more controversial: Religion as such would be declared a topic not suitable for common, quotidian debates. In fact, the plausibility of an approach to religion would increase the further removed from such debates it would be.

Be that as it may, either reading brings to the fore de Vries's insistence on a certain distance between the object of study, religion, and the standpoint from which it is studied. At the same time, he proclaims rather strongly the philosophical impossibility of ever escaping the long shadow of religion and theology. "The turn to religion" as envisioned by de Vries, amounts to "an attempt to situate oneself *at once* as closely as possible to *and* at the furthest thinkable remove from the tradition called the religious" (xiii). In short, de Vries hopes to engineer a direct encounter between philosophy and religion that would let the reader perceive their extreme closeness—just short of complete resemblance—that nonetheless indicates a minimal difference that makes all the difference.

It would thus seem safe to state that de Vries's "turn to religion" is not the philosophical analogue of conversion. Rather, it is a sort of *deconversion*. A conversion that suddenly swerves away from its own path or a frontal encounter that always ends up sideways, this turn is not restricted to turning towards its transcendent aim. It becomes itself subject to a mode of turning—to the point of vertigo, where all conversions are merely versions of, and perhaps even diversions from, religion. In a word, de Vries's "turn to religion" is intended as an always already deconstructed version of conversion.

The focus of de Vries's inquiry in *Religion and Violence* is the relation of "religious notions and theologemes whose theoretical and practical importance has become more and more evident in recent decades, in the wake of a certain Enlightenment," to the concept of violence (xv). At issue are notions as far apart as the "*horror religiosus*," of which Kierkegaard speaks when commenting on the sacrifice of Isaac, Kant's "radical evil," and "the worst" [*le pire*] in Derrida's sense. The general purpose is twofold. On the one hand, de Vries aims at demonstrating why, "in questions of ethics and politics, the religious ... *must matter at all*" (xvii). On the other hand, he wants to analyze why this "permanence of the theologico-political" (de Vries quotes Claude Lefort here) is inevitably tied to the question of violence.

One potential difficulty of de Vries's wide-ranging study becomes apparent early on. His notion of "violence" is extremely comprehensive. He has in mind not just empirical acts of violence but also a sort of metaphysical or noumenal "violence" (about which he does not and, *sensu stricto*, cannot tell us very much). According to de Vries, "any cause, any justified or illegitimate force, that is exerted—physically or otherwise—by one thing (event or instance, group or person, and, perhaps, word and object) on another" qualifies as "violence" (*ibid.*). The main problem of de Vries's ambitious investigation, however, may well be its very ambition. He is intent on clarifying "the analytical and normative elements that determine the nature of cultural diversity in relation to the practices and imperatives of sociopolitical cohesion, its limits, and its internal contradictions, spelling out the philosophical or, more broadly, theoretical underpinnings of the

pivotal concepts of culture, identity, difference, and integration" (18f.)—a tall order by any measure.

Of the two goals that de Vries announces at the outset of his study, the first one—namely, making the claim plausible that in matters of ethics and politics, the religious must matter—seems by far the more important to me. This is mainly due to the fact that de Vries's second goal, his attempt to "substantiate" (xvii) that violence is necessarily bound up with the theologico-political, would seem but a truism in light of his extremely inclusive definition of violence.² In order to bring de Vries's impressive erudition to bear on this problem, it would be necessary to draw distinctions between different types of violence. Clearly, as Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" illustrates, this is anything but an easy task.

This leaves us with the question concerning an inescapable religious remainder at work in ethics and politics, at least—or perhaps especially—in the Western tradition. Is it surprising to find evidence for this implication in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*? Or in Carl Schmitt's work, particularly his *Political Theology*? Or in Benjamin and Levinas? The only plausible answer to all of these questions is a resounding "not really"—which leaves Kant as the last major character standing among de Vries's *dramatis personae*. To put it differently, one might ask why de Vries decided to base his case concerning the mutual implication of religion and the political mainly on thinkers who emphatically insisted on this very dynamic. This is not to say that de Vries's readings are not in their own right compelling and frequently highly original. However, in light of the texts that de Vries chose for his project, one must ask whether his book on *Religion and Violence* really has a thesis that is worth proving. Would it have been possible to make the same case on the basis of, say, Machiavelli, Voltaire, and Nietzsche, all of whom de Vries quotes in passing? Are they less representative of "the Western tradition" than the thinkers he prefers to read at length? To be sure, the issue here is not which thinkers de Vries chooses to study. He is of course entitled to his preferences. What is in question, however, is whether de Vries's readings, no matter how original and ingenious they may be, constitute a reliable sample to draw conclusions concerning the entire "history of Western thought" (370), as he is wont to do.

It must also be said that de Vries occasionally tends to resort to rather forced readings in order to make plausible the theological residue or remainder in or to the side of all forms of reason. The cases I have in mind are not minor figures in de Vries's densely populated and multi-layered plot. On the contrary, they concern the two philosophers he quotes and reads more extensively than any other (with the exception of Levinas): Jacques Derrida and Immanuel Kant. Derrida, de Vries's declared model, is turned into a Levinasian of sorts, while

² As Derrida points out, Levinas too, draws his inspiration from "the legitimate truism" that "history is violence"; see "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1978), 79-153, 117.

Kant has to undergo a rather problematic quasi-deconstructive reading that is meant to show a pervasive religious strand in his entire practical (and possibly even his theoretical) philosophy. Ultimately, the problem of de Vries's readings of Kant—and, to a lesser degree, of Derrida—is that their results have the appearance of consciously or perhaps unconsciously predetermined conclusions.

For all the reasons mentioned, the decisive part of de Vries's argument is doubtless the lengthy first chapter of *Religion and Violence* that takes issue with Kant's philosophy of religion, especially with the notions of religious tolerance and the autonomy of reason. Clearly, de Vries intends to lay the foundation for his overall argument in these pages. The chapter promises a thorough investigation of the problematic of secularization via the work of Kant, no doubt the most prominent representative of the Enlightenment. To be sure, Kant's writings on religion are not merely of historical interest. And even though he published them quite late in his career as a philosopher, they are much more than mere post-critical afterthoughts. Rather, Kant's contributions to the philosophy of religion mark a thoroughgoing and systematic critique of the claims of religion that any attempt to establish even the partial validity of "[t]his body of knowledge" (xi) must address. At this point, we should perhaps keep in mind that Kant, unlike de Vries, would not have used the term "knowledge" in connection with religious claims.

The long opening chapter on Kant plus the subsequent shorter treatments of specific Kantian issues throughout the book are not only the most promising parts of *Religion and Violence*, they also provide the red thread of de Vries's argument. Moreover, the passages on Kant give the most complex answer to the question concerning the precise relations that obtain between religion, ethics, and politics, and they promise an engaging reading of some of Kant's important writings on politics and religion, which have received considerably less scholarly attention than the canonical *Critiques*.

Early on, de Vries states that Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* expands on the conflict between the sovereignty of the state and reason, which Kant outlined in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, "by situating it in a larger context: that of the development of the moral principle and of moral religion in the history of humankind as a whole" (7). This statement is misleading. Elsewhere in his argument, de Vries mentions that Kant's book on religion was published in 1793. *The Conflict of the Faculties* was published only in 1798. It was the last book published during Kant's lifetime (not counting lecture notes). To be sure, de Vries's momentary lapse consists not merely in jumbling the chronology of Kant's works. The stakes are higher. His claim regarding an expansion of "the conflict" ignores much of the historical evidence that sheds light on Kant's motivation in writing the two texts in question. Furthermore, it runs counter to the systematic development of Kant's philosophy of history. The rudimentary historical narrative contained in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*

marks a stage between its precursors in the "Idea" essay of 1784 and the "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" of 1786 and the novel account contained in the second "conflict" under the title "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" Talk about an "expansion" of the "conflict" between "the political and freedoms of thought and of speech" ignores that Kant's political commitment actually becomes *more concrete* in his last book, and that, in light of the regressive political developments he had witnessed for several years, he worries about a secure institutional space where a somewhat curtailed public sphere could survive even under less than conducive circumstances. Finally, de Vries's slip indicates that he underestimates the importance of the fact that Kant was seriously censored after the publication of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Kant had to give an official promise that he would not publish on the topic of religion again. Only the unexpected death of Frederick William II made it possible for Kant to send the *Conflict of the Faculties* to press. This explains why he adamantly insists on the institutional autonomy of philosophy, traditionally the "lower faculty," and why he goes to great lengths in the first "conflict" to reject the pretensions of certain dogmatic theologians and even insists on erecting a "wall" (Ak 7:24) between them and the territory of reason.³

In light of de Vries's interest in the connections between religion and violence, a sustained reading of Kant's experience with, and reaction to, the Prussian censors would have provided a highly informative case study that could have served as a focus for many of de Vries's concerns. Instead, de Vries offers a reading that rehearses a number of arguments from two of Derrida's perceptive essays on Kant, "Mochlos; or, The Conflict of the Faculties" and "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' Within the Limits of Mere Reason."

Following Derrida closely, de Vries claims that in Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*, "the interrogation at stake [in the act of instituting the university] precedes or exceeds the logical space opened by the demarcations within which, according to a widely accepted view, beginning with Kant, the university is supposed to function" (22). Derrida points out in "Mochlos" that there is no foundation beyond the foundation and that "[a]n event of foundation can never be comprehended merely within the logic that it founds."⁴ However, neither he nor de Vries recognize that Kant appears to be fully aware of the paradox—a paradox that also emerges, not coincidentally, in Kant's utterances regarding the possibility and justification of revolution. To state that for Kant the *essence* of the university is philosophy ("Mochlos" 26) is therefore too static, too disciplinary a

³ References to Kant are to the volume and page number of the authoritative *Akademieausgabe*, except in the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where I adopted the standard practice of citing the page numbers of the A and B (that is, first and revised second) editions. Quotations from the first *Critique* are taken from Norman Kemp Smith's translation; all other translations are from the Cambridge edition of Kant's works.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Mochlos," *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1992) 1-34, 30.

view. On the contrary, I would claim that Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*—unlike the foundational texts concerning the university by Fichte, Humboldt, Schleiermacher, and Schelling—does precisely not ponder the university's "essence and its destination in terms of responsibility, with a stable reference to the one idea of knowledge, technology, the state and the nation" ("Mochlos" 8). Instead, Kant stresses the lucky coincidence that has brought about the current form of the university—a coincidence, to be sure, that is paralleled and doubled by the "happy event" (Ak 7:10) of a change in government that has brought more enlightened politicians than the recently deceased Frederick William II and his censors to power. Nonetheless, this coincidence is not entirely coincidental. Kant argues on the contrary that it is based "on an idea of reason (such as that of a government) which is to prove itself practical in an object of experience (such as the entire field of learning at the time)." In such cases, Kant continues, we can safely infer "that the experiment was made according to some principle contained in reason, even if only obscurely" (Ak 7:21). As in the case of political institutions, Kant perceives in the historical institution of the university the expression of a "felt need" on the part of the founding government, which thereby "managed to arrive *a priori* at a principle of division which seems otherwise to be of empirical origin, so that the *a priori* principle happily coincides with the one now in use"; however, Kant adds wryly—again in close parallel to his view of political realities—that "this does not mean that I shall advocate it as if it had no faults" (*ibid.*).

The main point de Vries derives from Derrida concerns the logical status of the law of foundation as being ahead of, or coming before, the applicability of reason. Kantian transcendental critique amounts to a "self-knowledge" of reason. This task requires, as Kant famously declared in the first preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the "institution of a tribunal" [*einen Gerichtshof einzusetzen*] (A xi)—a tribunal in which reason is at the same time the judge and the object under investigation. It is a pronounced need or, in the words of the preface, "a call addressed to reason" [*eine Aufforderung an die Vernunft*] (*ibid.*) to which Kant's critique *qua* self-critique of reason responds. On these grounds, de Vries believes himself entitled to state that Kant's philosophy is "merely the repetition, or reiteration, of an age-old response to what is ... an immemorial call" (23). Such a reading neglects that Kant concludes his *magnum opus*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with an account of the history of pure reason. Moreover, it also neglects that the call or *Aufforderung* that Kant has in mind, and which could be rendered better as "summons," "request," "demand," or even "invitation," is precisely not just some unnamed "immemorial call." On the contrary, the summons comes in the shape of a strange "indifference" [*Gleichgültigkeit*] (A x) that was characteristic of much philosophy in Kant's day and age. Kant argues that this indifference is historically specific. It was caused by the frustration of the desire to free metaphysics from dogmatism and put it on its own secure footing. Kant adds: "And now, after all methods [*alle Wege*], so it is believed [*wie man sich überredet*] have been tried and found wanting, the prevailing mood is that of weariness and complete *indifferentism*—the mother, in all sciences, of chaos and night, but

happily in this case the source, or at least the prelude, of their approaching reform and restoration [*aber doch zugleich der Ursprung, wenigstens das Vorspiel einer nahen Umschaffung und Aufklärung derselben*]” (A x).

Three points are remarkable in this statement: First of all, there is a strong resonance between this passage and the concluding chapter of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that examines the “history of reason.” Only a few lines before the *Critique* ends, Kant states, not without a certain triumphant satisfaction: “The *critical path* [*Der kritische Weg*] alone is still open” (A 856/ B 884)—his response to the mistaken but common belief, cited in the first preface, that “all methods [or paths] ... have been tried and found wanting.” Apparently Kant did not think that he was merely reiterating or repeating “an age-old response to what is ‘in truth’ or apparently—that is to say, phenomenologically—an immemorial call.” At most, one might claim that the letter of Kant’s text does not exclude a reading that would aim at establishing that the “call” or “demand” has persisted since times immemorial. However, even such a reading would have to dwell on the question whether this “call” would take the same appearance throughout history. That does not seem likely since reason has its own history.

My second point concerns Kant’s implicit evaluation of the belief that all methods have indeed been tried. The German original makes clear that this is not a well-founded belief at all. Rather, those who hold this belief do so merely because they allowed themselves to be persuaded of its veracity. Strictly speaking, as the German reflexive verb indicates, they persuaded themselves—that is, they wanted to believe what they have come to believe. Nonetheless, it must be said that their belief is not wholly irrational. Their conclusion is correct for all methods, except one—a method, moreover, that had not been discovered before Kant. In other words, the conviction or belief that so many philosophers in Kant’s time held, is correct insofar as it refers to all previous paths of philosophy. This negative conclusion is informative—a point that is also apparent in Kant’s discussion of the history of reason. However, what Kant elsewhere calls “the need of reason” is not thereby met. On the contrary, this need or demand or call will continue to make itself heard. That alone is a clear sign for Kant that the flight into “indifferentism” (or radical skepticism) cannot be a satisfactory philosophical answer. That is why reason’s pressing need must be addressed again and this time differently: namely, as a critique of reason by reason.

Third, this also explains why Kant calls this type of indifferentism “the source, or at least the prelude, of the approaching reform and restoration” of the sciences. The German original of Norman Kemp Smith’s phrase “reform and restoration” is “*Umschaffung und Aufklärung*.” Kant thus refers verbatim to the “Enlightenment”; “restoration” turns this not-so-hidden political reference on its head. In addition, the expression “*Umschaffung*” should probably not be reduced to “reform.” It contains the strong echo of a hands-on experience, of reworking or refounding something that is already given in a certain shape or form. It

should be clear to any reader of the *Conflict of the Faculties* that Kant propagates exactly the same approach when it comes to refounding the old institution of the university.

De Vries poses an important question concerning the particular task of the so-called higher faculties, theology, law, and medicine. He asks whether it is their function to “guarantee the distinction, made by Kant in ‘Was ist Aufklärung?’ (‘What is Enlightenment?’) between the ‘private’ and ‘public’ use of one’s own reason and freedom?” (34) Although de Vries’s question is of great importance, one cannot help noticing that his casual equation of reason and freedom is misleading in this context. The issue at stake concerns the degree of freedom in the use of one’s reason. Perhaps it would have been helpful to point out that Kant in his essay of 1784 gives the terms “private” and “public” an idiosyncratic inflection. Whenever an explicitly or implicitly defined particular community is addressed, the use of reason in question concerns only a limited amount of people or, in Kant’s words, “a domestic gathering” and is therefore “merely a *private use*” (Ak 8:38). Thus, a priest addressing his flock speaks in private, according to Kant’s definition, as does a civil servant who speaks in his role as civil servant. In either case, the words are not addressed to the general enlightened public but only to a particular, limited group. Reason is used publicly if the subject of a statement speaks merely as a rational subject without being encumbered by any such limitations.

The Conflict of the Faculties, de Vries notes, does not reenact the operative distinction of the “Enlightenment” essay but instead introduces a whole series of refinements and amendments. In 1798, unlike in 1784, Kant names a concrete institution—namely, the university—as the site of rational discourse. This is not a mere theoretical change of direction. Rather, Kant’s own experience of censorship is decisive. After all, the first few pages of *The Conflict* cite in full the threatening letter Kant received in the name of the Prussian king in 1794 as well as Kant’s rather sly answer. De Vries does not appreciate the significance of this paratext.⁵ It can be argued, however, that it determines how the entire *Conflict* is to be read. Kant replaces the earlier binary opposition of “private” and “public” with a complex scale of different levels between these two poles. Only the philosopher speaks truly to an educated general public. The scholars of the higher faculties are more limited insofar as the state has an interest in matters of religion, law, and medicine and how they are taught. Yet these scholars have the freedom to research and debate contested points within the confines of the academy. In contrast, the actual “practitioners” [*Geschäftsleute*] of the higher faculties are bound by state regulations that pertain to their respective professions.

Throughout the *Conflict*, Kant reflects in great detail on the relationship and

⁵ I use the term “paratext” in Gérard Genette’s sense; see his *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).

interaction between reason and power, between intellectuals and representatives of the state. The establishment of an institution that safeguards reason is of the highest importance to him precisely because reason as such possesses merely the negative power of critique; it has no executive authority. Raw power—such as the king’s threat of “unfailingly unpleasant measures” [*unfehlbar unangenehmer Verfügungen*] (Ak 7:6)—trumps even the best rational argument, as Kant learned the hard way in 1794. However, rather than simply becoming an apologist for the powerful, as is sometimes claimed (and as de Vries seems to imply on occasion), Kant carefully designed a place where reason would find shelter even in difficult times: his university of reason.⁶

In Jacques Derrida’s estimation this Kantian university is “an uninhabitable edifice” (“Mochlos” 12). In fact, Derrida is “unable to decide whether it is in ruins or simply never existed, having only ever been able to shelter the discourse of its non-accomplishment” (ibid.). Strictly speaking, this description applies to the tentative status of any “regulative idea,” as the relevant passages in the transcendental dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 669/ B 697-A 703/ B 731) make clear. Here then, we get an early glimpse of Derrida’s adamant insistence in his late writings that his notion of the “im-possible”—that, which “must remain (in a non-negative fashion) foreign to the order of my possibilities”⁷—is not a Kantian regulative idea, regardless of how similar it may look at first glance. Instead, the “im-possible” is, as Derrida continues, “most undeniably *real*. Like the other. Like the irreducible and nonappropriable difference of the other” (ibid.). It should be noted that de Vries does not delineate the subtle and frequently misconstrued difference between Derrida and Kant on this singularly important point. It seems to me that in the absence of such an explanation, de Vries’s claim that Derrida’s later thinking on cosmopolitanism and the “democracy to come” (as well as a host of related notions) “revises some of Kant’s most basic assumptions, such as the horizon of infinite approximation that limits the radicality of the ‘regulative idea’” (59) only adds to the confusion.

With *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant inaugurates the notion of institutionalized reason or, more concretely, of reason as an institution. In the same text, however, Kant—“in spite of himself” (65), according to de Vries—also exposes certain inherent limitations of this model. Although it is debatable whether Kant really was not aware of what he was doing, de Vries makes an important point when stating that the limitations of Kant’s model become especially obvious “in his analysis of the ways in which the philosophical question becomes entangled in the problem of the theological and, more importantly, of religion” (ibid.).

⁶ Bill Readings coined the felicitous term “University of Reason” as a shorthand for the Kantian idea of a university in his influential book *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1996) 55.

⁷ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003) 134.

In both *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant suggests a threefold division of labor in the field of religion. The clergy consists of practitioners of religion who are bound to the established teachings of their respective denomination. Juxtaposed to them are the theological scholars who come in two varieties. The “biblical theologian” is a scholar of Scripture [*Schriftgelehrter*] who is committed to the faith of his church [*Kirchenglaube*] including its statutory laws. The scholarship of this theologian is circumscribed by a foundational text that is considered God’s word and a tradition of rules that is equally claimed to derive from a divine origin. The positive religious foundations are not subject to the scholarly probing of the “biblical theologian.” But these restrictions do not apply to philosophical theology which “must have complete freedom to expand as far as its science reaches, provided that it stays within the boundaries of mere reason and makes indeed use of history, languages, the books of all peoples, even the Bible, in order to confirm and explain its propositions, but only for itself, without carrying these propositions over into biblical theology or wishing to modify its public doctrines” (Ak 6:9).

It is apparent that the forms of belief that correspond to the two types of theology must be quite different. However, in Kant’s narrative account, they are ultimately not entirely incompatible. If it were possible to subtract from ecclesiastical faith all historical contingencies, all circumstantial conventions, and all claims concerning divine revelation, only its rational kernel would survive: the one true religion based on pure reason. The historically and culturally contingent form of ecclesiastical faith [*Kirchenglaube*] thus serves as a sensible vehicle for religious faith [*Religionsglaube*]. Nevertheless, for the time being, the biblical theologian’s positive norms and the philosophical theologian’s reliance on reason alone are in an antagonistic relationship. Both are wont to overstep their bounds. However, these infractions are by no means symmetrical. The philosopher has *in principle* every right to work towards an extension of his domain until one day—a day we will always approach but never quite reach—all of positive religion will have been purified and converted into pure rational religion. But in order to restrict the social upheavals such a procedure may cause if applied indiscriminately and without taking into consideration the prevalent level of knowledge and education, Kant insists that scholars be allowed to speak freely on these matters only among themselves. It is the task, indeed the prerogative, of the representatives of ecclesiastical faith to determine—always in accordance with the government—the most advantageous pace of replacing conventions based on revelation by teachings based on rational faith. It is on the basis of this division of theological labor that Kant can confidently respond to the king’s accusations simply by stating that he actually praised the Bible in his censored book “as the best and most adequate means [*Leitmittel*] of public instruction available for establishing and maintaining indefinitely [*auf unabsehbliche Zeiten*] a state religion that is truly conducive to the soul’s improvement” (Ak 7:9). The fundamental problem of this ingenious arrangement between theology and philosophy is, however, that biblical theologians tend to

read said infinite deferral merely negatively; in their view, Scripture shall not and should not ever be replaced. By contrast, the theologically inclined philosophers have always already replaced the trimmings of positive religion and would like to make their insights public. The distinct goals of these two types of theologians are compatible only as long as they are distributed along an historical axis. They are entirely incompatible when put into play simultaneously. De Vries states this paradox succinctly: “The more it is religion properly speaking, the less it is religion as we know it *Plus d’une religion*” (94).

Since real existing Christianity will always depend on a certain dogmatic husk for the duration of human history, de Vries asks whether it would not have to be considered “pagan,” in Kant’s sense, like all other positive religions (84). If this were indeed the case, de Vries continues, would the repercussions be limited merely to the visible church? Would its purest, invisible form that will prevail at the end of time not also be implicated? As his subsequent readings show, de Vries is concerned about the supplement of revelation, on which Christianity, like all positive religions, has relied throughout its history. If the proper Christian religion is indeed, as Kant maintains, a purely rational, moral religion, why does it need to be supplemented at all? De Vries stops short of attempting an answer to this perplexing question. Instead, he sees it as another example of a certain paradox at work in Kant’s philosophy: namely, “the paradox that reason itself provides reasons for its own supplementation” (85). One might wonder whether that is saying enough. Would it not be necessary in this context to attend, at the very least, to the Kantian “*as if*” and to examine the mechanism at work in the transference relation to the alleged divine law?

In the “preparatory, didactic, and even epagogic role” that Kant assigns to the government, de Vries recognizes “an affirmation ... of politics ‘as such’” and of its historical necessity (99). In keeping with Kantian principles, one might rather say that the external—call it legal or political—progress must come first in order to make the internal or moral progress possible. Evidently, de Vries wants to say more than that. For him, “religion is exemplary for the experience of deconstruction that affects all institutions from within, no less than in relation to the political and thus from without” (101). He claims that in matters of religion, the Kantian distinctions between “the intelligible and the empirical, between the noumenal and the phenomenal, between pure, rational, moral faith and the historical forms of ecclesiastical dogmatics or paganism” (ibid.) can no longer be maintained and that this “‘truth’ of religion ... might well reveal a central feature of thought and action in general” (ibid.). I must admit that I am rather perplexed by de Vries’s claim that Kant’s distinctions collapse in his treatment of religion; if anything, it seems to me that the central problem for Kant and all Kantians has always been the question of how to integrate the phenomenal and the noumenal order and, more concretely, of how to accommodate the spontaneity—that is, the freedom—of the human agent in the natural world, which is causally determined throughout. The difficult problem of compatibilism has been a vigorously debated topic in Kant studies. Judging by the bibliography of *Religion and*

Violence, de Vries does not seem interested in, or familiar with, this debate. I should perhaps add that I find the entire passage under review obscure since I am not sure what “central feature of thought and action in general” de Vries has in mind. I cannot help the impression that precisely at this crucial juncture in the argument, de Vries’s reading of Kant derails, and I suspect that this is largely due to his noticeable desire to accommodate his overall thesis concerning the deconstructive potential of religion.

De Vries concludes his reading of Kant with a discussion of radical evil and of the status of the university, before moving on to a much more religiously committed thinker, namely, Kierkegaard. The second chapter of *Religion and Violence* is primarily a reading of the role of sacrifice in *Fear and Trembling* vis-à-vis Levinas and Derrida, especially the latter’s *The Gift of Death*. The concluding sections of this chapter contain thoughtful and inspired meditations on the strange role of sacrifice in Derrida—namely, the simultaneity of the necessity of sacrifice and an anti-sacrificial stance. These sections could have made a significant contribution to the clarification of the difference between the Levinasian and the Derridean notions of responsibility in the larger part of the chapter. Yet at the very moment when de Vries acknowledges the specificity of Derrida’s view on sacrifice, he subdues this insight by asserting that “[w]hat is undeconstructable, for Derrida, is not finitude, the ontological difference between beings and Being—even though this distinction has (had) its limited analytical and strategic use—but the fact that the historicity of finite existence remains tainted by a certain religiosity (theologemes and the rites of ‘positive’ religion), of which ‘sacrifice’ is a salient example” (200). And this, de Vries continues, is not just some empirical fact; rather, it is—*pace* Kant—a veritable “fact of reason” (201). I have my doubts about the claim that the centrality of finitude in Derrida’s thought can be reduced to a “limited analytical and strategic use,” or that it has become a thing of the past since *The Gift of Death* at the latest. Why then, one might ask, “the gift of *death*”? Why not “the gift of religion”? It must be said in de Vries’s defense that many readers of Derrida who have made the claim that an ethical or religious turn can be observed in his late works, would probably find this central argument of *Religion and Violence* more congenial.

In the last two chapters, de Vries discusses the intersections of the religious with the political. He takes the position that such overlaps happen of necessity and not just contingently. Once again, de Vries returns to Kant, to whom he ascribes a “political theology” on the grounds that Kant’s “desire for an ultimate—an absolute and total—community” is but a “desire for an ‘ideal [*Ideal*],’ of reason, a regulative idea whose telos can only be approximated asymptotically, never as such or only on the *Nimmertag* [of which Kant speaks in the *Conflict*], the ‘end of all things,’ which presupposes a genuine conversion of heart and the eradication of radical evil” (231f.). This reading neglects the significant fact that Kant distinguishes between conditions of legality and conditions of morality. While it is correct that we cannot ever become perfectly moral—or “holy,” in Kantian

parlance—the possibility of creating republican states and a league of nations that includes the whole world has direct political but only indirect moral consequences. The creation of a just legal order will eventually make possible the development of morality for all its subjects. It leads to a social structure that is not constantly threatened by a possible relapse into the state of nature. De Vries is therefore simply mistaken when he claims that until the *Nimmertag* “we have almost nothing but statutes and observances to go by. ... Religion, in its historical formation, pragmatically realizes the almost ideal” (232). This is to confuse an ethical with a political question. For Kant, religion is tied to the development of morality and ethics; a community of morally perfect individuals would be rightfully called the “kingdom of God.” But in order to even make this development possible, some political or legislative measures must be taken. Once a just legal order is in place, the creation of this kingdom, in which morality and happiness go hand in hand, becomes a real possibility. Religion may serve to educate individuals and instill a moral sense in them. But when it comes to politics, a republican constitution and just laws are needed. Such a legal structure is no small achievement, and it should not be confused with the statutes and observances that are typical of positive religion. For all these reasons, I have my doubts about the Kantian “political theology” that de Vries finds in “Kant’s project, thus reconstructed” (235). The problem is that the political theology seems to have come first, while the rather idiosyncratic “reconstruction” was meant to support and confirm it all along. De Vries is, no doubt, correct when stating that Kant “already sees that modernity does not imply that all religious categories (figures of thought, rhetorical devices, concepts and forms of obligation, or ritual practices) have become obsolete in a single stroke” (236). That much should have been clear from the beginning; how else could Kant have developed his discourse if not by using the linguistic resources with which the theologico-philosophical tradition provided him? Considering the enormity of the break between Kant’s critical enterprise and traditional metaphysics, would it not be a bit much to chide him for not having invented an entire philosophical language *ab ovo*, if such a thing were possible at all? Moreover, if Kant’s philosophical practice shows a certain, albeit limited, continuity with the language of religion as far as figures of thought, rhetorical devices, and concepts are concerned, does this necessarily mean that religious forms of obligation and ritual practices must be continued as well? I have no doubt that the editors of the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, whom de Vries criticizes for writing that “Kant ‘had no patience at all for the mystical or the miraculous’ and was ‘deeply skeptical of popular religious culture, severely disapproving of religious ceremonies, and downright hostile to the whole idea of ecclesial authority’” (234), came considerably closer to the truth.

Before concluding my remarks on *Religion and Violence* with a brief analysis of de Vries’s discussion, in the concluding chapter, of Derrida’s notions of “hospitality” and “friendship,” I would like to address his *Minimal Theologies* for a moment. As will be seen, even a cursory analysis of the position de Vries assigns to Derrida in the latter book helps to elucidate some of the complexities

of his account of hospitality and friendship in *Religion and Violence*.

Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno & Levinas, the translation of de Vries's first book, was published only in 2005. The German original, *Theologie im pianissimo*, appeared in 1989. The English version includes some additional parts that clarify and extend the argument—this is especially true of the added appendix, an exposition of Derrida's theological thinking and its critique by the likes of Habermas and Manfred Frank. It also contains some minor revisions and a good number of additional notes that point to some of the relevant literature that has appeared in the interim as well as to de Vries's own more recent work. In a way, as de Vries remarks, *Minimal Theologies* thus constitutes "the first and last word" of his trilogy on religion and theology, which also includes the widely discussed *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* of 1999. The basic question that de Vries addresses is, how—and even whether—a line of demarcation can and must be drawn between philosophy and theology in modernity, which brings with it not only the process of secularization but also the rationalization and differentiation of "value spheres" (in Weber's or Habermas's words) or of "social sub-systems" (in Niklas Luhmann's terms). The larger part of de Vries's voluminous investigation is occupied by two detailed studies that are played off against each other in such a way as to show the inevitability of a "minimal theology" that must supplement philosophy and reason. The first expounds Adorno's "dialectical critique of dialectics," the second Levinas's "phenomenological critique of phenomenology."

Throughout, de Vries insists that the deployment of reason sooner or later leads to a point where reason touches "upon a dimension or an element directly opposed to itself, upon an otherness standing at its opposite pole, an 'other' of reason, the nonrational par excellence" (5). This can be seen even in a thinker as committed to the rational as Habermas. De Vries points to his use of "striking metaphors, whose theological overtones are hardly accidental and are difficult to ignore" (14). Needless to say, such supplementation of reason is problematic within the framework of the theory of communicative action (cf. 91 and 106f.), since it entails a performative contradiction. Instead, de Vries recommends Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the "infinite" *qua* absolute as the appropriate point of departure for the formulation of a viable theology "*in pianissimo*." It is thus the declared goal of *Minimal Theologies* "to clarify this idea of a minimal theology" (24). In addition, de Vries wants "to demonstrate that its central features are anticipated—and ... rigorously systematized and formalized—in the writings of Adorno," only to show "that these traits find an even more consequential expression in Levinas's philosophy of the trace of the absolutely other, especially as systematized—formalized, and, as it were, generalized, even radicalized and dramatized—in the studies Derrida has devoted to this author, from his 1963 'Violence and Metaphysics' on" (ibid.).

It is not easy to imagine how this constellation of rather distinct philosophies is

to lead to the desired end. In order to make the dovetailing of Adorno and Levinas plausible, de Vries is forced to insist quite emphatically on their similarities at the cost of the many substantial differences between their projects. This is particularly troubling in a book that pledges allegiance to Levinas's concept of the radical, unassimilable ab-soluteness of the other. A comparison of Adorno's critique of the philosophy of identity and Levinas's rejection of totality would seem a worthwhile project, provided that some important differences are not overlooked. For Levinas, totality is of necessity always finite and therefore more restrictive than identity in Adorno's sense. Furthermore, considering the ab-soluteness of the Levinasian "other," de Vries's claim "that Levinas's thought, even though it remains in sync with the general indictment of dialectics (and hence of negativity) in postwar French intellectual life ... sketches a *dialectical and negative metaphysics* of sorts" (xxi) is hard to believe, especially since it is never worked out in any detail. In fact, in a later passage, the former dialectical metaphysics survives merely as an "almost dialectical movement of thought" (33). But as they say, when it rains it pours. Is it possible to determine the degree of "dialecticity" of a movement of thought? Is the dialectic—be it Hegel's, Marx's, or Adorno's—a matter of gradation? How much *Aufhebung* is necessary for a movement to qualify as "almost dialectical"? The unconventional use of "almost" is not just a sign of a momentary loss of nerve or even partial recantation on the author's part. It also points to the larger question concerning the validity of comparisons. De Vries's "almost dialectical movement of thought" is meant to express vagueness or even uncertainty regarding the actual status—dialectical or not—of the movement of thought in question. All de Vries really claims, then, is that to him, said movement of thought *seems* similar to a dialectical movement of thought, at least in some respects. However, he does not tell us about the *tertium comparationis* on which such a claim would have to be based. For all we know, the claimed quasi-similarity could be just a subjective impression.

Unfortunately, the same is true for many of de Vries's comparisons and analogies.

De Vries tends to see similarities in the most unlikely places. Thus we read: "Like Adorno, Habermas, and Derrida, Levinas engages in an almost transcendental—one might say quasi-, ultra-, or simili-transcendental—mode of thinking" (33). In other words: Adorno, Habermas, and Derrida are all *almost* Levinasian thinkers. This claim would seem somewhat improbable only as long as one has not yet chosen a level of sufficient generality for the comparison. Conveniently, the gravitational center of de Vries's first book is Levinas. All paths and detours mapped by de Vries's readings, commentaries, and extensive quotations lead, paradoxically, to the same irreducible absolute alterity of the other. As a consequence, "a plausible, rational, philosophical, minimal theology—and vice versa, every bona fide theory of rationality on which theology could draw or, for its part, illuminate—must always allude to some singular incarnation, materialization, phenomenologization, or concretization of transcendence in

general" (65).

What is a "minimal theology" according to Hent de Vries? In preparation for his definition, de Vries quotes from Levinas's *Proper Names*: "The transcendent cannot—*qua* transcendent—have come unless its coming is contested. Its epiphany is ambiguity or enigma, and may be just a word." The upshot for Levinas is that "[l]anguage is the fact that always one sole word is proffered: God."⁸ De Vries continues in an emphatically Levinasian vein: "Minimal theology would mean just this: the theological, materialized and concretized in the name and the concept of 'God,' stands for 'just a word,' which is at the same time 'the sole word' of language. The word *God* would thus signal itself *nowhere* and *everywhere*: almost nothing, it is at the same time the very heart of—at least all linguistic—meaning. But this meaning absolves itself from whatever *criteria* one would want to measure it against, whether semantically, epistemologically, normatively, pragmatically, or aesthetically" (590). Can one avoid the impression that, defined in this manner, de Vriesian "minimal theology" is but another form of logocentrism? To put the matter differently, is there not a certain danger that even the most minimal of theologies is still precisely that: theology or even onto-theology, pure and simple?

Where, then, in all this would Derrida fit in? It seems to me, that perhaps the most insistent line of argumentation in *Minimal Theologies* consists of a leveling of the profound differences between Levinas and Derrida. What else can de Vries's claim mean that the fundamental traits of the minimal theology he envisions find "expression in Levinas's philosophy of the trace of the absolutely other, especially as systematized—formalized, and, as it were, generalized, even radicalized and dramatized—in the studies Derrida has devoted to this author, from his 1963 'Violence and Metaphysics' on" (24)? Here as elsewhere, we can discern de Vries's strong tendency to turn Derrida into a Levinasian and thus more of a religious thinker, more of a theologian than seems warranted. How is it possible to quote that most stunning deconstruction of Levinas—"Violence and Metaphysics"—in which Derrida patiently elucidates the philosophical shortcomings of Levinas's ahistorical juxtaposition of same and other with the help of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, and yet claim that this essay constitutes but a systematization or formalization or even radicalization of Levinas's project?

A related question could be asked of *Religion and Violence*. For Derrida, hospitality "is more than a philosophical category"; or, as de Vries writes, "this notion tests the limits of the concept of the political as we know it" (349). Already in the opening lines of this discussion, de Vries links the relation to the other as conceived by Derrida to Levinas's notion of the relation to the other as "a relation without relation." For Levinas, responsibility is, as de Vries puts it aptly, "the structure of sociality as such" (350), and it is of necessity asymmetrical and

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996) 93.

nonreciprocal. De Vries contends that Derrida's notion of friendship—a friendship that exceeds the familial and fraternal—possesses the same structural features. Derrida points to the “infinitezation” of friendship “*qua* conversion in God” that takes place in the Christian context, specifically in Augustine's *Confessions*.⁹ For Aristotle, by contrast, friendship reaches its *terminus* in divine perfection. One might say that for him human imperfection, which primarily means human mortality, is a necessary condition of friendship. Derrida links these two opposed poles and goes on to describe the specific “im-possibility” of friendship. Precisely because we have an idea of friendship and how it ought to be if it deserves the name, ideal friendship surpasses anything that is humanly possible. It is for this reason that Derrida states that “if there is friendship, if there is indeed a promised friendship, alas, ‘there is no friend’” (*Politics of Friendship* 235). Unlike a Kantian regulative idea, this idea of friendship cannot be approximated incrementally, as de Vries stresses.¹⁰ Instead, an *aporia* arises between the ideal and every finite and therefore imperfect realization of friendship. The need for a decision that every concrete gesture of friendship implies, indicates that we are faced here—as in the case of such Derridean ideas as hospitality and forgiveness—with “[t]he irreducibility of the theologico-political” (353). For is it not true that absolute friendship opens itself to the possibility of absolute hostility? And absolute hospitality in spite *and* because of its completely unguarded character invites and perhaps all but provokes absolute hostility.

The analysis of such ideas and their inherently aporetic structure is of course pervasive in Derrida's late works. De Vries chooses to trace the triangulation Derrida performs with the help of Carl Schmitt vis-à-vis Levinas and Kant in *The Politics of Friendship*. In the process, he rightly insists that the relation to the other, as Derrida conceives it, can be captured neither by communitarian political theories nor by any type of identity politics. In the same vein, Derrida demonstrates that Schmitt's basic theoretical matrix of friend and foe is insufficient in a time when we experience a “disorientation of the political field, where the principal enemy now appears unidentifiable!” (*Politics of Friendship* 84). De Vries follows Derrida's deconstruction of Schmitt closely. Moreover, he also adopts Derrida's take on Kant's discussion of friendship in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Anthropology*. For Kant friendship serves as an example of morality. But, as Derrida is quick to point out, friendship should not be reduced to a purely moral dimension. “*Friendship* considered in its perfection,” writes Kant towards the end of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, “is the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect” (Ak 6:469). It is the ideal relationship

⁹ See *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997) 187f.

¹⁰ The point concerning this impossibility is well taken. De Vries adduces another feature that is meant to help us distinguish between a Kantian and a Derridean idea when he continues: “nor does it give itself to intuition all at once” (353). But this putative criterion has no possible application, since a Kantian idea is a concept of reason. Therefore, no intuition corresponds to it at all. Kant outlines this point at great length in the first book of the “*Transcendental Dialectic*” that treats of “the concepts of pure reason” (cf. A 310/ B 366-A 338/ B 396).

between people insofar as it balances the centripetal forces of love and the centrifugal forces of respect. For Kant, “human beings have a duty of friendship,” even though, as he readily admits, “friendship is only an idea.” As all Kantian ideas, it is “unattainable in practice” (ibid.). Although de Vries appears to agree with Derrida’s reservations regarding the Kantian program of humanization *qua* friendship in the specifically Kantian (and Christian) version of fraternization, he changes his tune quite dramatically just a few pages before his impressive *tour de force* comes to an end. This change happens quite suddenly, but it does not come as a complete surprise. On the contrary, it is precisely this change that reminds the reader of de Vries’s larger project with its overarching thesis concerning the persistence of the religious.

In order to tie all the threads of his book neatly together, de Vries proposes a shady conceptual maneuver: He suggests that the Derridean aporia of friendship (or hospitality, democracy, forgiveness)—namely, the irreducible antinomy between a friendship that must be instantiated anew at any moment in the here and now and an ideal friendship that is always only “to come”—should be seen as analogous to the relation between positive or revealed religion and rational or moral religion in Kant. As if this proposal were not difficult enough to accept, he goes on to suggest that the relation between “hospitality” and hospitality in Levinas is likewise governed by an analogous structure. “*Mutatis mutandis*,” writes de Vries, “the discussion of friendship in *The Politics of Friendship* can be seen against the same backdrop” (379). Can it really? And what is the concession inherent in “*mutatis mutandis*” supposed to tell us? Is it perhaps a note of caution that de Vries inadvertently inscribed in his own text at the very moment when a totalizing synthesis is put in motion—a synthesis that has an uncanny resemblance with “the night in which ... all cows are black”?¹¹

To pose the crucial question in the clearest possible way: What is at stake in de Vries’s pronounced need for similarities and analogies? Does the conclusion of *Religion and Violence* simply succumb to the conceptual violence of de Vries’s comprehensive thesis? After all, if Derrida’s patient unfolding of the constitutive aporias of hospitality, friendship, or responsibility could indeed be read in analogy to Levinas’s ethics of the Other, then the claim that the primary deconstructive force to be mobilized within the current theologico-political situation must be of a religious nature would become considerably more plausible. If, in addition, it could be shown that Kant’s critique falters precisely at the point where it encounters the bedrock of religion (a claim I have examined above and found wanting), and, furthermore, that the aporetic structure of the minimal theology that allegedly haunts Kant’s transcendental philosophy is analogous to the Derridean aporias, de Vries could close his case. Instead, it seems to me, de Vries merely converts the texts he reads into versions of the

¹¹ Hegel’s remark—presumably directed at Schelling—can be found in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke*, eds. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986) 3:22.

minimal theology he has postulated all along. This procedure has less in common with a religious conversion than with the phenomenon that, according to Derrida, “is confusedly called the ‘return’ of the ‘religious’” (*Politics of Friendship*, 272). Perhaps we could call this sophisticated, but ultimately entirely dogmatic, maneuver a “deconversion,” provided we keep in mind the double sense that inheres in this neologism: On the one hand, it indicates that de Vries performs a *de/conversion*, a sort of deconstruction that is converted into a conversion. On the other hand, it points to de Vries’s idiosyncratic *decon/ersion*—that is, his version of deconstruction, which, instead of interrupting the religious economy of sacrifice, has always already diverted its profits.

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