DERRIDA ON RELIGION:

Glimpses of interculturality

by Wim van Binsbergen

ABSTRACT. *The author investigates Derrida's long essay 'Foi et savoir' (1996) in a bid to derive, from that study of religion, pointers towards a philosophy of interculturality. He identifies Derrida's strategies of investigation, and finds them to consist in: dialogue with the philosophical canon; with Derrida's own work; a further development of the latter's own idiosyncratic but effective vocabulary; reliance on Indo-European etymologies; on the juggling of place names charged with biblical and Ancient Greek significance; and finally a conversational discursive progress. The author then criticizes Derrida for Indo-European entrenchment and linguistic determinism. It is argued that Derrida's central thesis of the culturally specific nature of the concept of 'religion' (i.e. as an invention of the West, even specifically of Christianity) is not supported from an Arabic and Hebrew linguistic perspective, nor from a cross-cultural distribution analysis of the notion of tolerance, not by the historical common roots of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Here, growth points for an approach to interculturality may be discerned, although outside of Derrida's argument. On the other hand, the bifocality Derrida attributes to religion is much applauded. Derrida's ambivalence in his approach to Judaism is highlighted (cf. Sartre and Levinas). What Derrida describes as religion, has – contrary to the concept of religion in the hands of anthropology or 'comparative religion' as fields of study – too limited a distribution through space and time, and in fact (with a display of ethnocentrism commonly encountered in Derrida's work) takes the North Atlantic tradition for granted. This becomes especially clear when – using a paired concept from cultural anthropology – the North Atlantic tradition of religion, as ' emic', is dissociated from an analytical, 'etic' concept of religion. The author concludes with a sympathetic reading of Derrida's* khōra / 'space' *concept as having real promise for thinking interculturality.*

KEY WORDS: *ambivalence, anthropology, Afro-Asiatic, Arabic, bifocality, Christianity, comparative religion', conversational discursive progress, Derrida, emic, ethnocentrism, etic, etymologies,* Foi et savoir, *Hebrew, Indo-European, interculturality, Islam, Judaism,* khōra, *linguistic determinism, Niger-Congo, North Atlantic tradition, Nostratic, philosophical canon, place names, religion, space, tolerance*

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Introduction

This essay does not aim at a comprehensive discussion of Derrida's writings on religion and related topics.[1] Rather, it is a reflection on only one of his pieces on religion, albeit perhaps the most central one: 'Foi et savoir: Les deux sources de la ''religion'' aux limites de la simple raison',[2] which was based on his contribution to the 1996 Capri (Italy) discussions on religion in which also Gadamer and Vattimo participated. Having in the past manifested myself as the worst possible reader and interpreter of Derrida,[3] my present piece is not intended to atone for former sins – however much such a gesture would fit into the general thrust of Derrida's argument, in which sacrifice, wholeness and righteousness become increasingly central as one reads on. No doubt I will still make a fool of myself even with the present, sympathetic reading of Derrida. My intention is not so much to do justice to him or to myself, but to scan his text for *the articulation of philosophical problems of interculturality, and the suggestion of possible routes towards possible answers, specifically from the context of religion* (or, perhaps more generally, 'spirituality').

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[1] An earlier version was presented at the meeting of the Research Group on Spirituality, Dutch/Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy, 28 April 2000, Erasmus University Rotterdam; I am indebted to the participants, especially Henk Oosterling, for their stimulating comments; and to Sanya Osha, for suggesting its publication here.

[2] Derrida, J., 1996, 'Foi et savoir: Les deux sources de la ''religion'' aux limites de la simple raison, in: Derrida, J., & Vattimo, G., eds., *La religion*, Paris/Rome: Seuil/Laterza, pp. 9-86; English translation *Religion,* Stanford University Press, 1998. Derrida's piece, under the title 'Faith and knowledge: The two sources of ''Religion'' at the limits of reason alone', was also included, as Derrida's opening chapter, in Gil Anidjar, ed., *Jacques Derrida: Acts of religion*, Routledge/ London, 2002, pp. 40-101.

[3] van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1999, *'Culturen bestaan niet': Het onderzoek van interculturaliteit als een openbreken van vanzelfsprekendheden*, inaugural lecture, chair of intercultural philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam: Rotterdamse Filosofische Studies; revised English version: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1999 (actual date of publication 2002), 'Cultures do not exist': Exploding self-evidences in the investigation of interculturality', *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy*, special issue on language and culture, 13: 37-114; also as ch. 15 in: van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2003, *Intercultural encounters: African and anthropological towards a philosophy of interculturality*, Berlin/ Muenster: LIT, pp. 459-522.

Strategies of investigation

Derrida's text makes exciting reading. It has without the slightest doubt the pulse beat of our time and age, mediates today's experience in the inimitable, slightly pedantic, yet devastatingly relevant way which marks the author as a great philosopher of our time. If interculturality is indeed one of the few great problems of our time, it cannot fail to seep through in this text – and it does to a very great extent, even if the term interculturality is not used even once.

Derrida proceeds more or less in the manner familiar from his numerous other writings, and from kindred authors both in France and abroad. Much emphasis is laid, initially, on the anecdotal details that define the situation from which he is speaking and writing – the very idea of universals has to be nipped in the bud. He has a great deal of very important things to say about the modern world, the structure of the experience it generates, and the reflection of this state of affairs in current religious ideas and practices. Without pretending to have at his disposal a privileged external position from which to look at the world and produce systematic, empirical statements about it by some explicit and systematic social-science methodology, his observations on the contemporary world and on other empirical matters are presented in an off-hand manner, as if they are not worth the trouble of trying to falsify them. This attitude, after initial bewilderment, grows upon the reader and is rather endearing; moreover, much of what he says is, at the descriptive level, admittedly too familiar to invite closer empirical scrutiny; *much*, but – as we shall see – not *all*. The real challenge of his argument is not the facts of the contemporary world, but how to think about the apparent resurgence of religion in this context. His method is not empirical research but a combination of time-honoured philosophical *topoi*:

(1) the idiosyncratic but profound and revealing dialogue with very few yet highly relevant philosophical texts by his philosophical predecessors, – texts with which he clearly has struggled for decades and to which he is now returning with a new set of questions

(2) brief reference to and excursions into his own work where some of the terrain covered in his present argument has been treated at greater

length

(3) the gradual unfolding of a highly personal vocabulary which is not specifically geared to the philosophical study of religion but which, having increasingly proven effective to convey and to problematise crucial aspects of the contemporary experience, turns out to be extremely powerful to highlight the religious problematic

(4) the reliance on etymologies of key words from the Indo-European vocabulary to denote aspects of religion

(5) the reliance on key words and names which, although once part of a general North Atlantic intellectual education through school and church, can no longer be expected to ring an automatic bell with the contemporary reader – or do I underestimate the readership if I suppose that not everyone knows that *Moria* was, by tradition, the mountain on which Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son Isaac, as well as the mountain on which the first Israelite temple was erected; that *Patmos* was the island where the Christian writer John claims to have started his *Book of Revelations*; that *Delos*, as the reputed birth-place of Apollo, was the most sacred island of ancient Greece, having a specific relationship also with the divine beings Leto, Artemis, Dionysus, and Ariadne; or that the Greek (specifically Platonic) χώρα (*khōra*), 'space, refuge', contrasts with τόπος (*topos*) but has nothing to do with the more familiar and somewhat similar sounding χορός, (*khoros*) 'dance, chorus or choir'.

Any technique is as good as the person using it, and in Derrida's capable hands this rather unpromising combination of strategies produces a brilliant argument.

The main philosophical props which Derrida sets up to deliver his argument are eminently familiar: Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*; Plato, *Timaeus*; Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*; Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*; Heidegger, *Holzwege* (specifically 'Der Spruch des Anaximander'), and *Sein und Zeit*; Levinas's entire oeuvre; Nietzsche, *passim*; and more implicitly Guattari & Deleuze, Bataille, and Sartre.

In addition to his own repeated assertions in the field of classical Greek and Latin philology, the principal source for Derrida's Indo-European ety-

mologies is: the authoritative (but somewhat dated) work of the distinguished linguist Benveniste – an author whom Derrida occasionally chides for his apodictic and positivist attitude to scholarly truth, but without setting up the proper discursive context in which the assertions, and shortcomings, of Benveniste can be properly assessed.[4] One may well appreciate Gadamer's misgivings (as vented in another chapter in the same book *La Religion*) about Derrida's reliance on etymologies; I shall come back to this.

The format of Derrida's lengthy piece is almost that of the protocol of a conversation, later augmented (by more than 200%!) in a postscript which step by step reiterates the argument of the main piece (the first 30-odd pages), thus greatly adding to the accessibility and transparency of his train of thought. The conversational structure and tone introduce, in a most felicitous manner which I greatly applaud, an element of what I take to be genuine and somewhat embarrassed humility vis-à-vis the truly formidable topic which the writer has set himself. He admits that he is not sure where to begin, he starts in the middle and lets the argument gradually unfold itself, and at the end one realises one has witnessed one of today's greatest minds at work, at its best. Gradually the mist of post-structuralist phraseology is dispelled (of course, Derrida has, against the background of his massive oeuvre, the right not to pause too long on the familiar aspects of his past itinerary); with ever greater clarity we see materialise problems of life, thought, truth, righteousness, sacrifice, violence, in short today's experience as filtered through a history of two millennia of Christianity.[5] It almost comes as an afterthought that the real challenge which inspired Derrida's piece, and the

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[4] Benveniste, E., 1975, *Le vocabulaire des institutions Indo-européennes, i. Economie, parenté, société, ii. Pouvoir, droit, religion*, Paris: Minuit. Remarkably, a struggling with the same etymologies occupies the opening pages of Mudimbe, V.Y., 1997, *Tales of faith: Religion as political performance in Central Africa: Jordan Lectures 1993*, London & Atlantic Highlands: Athlone Press. With his Louvain Ph.D. on the lexical and semantic ramifications of the word *air*, Mudimbe is a historical linguist and classicist in his own right; Cf. Mudimbe, V.Y., 1979, *Air: Etude sémantique*, Wien-Föhrenau: Institut für Völkerkunder der Universitat Wien/E. Stiglmayr, Acta Ethnologica et Linguistica.

[5] That Christianity seems to be taken for granted as Derrida's point of departure will soon become understandable from his particular reading of the history of ideas, specifically of the idea of 'religion', yet remains puzzling and disquieting, not least because of Derrida's own, Jewish background.

Capri conference, in the first place, was not any re-peopling of Christian churches or any occasional backsliding of North Atlantic philosophers and social scientists into a religious stance,[6] but the resilience, militant and intolerant position-taking, and the northern penetration, of *Islam*. Derrida's piece is, among other things, under conditions of globalisation, a brief exploration of the context and structure of Islam in the modern world. It is particularly a statement on the nature of religion as seen against the background of two millennia of (post-) Graeco-Roman culture. It has fundamental things to say about the nature of today's globalisation process and the place of religion therein. And it attempts to explain, on this basis, why it should be today that we witness the resilience of religion – although not so much of Graeco-Roman-Christian religion, but of Islam.

I will not attempt to situate this piece against the background of Derrida's general oeuvre. Let me merely indicate a few aspects of this rich text which are somewhat in my field of competence: interculturality and the empirical study of religion.

Religion as a parochial category – lexical determinism

All these gems of erudition I indicated under (5) above are apparently intended to confirm a claim which, although plausible, constitutes one of the important questions of interculturality implicitly raised by Derrida: the idea that 'religion' is very far from a universal category but, as a concept, is exclusively tied to the Graeco-Roman-Christian intellectual and institutional tradition from Imperial Roman times onward; we can only think of it, or

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[6] A phenomenon of which I am guilty myself, among – I now begin to suspect, after reading *La religion* – quite a few others, including for instance Benetta Jules-Rosette (who during fieldwork in the Zambian capital on the Vapostori Christian churches became an active member), and Matthew Schoffeleers, who although a Roman Catholic priest was for many years the main force keeping alive the Mbona territorial cult in Southern Malawi. Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1991, 'Becoming a sangoma: Religious anthropological field-work in Francistown, Botswana', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 21, 4: 309-344; reprinted as chapter 5 of my *Intercultural encounters*, op. cit.; also available at: http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/become.htm .

Derrida could only think of it along with his fellow-philosophers in splendid seclusion on the isle of Capri, because after all there is the shared background of Christian culture – even for Derrida with his background in North African Jewry. Religion is declared not even to constitute a general Indo-European idea, for as Derrida is happy to point out on the basis of Benveniste (whom, however, Derrida chides with as much gusto when his etymologies do not suit him), the Indo-European languages did not originally have a common term to denote 'religion'. Of course, one level of abstraction lower, they did have a common vocabulary to denote the various aspects of religion, such as 'priesthood', 'sacrifice', 'auspices', 'deity'. Here and elsewhere Derrida[7] comes dangerously close to the kind of linguistic determinism that has been associated, since the first third of the twentieth century, with the Whorf-Sapir thesis.

He is right (p. 11) to question Heidegger's assumption of the prior understanding of the words we use in a philosophical argument, but such questioning should be recognised to apply to all language use:

- in individual introspection,
- in intersubjective communication between native speakers of the same language, and
- in intercultural translation and, in general, communication, between different languages.

A false impression of the transparency of personal introspection and of intracultural communication is given if intercultural situations are singled out as particularly problematic.

This is not to say that intercultural communication, in the field of religion or otherwise, is unproblematic; all I am saying is that it is about as prob-

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[7] Cf. Derrida:

> 'La langue et la nation forment en ce temps le corps historique de toute passion religieuse.' (p. 12).

Cf. Whorf, B. L., 1956, *Language, thought, and reality*, New York/ London: M.I.T. Press; Black, M., 1959, 'Linguistic relativity: the views of Benjamin Lee Whorf', *Philosophical Review*, LXVIII, pp. 228-38.

lematic as intra-language and intra-cultural communication. If intercultural translation would be proven to be inherently so defective as to be practically impossible, that would mean the end of intercultural communication, but not of intercultural philosophy: the very field within which such a depressing impossibility could be argued in the first place; so we can afford to be frank. The real point is that, both between native speakers of the same language and in intercultural situations, there can be no exclusively linguistic confirmation of the possibility or impossibility of communication, understanding and translation – indications to that effect (relative indications, and never absolute proofs) can only be derived from extra-linguistic social actions giving evidence of trust, rejection, exchange, violence, or other such demonstrable social interactions that follow as a result of language communication. And all evidence points to the social fact of impredictably, yet by and large moderately, effective intercultural communication – the boundaries between cultures and between languages are demonstrably porous. By implication, the term 'religion', while having a solid Latin and European ancestry (as Derrida insists), might yet contain possibilities of being generalised beyond the Indo-European language domain and beyond the European historical experience. From the perspective of interculturality this is a crucial point: for all statements on other cultures (including entire scientific disciplines such as anthropology, comparative religion, archaeology) would be revealed to be entirely spurious – which from a point of view of intercultural philosophy they might very well be – if the semantic applicability of words could be demonstrated to be limited to the one culture in which they originated, and if the boundedness of that one culture could be demonstrated to be absolute and non-porous.[8] I shall return to this point below.

This does reveal the one-sidedness of Derrida's approach, but does not render it inherently invalid. He rightly stresses the parochialism of the universalist claim of a particular type of spirituality as 'religion'; particularly when this claim is broadcast by Christian missions and colonial states, and when it is reinforced, as Derrida very rightly points out, by the alliance between Christianity, capitalism, and the scientific-technological complex of today. His insight in the potentially deceptive nature of pacifist and ecumenical projects (p. 57) is profound. And yet he fails to convince. In an

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[8] It is the latter thesis I contest in my *Intercultural encounters, o.c.*

attempt to bring out the parochial, Christian historical indebtedness implied in our thinking about religion, with his enormous display of etymological claims (rival, including non-Indo-European etymologies could be adduced in at least some cases cited by Derrida and Benveniste), he begs the question as to the possibility of radical transcendence from cultural constraints in inter-cultural communication. Genealogies, etymologies, histories – the very constitutive elements of a religious continental tradition with which Derrida is familiar and which he stresses greatly can only bring out historical, unal-terable generic relationships since that is the idiom in which they happen to be expressed; they cannot reveal formal, structural similarities which may have historical roots now lost to consciousness, let alone *Wahlverwand-schaften* (Goethe: 'kinship by deliberate choice') between people initially pursuing historically totally unrelated cultures, religions and languages. Yet such *Wahlverwandschafte* are among the stuff that interculturality is made of. A tree-like divergence from a common source is all what these historical, etymological and genetic models can conjure up, not convergence, crossing-over, mutation, optionality, transformation – and the latter is very much the standard experience of the contemporary world. The proper approach is not in terms of either-or, but the admittance of the tension which exist between the parochial and the universalisable approach to concepts of religion, and I suspect that, before a different – less 'Roman', less 'Catholic', less 'Mediter-ranean' – audience, Derrida would have admitted as much.

Islam as religion

This is all the more important given Derrida's own partially non-Indo-European background: born in 1930 from Jewish parents in a Arabic and Berber speaking Algeria colonised by the French. One would expect him to dwell, not only on the Indo-European language family to which French, Latin and his cherished Greek belong, but also to pay some attention to the Afro-Asiatic language family to which Hebrew, Arabic and Berber are reck-oned to belong – along with many other languages of northern and eastern Africa and of West Asia; and one wonders what would be the implication, for his etymological musings, of current long-range approaches in linguis-

tics, in which Indo-European, Afro-Asiatic, and most other languages of central and northern Eurasia, are argued to belong to one linguistic super-family, termed 'Nostratic' – allowing even for a super-Nostratic extension to which also the other language families of Africa are reckoned (i.e. Niger-Congo – including Bantu – and Nilo-Saharan) with the exception of Khoi-San.[9]

But Derrida's position is particularly remarkable given the central position Islam (even long before the terrorist attacks on the American eastern seaboard on "9/11" 2001) has occupied in the debate on multiculturality in the contemporary North Atlantic, including in Derrida's text. As the prominent Dutch social scientist Bram de Swaan has argued, the term 'multicultural' is increasingly employed as a euphemism for 'Islamic', not only in the Netherlands but throughout Western Europe, with its massive influx of Mediterranean immigrants in the course of the last few decades.[10] In a brilliant conversational way, Islam gradually emerges from Derrida's argument both as the 'worst' (violent, sexist, intolerant, anti-literary, anti-human rights) embodiment of the paradox of resilient religion after the death of God, and as an understandable case (Islam being seen as a deliberate contrast with an exploitative and humiliating Christianity; p. 60 n. 24) given the hegemonic North Atlantic subordination to which the Southern shore of the Mediterranean and other predominantly Islamic regions of Asia and Africa have been subjected since the 18th century CE. Derrida's argument is far too subtle and too well-informed to fall victim to the common stereotypes re-

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[9] Cf. Bomhard, Allan R., 1984, *Toward Proto-Nostratic. A New Approach to the Comparison of Proto Indo-European and Proto-Afroasiatic*, Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science, Series IV – Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 27, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia; Bomhard, A.R., & Kerns, J.C., 1994, *The Nostratic Macrofamily: A study in distant linguistic relationship*, Berlin / New York: Mouton de Gruyter; Dolgopolsky, A., 1998, *The Nostratic macrofamily and linguistic palaeontology*, Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. However, in the Russian branch of Nostratic studies, the status of Afro-Asiatic as a branch of Nostratic is contested. The claim concerning the African languages is in: Kaiser, M. & Shevoroshkin, V., 1988, 'Nostratic', *Annual Review of Archaeology*, 17, 309-329. The isolation of Khoi-San suggested in this nutshell treatment is only apparent but cannot be elaborated here.

[10] Gerda Sengers, 2002, *Women and demons*, Leiden: Brill; originally Ph.D. thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2000.

garding fundamentalism, of equating – lock, stock and barrel – Islam with today's Islamism.

But there is more. In the Semitic vocabulary of Islam, and in that of Judaism for that matter, Derrida could have found much of the material not only to illustrate his thesis as to the culturally parochial nature of the concept of religion, but also for the denial of that thesis. It is simply not true, as a statement in intellectual and social history, to affirm, with Derrida, that toleration is a predominantly or uniquely Christian concept. Jews, Parsis, Christians, even Irani and Iraqi worshipers of the peacock demon which happened to be associated with a sacred book, were (as compared to other non-Muslims) privileged in that they were accommodated as *dhimmi* under Islam, a status which however wrought with humiliating implications at least meant that they were recognised and tolerated to be different – at a time when, by way of comparison, Christian Western and Southern European planned and executed the crusades in order not to accommodate, but to exterminate Islam. Or a more recent and conclusive example: in the early twentieth century the enlightened Christian theologian Rev. Dr. Hastings compiled his massive and famous, 12-volume *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*,[11] to cover every aspect of mankind's religion and philosophy as known to scholarship at the time. The article on toleration covers dozens of pages in volume XII, some devoted to Christianity, admittedly, but others to Buddhism (an older and more numerous expression than Christianity during by far the greater part of the last two and a half millennia – and incidentally one which had[12] a considerable influence on early Christianity), Islam, etc. This is one of the several places in Derrida's argument where his well-taken point of the parochialism of the concept of religion misfires and produces notions which are undesirable and wrong from a viewpoint of intercultural-

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[11] Hastings, J., 1908-1921, ed., *Encyclopaedia of religions and ethics*, xiii vols, Edinburgh/ New York: Clark/ Scribner.

[12] As is e.g. indicated by the close parallels between the Jâtaka accounts of the Buddha's life, and the accounts of Jesus' life in the New Testament and the apocryphal books. Cowell, E.B., ed., 1895, *The Jâtaka: Or stories of the Buddha's former births: Translated from the Pali* by various hands, vol. 1 translated by R. Chalmers, Cambridge: University Press; Budge, E.A. Wallis, 1923, *Beralâm and Yêwâsêf: Being the Ethiopic version of a Christianized recension of the Buddhist legend of the Buddha and the Boddhisattva, the Ethiopic text edited for the first time with an English translation and introduction, 2 vols.*

ity.

By the same token, the concept of religion, however much tied to a particular Latin etymology (*religere*? or *religare*?) in the case of West Indo-European languages and North Atlantic intellectual history, has an almost perfect counterpart in the Arabic concept of الدين (*ad-dīn*, 'religion'). No one would expect the semantic fields to coincide completely; but then again, the semantic fields of the term 'religion' as used in the various European languages where this term appears, or even by different native speakers of the same European language, also greatly differ and only partially overlap. It is largely the actual social situation of interaction which determines translatability and its demonstrability.

Towards a philosophical theory of religion

Admittedly, the central thesis of Derrida's piece is not explicitly about interculturality but about the contradiction between what he – with layers of implied reference (cf. Bergson) – calls the 'Two Sources' of religion. Alternately, and fascinatingly, Derrida attaches different labels to these two sources: now it is

(a) the contradiction between sacrificial destruction and the intact integrity, the wholeness or holiness, of the sacred; or
(b) the contradiction between the constitutive, transparent force of rationality which informs science, technology, theology, on the one hand, and on the other the *belief* in the soundness and efficacy of such rationality, which cannot be based on rational grounds itself and therefore involves an act of irrationality, absurdity (St. Augustine) and hope formally equivalent to religious attitudes;[13] or

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[13] Cf. the following passage:

'Religion et raison se développent ensemble, à partir de cette ressource commune: le gage testimonial de tout performatif, qui engage à répondre aussi bien devant l'autre que de la performativité peformante de la technoscience. La même source unique se divise machinalement, automatiquement, et s'oppose réactive-

(c) the contradiction between a morality which (contrary to the Hellenic moral ideal) may originally be based on Christian theology, but which (as Kant, God's principal through unintentional and privately even pious murderer, has argued) takes optimum realisation and effect once we are prepared to consider the possibility that God does not exist or is not interested in our existence; or even, towards the end of the argument,

(d) the contradiction between the bloated erected penis (evoked with sufficient irony, I would think, to disculpate Derrida from the possible accusation of phallocracy) and the violated female body.

Ultimately, there is the suggestion that at the most formal level the constitutive element of religion is

(e) that it is literally elliptic i.e. is a construct whose main feature is that it has not one but two foci:
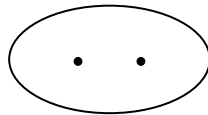
According to Derrida's latter intuition thus the roots of religion are to be sought in a formal, early characteristic of human thought, in a twosome that is partially but incompletely dissociated, perhaps somewhere halfway between individual self-assertion along Cartesian lines (the twosome destroyed into object and subject) and the complete participatory merging that we tend to associate with pre-human levels of consciousness. I find this suggestion very inspiring.

But Derrida does not stop there, in the remotest human past – he also, and particularly, probes into the present-day conditions of religion. He is aware of how under postmodern conditions of globalisation and ICT, relig-

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ment à elle-même: d'où les deux sources en une. Cette réactivité est un processus d'indemnisation sacrificielle, elle tente de restaurer l'indemne (heilig) qu'elle menace elle-même' (p. 41).

ion unavoidably presents itself as a panoptical ecstasy, with layers upon layers of transmission and performativity. These sections communicate a profound insight in religion as a phenomenon, and should be compulsory reading to any researcher in this field. In the light of these penetrating analyses, Derrida manages to interpret contemporary 'fundamentalism' as a particular, naive, attempted solution to the kind of contradictions outlined above. It is an illusory solution which could only be articulated under conditions of (post-) modernity. Here he does not necessarily mean fundamentalisms of the Islamic kind: there is also Christian Pentecostal or Evangelic fundamentalism, and – despite Derrida's avowed sympathy for the following present-day manifestations – there are also ecological and dietary forms of fundamentalism to be identified in the contemporary North Atlantic. That the analysis may be extended to Islam, although this is way outside the Indo-European linguistic tradition, and largely (despite Aristotle's influence on Islamic philosophy, which was subsequently sacrificed to theology) outside the Graeco-Roman-Christian intellectual history, demonstrates that in addition to the parochial nature of the concept of religion, also a more universal, transcultural or intercultural use for the concept, and domain of analysis and debate, may be rightfully claimed – and is in fact claimed, even by Derrida.

Judaism

Derrida realises that it is not only contemporary Islamism which challenges the anti-religious philosophical interpretation of god's death in the North Atlantic, but also Judaism. He is strangely divided, sarcastic and tender at the same time, when it comes to juxtaposing his own thought on religion and modern times to that of Levinas. With Derrida's insistence that Western philosophy as well as the concept of religion can really only be thought within a Christian context, this leaves Jews as the odd ones out (p. 20, citing Nietzsche). Thus we have the puzzling situation of three Abrahamic religions, explicitly paraded as such by Derrida, out of which one only, Christianity, by producing the term 'religion', historically defines the scene of religious enquiry and, via its collusion with capitalism and techno-science,

hegemonically forces the rest of the world into this conceptual mold;[14] whereas the other two, Judaism and Islam, while sharing a common origin (not only because of pre-Islamic Arabian religion, but particularly, in addition to local Arabian religion, since Judaism and Christianity were the Prophet Muḥammad's main earthly sources of inspiration) are reduced to an ethnic, cultural and religious otherness which poses fundamental questions of interculturality.

> 'Le judaïsme et l'islam seraient peut-être alors les deux derniers monothéismes à s'insurger encore contre tout ce qui, dans la christianisation de notre monde, signifie la mort de Dieu, la mort en Dieu...' (p. 20f).

Not to say that they are the only two, since historically and comparatively monotheism is a rare exception, instead of a common phenomenon. Derrida, himself Jewish, thus gives a new meaning to 'the Jewish question' (Sartre).[15] The phrase is problematic enough in itself; sixty years after Auschwitz, one does not want to be reminded of any such question, not as a Jew and not as a Gentile. But there is another aporia hidden underneath: how to negotiate a common origin in the past and a complementary fate in the contemporary world, if not by virtue of an encompassing concept (such as 'religion') which cannot be completely relegated to the history and nature of Christianity and its antecedents on the *northern* shores of the Mediterranean? The same kind of questions could be asked with regard to the status and translatability of non-Indo-European, non-Latin concepts, not only of the Arabic الدين (*ad-dīn*, 'religion') but also, as explicitly paraded by Derrida, of the Hebrew קדש (*qdš*, 'sacred').

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[14] For a brilliant recent study of all three in their historical interconnection, cf. Armstrong, K., 1995, *A history of God: From Abraham to the present,: The 4000 year quest for God*, London: Heinemann, where she is particularly subtle in her discussion of Islam. In the study of Abrahamic religion, one of the most seminal texts has been: Robertson Smith, W., 1927, *Lectures on the religion of the Semites, I., The fundamental institutions*, 3rd ed. with additions by Cooke, London: Black; first published: Cambridge 1894 (no other volumes published); this implicitly also influenced Derrida in his emphasis on sacrifice, as a century ago it was a major inspiration for Durkheim.

[15] Sartre, Jean-Paul, 1946, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Paris: Gallimard.

Wim van Binsbergen

Particularising emic 'Christianity', or generalising etic 'religion'

There is, still in the context of interculturality, an even more important point to be appreciated here. By insisting that religion has only been thought along Graeco-Roman-Christian lines and in the attending Indo-European language(s), Derrida suggests that there would not be religion outside that initial sphere, unless as a result of the hegemonic assault of the Christian/ capitalist/ techno-scientific complex upon the rest of the world, in the context of globalisation and proto-globalisation during the last few centuries. That is to some extent an illuminating thought. Yet we have seen that there are reasons to allow for a less parochial and somewhat more generalisable notion of religion, which may be arrived at by extrapolation not just from the Christian point of departure, but also from, e.g., the Islamic one. Such an attempt to find a common denominator for religious phenomena beyond the boundaries of any one culture, is an exercise in interculturality. It would have to export the lexical element 'religion' beyond its original linguistic niche of Romance languages. Moreover, in Derrida's hands religion is not only considered from the point of view of lexical definition. As his argument proceeds, he brings out the main characteristics of religion in the Graeco-Roman-Christian historical tradition: the constitutive contradictions which he develops so insightfully and which I have very imperfectly rendered above as (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e), essentially serve to articulate the contents of religion in the North Atlantic tradition. It is thus a highly culture-specific complex of traits which he claims to be describing under the term 'religion', and not the *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Durkheim)[16] as if these constituted a universally underlying model of all religion whenever and wherever – as was Durkheim's claim.

Because philosophers are rarely occupied with particularising historical or ethnographic description, the methodological implications of the problem at hand may somewhat elude them. But that problem is eminently familiar to historians and anthropologists,[17] who are always torn between two formats

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[16] Durkheim, E., 1912, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

[17] On this concept, cf. van Binsbergen, *Intercultural encounters, o.c.*; Headland, T.N., Pike, K.L., & Harris, M., 1990, eds., *Emics and etics: The insider/ outsider debate*, Fron-

of social description: an *emic* or an *etic* one. The *emic* format, explicitising the very concepts which the people described are themselves using (although yet rearranged and rephrased in an alien academic idiom – very few ethnographies are written in the language of the people they describe), remains as close as possible to these people's conscious structuring of their life worlds, but in principle defeats all possibility of generalisation. The *etic* format imposes alien, theoretically informed analytical categories upon the people's own structuring of their life worlds, thus renders the latter very imperfectly, but with the great advantage that via the analytical categories intercultural comparison becomes possible. Of course one can try to have one's cake and eat it, by taking an *emic*, parochial category like *mana* or *taboo* – words derived from specific Polynesian languages and life worlds – and re-coin them into analytical categories; this was the great but clearly deceptive innovation of religious anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century. Now Derrida's method essentially amounts to the same deceptive devise. It invests a great deal in an emic description of Christianity which becomes increasingly rich in contents (bringing in sacrifice, Messianism, the concept of the holy as intact and vulnerable, as polluted and threatened particularly by rationality which yet is invoked to protect the holy against the very threat it itself represents, the violence which this generates, the way that violence finds a bodily, especially a sexual expression, etc.).

However, the argument does not remain limited to Christianity exclusively. It immediately extends to include Islam, and soon also Judaism; it might as well extend to modern African cults, to witchcraft eradication movements, and to Christian Pentecostalism which, next to Islam, is becoming Africa's dominant religious expression. Implicitly, the appeal of Derrida's argument derives from the suggestion that what he asserts to be the case for Christianity, in fact applies also and particularly to contemporary Islamism, and even to 'all' 'religion'. By sleight of hand, the emic perspective has become an etic one. But this step is fundamentally unacceptable, not only for reasons of methodological rigour, but particularly because the emic characteristics attributed to Christianity, demonstrably, by reference to in-

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tiers of Anthropology no. 7, Newbury Park/ London/ New Delhi: Sage. In the latter book especially the contribution by Quine: Quine, W.V., 1990, 'The phoneme's long shadow', p. 164f.

disputable empirical data to be derived from anthropological ethnography and from comparative religious research, are not necessarily found elsewhere, in other... *religions*.

Clearly one major question (a question of interculturality) underlying Derrida's whole argument is whether it is possible to distinguish between

- the concept of religion (as an analytical category capable of generalisation over more than one culture, region, historical period),
- the specific contents, in the form of empirically demonstrable traits, of any one religion identified with the aid of that analytical concept.

It is the dissociation between the idea of sacrifice (redefined as bloodless) on the one hand, and the actual ritual killing of mammals and birds on the other (bloody sacrifice), which separates Christianity and Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, from earlier Semitic religion and from latter-day popular and even formal Islam. Derrida's intriguing scenario of religion, righteousness, the death of God, and globalisation, however appealing as an original perspective upon Christianity, therefore does not even apply to all three Abrahamic religions, let alone to all the thousands of 'religions'[18] known from empirical research – sacrifice, righteousness, truth, are differently constructed in many of them, and in many others do not even constitute identifiable traits at the level of the consciousness of the people involved. In other words, Derrida's scenario cannot justifiably be invoked to explain Islam under globalisation, and such light as it appears to cast on that

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[18] I am fully aware of a huge underlying problem here and on other points in my argument where I speak of 'one religion' or of a plurality of 'religions'. What is the unit of analysis in the study of religious phenomena? If – as I claim elsewhere – cultures do not exist in the form in which they have been represented through much of the twentieth century: as bounded, distinct, integrated more or less natural units, then in all likelihood the same argument would apply to 'religions'. So much I am prepared to admit. However, my rejection of the particular definition of culture as indicated does not make me deny the existence of any cultural systemic specificity, – my point is that in no one such systemic specificity is it possible to live a complete life, one always needs several such specificities. Whatever the case, the problem of the unit of analysis in the study of religion is to important to be treated to any satisfaction here. I have to pretend naivity on this point, in order to be able to make, concerning Derrida's argument, the more pertinent points as contained in the present paper.

phenomenon is a false halo, a shimmering reflection originating from (what is, as seen from the southern, *African* shore) the opposite side of the Mediterranean, i.e. the northern shore.

Place

Moria, Delos, Patmos, Capri...

Derrida's argument is permeated with spatial metaphors. He emphasises from the beginning that is impossible to philosophise without taking a definite spatial position, also in the literal geographical sense. He revives implicitly the Ancient Near Eastern fundamental religious notion of the sun-god from whom there is no hiding, whose light penetrates *everywhere* (thus exploding the concept of 'place') in order to bring illumination, especially in the sense of knowledge of good and evil, justice to be meted out to evildoers, and righteousness.

His argument further focuses on three spatial evocations of the religious: the island, the Promised Land, and the desert – later even *the desert in the desert*. The latter (not ecologically but in terms of the abstraction and livelessness of thought) sets the scene for a discussion of Islam, which Derrida, with his North African background even though he disclaims all personal relationship with Islam, cannot fail to appreciate as desert-originated and desert-bound. He calls these places *aporetic*: they represent varieties of being caught and hemmed in, of incapability or unwillingness to access or to escape. This sets the tune for a particular mode of handling space which has considerable implications for the thinking of interculturality. The three aporetic places, however exemplary for varieties of religious positions, are all of them by implication dry, bounded, and secluded *par excellence*; the island and the desert are per definition the opposite of water, and the Promised Land, however much it may be accessed by crossing a small river (Derrida knows his Bible!), is ultimately, after that *fording*, just that: *Land*. In such solidity and dryness the flow of mediation, boundary

crossing, 'inter', stagnates, solidifies, dies.[19] The active dynamics and ambiguity of the notion of *aporia* is therefore lost in these three images that dynamic ambiguity consists in: the temporary or eternal, accidental or inevitable, incapability (hence *α-, a-*) of fording (*πορειν*, porein), but necessarily: *in the face of a promise or suspicion of fordability*. The three religious positions are defined as if taken once for all, they deny movement, approach, interaction ('fording'). They amount to evocations of non-communication, as if religion in the modern world is inescapably bounded and bounding, and has no potential whatsoever of crossing, relativising, or destroying boundaries; cf. once again:

'In our time, language and nation form the historical body of any religious passion.'[20]

Yet what is popularly called fundamentalism is not the only typical religious experience of our globalising age – it is accompanied, among other things, by a proliferation and spatial explosion, all across the globe, of low-threshold cults binding and uniting rather than separating people from greatly different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Religion not only sepa-

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[19] It is also as if the 'ban' (Hebr. חרמ *khrm*), the relentless, allegedly divinely-sanctioned (and utterly anti-intercultural) drive at total exclusion and total extermination of the Canaanite population, which the author of the Book of Joshua attributed (albeit more than half a millennium *after* the postulated and probably largely illusory event) to Joshua after the crossing into Canaan, is already implied in the desert-like metaphors of the Exodus story. Meanwhile the reference to the same ban on the Early Iron Age stele of Mesa of Moab (line 11 and 17) demonstrates that here we have a genuine historic institution, whatever the historicity of its projection onto Joshua and the Exodus story; cf. Noort, Ed., 1998, *Das Buch Josua: Forschungsgeschichte und Problemfelder,* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft; Albright, W.F., 1969, 'Palestinian Inscriptions', in Pritchard, J.B., ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, pp. 320-322. We cannot overestimate the devastatingly tragic influence of these (originally poetic, nostalgic, and illusory) images of relentless exclusion, violence, legitimation and conquest in the Book of Joshua, not only on the modern state of Israel, but especially on two millennia of Christian and European expansion in the world.

[20] As in:

'La langue et la nation forment en ce temps le corps historique de toute passion religieuse' (p. 12).

rates, it also has a unique potential for unifying against all odds – as Durkheim was to stress in his main contribution to the social science of religion. Entrenchment behind a newly erected boundary is not the only face of fundamentalism. Look who are hiding behind that boundary: people whose religious self-organisation allows them to create, among themselves, a new social identity, a new communitas, which they would never have had without that religious expression; whilst creating a boundary between the chosen and the outside world, the diasporic religious situation seeks to efface boundaries among the chosen whatever their pre-existing differences in terms of class, gender, region, itinerary, age, etc.

Exploring spatial imagery, it is remarkable that Derrida did not dwell on the obvious spatial imagery involved in a concept so closely related to 'religion': the *cult*, which – for one who, like he himself, believes in the revelatory power of etymologies – has everything to do with the tilling, not of the desert, the island or even the Promised Land, but of the fertile home which is a good mixture of dryness and wetness, and where therefore fordability (in other words, sociability, in part constructed through religious activity and belief) is an implicit given. Needless to say that for me, fordability is synonymous to interculturality; and in my capacity of anthropologist of religion, conducting, over the years, participatory anthropological research in four different African settings, I have always experienced that fordability, building it into the heart of my approach to African religion and becoming an African believer in the process.[21]

For Derrida, two roads, or wells – the imagery becomes unacceptably muddled, but the one important thing implied is: liquidity, flow, movement and transition as the opposite of unfordability – appear as so many fata morganas in the 'desert of deserts' (a nice Semitic phraseology which Derrida might have employed for extra effect): Messianism (as the hope of a radical transformation of time, truth, and righteousness), and χώρα as privileged, and above all, as *shared*, space beyond boundedness.

'Khôra, l' « épreuve de khôra[22] » serait, du moins selon l'interprétation que j'ai cru pouvoir en tenter, le nom de lieu, *un* nom de lieu, et fort singulier, pour *cet espace-*

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[21] Cf. my *Intercultural encounters*, o.c.

[22] Original reference to Derrida, J., 1993, *Sauf le nom*, Paris: Galilée, p. 95; *non vidi.*

ment qui, ne se laissant dominer par aucune instance théologique, ontologique ou anthropologique, sans âge, sans histoire et plus « ancien » que toutes les oppositions (par exemple sensible/ intelligible), ne s'annonce pas comme « au-delà de l'être »,[23] selon une voie négative' (p. 31).

As intercultural philosophers, we are suddenly quite at home here. For this is 'the inter-' we were looking for. This is also the 'placeless everywhere', the 'ubiquitous utopian never-neverland', to which Mall in his authoritative exposition of intercultural philosophy[24] clings, not in the least as an arguable and plausible, identifiable factuality,[25] but as a last resort, lest we give up all hope of the possibility of intercultural communication, translation and understanding. The parallel is not accidental: Mall has read Derrida and expects from the latter's philosophy of difference a way out of the aporias of interculturality, even though finding such a solution is not explicitly part of Derrida's project. And given Derrida's insistence on North Atlantic parochialism as unavoidable, more than a Derridean inspiration alone is needed to arrive where we want to be as intercultural philosophers.

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[23] Is this perhaps an oblique reference to: Levinas, E., 1981, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence. Le livre de poche edition*. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974; *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. A. Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981?

[24] Mall, R.A., 1995, *Philosophie im Vergleich der Kulturen: Interkulturelle Philosophie, eine neue Orientierung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

[25] Cf. van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 1999, 'Enige filosofische aspecten van culturele globalisering: Met bijzondere verwijzing naar Malls interculturele hermeneutiek', in: Baars, J., & Starmans, E., eds, *Het eigene en het andere: Filosofie en globalisering: Acta van de 21 Nederlands-Vlaamse Filosofiedag*, Delft: Eburon, pp. 37-52. Here I demonstrate that Mall's insistence on the placeless everywhere as the focus of intercultural philosophy is deliberately utiopian in the strict sense of wishful thinking. *But so, of course, is my own approach to African religion.* English version, 'Some philosophical aspects of cultural globalisation: With special reference to Mall's intercultural hermeneutics', included (ch. 12) in my *Intercultural Encounters*; also at: http://www.shikanda.net/general/gen3/index_page/cursus_1999-2000/mall_english.htm .

Conclusion

Later on Derrida's spatial argument turns out to lead to 'the' place, the place of truth (Golgotha? Patmos? Delos? Mecca? or simply Capri, after all?), monopoly of which is the main claim and counterclaim in the rise and fall of religion. It is tele-techno-science which dispossesses and delocalises, which takes away space and threatens space. Is religion the answer to this process? Could it be? Is that what Islamism mediates despite its repulsive trappings of fanaticism, infringement of human rights, sexism, violence, undeclared war, war under false yet quasi-democratically negotiated pretences, etc.? Is an answer possible regardless of our theory of interculturality, or is it only through a theory of interculturality that we may understand more about the contemporary resilience of religion?