

VICTOR E. TAYLOR
York College

MINIMAL DIFFERENCE WITH MAXIMAL IMPORT:
“DEEP PRAGMATISM” AND GLOBAL RELIGION:
AN INTERVIEW WITH HENT DE VRIES

Hent de Vries is Director of the Humanities Center at The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD. Since 2002, he has held a joint appointment as Professor in the Humanities Center and the Department of Philosophy. Since October 2007, he has held the Russ Family Chair in the Zanvyl Krieger School of Arts and Science.

Before joining the faculty at Johns Hopkins, de Vries held the Chair of Metaphysics and Its History in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam (1993–2002), where he remains a Regular Visiting Professor of Systematic Philosophy and the Philosophy of Religion. He was a co-founder of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) and served as the Director of its governing board (1994–1998) and its Scientific Director (1998–2004).

Since May 2007, de Vries is also Directeur de Programme at the Collège International de Philosophie, in Paris.

He is the author of *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), and *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1999). He is the editor of *Religion Beyond a Concept* (Fordham UP, 2008). Among the volumes he has co-edited are: with Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (Fordham UP, 2006); with Samuel Weber, *Religion and Media* (Stanford UP, 2001) and *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination* (Stanford UP, 1998); with Henri A. Krop and Arie L. Molendijk, *Post-Theism: Reframing the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (Peeters, 2000); with Willemien Otten and Arjo Vanderjagt, *How the West Was Won: Essays on the Literary Imagination, the Canon and the*

Christian Middle Ages for Burcht Pranger (Brill, 2010); with Ward Blanton, *Paul and the Philosophers* (Fordham UP, forthcoming 2012).

Victor Taylor: *Thank you for agreeing to the interview. Could you describe your intellectual history? For instance, who were the key figures that shaped your early interest in philosophy and religious studies?*

Hent de Vries: No doubt what has originally brought me to theology (or, more precisely, religious studies) and immediately sparked my interest in the philosophical questions that the modern phenomenon of religion more than anything else, to my knowledge, seems to call for was the example of inspiring role models I found in certain teachers and even ministers. Paradoxically, it was also the liberal-minded, quasi-secular upbringing that I had enjoyed in my family. My parents had both come from opposing orthodox milieus and factions in the Dutch Reformed tradition, but having left their respective parental church communities, they felt disinclined to impose on their children the strict religious outlook they had fled, while at the same time keeping a lively interest in the wider intellectual, moral, and emotional resources for which a more broader-minded conception of ecumenical Christianity, but notably liberal Protestantism, stood in their eyes.

At the same time, I grew up in a village, just north of Amsterdam, which was “rooms-rood [Roman-Catholic and politically “red,” i.e., socialist] meaning that the dominating denomination and, hence, religious background of many of my school friends was Roman Catholic, whereas its overall political outlook was Social-Democratic, with a relatively strong presence of the local Communist Party, whose cultural influence was, as so often in postwar Europe, far greater than the number of its adherents, that is to say, members and voters or even intellectual fellow travelers might have suggested. Indeed, my political coming of age was to no small extent initially framed by the very effective and disciplined way in which this party’s broader social movement orchestrated the anti-cruise missile demonstrations in the late 1970s when the Vietnam protestations had run their course and the next big thing was the so-called neutron bomb that the Reagan administration tried to impose on NATO. One thing you didn’t want to be in those days, as a young high school and then university student, was “anti-communist.” It was only after I had read Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Mandarins* and Arthur Koestler’s two-volume autobiography and his novel *Darkness at Noon*, Stefan Heym’s *Fünf Tage im Juni*, and, especially, after I attended a speech by the then Social-Democratic (PvdA) Prime Minister Joop den Uyl, that I understood how silly this was. Being a democratic socialist could only mean that one did precisely not espouse “the communist hypothesis” (to cite Alain Badiou’s recent title, which inaugurates an interesting attempt to disentangle the very idea of communism from the seventy years of failed statist experiments). I soon came to realize that to insist on capitalism’s abrupt or ultimate destruction instead of opting for targeted and incremental reforms and compromises was a vain idea, the empty hope of a *schöne Seele*, nothing more. Yet I still remember being perversely impressed by the narrative of the father of one my high school teachers, who as a functionary of the Communist Party’s (CPN) newspaper *De Waarheid* (The Truth) had literally defended the party building Felix Meritis in Amsterdam with his own hands against an angry mob, first in 1956 and then again in 1968, when so-called real existing socialism and Stalinism had shown its teeth first by crushing the Hungarian uprising and then also the democratic Spring in Prague. My later repeated travels to the East block, first to the

German Democratic Republic, then the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and eventually also Cuba, cured me from any remaining political romanticism with respect to the communist hypothesis in its real existing state socialist variety, once and for all. Nothing really seemed to work there and it was hard to imagine how the Warsaw Pact and its third country allies could be much of a military threat, as the NATO propaganda tirelessly hinted. And, lest we forget, during the post-war and post-cold-war era, some of the worst calamities happened *after* the Berlin Wall fell (the ethnic cleansing and genocides in the former Yugoslavia, the ethnic strife in Russia, Georgia and Tjetsjenia, etc., not to mention the wars in the Gulf and Iraq, all of which would in all likelihood not have been unleashed so easily under the old dispensation).

Although I had originally imagined to prepare for a medical career, I decided that the academic study of religion in an interdisciplinary perspective and at a respected non-confessional institution, the University of Leiden—which based its curriculum on the so-called *duplex ordo* of two distinct modes of approaching religion, namely theologically, biblically, and dogmatically, on the one hand, and in terms of its textual, social and cultural history (i.e., as *Religionswissenschaft*), on the other—fitted my intellectual and political interests much more. I studied religion and theology, therefore, but with a mindset and attitude that was engaged and somewhat disengaged at the same time. This ambivalent relation to religion had, no doubt, its background in my upbringing, as indicated earlier, notably in my parents self-chosen exile from their religious communities and the repercussion this as to how they portrayed the darker and brighter—indeed, more enlightened—side of their tradition to me, but also in the fact that, growing up, I very much felt a Protestant in a largely Catholic community (and understanding and appreciating that tradition only much later and increasingly so). Yet, also beyond the biographical and anecdotal, the problem how one could be “in” on a phenomenon while staying “out” of it as well soon became not just an existential and political concern but also an explicit intellectual question and challenge, one that I may have not fully solved or lived up to until this very day. This much seems to me certain: my current inclination to adopt a quasi-Spinozist and –Wittgensteinian “dual aspect theory of reality” (the expression I borrow from Stuart Hampshire) or, at least, a “double vision” in our way of perceiving and evaluating that reality, is on the whole much closer to a plausible answer to this predicament and the genuine chance of situating oneself at once inside and outside tradition than any of the reductionist—whether naturalist or confessional—approaches that I have come across in the literature and in public debates so far.

Before completing my PhD in theology and religious studies, in which I would specialize in the philosophy of religion, in 1989, I made a long detour and sought further training in two distinct fields, namely that of Judaic and Hellenistic studies, concentrating on Philo of Alexandria, as well as in Social Ethics, Political Economy, and Public Finance, during a year spent in the Faculty of Law, also in Leiden.

During this period, which lasted roughly from 1976 until 1988, I had the privilege to study with Professor Hendrikus Berkhof, who taught Christian dogmatics, with Jürgen Lebram, who introduced me into the world of Judaic Hellenism but also of Qumran, and with Herman de Lange and Victor Halberstadt, two economists and prominent members of the Labor Party (PvdA), both of whom paired an interest in economic ethics with a solid understanding of the world of public

finance and the political sustainability of the social- and Christian-democratic compromise that was the European welfare state (now so easily despised for its current woes, but arguably one of the greatest social experiments that offered people a halfway decent life, healthcare-, income-, and pension-wise).

During my studies with these mentors, I wrote my MA thesis on the subject of democracy and welfare economics in the work of the late Hans van den Doel while also engaging several issues in the debates on capitalism, progress, and sustainability, notably in the writings of Bob Goudzwaard and de Lange. In addition, I spent two semesters at the Interuniversity Institute for Norms and Values in Society, in Rotterdam. In this context, I was privileged to extensively meet and discuss with the imposing and deeply inspiring Nobel laureate in Economics and one of the founding fathers of econometrics, Jan Tinbergen, who had headed the Central Planning Bureau of the Dutch Government for many years. In the same period, I also spent some months as an intern at Royal Dutch Shell's Pernis oil refinery, at the time Europe's largest plant, as part of a program that was, no doubt, modeled after the example of priest-workers, who mingled incognito among working class populations and under the worst of working conditions, to learn and "be there and ready," just in case general strikes and revolutions would trigger more wide-ranging changes than labor unions, on the priest-worker movement's views, were able to achieve. It was the political liberation theology of a quasi-Maoist bend and, no doubt, the closest I ever got to this type of religious socialist experimentation. Its naïveté and hubris still makes me shudder and it was only when I was quickly identified at the assembly line by officials from the Shell human resources department who had become suspicious of my ulterior interests beyond earning the minimum wage—and who in a manner that seemed more saddened and intrigued than irritated said to me "Now that you mention this, why hide, don't you think Shell could use theologians?"—that I realized the near-inexhaustible resourcefulness and resilience of real existing capitalism.

My main source of inspiration during these long years, however, was Hendrik Johan (Han) Adriaanse, professor of the Philosophy and the Encyclopedia of Religion at the University of Leiden and my "Doktorvater," who introduced me to the work of Emmanuel Levinas and whose erudition, intellectual integrity, together with his seminal and deeply original work on Karl Barth and Edmund Husserl, entitled *Zu den Sachen selbst*, has been a source of inspiration for me to this day. He was the first who taught me what a genuine phenomenology of religion might look like. Indeed, his conception of theology as a *disciplina arcana* as well as his later plea for a rigorous philosophical conception of so-called *post-theism* were important markers along the path I tried to cut out for myself and increasingly on in my own terms. For this the slow reading and even slower digestion of several twentieth century thinkers from different, seemingly opposed—German neo-Marxist and hermeneutic, French phenomenological and existential, and, much later, Anglo-Saxon analytical and moral perfectionist—traditions would prove crucial.

To respond even more directly and precisely to your question: my deepest theological and philosophical interests originated in these early readings and found their first tentative expression in a comparative study of the work of Theodor W. Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas, which I wrote and published in German under a title, *Theologie im pianissimo*, that was an homage to and gentle

parody of Max Weber's famous essay *Wissenschaft als Beruf* (Science as a Profession and a Vocation). As you will recall, in this essay Weber referred to the retreat of the prophetic fire that ran through the streets in earlier times into the domain of the private and the interpersonal. I took this motif into a different direction, though, suggesting that if religion withdrew more and more from the public square and from the general criteria of the theory of rationality it did so *increasingly* and *permanently*, with no endpoint in sight. In other words, the ongoing reduction of its substantial content went, I suggested, hand in hand with an ongoing *formalization* and, indeed, *intensified use* of its more and more *reduced* figures of thought as well as of its morally and otherwise exemplary figures of conduct that secured it an undeniable permanence, in its turn. I have only recently come to think of this indelible *minimal theological* feature – which I laid out in *Minimal Theologies* (*Theologie im pianissimo*, technically my first book) – as a genuinely *global* element and structure of the religious in the contemporary day and age, notably its political and especially media phenomenon, as well. Without it, I now think, we would not have witnessed a resurgence of “global religion” on a worldwide scale. Nor would any reference to what Claude Lefort has called the “permanence of the theologico-political” make any sense in the current debate about the renewed prominence of religion in the public domain.

Victor Taylor: *Let ask me you to discuss the “minimal” as a “global element and structure” in more detail before we continue with a discussion of Minimal Theologies. Why is its presence so significant to the “resurgence of ‘global religion’”?*

Hent de Vries: Let me put it this way: it is my contention that a new “transformation of the public sphere [*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*]” – one far more radical than Jürgen Habermas's groundbreaking work with the same title ever anticipated – has been taking place in recent decennia. I am claiming that this historical and socio-cultural change of paradigm and perspective remains inexplicable in its original meaning and unprecedented force without invoking the specific and especially effective role played by “global” religion, as distinguished from its “political,” “civic,” “private,” “public,” “historical,” “revealed” and “natural” counterparts, all of which identified something important in its historical and overall phenomenon or “total social fact” and, indeed, as theoretical designations and empirical references have dominated debates in the scholarly study of religion and the social sciences over the last few centuries. In fact, they continue to direct and limit most current research programs, which, I think, would profit from a more sustained reflection upon the the meaning and force of the “minimal” and “global” that *Minimal Theologies* and my current work on miracles, events, and so-called special effects, analyzing the politics of religion in an age of new media, seeks to capture.

In order to substantiate this claim, I will have to explain and further detail what the adjective “global” (as in the relatively recent denominator “global religion”) connotes and also what it, perhaps surprisingly, enables as an innovative interpretative key that helps us unlock some of the most promising and most disturbing political and media driven phenomena of our time. In sum, I will need to explain how the “minimal” and the “maximal” – or “global” – are related and revert into each other, for good and for ill. In order to do this, I need to recall that the designation “global” means much more – and, in a sense, also much less – than the all too direct

reference to the (in themselves undeniable) processes in and through which economic and capital markets, helped by analogue and digital media for telecommunication and social networking have furthered their reach, not so much gradually but explosively, exponentially, indeed, extensively and intensively, leaving virtually no region of the globe – indeed, no social surface and no cultural debt – unaffected, unaltered, intact. For the term “global” also hints at something else and beyond, before or around, these social historical and empirical trends and indices: I mean at something, perhaps, older – deeper and wider – and more-dimensional, stratified and multi-layered, that *warps* and *curves* the worldly realities we live by, indeed, our very sense of so-called real and symbolical time and space. This, if you like, *minimal* – that is to say, far more elusive and ultimately irreducible – “globality” comes to us *from a certain distance*, albeit one that is *virtual* rather than *real*. Yet, it is also strangely *present* and emerges, resurges, at times, upsurges from an “archive” whose ontological or, rather, metaphysical nature must be determined, read and seen, in what are, fundamentally, non-criteriological terms. The need for learning once again to read the “signs of the times,” the “writing on the wall,” is no bad metaphor to convey this point. Learning to “see” the almost invisible and “hear” the nearly inaudible – again, the *pianissimo* of which Weber spoke in *Wissenschaft als Beruf* – expresses the same task for philosophy, indeed, for what (with a nod to Merleau-Ponty and Lefort) one might call a “thinking politics.”

Victor Taylor: *We see this first taking shape in Minimal Theologies?*

Hent de Vries: Yes. *Theologie im pianissimo*, completed in its first outline in 1989, was translated into English and published in 2005 in a considerably expanded and completely revised paperback edition by The Johns Hopkins University Press under the title *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Theodor W. Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas*. I still consider it to be an extensive prolegomenon to my subsequent work and writing. While the book was primarily devoted to Adorno and Levinas, it contained a lengthy exploration of Jürgen Habermas’s “blue monster” (the two-volume *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* as well as of accompanying writings, notably those preceding his somewhat unhelpful critique of twentieth-century French thinkers, in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*) as well as a first attempt to sound out major themes – and, in my view at the time, far more consequential insights – in Jacques Derrida’s earlier thought.

To Habermas I have returned only recently, at Craig Calhoun’s, Eduardo Mendietta’s and Jonathan van Antwerpen’s friendly invitation to participate in a workshop at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) devoted to this author’s recent excursions into the relationship between religion and naturalism as well as his, more tangential, explorations of the meaning and use we might still have the metaphysical concept of “the political” or even “the theologico-political.”

To Derrida, however, I have returned time and again, ever since I read his early commentary on Levinas, in “Violence et métaphysique,” the first serious intellectual engagement with this author’s oeuvre (also in the eyes of the latter). Notably Derrida’s philosophical writings – not always the ones that Richard Rorty characterized somewhat hastily as specimens of “private irony” – have accompanied my subsequent work and will, no doubt, continue to do so. But the Derridian legacy that appealed to me had and has little in common with the American phantom of “deconstruction”

in its literary and especially de Manian variety, nor did I find any use for the appropriation and domestication of Derrida's thinking under the rubric of so-called "Continental philosophy" (yet another phantom, in my view, that insulates a deeply original thinking whose universalizing and analytical impulses are undeniable – Rodolphe Gasché was one of the first to point that out).

Minimal Theologies sought to distill a contemporary framing for theological questions in critical discussion with the basic ideas and concepts of so-called Frankfurt School Theory as I found them not only in Habermas but also in Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Albrecht Wellmer, Axel Honneth, Seyla Benhabib, and Martin Seel—and, in a more qualified way, also in Herbert Schnädelbach, Michael Theunissen, Christoph Menke, and others—with whose positions I contrasted my own reading of Adorno's paradoxical logic of so-called negative dialectics and negative metaphysics. But the book further attempted to establish its argument by situating itself at a crucial distance from the earliest beginnings of so-called poststructuralist thought (yet another unhelpful designation I would soon realize), notably in the writings of Jacques Derrida.

The book's central claim was that the philosophy of religion has a proper perspective, distinct from—but in dialogue with—dogmatic, biblical, and systematic or philosophical theology, on the one hand, and the scientific study of religion as an empirical and a cultural object (i.e., as *Religionswissenschaft*), on the other. Espousing a paradoxical and, more precisely, aporetic model of thinking, inspired by Adorno's *dialectical critique of dialectics* (i.e., negative dialectics) and Levinas's *phenomenological critique of phenomenology* (i.e., the thinking of the Other), *Minimal Theologies* investigated the chances and perils of a so-called *non-bisected rationality under post-Enlightenment and presumably secular conditions*. Its argument culminated in a critique of political idolatry, inspired, albeit differently articulated, by Raymond Aron, Avishai Margalit, Moshe Halbertal, and others, while in an appendix it also sought to cast doubt on the efforts of some scholars, such as Manfred Frank, to rubricate Derrida's legacy under the heading of so-called "Neostructuralism" (which, I claimed, was precisely to miss it ethico-political, call it more Levinasian, point).

In sum, my main concern was to prepare a third path for a philosophical approach to religion and theology that would be neither "dogmatic" ("confessional") nor "scientistic" ("historicist" and "culturalist"). Instead, *Minimal Theologies* charted a terrain that my later interest in so-called political theologies, religion and media, and especially my current research on "events" and "special effects"—investigating the alternative registers or dual aspects (namely, religious-miraculous and technological-artificial) with the help of which we can describe them—address in a more systematic, developed, and, I hope, more satisfactory fashion. In one word, *Minimal Theologies* summed up what I had learned since my studies in Leiden and in its open and loose ends pointed to the sequels that sought to fill in its remaining blanks, without negating any of the necessary steps that brought me there.

Victor Taylor: *Could you describe some of these "remaining blanks," the wider intellectual context for the development of your work, especially the trans-disciplinary nature of your scholarship?*

Hent de Vries: After my PhD defense in Leiden, I went for a semester to Paris at the invitation of Jean Greisch, then the Dean of the Department of Philosophy at the Institut Catholique and

currently the Romano Guardini chair holder at the Humboldt University in Berlin, who had been one of the two external readers for the dissertation (Klaus-M. Kodalle was the second). I started to attend Derrida's classes and met twice extensively with Levinas who kindly invited me to his house to discuss my dissertation, which he had asked me to send to him on an earlier occasion when I had briefly met him at conference on Franz Rosenzweig in Aachen and Roermond. As Levinas had sworn not to set foot in Germany again after the war, the concluding roundtable of that conference, whose transcript was published some years later, took place just across the Dutch border and with all conference participants I was transported by bus just three miles into The Netherlands to the abbey of Roermond to hear Levinas speak on the subject of Jewish-Christian relations (something he did without great appetite but without the slightest hint of irritation: if his interlocutors really felt they needed to have this discussion, he was willing to have it). This was also the first time I met Stéphane Moses, whom I would get to know better in later years and whose work on German-Jewish letters and thought continues to set a high—so far unparalleled—standard for any current and future work in this field. His passing was a tremendous loss for our fields and his subtle and precise studies on Rosenzweig, Kafka, Benjamin, Celan, and so many other thinkers and literary authors have not yet found the attention in the English-speaking world they deserve.

Following that all-too short stay in France, I moved to the United States, to Baltimore, in August 1989, where I taught for two consecutive years as a Mellon Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Department of German at Johns Hopkins University, at the invitation of Werner Hamacher and Rainer Nägele. From there, I went on to teach philosophy at Loyola University Chicago, which would prove to be an important experience for me, at a very different institution than Hopkins was, but one I came to respect enormously for its intensive core curriculum, its commitment to philosophy overall, and its deep engagement with the city and the communities from which it attracted many of its students.

In September 1993, however, I took up a position in The Netherlands, first in the Department of Theology, responsible for teaching and research in the history of philosophy, then almost immediately as a Full Professor of Philosophy, serving as the Chair of Metaphysics in its systematic and historical aspects. Meanwhile, however, I continued to teach and do research at American universities, as a Visiting Professor of German and at the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins (in 1994, 1996, 1997, 2002), as a Senior Scholar at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion (now called The Martin Marty Center) at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, in the Spring of 1993, and in 1997/98 as a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions as well as a Visiting Scholar at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University. It was my stay at these inspiring American centers of academic learning that would deeply influence my further professional orientation and overall interests.

In it, a long standing engagement with the history of classical and modern theology and the philosophy of religion goes hand in hand with an almost limitless openness toward interdisciplinary and, more precisely, comparative approaches to contemporary society and politics, culture and media, and literature and the arts, technology and the natural sciences. Increasingly, I found it hard to draw the line anywhere. In principle, it seemed to me that everything is potentially relevant, just as almost "anything goes" (as Paul Feyerabend famously

said), where issues of general philosophical concern and *a fortiori* so-called global religion and its ethical implications are at issue: that is to say, virtually everywhere.

Trans-disciplinary interests manifest themselves throughout my publications, I think, as well as in my involvement with an international book series, entitled *Cultural Memory in the Present*, of which I have served as co-editor, together with Mieke Bal, for over some fifteen years at Stanford University Press. This series has by now brought out more than 160 original titles and translations, many of them dealing with the complicated relations between memory and modernity, post-continental and post-analytic philosophy, faith and the global world, espousing methodologically diverse approaches to religious studies with innovative studies in anthropology, literary and cultural theory, psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, and gender as well as visual (film and media) studies.

Indeed, in addition to my own writing projects, I have continued to be deeply involved in several institutional efforts of an academic but also policy-oriented nature that operated across traditional disciplinary lines of demarcation between scholarly and practical fields, methodological orientations, and political preconceptions and affiliations.

In Amsterdam, I was one of the co-founders, in 1994, of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), an institute that was premised on the principle of “local internationalism” rather than seeking disciplinary identification with other universities in The Netherlands along simple departmental lines (e.g., Philosophy, Comparative Literature, Art History, etc.), as was the first impulse of scholars nationwide, especially when the Ministry of Education issued an invitation to structure graduate programs and their curriculum in a more rigorous and sound way during the mid-nineties: a measure that was soon followed by a laborious process of accreditation by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences with little promise of improvement in the funding bases of those institutes (“research schools”) but proved successful. ASCA soon became the second largest research institute and graduate program at the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Amsterdam and is still flourishing and has become somewhat of a model for other institutes in The Netherlands, even though it never received the necessary support of vision and leadership at the central level of the university’s administration, let alone other incentives, that we cherish at American research universities and that might have allowed research institutes and graduate schools of this kind to develop into genuine international “centers of excellence” (to stay in the jargon) in The Netherlands as well. This is not to say that nothing was or could be done under these challenging institutional circumstances, which, sadly, remain fairly typical of the European context of higher education and research policy.

Beyond this experimentation with trans-disciplinary efforts in the humanities, I was also involved in attempts to foster dialogue and cooperation among humanists and social scientists at the national and international level. From 2002 onwards, I served as the Chair of the interdisciplinary program *The Future of the Religious Past: Elements and Forms for the 21st Century*, sponsored by The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), whose councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences granted a proposal conceived under my direction an unprecedented sum of 5.4 million Euros for advanced research and international workshops at

Dutch universities from that year onwards through 2011. In my function as Chair of the national program committee, I was the General Editor of five collective volumes with proceedings resulting from the program. The first published volume was entitled *Religion: Beyond A Concept*. In its extensive introduction, I sought to spell out the premises of the program and to suggest that the future of religious studies should be seen in a renewed appreciation and reevaluation of its overall, indeed “global,” if also virtual, “archive.” I further insisted that the cooperation between philosophical approaches in the humanities and fieldwork and other empirical modes of inquiry in the social sciences call for an approach that, for lack of a better term, is that of *deep pragmatism*. We should probably return to this term in a moment, since it encapsulates much of my current convictions and epitomizes a promising research agenda for the study of religion – or, again, “global religion” – as I see it.

To complete the picture and sketch out the larger context for my most recent work, from January 2006 until October 2009, I was an official advisor to the Netherlands Scientific Council of Government Policy (WRR), in The Hague, and a member of its project group on Religion and the Public Domain. Its preliminary report was widely discussed in the Dutch national press and consisted in a courageous intervention in an intellectual and political climate poisoned by the reaction to the murder of Theo van Gogh, the threats made to Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders, events that were lucidly presented and analyzed by Ian Buruma in his book *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*. As Buruma recalls, The Netherlands, for all the aura and past glory of its Golden Age, its Humanist as well as radical Enlightenment culture of openness and tolerance, experienced much more difficulty in coping with immigration issues than the more traditional immigration countries, such as the United States, Canada, or even France. Post-war and early 21st century Dutch public life, Buruma claims, remained largely characterized by “Calvinist restraint,” “bourgeois disdain for excesses,” and “phlegmatic preference for consensus and compromise,” just as in the 1990s, during the so-called “purple” government coalitions of market liberals and social democrats, the “*polder model*” became the answer to all existing and potential political conflicts in the “welfare state,” whose administrative and “self-perpetuating” elites – in spite of the officially professed “multiculturalism” – remained largely the “Our Kind of People” reminiscent of the virtuous and self-satisfied “*regenten*” Frans Hals portrayed so faithfully in his well-known paintings.

Buruma recounts a disturbing tale, documenting the inability and unwillingness to face a larger problem that hardly limited itself to the effects of mass immigration from Islamic countries into The Netherlands’ major cities. For one thing, there were the felt or imagined detrimental effects of disempowerment as a consequence of European unification and the ongoing process of globalization. For another, there was a general sense that the substitutes for the early and mid-twentieth century “pillorization [*verzuiling*]” and the subsequent “erosion of organized faith” – namely, the revolt of the 1960s, multiculturalism, and the purple “*polder model*” – had offered no viable alternatives. Especially, among so-called “progressives” there was an abrupt shift “from a position of automatic, almost dogmatic advocacy of multicultural tolerance to an anxious rejection of Islam in public life.” It is a view, Buruma suspects, that was the result of “a

certain yearning for something that may never really have existed, but whose loss is felt keenly nonetheless.”

Yet, questions of national identity and, hence, inevitably of religion continued to simmer below the surface, waiting to erupt. In a 2002 lecture, Job Cohen, then the Mayor of Amsterdam, suggested that the main question in modern European societies such as The Netherlands was going to be whether “a new adhesive” could enable both so-called autochthonous and recent immigrant citizens and subjects to “glue society together” under radically new—post 9/11—conditions, characterized by a dramatic “switch.” The possibilities for “accommodation” of immigration populations he saw could be relayed to a sense of “belonging” that would begin by giving the religion of their origins its public face and place once again. In Cohen’s words, “The easiest way to integrate these new immigrants might be through their faith. For that is just about the only anchor they have when they enter Dutch society in the twenty-first century.” It was a suggestion that provoked an avalanche of criticism. But Cohen’s premise was bold. If religion was not the problem, could it be the beginning of the answer? Could it be a source for social cohesion where all other societal tendencies—not least those related to globalization, the Internet, etc.—had become centrifugal forces that seemed to steadily undermine all sense of “belonging”? Or was this latter sense of “belonging” a nostalgic-romantic fiction all along, a retrospective projection, nothing more? These seem pertinent questions that are still relevant and continue to guide the recent debates on so-called “political religions” and “political theologies” both in academia, journalism, and policy venues.

It is only more recently that a more fundamental discussion has emerged to address these issues in The Netherlands. I am thinking of a series of detailed reports published by the aforementioned Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) over the last few years, focusing on questions of national identity, the role of Islam, Turkey’s admission to the European Union, and, most relevant for the purposes of my current research, a thorough investigation of religion and the public domain in all of its aspects. These WRR reports have provoked vehement discussion in national media and invited several critical reactions. The dust is still settling and much will depend on how actual policy recommendations withstand the test of further study of empirical data, theoretical analysis, and, of course, also the principal and practical input of municipal, provincial, and national publics and functionaries that form their primary audience. This much is clear, however: in so far as the more principal—i.e., conceptual and normative—framework for its analysis is concerned, the WRR, on the whole, has promoted a “post-secular” stance, of sorts. By this I mean that its considerations and overall recommendations do not so much intend to revise existing *constitutional arrangements*—notably, the relationship between Church and State (which no one in his or her right mind would want to touch, even though they are certainly not sacro-sanct per se either)—but to contribute to a change in the perception and appreciation of public, political and, eventually, “global” religion, to begin with among government officials and their advisors, but also of public educators, journalists and other media representatives. This view, by the way, resonates with themes in the recent writings of Habermas and Hans Joas (notably in his *Warum brauchen wir Religion?*)

who have emphasized a “post-secular” understanding of our current dispensation, not least in the larger – “global” – context of an emerging “world society” (as Habermas puts it).

Victor Taylor: *There are many themes and issues running through your scholarship and before we discuss your current scholarship specifically, could you situate your prevailing concern(s)? Is there are coalescing point?*

Hent de Vries: I would situate my work first of all against the background of several collaborative interdisciplinary projects and volumes in which I have been involved and from which I have learned a great deal.

Related to my first book project, *Minimal Theologies*, mentioned earlier, I co-edited volumes of essays on the concept of Enlightenment and the debate between the Critical Theory of the first, second, and third generations of the Frankfurt School and recent developments in French phenomenological and so-called poststructuralist thought. These volumes, entitled *Die Aktualität der “Dialektik der Aufklärung”. Zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne* and *Enlightenments. Encounters between Critical Theory and Recent French Thought*, published in 1989 and 1993, respectively, brought together thinkers from very different methodological schools of thought (Herbert Schnädelbach, Gianni Vattimo and Jakob Rogozinski, among many others). Indeed, encounters of this kind framed my early projects up to the point where I started to feel that certain complementary insights were to be gleaned from the tradition of so-called Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy in its post-Wittgensteinian variety, on the one hand, and in the more neo-pragmatist and moral perfectionist vein, on the other. To this latter insight my encounters, relatively late in my formation, with thinkers such as Rorty, Stanley Cavell, and Hilary Putnam played an immense role, as did my timely exposure to the work of my more epistemologically oriented colleagues in philosophy at Johns Hopkins, such as Michael and Meredith Williams.

This said, it is fair to say that the tradition of so-called Western Marxism and its dialectical or, more broadly, paradoxical, indeed,aporetic model of critique has remained a prevailing concern for me, even though this interest, as already indicated, always went in hand with a commitment to phenomenological themes and methods. The alternation between these two styles and figures of thought seemed to me more all the more natural since two my original heroes, Adorno and Levinas, had first started out from inquiries into phenomenology and a certain dialectics, respectively, before embarking upon a journey in which these terms and allegiances switched places effortlessly. What did it mean that this could have happened at all and also that one could discern similar reversals in other authors as well (as my further points of reference at this time, namely Habermas and Derrida, illustrated with the development of their own thought all too clearly)? This said, new themes and concerns, other references and authors, have become at least as important to me since then.

Since the early projects condensed in *Minimal Theologies*, my work has evolved in multiple directions. Parallel to publishing two further monographs, entitled *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* and *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Reflections from Kant to Derrida*, I pursued my scholarly interests in philosophy and systematic theology within the frameworks of further

extended international and interdisciplinary collaborative projects, without which they would have remained exercises in dry swimming. It is hard to think of philosophical matters without invoking particular empirical situations and problems and exemplars—often down-to-earth things, even “banal phenomena” (to cite Jean-Luc Marion)—that have triggered them, even and especially when one’s own predilection goes in the direction of the abstract and formal, metaphysical and mystical, as, I suppose, it does in my case. And we all know that for at least some of us the longest detour on the way to concretion leads through the icy desert of abstraction (as Adorno mused on the opening page of his *Negative Dialectik*) and is also the shortest.

In this spirit, then, I was a co-editor, with Samuel Weber, of the volume on *Violence, Identity and Self-Determination*, published by Stanford University Press in 1997, as well as of the volume on *Religion and Media*, published by Stanford in 2001. The latter book has often been credited for setting some of the methodological parameters and standards for a relatively new field of study, and it is along these lines that I have continued to think, teach, and write.

The two larger monographs, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* and *Religion and Violence*, in their turn, sought to solidify my earlier claim that contemporary post-Enlightenment, secular, and post-secular thought draws on a semantic, axiological, rhetorical, and figurative “archive,” whose virtual presence and, if we can still say so, origins are of a religious and theological nature and whose intellectual, ethical, political, and affective potential under current conditions of the global expanse of markets and media we have not yet begun to fully realize. In addition to adding new themes and concerns, concepts and arguments, these books allowed me to considerably broaden my own horizon, allowing me to bring very different interlocutors, such as Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jan Patočka, Michel de Certeau, and Marion.

I also co-edited a volume on *Post-Theism*, in honor of my aforementioned mentor, Han Adriaanse, collecting essays in philosophical theology, and I brought out a lengthy volume, published by Fordham University Press in 2006, with the proceedings of an international research project on *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, directed together with Professor Lawrence E. Sullivan, the former Director of the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions. With *Religion and Media*, the latter volume proved to be the more programmatic of these series of edited volumes, together, perhaps, with its more recent follow-up, entitled *Religion Beyond a Concept* and published by Fordham University Press in 2008. And I have modest hopes that yet another volume I recently co-edited, this time with Ward Blanton, an extensive collection under the title *Paul and the Philosophers* to be published by Fordham in 2012, may serve a similar purpose as a catalyst of innovative debate across disciplines.

In all these collective projects the intensive cooperation between philosophers and theologians, cultural historians and anthropologists, political scientists and specialists on media, gender, and race, has been essential and I strongly believe that their results have profoundly influenced the course of my own thinking. Their results also indicated novel paths for future inquiry that I hope to make good on one day. Without exception, these collaborative volumes investigated contemporary modes of religious and cultural symbolization and assembled a host of direct and indirect inquiries into their present-day situation as well as into the ever-increasing urgency of

ethics and values (including critical scrutiny of the very value or values of “value” itself). This, I believe, is true *a fortiori* of a series of recent monographs that have been long in the making but that I am about to complete and to which we should perhaps return in a moment.

Victor Taylor: *I am always struck by the intense flow of disciplines in your work... philosophy, religion/theology, literature, politics, and culture and media studies. Some of these “flows,” as I have described them, are directed by metaphysical and epistemological concerns. Others seem to be more thematic at times, “violence” for instance. You manage all of this without developing a system, which seems to be required in academia. How do you resist that demand? Do you want to resist that demand?*

Hent de Vries: I have nothing against a “system.” In fact, I am “all for it” and deeply admire theorists who give it their best shot, in full awareness of the limitations of totalizing views, grand narratives, and the like. So I too aspire to a system, an anti-system, if you prefer, that would be systematically developed and explicit to the fullest detail. If I have not integrated the bits and pieces yet—although I have published my share of programmatic statements, notably in several longer introductions to the collective volumes I mentioned earlier—then I am solely to blame. For I think that I should aim at nothing else and I also do think that the current and planned studies are, no doubt, insufficient efforts to do just that: namely, articulating a vision for what I now like to call “deep pragmatism,” again, for lack of a better term. My most recent work aims at demonstrating how this vision emerges out of a reappraisal of the religious and theological “archive” and, indeed, moves freely in and out of it, with a curious mixture or oscillation of engagement and disengagement.

I still think that Derrida found the best formulation for such approximation in distancing and vice versa, when he formalized this paradoxical movement back and forth (an aporetic movement on the spot, if you like) by characterizing himself as *le dernier des juifs que je suis* (in “*Circonfession*”) and, again, with regard to Blanchot’s reading of Heidegger in particular (in *Apories*). On each occasion, he suggested that one can at once feel closest to and at the furthest remove from the same author or same tradition, just as one can have the distinctive feeling of being an “anachronistic contemporary” (“*Apprendre à vivre enfin*”) of past generations and the archives they generated and guard, as it were.

I agree with your differentiation between metaphysical and epistemological concerns, on the one hand, and thematic emphases, on the other. This is no doubt a fair description, even though I feel it is hard to avoid also the methodic back and forth between more conceptual and topical excursions, both of which are certainly not unrelated and which are not worth much without the constant reference to their counterparts. This might be another way of adopting and transposing the Wittgensteinian motif of dual aspect seeing, without saying all too much about a (Spinozistic) “dual aspect theory of reality” that this might or might not imply. And, surely, there must be more “aspects” than just two (infinite attributes or dimensions, if you like, of which *we*, finite theoreticians, know nothing yet)?

Be that as it may, I have always attempted to generate systematic insight and refine certain conceptual tools *from within* the historical and present state of the debate, taking as my point of

departure the views of a limited number of significant authors and texts, philosophical and theological, literary and popular, including authoritative think tank reports as well as telling examples from a host of visual media.

In so doing, I have tried to pay utmost respect to what has been researched and written or stated by others—listening to some of the most traditional and orthodox religious as well as heterodox and so-called idolatrous or blasphemous voices—while also taking the freedom to interpret their texts not just *e mente auctoris*, but rather to *ventriloquize* and *allegorize* them, showing their analyses to have implications that they might not have intended, envisioned or accepted. As I have suggested elsewhere, the greatest fidelity and ultimate betrayal—in textual, interpretative matters, and not just here (after all, ethics and politics are no different matter)—often go hand in hand. What we should simply accept—affirm and always suspect—is that we have no firm criteria ready at hand to navigate ourselves out of this predicament, once and for all.

My method and aim, if one can still say so, is thus neither empirical nor analytical; nor is it vaguely intuitive or constructive. In some respects, it is more hermeneutical—some would say, deconstructive—than it is speculative; also, it is less an exercise in conceptual analysis than it is one in pragmatics, broadly and, especially, “deeply” understood. But to the extent that I focus on singular and, as it were, concretely lived historical and contemporary experiences, their implicit horizons of meaning and their peculiar—and, often, unanticipated, novel, or, as I would now say, miraculous, eventful, and special effective—mode of *givenness*, my approach is phenomenological as well.

In sum, I feel that I am mostly proposing a different way of thinking about things—historical, empirical, and textual givens or data—that are either known or handily available. It is, however, a matter of combining the dots differently (or, in decisive cases, not at all). With this method and aim in mind we can bring classical-theological discussions and modern philosophical critiques of the belief in miracles—from the so-called Old and New Testament, through the Church fathers, Spinoza, and Hume up to contemporary treatments of testimony—to bear on attempts to analyze and track revised self-definitions of “religion” in their present-day political transformation and mediatic effect. It is my wager that to do so can have implications for understanding some of the most pressing issues in contemporary philosophy, media studies, anthropology, and cultural analysis, as these disciplines increasingly reflect on global religion and the social, cultural, and political impact of the new technologies of communication that have steered its resurgence.

In terms of my current research: study of theologies of the miracle, philosophies of the event, and theories of the special effect can deepen our understanding of the meaning, power, and end of religion today. And it is precisely in comprehending and engaging the relatively new phenomena of *global* and *mediatized* events of what I have (quite conventionally) called a *theologico-political* nature that the comparative and philosophically attuned study of religion finds its most daunting task. This much we can predict with some confidence for its likely—and, it seems, for the

time being only possible—immediate future, which is also to say, for its different, yet intersecting and overlapping, virtual and present pasts.

Victor Taylor: *How you would situate your work on “political theology” in relation to Milbank, Žižek, Marion, and Caputo. How do you frame the key issues?*

That is a difficult question to which I have no simple answer, not much of an answer at all, in fact. And, lacking both syncretistic and polemical appetite, I am not sure that whatever I can say here will satisfy you or your readers.

These authors are all in a different league, for one thing. To put things bluntly and all too schematically, without doing justice to any of these very different thinkers, whose writings I have been following from a certain distance in some cases: I do not work within the framework of a critique of so-called bio-politics, let alone within the program of so-called Radical Orthodoxy, however defined, nor do I have much of a psychoanalytical mindset, training, or general frame of reference (although I am happily married to a psychoanalyst who continues to educate me in things I should know or should have known all along), nor, finally, is my concern religious or confessional per se, in any strong or weak sense of these terms.

That said, each single one of these authors has worked hard and creatively to formulate ways to receive and revive the traditions I deeply care about. No doubt, I continue to learn from them or should do so even more. Yet I have no taste and skill for pointing out differences, points of contact, or overlaps, even when gently prompted (which happens at times, often to my surprise). Too much time in modern and contemporary philosophy is, I think, wasted with the wrongly understood need for syntheses or, even worse, with vain and futile polemics (which is always a sure sign that sometimes else goes on, but not something I think much of).

This said, it is fair to say that I feel probably closest in orientation, if not inspiration, to Jean-Luc Marion’s overall philosophical project in its rigorous mode of argumentation and strict insistence on making a phenomenological rather than merely theological claim (or, at least, in trying to separate these two types of claims while fully realizing how difficult, indeed impossible, this is).

I am deeply in awe with regard to the scope of his historical learning, steeped as it is in the tradition of Western metaphysics and in the very attempt to overcome its central premises, just as I am also impressed by the extent of his often relentless radicalism, which selects a seemingly classical motif (say, the apophatic discourse of “love”) and then takes its analysis *all the way*. Finally, I am greatly appreciative of Marion’s skill to write and work in altogether different disciplines and registers: from his groundbreaking Cartesian studies to his profound probing of the method of phenomenology (in Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas and Michel Henry, in particular), to his subtle and resolutely theological meditations, not to mention his insightful contributions to modern visual art and, occasionally, literature. All these aspects of his oeuvre set the bar very high for us all.

To return to your question, I don't think that either Marion or the other authors you mention have much positive use for the term "political theology," as I have found it possible and helpful to define it, widening its scope to cover contemporary phenomena in so-called "global religion" and deepening its pragmatics in the more formal and analytical philosophical idiom (with the help of the writings of Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, and Robert Brandom, among few others). Nor do I think that any one of the authors you have mentioned would have much patience with my hopes to tie some of my strands of thoughts (even the ones I share with them) together in a conception of political thinking that seeks to pair this so-called "deep pragmatism" with some of most profound insights of offered by "moral perfectionism," as notably Cavell has revived it. Again, Marion would seem most open to such an endeavor, given his episodic but very interesting excursions into world of analytical thought, beginning in *Étant donné* (*Being Given*) and extending into more recent discussions of the perlocutionary features of the so-called "passionate utterance" (Cavell) as well as in the recent essays collected and translated in his *The Reason of the Gift*, which confront the phenomenological definition of givenness with the much debated Sellarsian "myth of the given," among other topics.

Victor Taylor: *Now that we are approaching the conclusion, could I ask you to discuss your current research . . . works in progress?*

My next project, which I now hope to publish in two or three installments, consists in completing a volume, entitled *Of Miracles, Events, and Special Effects*, and a volume, *Miracle Workers of the Eleventh Hour*, while a third is planned under the somewhat different heading *Out of the Ordinary: Moral Perfectionism, Religion, and the Case for Deep Pragmatism*. The sober descriptive subtitle of this eventual trilogy will be *The Politics of Global Religion in an Age of New Media*.

The first volume, *Of Miracles, Events, and Special Effects*, seeks to establish a dialogue between classical theologies of the miracle and miracle belief, modern philosophies of the event, and contemporary theories of special effects. The larger question of religion and media, broached in the earlier collaborative interdisciplinary project with the same title (*Religion and Media*), is submitted here to a more thorough philosophical and, if you like, systematic theological reflection, centered around a well-circumscribed motif: the emergence of the new—epitomized by miracles, events, special effects—and the thought and action it inspires, interrupts, and carries out.

The second volume, *Miracle Workers of the Eleventh Hour*, seeks to spell out the fate of the theologico-political and of concrete policy-induced political theologies under the expansion of economic markets and technologies, in light of this logic—and rhetoric or imagery—of the new and the beliefs we invest in the phenomena that express it. It does so by relating traditional, modern, and contemporary theories of the "spiritual automaton," from Spinoza and Leibniz to Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and beyond, in order to theorize the "special" effects of present-day religious discourse, testimony and affect, which often reveal themselves in the least expected of contexts (for example, in the debates on artificial intelligence and computational models of the mind, but also in the expansive uses of the Internet, blogs, political spin, and so

on). I argue that the tradition inspired by the miraculous offers us a useful interpretative key to understanding the structure and impact of even the most ordinary, banal and down-to-earth events, whether in everyday life or in the hyped—and politicized—reality of contemporary media.

The third volume, *Out of the Ordinary*, draws together my published essays devoted to Cavell's writings and elaborates on several motifs that I introduced in my opening essay in *Religion Beyond a Concept*. In a more analytical register, it seeks to make the case for "deep pragmatism" with constant reference to certain helpful intuitions in the tradition of so-called moral perfectionism. It raises the question what "deep pragmatism" could mean, given the fact that pragmatism (with the exception of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*) has not been very receptive to the specific religious motifs and motivations, moods and modalities—to say nothing of miracles—that interest me (and seems not finely attuned to the question of modern, especially new technological media either)

In this current overall project, then, there are two main lines of argument. *First*, it has struck me that one cannot study, describe, and analyze, let alone comprehend, what an "event" is without immediately tapping into historical sources and intellectual registers that claim what—in the language and imagery of religion or, as it were, theologically—constitutes a "miracle." Nor, I have felt compelled to add, although this may seem somewhat of a stretch, is it possible to understand either one of these notions—"event," "miracle"—without addressing what in the language of cinema and so-called new media is called a "special effect."

What is important is to realize that this does not only—or even primarily—hold true for so-called major events, for example world-shocking historical events, the determining or effective causes of which likewise elude us. The comparison can also be made with what we take to be ordinary events or the eventfulness, even "uneventfulness" (as Cavell called it) of the everyday. The religious testimony of the miracle—the very phenomenon or set(s) of phenomena for which it stands—can be said to epitomize and flag, but also condense or magnify, foreground and highlight, the most material, profane, and secular difficulty in our coming to terms with virtually any culturally mediated and, indeed, ever more mediatized given. As Walt Whitman wrote in a notebook and also suggested throughout in a beautiful poem entitled "Miracles," published in *Leaves of Grass*: "We hear of miracles. — But what is there that is not a miracle?"

My *second* theme throughout this larger project relates directly to the first. One cannot theorize "the political" or concrete contemporary forms of "politics" without drawing, once again, on its theology, more precisely, its "political theology," just as one can hardly assess its current forms and re-shapings without reference to technological media, old and especially new. This is particularly clear in the ways that violence, in random terror no less than so-called justified wars, is differently—and never fully or convincingly—legitimated but always clings to grounds and motivations that remain transcendent to any cause. "No violence without religion, no religion without violence," I once wrote in a somewhat metaphysical mood. "No events without miracles, no miracles without special effect," I would now add. This is the case for

good and for ill, since there are genuine or “true” and also merely fabricated or “false” – call them *miserable* – miracles, just as there are real events, good *and* disastrous.

True, the clips, sound bites, and spin of public religion and its political theologies differ greatly, and so do their calculated and incalculable effects, leaving no alternative but to learn to read the signs, the writing on the wall, but also to read between the lines, to see what is not visible, to hear what is not said, unaided by sure criteriological means or by rules for their interpretation. Minimal differences have maximal import and massive agendas have only minimal effect. An hour of zapping or surfing confirms the point. But, again, this point is best made by exposing our concept of pragmatic engagement and disengagement with “the world as we found it” to a more than historical “depth” for which the religious “archive” – in spite of or, rather, thanks to its virtuality (as, Bergson knew, absoluteness) – is, so far or still, the best repository. As *Out of the Ordinary* will argue, the tradition of moral perfectionism and, especially, that of deep pragmatism is among the contemporary discourses well positioned to hammer this out, turning what is, at this point, an intuition into a – no doubt, paradoxical, aporetic, in any case, metaphysical – argument, of sorts.

A second larger project I am currently preparing consists in a series of detailed studies of the relationship between philosophy, literature, and temporality in the tradition of spiritual exercises from Antiquity up to Wittgenstein and beyond. It is entitled *Instances: Spiritual Exercises and the Literatures of Time*. In this planned book, I take my point of departure from the writings of Paul Ricoeur (notably his *Temps et récit*) and from the writings of Pierre Hadot in order to demonstrate how the interrelation between philosophy and literature hinges on a specific understanding of temporal experience, revolving around “the instant” as an elusive and abiding presence, whose religious overtones are undeniable. I see this volume as the elaboration of a corollary and existential basis for the analyses propounded in my other project. This study is further crucial for a proper understanding of the logic of testimony, confession, and conversion that governs the “turn to” and “away from” religion (*à-dieu, adieu*), which I discussed in detail in *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*.

In a certain sense, therefore, this set of meditations will allow me to come, if not full circle, then at least back, once again, to motifs and motivations that drove my earliest work: spelling out how one can and, indeed, must inhabit a tradition and even world, while never fully being absorbed in or by it (after all: “The matrix cannot tell who you are”); but also: seeking one’s way into (and out of) these historical legacies and contemporary situations, zooming in on (and snapping out of) the most minute of moments, especially those that have the potential of revealing, perhaps, producing maximal (i.e., “global”) effect.

©Victor Taylor and Hent de Vries.

Taylor, Victor and Hent de Vries. “An Interview with Hent de Vries,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 11 no. 3 (Fall 2011): 1-19.