Of miracles and special effects

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Though the phenomenon of religion might seem to have become obsolete in the recent intellectual and political history of 'secular' modernity, in late twentieth and early twenty-first century liberal-democratic states and worldwide, it has resurfaced with an unprecedented – and unanticipated – force. This 'return of the religious' at a geopolitical scale conflicts with the self-interpretation of modern states and their citizens. The emergence of a supposedly enlightened and increasingly differentiated public sphere had gone hand in hand with the formulation of ideals of identity and self-determination, individual autonomy and universalist cosmopolitanism, both of which seem at odds with the heteronomy and particularism – the authoritarianism or even the violence – commonly ascribed to religious doctrine and its practices.

The uncontested and often self-congratulatory narrative of Western, 'secularist' modernity – whose hegemony has only been reinforced by current tendencies toward globalization and the almost unchallenged appeal of free market capitalism – has from the outset obscured the fact that, in most of its historical formations, the concept of the political had to some extent always been contingent, if not upon the authority or the explicit sanction of a dominant religion, then at least upon a plausible translation and renegotiation of the central categories of this religion's historical beliefs, its central rituals, and their implicit politics. This was true for premodern times and during the first establishment of so-called nation-states. Mutatis mutandis, the same holds true for the so-called new geopolitics that follows in the wake of globalization and its medium, 'informationalism'.

Most analytical and empirically informed studies on the recent transformations of the information based economy, society, and culture, on the one hand, and of the contemporary role of religion in the public sphere, on the other, have a common blind spot. What they fail to see is that it is precisely an intrinsic and structural relationship between the new media and the renewed manifestation of religion that enables a comprehension of the ways in which socio-cultural identity, diversity, a certain commonality and universality as well as adversity and violence, are constructed and, so to speak, diffused. Turning to a recent essay by Jacques Derrida will help me to address this relationship in a systematic, theoretical or philosophical,

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mode. But concrete contemporary examples of it abound. A certain *politics of the miracle*, such as the one regularly deployed by the Vatican, is only one of them.\(^7\) By presenting a concrete example (confronting the ancient concept of the miracle and its present day counterpart, the special effect), this article sketches out the place and function of religion in relation to the new technological media. In the understanding of these relatively new phenomena contemporary comparative religious studies find their most daunting task.

Thus far not much has been done to bring these two revolutionary and unanticipated developments – the rise of the new media and the re-emergence of religion – into a single perspective. At a major Harvard conference some years ago, entitled *The Internet and Society*,\(^8\) no one raised the question of religion and even the most interesting studies in media and networks that originate in literary studies, hermeneutics and system theory pass over religion in silence.\(^9\)

Conversely, contemporary discussions in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism* and *Religion in Public Life*,\(^10\) to cite just a few of the most compelling contributions to the question of democracy, pay little attention to the simultaneous rise of the new media technologies and the relation they may have to the phenomenon of religion and its return as a political factor of world importance. The renewed prominence of the religious and the proliferation of political theologies it entails, on the one hand, and the equally unanticipated revolution in information technologies, on the other, are analyzed as if we were dealing with two totally independent developments. And where a relationship between the phenomena is acknowledged at all, the assumed link is often that of an instrumentalization of the one by the other, as if media formed the mere vehicle of religion or as if the medium could ever succeed in creating religion in its own image. Yet the medium is not secondary, nor is the religious mere epiphenomenon. And this is precisely what even the most promising theorizations of the contemporary social and cultural world would seem to suggest.\(^11\)

The sole exception to this mutual blindness, it seems, is Derrida’s ‘Foi et savoir: Les deux sources de la “religion” aux limites de la simple raison’ (Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone), a text that be taken as an reelaboration of certain insights first formulated in the analysis of the postal system in *La Carte postale (The Post Card)*, a text in which the reference to religion could have seemed virtually absent at a first reading.\(^12\) In Derrida’s more recent analysis, the reassessment of the concept and the practice of ‘religion’ goes hand in hand with that of the new media of communication, the increasingly sophisticated form of teletechnology. The two cannot be separated; inquiry into the first forms an interpretative key to the latter, and vice versa. What is more, their
intersection – and virtual interchangeability – have everything to do with a peculiar ‘artifactuality’ and ‘actuiviality’ that is characterized by a singular temporality, a ‘deconstructed actuality’, of sorts.\textsuperscript{13}

As his title indicates, Derrida’s whole analysis is driven by certain reticence concerning what seems to be central presupposition of the project of modernity and, perhaps, of the philosophical tradition in toto as it seeks to radically distinguish between muthos and logos, physis and nomos, doxa and episteme, faith and knowledge:

one would blind oneself to the phenomenon called ‘of religion’ or of the ‘return of the religious’ today if one continued to oppose so naïvely Reason and Religion, Critique or Science and Religion, technoscientific Modernity and Religion. Supposing that what was at stake was to understand, would one understand anything about ‘what’s-going-on-today-in-the-world-with-religion’ . . . if one continues to believe in this opposition, even in this incompatibility, which is to say, if one remains within a certain tradition of the Enlightenment, one of the many Enlightenments of the past three centuries (not of an Aufklärung, whose critical force is profoundly rooted in the Reformation), but yes, in this light of Lights, of the Lumières, which traverses like a single ray a certain critical and anti-religious vigilance, anti-Judaeo-Christian-Islamic, a certain filiation ‘Voltaire-Feuerbach-Marx-Nietzsche-Freud-(and even)-Heidegger’? Beyond this opposition and its determinate heritage (no less represented on the other side, that of religious authority), perhaps we might be able to try to ‘understand’ how the imperturbable and interminable development of critical and technoscientific reason, far from opposing religion, bears, supports and supposes it.\textsuperscript{14}

There is, Derrida maintains, an intrinsic relationship between the mediatic and the religious. Translated into contemporary geo- and theo-political terms, this would mean that one cease to portray, for example, political Islam in an anachronistic way, as the epitome of fundamentalism, ‘intégrisme’, and the like:

the surge of ‘Islam’ [le déferlement ‘islamique’] will be neither understood nor answered . . . as long as one settles for an internal explanation (interior to the history of faith, of religion, of languages or cultures as such), as long as one does not define the passageway between this interior and all the apparently exterior dimensions (technoscientific, tele-biotechnological, which is to say also political and socioeconomic etc.).\textsuperscript{15}
This interfacing between the interior and the exterior, to the point where the very distinction collapses (or is, at least, significantly displaced), must have held true for all times, even though the present day and age would seem to have witnessed a generalization and intensification beyond measure of the mode of communication and mediatization: the ‘mondialatinization’ of the ‘nouvelles nouvelles’, as he has it, but one in whose expansion the sheer quantity of scale and pace reverses – once more almost, albeit it not necessarily dialectically (as Hegel and Adorno believed) – into a virtual qualitative change:

Like others before, the new ‘wars of religion’ are unleashed over the human earth ... and struggle even today to control the sky with finger and eye: digital systems and virtually immediate panoptical visualization, ‘air space’, telecommunications satillites, information highways, concentration of capitalistic-medicative power – in three words: digital culture, jet, and TV without which there could be no religious manifestation today, for example no voyage or discourse of the Pope, no organized emanation [rayonnement] of Jewish, Christian or Muslim cults, whether ‘fundamentalist’ or not.\(^{16}\)

Derrida observes that if religion had ever been dead and overcome, surely in its resurrected form it is less predictable than ever before, most manifestly in the ‘cyberspatialized or cyberspaced wars of religion [guerres de religion]’ or ‘war of religions [guerre des religions]’.\(^ {17}\) And these wars may take on all the forms of radical evil and atrocity and mask themselves behind the most enlightened and most universalist intentions. Indeed,

it is not certain that in addition to or in face of most spectacular and most barbarous crimes of certain ‘fundamentalisms’ (of the present or the past) other over-armed forces are not also leading ‘wars of religion’, albeit unavowed. Wars or military ‘interventions’, led by the Judaeo-Christian West in the name of the best causes (of international law, democracy, the sovereignty of peoples, of nations or of states, even of humanitarian imperatives), are they not also, from a certain side, wars of religion? The hypothesis would not necessary be defamatory, nor even very original, except in the eyes of those who hasten to believe [sic] that all these just causes are not only secular but pure of all religiosity.\(^ {18}\)

Never before has it been so clear that there can be no such thing as an ultimate – analytical, de iure, let alone de facto – neutrality of the public sphere. Attention to the new and persistent prominence of religion could counterbalance the phantom of a culturally homogeneous society. And yet, it would be false to identify religion with inevitable resistance with particu-
laristic and idiomatic or even idiosyncratic views alone; religion has opposite, universalizing tendencies as well. What may be needed is a conceptual and empirical analysis of the multiple ways in which religion not only shapes the experience of possible tensions between collective and personal identities — and, perhaps, challenges the very concept of ‘identity’ — but also affects the conditions under which conflicts can be addressed, worked through, and ‘resolved’. The relationship between religion and media sheds light on the question of how cultural identity and difference are constituted, as well as on how they relate to the aims of socio-political integration. Religion, thus interpreted, forms the condition of the possibility and the impossibility of the political. Derrida offers a simple ‘hypothesis’, whose implications are far-reaching:

with respect to all these forces of abstraction and of dissociation (deracination, delocalization, disincarnation, formalization, universalizing schematization, objectivation, telecommunication etc.), ‘religion’ is at the same time involved in reacting antagonistically and reaffirmatively outbidding itself. In this very place, knowledge and faith, technoscience (‘capitalist’ and fiduciary) and belief, credit, trustworthiness, the act of faith will always have made common cause, bound to one another by the band of their opposition.19

On the one hand, it is increasingly difficult to deny that hyper-text manifests itself in a quasi-religious manner, in ways that we have, perhaps, not yet begun to comprehend. Indeed, there seems to be both irony and a deep truth in the description of media-produced and media-dependent celebrities a ‘icons’ and ‘idols’.20 On the other hand, the return of the religious, Derrida points out, concerns a certain resistance toward the abstraction of technological in the name of language and of nation and be it in name of the lingua franca, the Latin, of the West:

if, today, the ‘question of religion’ actually appears in a new and different light, if there is an unprecedented resurgence, both global and planetary, of this ageless thing, then what is at stake is language, certainly — and more precisely the idiom, literality, writing, that forms the element of all revelation and of all belief, an element that ultimately is irreducible and untranslatable — but an idiom that above all is inseparable from the social nexus, from the political, familial, ethnic, communitarian nexus, from the nation and from the people: from autochthony, blood and soil, and from the ever more problematic relation to citizenship and to the state. In these times, language and nation form the historical body of all religious passion.21
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