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“RELIGION” AND ITS OTHER: A RESPONSE TO GREGG LAMBERT, *RETURN STATEMENTS*

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Return Statements is a suggestive book, which opens more questions than it answers. The first sentence reads: “Most books are written with a clear statement in mind, usually in the space of a few years, as if to emulate a thought that unfolds as a continuous and unbroken element. This book is not among them.”¹ I find it difficult to summarize Lambert’s main claims, but I take it that the book aims to stimulate reflection rather than resolve the issues it raises. In that spirit, this brief response continues the conversation Lambert has opened by sketching a question concerning the relation between religion and its other.

“The return of religion” is a theme signaled in the subtitle of *Return Statements*, and it recurs throughout. In response to those who welcome the resurgence of religion in a post-secular age, Lambert describes himself as skeptical. In his view, the post-secular enthusiasm for weak theology fails to contend with fundamentalisms that are flourishing, and it is at odds with a critical rationalism.² Lambert is particularly critical of John Caputo: where Caputo appeals to Jacques Derrida in order to defend a religiosity devoid of content, Lambert argues that Derrida attends to the dark affinity between hatred and the divine. In Lambert’s view, “What we need most today is a little less religion...and a bit more good old-time psychoanalytic pessimism.”³

Although Lambert criticizes Caputo, I think the two authors are close insofar as they both frame the conversation in terms of religion. My worry is that this risks obscuring the issues at stake. Because the modern category “religion” is marked by colonialism and the rise of the secular state,

¹ Gregg Lambert, *Return Statements: The Return of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 1-5.

³ *Ibid.*, 64. The quotation continues: “Which is to say, a little less exaltation of a position of ‘non-knowledge’ concerning the impossibility of Love, and a bit more knowledge of the hatred that binds us to this God who murders us daily, but who leaves us in the dark concerning the secret source of his passion.”

scholars of religious studies have argued that the term flattens the diversity of particular traditions. Whereas many philosophers use the term “religion” as if its meaning were clear, its significance shifts in particular contexts, and its relation with its other (“the secular”) is unstable. For this reason, I am skeptical of both sides in the debate over religion’s return.

My question for Lambert concerns the relation between this critique of religion and his work. Like Lambert, my instincts are informed by Derrida, but I think Derrida points toward an alternative approach. In my reading, although Derrida complicates the concept of religion in terms that intersect with recent scholarship in religious studies. Even though he is not “religious” in any obvious sense, Derrida draws on upon Jewish and Christian texts (among others) in developing his project. In this way, he suggests that the relation between these traditions and modernity is too complex to be captured by the opposition between religion and its other.

Lambert frames the book by describing what he calls “a radical *skepsis*, a ‘suspension of judgement.’”⁴ On this approach, he says, “Any truth-claim that cannot be invested with absolute certainty must be radically suspended.”⁵ This goes, above all, for God: although this skepticism relinquishes belief as such, the example that he provides concerns the divine. He writes, “The skeptical attitude leads only to the suspension of the necessity of ‘belief,’ thus laying out a philosophical image of a life without belief, which only leads to error, suffering, and death. In the final analysis, to live without belief means nothing less than to live without the necessity of a judgement of/concerning God.”⁶ Against the background of the broader argument of the book, Lambert appears to be especially uneasy with religious commitment.

At the outset of the book, he describes two dimensions to the return of religion. On the one hand, commentators such as Caputo attempted to disentangle religion from any particular tradition; by abstracting the category from its historical manifestations, they advocated for a pacifist religiosity. On the other hand, Lambert observes that, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York, religious fundamentalism was also on the rise.⁷ Lambert implies that these two returns of religion

⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. It is not clear what motivates this approach—it would be useful, for instance, to know what “belief” means here and what belief has to do with suffering and death.

⁷ Ibid., 2.

are linked, and so he concludes that neither is compelling. However, it is important to note that these are not the only options.

Although fundamentalists are the ones who usually make it into the news, there is an astonishing diversity of religious practices—so much diversity, in fact, that some scholars doubt whether the term “religious” can encompass them all. As it happens, some forms of religious practice incorporate a circumspection that resembles Lambert’s radical skepticism. This ascetic instinct may operate on the level of ethical, political, or ritual practice, but it is particularly evident in theological traditions that explicitly insist upon intellectual self-critique.

To take one example, according to the sixth century Christian Dionysius the Areopagite, it is necessary both to call God by every name and to negate every name for God.⁸ Some assume that this is an empty gesture, but Dionysius is unstinting—although he affirms traditional Christian beliefs, he calls those beliefs radically into question. The effect of this juxtaposition is to underscore that any claim concerning God is a relative judgement that is necessarily tenuous. Dionysius suggests that in order to resist metaphysical confidence it is not necessary to relinquish belief altogether. Instead, it is possible to maintain a commitment that one acknowledges to be uncertain.

Derrida was preoccupied by negative theology (and by Dionysius in particular) from the outset to the end of his career.⁹ Like Dionysius, Derrida affirms particular judgements while, at the same time, subjecting those judgements to rigorous (and reflexive) critique.¹⁰ In my reading, the function of this negativity is not to suspend judgement altogether but to highlight the irruptive decision required by every act of judgement. In this way, Derrida and Dionysius suggest that

⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 56; cf. David Newheiser, “Ambivalence in Dionysius the Areopagite: The Limitations of a Liturgical Reading,” in *Studia Patristica XLVIII*, ed. J. Baun et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 211–16.

⁹ The earliest reference I’ve found to negative theology comes in 1949, while Derrida was a student at Lycée Louis-le-Grand (Jacques Derrida, “Recherches Sur L’Hellenisme,” 1949, 37, DRR 222, Fonds Jacques Derrida, IMEC, Saint-Germain-la-blanche herbe, Normandie). He refers to the tradition more than thirty times in his published work, e.g. Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume II*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 143–95; Jacques Derrida, “Sauf Le Nom (Post Scriptum),” in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995), 35ff; Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998), 71; Jacques Derrida, “Abraham, the Other,” in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, ed. Bettina Bergo, Joseph D Cohen, and Raphael Zagury-Orly (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 25.

¹⁰ As Lambert observes, Caputo’s religiosity is oddly de-obligating (Lambert, *Return Statements*, 151). Lambert associates negative theology with this movement towards the internalization of religion (at the expense of external practice) (*ibid.*, 153), but I think that is a mistake (at least with respect to negative theology in its classic forms). In contrast to Caputo, Dionysius affirms that practice of Christian commitment in all its concreteness while, at the same time, subjecting it to critique. Caputo’s mistake—which Lambert seems to share—is to think that particular religious commitments entail fundamentalist dogma. In my view, Derrida knows better.

rationality does not require the suspension of judgement; on the contrary, it allows judgement to continue while remaining provisional, subject to future revision. Derrida explains that the purpose of this approach is to keep a bad conscience, attending continually to a responsibility that remains unfulfilled.¹¹ Rather than opposing skepticism and religious commitment (as Lambert appears to do), Derrida suggests that negative theology exemplifies the ethical self-critique that motivates his own project.¹²

Lambert suggests that religion is a relic of an earlier time. He writes, "We often speak of religion today only in the historical past tense, somewhat like anthropologists will speak of past cultures, as if there is not the slightest expectation either on earth or in heaven for the creation of a new religion of Man springing from the prodigious power of Life itself. The source has dried up, it seems, leaving us bereft of inspiration."¹³ As a statement of fact, this seems doubtful. Many religious traditions appear to be flourishing, and some have creatively incorporated features of modernity that are otherwise associated with the death of God. That does not mean that religion has returned (for good or for ill), but it does suggest that the sacred persists. The world is full of minor gods—from mammon to the American military—and there is reason to suspect that political collectives can't do without them.¹⁴

As Derrida observes, the distinction between religion and its other is highly unstable.¹⁵ I have argued elsewhere that Derrida's analysis intersects with recent work on secularization in the field of religious studies.¹⁶ According to scholars such as Talal Asad, the modern concept of religion was constructed in the modern era as a term of contrast to the secular state, and it has often been used to bolster the state's power (for instance, by relegating commitments that could compete with the state to the private sphere of religion).¹⁷ Some argue that the word "religion"

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida," in *Questioning God*, ed. John D Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 69.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993), 19.

¹³ Lambert, *Return Statements*, 146. In this chapter, Lambert is commenting on Derrida's essay "Faith and Knowledge." I read the essay somewhat differently.

¹⁴ I find Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the persistence of the sacred in secular politics to be useful on this point (Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Meridian, Crossing Aesthetics [Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011]).

¹⁵ Derrida, "Others Are Secret Because They Are Other," 142; Derrida, "On Forgiveness," 67; Derrida, *Rogues*, 28.

¹⁶ David Newheiser, "Derrida and the Danger of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, forthcoming.

¹⁷ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 191-92. Cf. Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An

should therefore be abandoned, and others insist that it remains useful.¹⁸ All sides agree that it is important to remain alert to its shifting significance in particular contexts.

Lambert acknowledges that the category of religion is not univocal. He notes that the Latin *religio* may be taken in several senses, and he acknowledges that the modern category is marked by Anglo-American Christianity.¹⁹ At the same time, Lambert continues to rely upon the term to frame the main claims of his book. Lambert writes that “we are too hasty in talking about ‘religion’ even before we know what it is we are talking about,”²⁰ but his own use of the term is not always perspicuous.²¹ It sometimes seems that, in describing his skepticism toward religion and diagnosing its decline, Lambert depends upon an unreliable word.

In contrast, Derrida’s engagement with negative theology exemplifies the creative retrieval of particular traditions that characterizes his work. In keeping with his methodological predilection for impurity, Derrida argues that the central concepts of modern politics—tolerance, globalization, forgiveness, and secularization itself—have a theological genealogy.²² Although modernity is often portrayed as the gradual fading of religious particularity in favor of critical reason, Derrida claims that this process itself originates in Christianity.²³ In place of a neat distinction between religion and secular reason, Derrida recognizes that the influence of religious traditions insinuates itself in unexpected places. Because every tradition is multivalent, Derrida draws freely upon religious texts in pursuit of his own project.

If my reading of *Return Statements* is right, Lambert is not alone. Many philosophers discuss “religion” broadly, as if the meaning of the term were clear. I have sought to suggest that they

Incommensurable Divide?,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 836–62; William T Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Craig Martin, “Theses on the Critique of ‘Religion,’” *Critical Research on Religion* 3, no. 3 (December 1, 2015): 297–302; Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–84.

¹⁹ Lambert, *Return Statements*, 136–37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

²¹ To take one example, Lambert describes Badiou’s faith as “a post-secular form of ‘conviction’ which is not religious in principle” (*ibid.*, 163). It is not clear to me what the word “religious” means in this sentence.

²² Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 127, 130; Jacques Derrida, “Above All, No Journalists!,” in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 66; Jacques Derrida, “What Does It Mean to Be a French Philosopher Today?,” in *Paper Machine*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 116.

²³ Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Others Are Secret Because They Are Other,” in *Paper Machine*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 142; Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” 67; Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Meridian (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005), 28.

would do better to attend to specific texts and traditions in the recognition that each presents particular challenges and opportunities. As I have described, I think Derrida models this form of attention. In my reading, Derrida recognized that, insofar as religious traditions can incorporate self-critique, the distinction between religion and its other is fluid and unstable. By drawing freely on traditions that are not his own, Derrida demonstrates that the this division is both unhelpful and unnecessary.

I recognize, however, that Lambert's book may contain a response to the worry I have raised. Its essays are wide-ranging, and they are also (in my experience) elusive. Because I find it difficult to summarize the book's main claims, I do not intend to level an objection to its argument. Instead, in the spirit of conversation, my aim is to pose three questions:

Is it possible to distinguish between religion and its other? What is the point of trying? And what is lost in the attempt?