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WRITING: THE TRANSGRESSION OF RELIGION

Foreword

IN THE SUMMER OF 2002, Aspen Colorado was thrust into the international spotlight when the local school board decided to add Yoga to the public school curriculum. As the Religion Columnist for *The Aspen Times*, I dutifully began making the rounds attending acrimonious public meetings and interviewing some of the most outspoken individuals. The most vigorous opponent of Yoga was Pastor Steve Woodrow of First Baptist of Aspen (FBC). Mr. Woodrow had already been interviewed by CNN, the BBC and most of the major networks. He was well informed and forceful in his arguments. His position was that Yoga was a religion and should not be allowed in the schools because of the separation of church and state. While he was explaining his position to me in an interview, a question popped into my head, "Is Biblical Christianity a religion?" After I asked the question there was a long pause. "No," came the answer. Dutifully I asked the next question, "Then what is it?" He answered, "A relationship with God."

Later that Fall when a group of religious scholars known as Res Publica had its annual conference in Aspen, there was a public forum at the end. The question was posed: "Should Yoga be offered as part of the Aspen public school curriculum?" Professor Ronald Thiemann from Harvard University was on the panel of experts fielding questions from the audience. In that question and answer, a woman active in the one of the down valley Bible churches posed an interesting argument: the freedom of religion as conceived by the Founding Fathers was never intended to be today's all inclusive notion of religion comprising all the world's faiths, but rather was aimed only at the various Christian denominations and their related offshoots that constituted "religion" in the thirteen colonies. To almost everyone's surprise, Professor Thiemann agreed - not that he would have necessarily agreed with the woman's further contention that the First Amendment's protection of religion only extends to the specifically Christian religions as they were practiced in the early colonies. But clearly this woman, like the Baptist pastor, felt uneasy describing Biblical Christianity as

having any part in some kind of generalized “religion” – conceptual of otherwise. Their view, which is becoming more popular among judicial conservatives, is that Christianity is really not a “religion” at all. In fact, in the dispute over the placement of the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the Alabama Supreme Court, State Supreme Court justice Roy Moore stated in a CNN interview that the controversy was “about *God*, not about *religion*.”

There is a pattern emerging here, and it reads: “Mine is not religion.”

Certainly, neither a sparrow nor one fine day may make a summer, but these are signs nonetheless. The tip of a gigantic iceberg capable of ripping a wide gap into our unsinkable academic Titanic? What are we scholars of religion to answer to this these dissenting voices? “Yes, we know better.” “Excuse me, but I am afraid yours is a religion after all.” Doesn’t this sound a bit condescending? Patronizing? Pompous?

The following essay is an attempt to grapple with the sincerity of those who are ordinarily ascribed by scholars of religion as practitioners of religion but who nevertheless deny religion. Why is this? And is this denial of religion a phenomenon of religion—or not? Furthermore, should this phenomenon, this denial of religion, itself be denied in favor of some “higher truth” ascribed to by only a few scholarly elites? A denial of a denial?

The answer I am suggesting is that those of us who write about religion are only writing about a system of writing, and this is “religion.” This “religion” can never be personal, but only articulated as “writing.” Karl Barth said for example, that Christianity is *about* faith and revelation, not *about* “religion.” Is “religion” an alterity, an otherness, as opposed to personal belief or faith, primarily because what it is “about” is, in itself, problematic? Is “religion” only *about* writing? And is our writing *about* “religion” only *about* a curious kind of writing?

There are those who might point out that this is simply ground covered by Jonathan Z. Smith’s famous essay “Map is Not Territory” where he distinguished between the “map” of religious studies and the “territory” of religion.¹ Smith’s point is that the “phenomenon” of “religion” is an artifact of writing, of “grammatological” topologies developed from the obsessions of scholars with sacred texts and their interpretations down through the ages. There is certainly a kind of “use” for this kind of writing in a particular (academic) “language game.” But this is not what this essay is about. Wittgenstein’s deeper, more subversive point would have been to say, that while it may be true that the map

¹ *Map Is Not Territory*. Chicago: University of Chicago press. 1993. See also *Imagining Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1988.

is not territory, a more accurate statement would be to say, *there never was any territory in the first place*. To say or write “religion” is simply to say or write the impossible. All we can do as scholars of religion is to write about ourselves writing about religion. Even the anthropologist of religion only writes the concepts already written, hoping for at best, a new “trajectory” of thought or a “plane of thinking” that cuts a new way. In this sense, we are all “philosophers” or “conceptual personae,” as Giles Deleuze said.² But only as philosophers of immanence, of a “religion” always within the apostrophes. Thus, when we analyze or study “religion,” we are only writing *about* writing, which is the writing of “religion.” “Religion” is always denied *itself*. Thus the only true believers in this “religion” that is written, are the writers of this “religion.” They are the defenders of the faith – defending against all who would deny *It*.

I. Writing Religion and the Eternal Return (or Repetition) of Difference

Hence we must ask ourselves: What does it mean to ask the question, ‘What does *it* mean to write religion?’ The question should be posed simply, but *it* cannot be posed simply. There is this ‘it’ that keeps floating in and out, above and beyond the question – a kind of unrealizable ‘it’ – neither present nor not-present. What is this ‘it’ that resurfaces in both questions? – The question asked and the question asked of the question. We have a word, certainly. *It* is that word. *It* is the meaning of religion. *It* is “it.” But we are just repeating ourselves. As Ludwig Wittgenstein said, “One *thinks* that one is tracing the outline of *the thing’s nature...*”³ But are we? Even if we do *it* “over and over” as he says? Aren’t we just retracing the linguistic frame ‘over and over’? – saying the same *thing* ‘over and over’ – Feeling like we are never getting it quite right. A little different each time but still caught up in words? As Heidegger said “‘Language is language,’ leaves us to hover over an abyss...”⁴ To repeat the question means to simply reassert the intangible “it.” ‘Over and over.’ Assert-able but uncertain. The philosopher Giles Deleuze called it a “stuttering,” and Nietzsche, a “stammering”. Neither here nor there. A little different each time? The question presupposes some-*thing*. But what? And is it a some-thing that is a same-thing? *It* is “at least the same,” but is it also *more*? What is *it* that we assume when we ask, ‘What does *it* mean to write religion?’ “What is this ‘it’ of the writing of religion?” What is this ‘it’ of

² Giles Deleuze. *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press. 1994. p. 208 –209.

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. 1958. Proposition 114 (italics mine). See also Proposition 215: “Isn’t the same at least the same?” For Wittgenstein the implied answer is *no*. “Then are two things the same when they are what one thing is?” Again the implication is *no*. And the key Proposition – 216: “‘A thing is identical with itself.’ – there is no finer example of a useless proposition.” Why this impossibility of self identity? Why is the “thing” never identical to itself? There is a strange Hegelian ring to this idea. We will return to it and Derrida’s similar notion of the “One + n.”

⁴ *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York, London: Harper Colophon Books, 1971. Page 191.

Derrida's "It must be written?"⁵

I insist. I want to know. I have been asking 'it' my whole life – asking passionately. But now I hesitate. Doubt creeps into my mind. Perhaps I am asking wrongly. Perhaps there are too many hidden assumptions in this 'it,' too many secret presuppositions. Too many secrets. Therefore I will re-ask the question (I am passionate). I will do the right thing and reformulate my question. So now my question becomes, "How does 'it' write religion?" For is that not what I really want to know? Isn't 'it' the thing that I want, that I desire to find and to know? For I want to know – certainly - how religion is written. I have asked it how many times already? I am haunted by this specter of a question inside a question, like Heidegger's great quandary in "What is Called Thinking." Part question, part title, part assertion, part question enfolding inside a question." Never an 'it,' just a 'calling.' So I come back to my question and ask again, "Is there an 'it' that does the writing – writes itself – 'calls' to itself?" Should I just reformulate my question, safely, along the lines of Heidegger's question and ask instead, "What is 'called' religion?" But I am not interested in what is 'called.' I am not interested in the calling and the naming. I am interested in the 'it' – the 'it' of writing religion. For just as thinking is 'called,' religion is 'written.' But this writing is different from calling. This writing of religion is "active and stirring" in the texts and the palimpsests. It is like a doing, and not just a saying or a calling. It is like an act, the act, of writing religion.

Is *religion* – the real thing – written with the letters r-e-l-i-g-i-o-n? God did not write such a word as "religion" when he inscribed the tablets of stone with his own finger. But perhaps he was writing the *thing* of religion. For the word did not exist then, but surely the *thing* did. So how do we now proceed? From the word back to the thing? Why did the apple hit Aristotle on the head? Was it "gravity?" There was no word "gravity" back then. Was it "gravity" nonetheless? Do we move without the word? With the 'it,' with the 'thing?' What do we do when nowhere on the tablets of stone was word "religion" used? So if there is no "religion" here (or there)? How do we proceed?

The stones have long since vanished, slipped into those vast wastelands and dark labyrinths of (fables?) of history, like the most holy, the Ark of the Covenant. Now they are simply a topic of amusement and Hollywood movies. So this should really be of no concern of ours, this so-called God's writing on tablets of stone (unless you think this God somehow wrote "religion" without writing it). So we will pass on by. "*But there was no information, and so we continued...*"⁶ We are not interested in dead Gods and old tables of stone. We are interested in the writing of religion.

⁵ Derrida, Jacques. "The Double Session," as found in *Dissemination*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1981. Page 279. Emphasis mine.

⁶ T.S. Elliot, *Journey of the Magi*.

If “religion” was not written by the finger of God, and no serious scholar of religion would assume so, was it perhaps then written by the hand of the prophets and their scribes? We still have their texts. But there is yet another question, “Does the word ‘religion’ have to be used in order for *religion* to be written?” Can it be written of, and written about, if it is not explicitly written as *religion*? Again, this ‘it,’ this ‘thing’ of religion persists. But before we explore this question, had we not better back up and ask an even prior question—“Can religion even be written if it is only spoken?” Can *it* even be written by the prophets who only speak, or is *it* only written *per se* by the scribe? The prophet speaks, words on the wind: here today, gone tomorrow. Heard today, forgotten tomorrow. But the scribe writes and writes and writes – forever remembering, keeping, preserving. He remembers because the letters and words remember for him, just like they will remember for us. The inscription remembers and speaks: of something ancient and terrible and patriarchal. Words forever preserving, forever remembering, even if they are hated. Even if the scribes did not write “religion” perhaps they were truly writing *of* religion and thus in some sense were “writing *religion*.” One thing is certain, the truth of religion cannot simply be a matter of hearsay, it must not be open to the emendations and embellishments of singers and chanters, shepherds and druids – those who hear songs and melodies, cadence and rhythm. The writing of religion is not like that. It must be eternal, *logos*, forever a part of the ancient myth and history of humankind, forever a part of the story, like the angel with a flaming sword at the eastern gate of Eden barring the way back to Paradise, back to innocence, back to a time before the knowledge of Good and Evil.

All of these words are a writing of some kind, surely. We can recognize the shapes, the letters. We can put them together into words, for the letters themselves are meaningless are they not? But when do those letters r-e-l-i-g-i-o-n lift off the page, off the stone, and become *something* – when do they become the *thing, religion*? Scholars write the letters, make the word – “religion” – but is *it* “it”? Is “it” *religion*, the *thing* we want to point to, capture, represent or remember? Letters without the thing? Is this how religion is born? Is this how *it* comes to being and comes to exist? Always stillborn? Or does *it* rather rest and reside somewhere, somewhere else? Does *it* await to be called so that *it* can come inhabit the act, the feeling, the thought? If religion is indeed a denizen of the mind and not of heaven,⁷ where exactly in the mind does it reside? If it is an act – what kind of act? If it is a feeling – what kind of feeling? And does this even matter? For what if, when we write the letters r-e-l-i-g-i-o-n, *religion* is conjured forth, like some kind of wizardry *it* just happens, and *it* need not concern us why this is so. But this is disturbing. How can we accept this—this “alchemy of the word”—this *religion* that is called forth from the magical, the mystical, the

⁷ Similar to Pascal’s description of Truth in Pensee 131.

mystery - like a rabbit out of a hat, or God on Mt. Sinai? I am not satisfied with that power that we supposedly have when we write *religion*. 'It' is not enough. 'It' is never enough.

Or is 'it'?

According to Nietzsche, God is now long dead. Others will now concur that such a death was long overdue, God being responsible for many of humankind's evils, not least of all Patriarchy, war, genocide, fanaticism, etc.⁸ For such persons God's death was long overdue and *his* stone tablets a good riddance. It is now time for new Gods and thus religion lives on even though God is dead. Still religion is written, written not by the old scribes of prophets, or the finger of God, but by today's academicians and theologians. These are the new scribes, the new scribblers, the writers of the word "religion." These are the ones that now describe, ascribe and inscribe. Gods have come and Gods have gone, but we make for ourselves new Gods. And these new Gods, unlike the old Gods, will be ours.⁹ God's written of, and God's written about. Unlike the old Gods that were thrust upon us by others that we despise, these Gods are truly ours. We always were the God-makers anyway, but now we shall be so self-consciously. We now know we have the power to write religion and that the power of religion lies in *its* writing. This is how we make sense of *it*, this is how *it* makes sense to us. Like magic, like alchemy. If we could not write we would be like those fish in the sea that have no concept of water. It is when we write the water that we can see the water, objectivize the water, realize the water and then breathe the water. We are the water makers. The water breathers. We write the water. Religion, like water, is in the letters and the words.¹⁰ And so, like water-witchers we must divine for water so that we may drill for water. Similar to archeologists, we must dig for that meaning in our letters and words. "*The essence is hidden from us,*" as Wittgenstein said in his *Philosophical Investigations* (proposition 92).¹¹ So we dig, for it is buried. Like the well-witcher we walk over the plane of the land, the surface of the world, the *plane of immanence*, with our divining sticks, our pens, looking for sign. The sign of religion. We know that water is somewhere down there, water that we will have to drill for. Water, has a meaning, like

⁸ "The massive evils experienced in the twentieth century - the terrible suffering, destruction, and death in two world wars, the deliberate murder of millions of human beings in death camps, the stockpiling of weapons which threaten a nuclear catastrophe that could bring human history to an end - present overpowering counter-evidence to the myth of the God who cares for each person in even the tiniest detail of life." Gordon Kaufman. *In the Face of Mystery*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 305.

⁹ "To the extent that our received traditions about God...are inadequate to, or destructive of, human life and the environment within which it has emerged and by which it is sustained, it is theologically requisite that we transform or eliminate them." Kaufmann, *In the Face of Mystery*. Page 332.

¹⁰ Deleuze, Giles. *The Logic of Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. p. 21.

¹¹ This is a parody. Wittgenstein's ever elusive point, the title of Norman Malcom's famous work, is that *Nothing is Hidden*.

religion—deep and covered over by eons of geological (or “genealogical”) sedimentation. Meaning that has trickled down and percolated through the ancient texts into even more ancient texts. This water might have been trapped, covered over, like ancient lakes. Perhaps this essence of religion, this meaning behind and underneath all meaning, lies in caves and caverns. But, “behind each cave another keeps opening up still deeper, and beyond each surface a subterranean world yet more vast, more strange. Richer still...and under all foundations, under every ground, a subsoil still more profound.”¹² This is a meaning that lies very deep. We must be good linguists if we are to be scholars. We must be good philologists and do our etymologies. We must be good archeologists and dig for those meanings, especially those meanings of Gods buried in tombs behind where stones were once rolled. We must witch for religion, then drill and excavate. We must go beyond, even to, *religiones*—back to, and even past, those dark woodlands, and the chants of those mysterious pagans and druids, before liberal theology, before transgendering – back to a time when there was only, in Max Muller’s words, the “disease of language.” In this etymological cave we might find the sky itself. For beyond, deeper than Re-Horus Weber found Sky, beyond Pharoah he found Sun, and beyond Osiris he found Death. Something was found deeper, more original, hidden. It was older, more authentic, closer to the unvarnished truth of the Real: before interpretation, before tradition, before culture, before the Real could be sullied and tainted by the high priesthood of those dark manipulators of all of humankind – those that C.S. Lewis called in the *Abolition of Man* “the Conditioners.” Before Nietzsche was the killer of God and the great Nihilist, he was the humble philologist, plying his trade by writing about, on, writing. Writing on writing. The great palimpsest of humankind. Writing of tragedy, and goat songs, of ancient shepherds long since dead. Of tombs and crypts where Gods were once buried but now only the stains and lingering stench of carrion remain. It was there, in woodland chants and shepherd’s songs, that Nietzsche heard something. This ‘something’ was not the angels that proclaimed the birth of Christ as Savior, but rather the thunderclap of God’s death. It was in the original text, the Vedic fire chants, the oral traditions, the shepherd’s songs and, yes, in the woodlands, that God’s death was celebrated. If only we can get back to the source, the *ursprung*, the original texts, the breath and expiration of a God that according to Nietzsche sings his own death. Then we too can revel, along with the theological constructivists, in this old patriarchal God’s none-to-soon deconstruction. We must make straight, make right, reconstruct and write the way to the tomb of God.

Kierkegaard understood this. That is why he meditated on the Greek doctrine of Recollection in the early part of the *Philosophical Fragments*. It is the divine

¹²Deleuze 1990, 263. Deleuze is quoting from *Beyond Good and Evil*.

doctrine, the original and final truth of all men and women that they will be gods, that the Absolute can be found in history, that the Initial Aim of Process can be discerned, that Reason can be shown to be the candle of Truth, and that the One lies behind the manifest. "What a man already knows he will not seek" Kierkegaard tells us. And what he does not know he cannot seek, because he knows not what he looks for. Thus Socrates and Plato gave us Recollection – a truth that must be unearthed, discovered - dug for. For the Greeks this served as a proof for the immortality of the soul. Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche, knew all this.¹³ They also knew that every spadeful of dirt dug up in order to find religion, would be used to bury religion even deeper.

And where do we find such recollected Truth? The truth of God and the World – of the knowledge of Good and Evil? Perhaps we will find it in one of Zarathustra's labyrinths? Or maybe in one of Derrida's palimpsests? Will we find it underneath Wittgenstein's "icy logic" or in Heidegger's "abyss"? We must look behind the words, underneath the words to find those that were erased, those that were original. We must look through, past, beyond and underneath the copies, and the copies of those copies. Then we will find true religion, the birth of religion, the infant religion born immaculately, the first writing of religion. Or the Death of God. This is the Platonic motivation: "to distinguish essence from appearance, intelligible from sensible, Idea from image, original from copy, and model from simulacrum... God made man in his image and resemblance."¹⁴ But something lies in our way: layers of sedimentation. Eons of sedimentation. Dirt turned into rocks and stone. But there are letters on these rocks and on these stones. Letters on stone that speak of Law and Sin. This Law and Sin block our way. "Through sin, however, man lost the resemblance while maintaining the image. We have become simulacra. We have forsaken moral existence in order to enter into aesthetic existence."¹⁵ We have forsaken the moral for the aesthetic. We have forsaken the state of innocence for the knowledge of innocence. It is the way of our race. In the Garden there was neither innocence nor guilt because there was no sin. There was no difference. It was only in the aesthetic of difference, of knowledge, that morality was both born and forsaken. Now, an angel with a flaming sword bars our way. And *religion* is that flaming sword.

For the Christian, sin gave birth to difference, but for Deleuze, the philosopher of pure immanence, difference gave birth to...everything human, everything we

¹³ "There is a force common to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche." Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* New York: Columbia University Press. 1993, p. 5. The next twenty two pages explain this 'common force' in terms of "the repetition of dissymmetry" (24) whereas "they oppose repetition to all forms of generality" (in other words Kant and Hegel – see pages 5 and 7. Emphasis is his.) in favor of a "repetition as difference without concept" (or "synthesis," "mediation," or *aufhebung*).

¹⁴ Deleuze 1990, 256-7.

¹⁵ 257.

know, everything there is and is not. This is sin without grace. "Difference is behind everything, but behind difference there is nothing."¹⁶ All we are now is cheap counterfeits, forgeries, poor copies of something perfect, "made in the image of" but separated by difference. We have become the simulacra. And what are simulacra? It is nothing "...but a pretension – to underhandedly, under cover of an aggression, an insinuation, a subversion, 'against the father,' without passing through the Idea."¹⁷ The Idea is perfection, it is the divine. The Idea is the embodiment of all that we strive for when we write religion, when we simply write *anything*. We want to write through the cheap copies, cut through them, cut through all the crap – the biblical emendations and embellishments. We want to dig past, mine and blast, force our way back to the original autographs and eventually to the breath of God. Or the Death of God. Metaphysics is violent indeed. And so is the writing of religion.

Between religion and us, between God and us, stand the great dissimulators – the anti-Hegelians – Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Deleuze. The prophets of sin and dissimulation, of copies and simulacrum, of eternal repetition and recurrence of difference. They preach of that which is "built upon a disparity of difference," the very internalization of dissimilarity in Being itself.¹⁸ But how can we think, describe, difference "in itself" without it being in its essence, reflexivity and transitivity, a being of difference *between*?¹⁹ It's only possibility of a description "is another model, a model of the Other (*l'Autre*) from which there flows an internalized dissemblance."²⁰ The great Kantian paradigm revisited by Levinas: morality as aesthetic – the aesthetic of difference, the difference of copy and original, the difference of thing and thought, the difference of Same and Other. "In short, there is in the simulacrum a becoming-mad, or a becoming unlimited, as in the Philebus where 'more and less are always going a point further,' a becoming always other, a becoming subversive of the depth, able to evade the equal, the limit, the Same, or the similar: always more and less at once, but never equal."²¹ More and less going a point further defines the two infinities of science – the one great and the other small – that Pascal wrote about in *Pensee* 199. "Nothing can fix the finite between the two infinities which enclose and evade it... One depends on the other, and one leads to the other. These extremes touch and join by going in opposite directions, and they meet in God and God alone." Or the Death of God.

In which do we write religion?

¹⁶ Deleuze 1994, 57.

¹⁷ Deleuze 1990, 257. I am citing here Deleuze's citation of Derrida's citation of Plato's Pharmacy. Perhaps an apt illustration of the poison and potion of the *Pharmakon*.

¹⁸ 258.

¹⁹ Deleuze 1994, xv.

²⁰ Deleuze 1990, 258.

²¹ 258.

We are all under condemnation, condemned to forever imitate, to create copies, erect idols, engrave images. This is the sin of our forbearers, a sin of origins, a sin that is original in every imitation, every copy, every engraving and every inscription. Thus the writing is always the sin. Religion is always, forever, an eternally repeating and recurring (different) sin.²² Every writing of religion is an attempt to go back, back to the original, the first, the originary. But we cannot get back, for an angel with a flaming sword blocks the way.

In this kind of "Deleuzian sin" (if I may) each copy is of the same economy – an economy of difference, of more or less, more *and* less – remainder and supplement. Sin (difference) recurs eternally in an eternal recurrence (of difference). "Each difference passes through all the others. That is why eternal return does not appear second or come after, but is already present in every metamorphosis, contemporaneous with that which it *causes* to return."²³ I am surprised that instead of causes to return Deleuze did not write *forces* to return.²⁴ For surely we are now writing of eternal forces. "The world is neither finite nor infinite as representation would have it: it is completed and unlimited. Eternal return is the unlimited of the finished itself, the univocal being which is said of difference...the circle of eternal return [an elliptical circle with a displaced center Deleuze says elsewhere], difference and repetition in a tortuous circle in which Sameness is said only of that which differs."²⁵ Like an engraver's lathe turning round and round, gaining the breadth of a hair, but never in any instant truly round – serving only to distribute and disseminate difference over the entire plane of the curve: this is the plane of immanence. Is this perhaps a "hermeneutical" circle? Is this perhaps a slightly elliptical, de-centered, displaced, off axis hermeneutical roundness? No. Not for Deleuze, for "this circle, is not nearly tortuous enough...to show that philosophy is powerless to truly begin, or indeed to authentically repeat."²⁶ This is the very sign that issues from all "signalization." It is in a sense, a kind of costume, "a mask, expressing a process of disguising, where, behind each mask, there is yet another... Simulation understood in this way; is inseparable from the eternal return, for it is in the eternal return that the reversal of the icons or the subversion of the world of representations decided...The eternal return is becoming mad, determined to copy the eternal."²⁷

²² For Kierkegaard it is a *repetition*. For Nietzsche it is a *return*. Deleuze uses both words and sometimes a third, *recurrence*.

²³ Deleuze 1994, 57. Emphasis mine.

²⁴ "The Will to Power is the...the difference of related forces." Giles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. New York: Columbia Press. 1983. p XIV. See also Alphonso Lingis statement in *The New Nietzsche* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988. p. 41), where he says "Difference is enacted not in a reiteration of the same, but in the self-affirmation of a force exercised against another force."

²⁵ Deleuze 1994, 57.

²⁶ 129.

²⁷ Deleuze 1990, 263.

This is not some Hegelian difference that only seeks to preserve the negative in the “contrariety” of identity and a greater unity of “mediation” and “synthesis.” Deleuze (like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) loathes this idea reducing difference to the negative in order to subordinate it to identity again.²⁸ This is the mistake of those who would make Heidegger’s *Not* into a negative in Being rather than Being as difference itself.²⁹ It was Merleau-Ponty who more properly interpreted the Heideggerian “*Not*” as *folding* or *pleating*.³⁰ This is not a difference “between” but a difference “constitutive of Being” itself.³¹ This is the eternal return that we are all condemned to.

But we are not only *condemned*. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida reminds us in his *Des Tours de Babel* we are all also *commanded* to this eternal return. We are commanded to *write*: “I am alive for evermore; and have the keys of heaven and hell. *Write...*” (Revelations 1:18ff.). “Take thee a roll of a book and *write...* (Jeremiah 36:2,4).³²

And we are not only *condemned* and *commanded* to just *write* either. We are *condemned* and *commanded* to *write and interpret*, “If anyone speak...let one interpret” (1 Corinthians 14:27). From the Tower of Babel came the babble of many languages. And out of that babble we try to write, and out of that babble we try to interpret. When Pascal says in *Pensee* 697 that “Language is the same everywhere,” he means that it is the same in that it is ever changing. The only “same” is the repetition of difference, a difference of eternal recurrence. Thus when Pascal says “Language is the same everywhere...” he goes on to say, “...we need a fixed point to judge it. The harbor is the judge of those aboard ship, but where are we going to find such a harbor...?”

Derrida, like the heretic Pelagius, sees the ineluctability of condemnation-as-command. But unlike Pelagius he does not seek to ease our culpability. For the scholar of religion writes freely. Merrily the theological constructivists seek the

²⁸ Deleuze 1994, 58. In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze writes of “...a generalized anti-Hegelianism” that is “in the air.” This “anti-Hegelianism” opposes difference and repetition to identity and contradiction. Deleuze’s further anti-Hegelian proposal (underlying all his authorship) is an attempt to “think difference in itself” (xx). When Brian Massumi wrote the Translator’s Foreword to *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) he quotes Deleuze from an article in *Semiotext(e)* entitled “I Have Nothing to Admit.” In it Deleuze states he saw the history of philosophy “as a kind of assfuck” whereas he imagined himself “approaching the an author from behind and giving him a child that would indeed be his but would nonetheless be monstrous.” Massumi says that “Hegel is absent [in this description] being too despicable to merit even a mutant offspring.” Indeed Massumi quotes Hegel as saying “What I detested more than anything else was Hegelianism and the Dialectic.” See pages x and footnotes 5 and 6 on page 517.

²⁹ Deleuze 1994, 64.

³⁰ See chapter 3 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, “A Geology of Morals” where Deleuze and Guattari write of the folding of meaning which is very similar to Derrida’s notion of “dissemination” and “remainder-supplement” and also Ricouer’s “plurivocity-multivocity.”

³¹ Deleuze 1994, 65.

³² As quoted in Derrida’s *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Page 9.

death of all Gods so as to overwrite their own Gods. Thus Derrida recounts the ancient story of when Man, and now Wo-Man, the great constructivists of God, build their tower to storm the heavens and take God by force. Titans by the Greeks, hermaphrodites, half man, half woman, Nephilim by the ancient Hebrews, seeking by violence, by the *process* of constructing a great metaphysical tower to the heavens to achieve what every human desires: the death of God. Why? "So we may become like Gods," as the serpent hissed. And thus God destroys the artifice of those efforts. He destroys the Tower of Babel made of bricks and bitumen and recreates a curse of babbling tongues. Babel becomes babble. God curses humankind forever, eternally, with the multiplicity, excess and endless replication of difference: "a bottom without bottom of this crypt, the One + n incalculably engenders all these supplements. It makes violence of itself, does violence to itself and keeps itself from the other... bottom without bottom..."³³ We are condemned to speak in babble and commanded to interpret babble. We are commanded to translate the prophecies of tongues and angels, but condemned by the mouths of asps, mouths that issue forth a substance both foul and brackish, filled with the sparks of a terrible blaze. Here is a translation that meaning refuses. Meaning "commands right away the translation that it seems to refuse... transferable and untranslatable. There is only letter, and it is the truth of pure language, that truth as language."³⁴ Are these letters, perhaps the letters of the law? Are they inscribed on tablets of stone long lost or on human hearts circumscribed in a conscience that none can escape? In this essay Derrida is silent on these issues. Later he is not.³⁵

Derrida and Deleuze see the human condition as both condemned and commanded by this constitutive enfolding of difference into Being itself. We no longer live in the moral existence of the Garden. We forsook that existence. We now live in the aesthetic body of desires in a world of sin, of the flesh, of the knowledge *of* and the knowledge *about*. We now live not in Eden but *East of Eden*, upon the great plane of immanence: cracked and fissured, striated and smooth—we transverse this plane like great war machines, assemblages of desires, coupling and uncoupling, engaging and disengaging, transversing, wandering, always moving, nomads dreaming of *nomos*. We are strangers and sojourners in a foreign land. Commanded to hear ("*Hear O Israel...*"), but condemned to write, to copy, "in the image of..." We cannot go back, we cannot write our way back. Baring our way is the word, the letters r-e-l-i-g-i-o-n.

³³ *Acts of Religion*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002. p. 100. One wonders whatever happened to Spivak's being "intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom" (*Of Grammatology*. 1997. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press. Page lxxvii). Perhaps Derrida is now becoming "weary, weary, weary...of the truth and of the truth as untruth of a being-there, a Dasein which is "each time in the truth and untruth...co-originarily in truth and untruth...in uncovering and recovering, unveiling and veiling..." (Derrida 2002, 323).

³⁴ Derrida 2002, 133.

³⁵ 347.

Condemned and commanded to translate the translations. We are all scribes now, scribes of sophists, and sophists of the scribes. Describing, ascribing, inscribing – scribbling as scribes – forever writing. Copying copies. Copying copies of copies. Caught in the *Double Bind* that is inscribed in the law itself.³⁶ We are condemned to always return – to face once again the Cherubim with flaming sword of *religion* that bars our way back to Paradise and a time before innocence and guilt, before good and evil, before the knowledge of the original and the copy. We are both *commanded* and *condemned* to write religion. That is the *act* of religion. That is our *destiny*.

II. The Logic, or Veil, of Sense and Language

When man orients himself to other-than-God, veils of darkness and light envelop him... Total separation from this world is achieved when all veils, both those of darkness and those of light, have been drawn or torn aside, allowing man to enter the divine hospice that is the 'fountainhead of magnificence.' – The Ayatollah Khomeini.³⁷

Our way back is barred. By a sword. And a veil. What do these metaphors of veil and sword *represent*? We hang on a knife-edge as thin as the edge of a piece of paper. What does it mean to even *represent*? To *re-present*: the present as given again, but already given. To *re-pre-sent*: the present already given in the past and given again in the future. Transversing the tenses with no location of the subject – given, sent before, already sent, sent again, already sent before and sent again. What is the *re-pre-sent*?³⁸ Once again, for Kierkegaard there *was* no present, there *is* no present, and there *will be* no present. There can only be suffering: a suffering of all coming into existence, of all coming into being. The suffering of necessity in the present denies necessity itself and allows only for freedom – his “*freely effecting cause*.” Against Hegel’s “mediation” stands Kierkegaard’s suffering and

³⁶ Derrida 2002, 118. Compare Derrida’s notion of duplicity in the “double bind” or “double writing” to Kierkegaard’s “double reflection” or “reduplication” in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971. Pages 68 – 72). For Kierkegaard there was no “direct communication” (in philosophical discourse) because “Direct communication... constitutes... a deception.” According to David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (n. 25, p. 566) Kant’s contemporary, Georg Hamann, was “much admired and often quoted by Kierkegaard.” More is coming to light of Hamann’s *metacritik* of Kant’s use of language which sounds oddly postmodern: “Not only does the entire capacity to think rest upon language... but language is also the pivotal point in reason’s self-misunderstanding...” (as quoted in Jere Surber’s fascinating work *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism*. New York: Humanity Books, 2001. p. 60).

³⁷ *Islam and Revolution*. Berkeley: Mizan Press. 1981. Page 351.

³⁸ Long before Derrida wrote *Speech and Phenomenon* another of Kierkegaard’s predecessor’s, August Ferdinand Bernhardt, wrote in his *Sprachlehre* (1801–1803!) “However, everything that is in me I represent (*vorstelle*) to myself, that is, it becomes an object of my inner cognitive capacity, so that “to present” (*darstellen*), in the most universal sense, means nothing but making something be an object of the cognitive capacity of another rational being. Therefore, any presentation (*Darstellung*) whatsoever would have as its correlate a representation (*Vorstellung*), and so too language and each of its parts, since it belongs under the concept of presentation” (as quoted in Surber 2001, 158).

Paradox. "What is the opposite of mediation? It is the Absolute Paradox!"³⁹ For Kierkegaard there can be no necessary in history because that would mean the changeless of the non-existent would have to change in order to become existent, and the necessary cannot change. Like Deleuze and Guattari's "War Machine" patterned after Indra, the warrior God, Kierkegaard (like Nietzsche) "sees all things in relations of becoming."⁴⁰ All we have is an endless, eternal repetition and return of becoming. The present as necessary never *is*, because *it is* always slipping into the past or not realized yet out of the future. What we have is a present so thin, so impossible, so unrealizable that whether it even exists is suspect. Can Hegel's necessity "suffer" on the edge of such a razor? Or is there only movement? – a movement on life's stage, a drama, a theater – "All the world is a stage" – of modern (or *post*-modern) cinema: cameras on booms, turning on tripods, spinning reels of film, actors and actresses on a moving stage of drama in changing lights and speeds and perspectives with ever changing focus.⁴¹ Where is that nanosecond of the present, as thin as the paper we write on, but so thick, so impenetrable that we can never write through it, never penetrate it? – "Card figures that have not thickness."⁴² The present as given has no economy, it is freely given without necessity, both as the "*it gives*" and the "*it is*" of the "there is" of *es gibt* and *il y a*. "No being, no present, no presentation can here be indicated in the indicative. *It was, is, shall be, shall have been, should have been* for all time the sentence, the saying of God, his verdict: by God *order (is) given to give* the veil, the veil (is) the gift (that *it is*) ordered to give."⁴³ This is the veil of Moses, the veil of the temple – *it is* that which separates us from the Ark of the Covenant and the very presence of the impenetrable God. "Neither a history of a veil, a veil to be lifted or torn, nor the Thing, nor the Phallus nor Death... or a theorem wrapped up in shroud or in modesty, neither *aletheia*, nor *homoiosis*, nor *adequatio*, nor *Enthüllung*, nor *Unverborgenheit*, nor *Ershlossenheit*, nor *Entdecktheit*... but another unfigurable figure, beyond and holy shroud, the secret of a face which is no longer even a face..."⁴⁴

This veil, is none other than what Kant called sense: "the boundary between things and propositions."⁴⁵ Sanskrit teaches us that between the guttural force deep in the diaphragm and the labial stop lies the entire cosmos, the alpha and the omega, the sacred OM. It is Chrysippus' chariot: "If you say something, it passes through your lips; so if you say 'chariot,' a chariot passes through your lips."⁴⁶ That distance between the diaphragm and the lips is an infinite universe

³⁹ Kierkegaard 1971, 338.

⁴⁰ *A Thousand Plateaus*. 1987. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. Page 352.

⁴¹ Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* provide excellent illustration here.

⁴² Deleuze 1990, 8.

⁴³ Derrida 2002, 316. Emphasis of the "*its*" are mine. The rest of the emphasis is Derrida's.

⁴⁴ 317.

⁴⁵ Deleuze 1990, 8.

⁴⁶ 8.

from which all of meaning springs. A command is given, perhaps by *Tiglath-pileser*, or *Sargon*, or *Sennacherib*, or *Assurbanipal*, and the chariots of iron, of death and destruction, roar forth to destroy all worlds and fulfill all prophecies. "Their arrows are sharpened, and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs are like flint, their chariot wheels like the whirlwind. Their roar is that of lions" (Isaiah 5:28-29). But when is the sound formed and the sound made final? At what point between the two - the gut and the lips? Like Apollo's chariot crossing the sky, how do we know when it is light and when is it dark? We know darkness certainly, as we know light certainly - like birth and death. But when is 'birth like death: hard and bitter agony, like death, our death'?⁴⁷ But when is the Moment? Of darkness and light? Of birth and death? Of sanity and madness?⁴⁸

When is *religion*?

Sense is Kant's impenetrable barrier between the thing-in-itself and the concept. What I have called, improperly perhaps, 'Deleuzian sin.' Maybe I should rather call it instead Deleuzian *sinn*. Sense that is never alive except when both the thing and the concept are present together; then there is a synthesis of *sinn*, of sense - the "unity of apperception." This synthesis of sense, of perception and idea, was Kant's veil, and this is why Derrida has claimed him as Jew. This veil, this boundary, is "the straight line that separates...but also the plain surface which connects..."⁴⁹ It connects mind and matter, subject and object, self and world. It is sense as perception: sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste. But it is also the sense as meaning and reason: that which we make of things or out of things. It is the sense of the perceptions and the sense of concepts. We sense the world of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, but can we make sense out of those things? Sense is neither wholly thought nor wholly thing. It is an impenetrable barrier but also the indestructible bride. Our senses connect us to the world of things but forever bar our way to knowing those things apart from that very thing that connects us to them.

Sense is as thin as a veil, a veil worn by the virgin bride, like the hymen Derrida says, guarding that which is "intact and virgin," pure and innocent in the

⁴⁷ From T.S. Elliot's *Journey of the Magi*. "Were we led all that way for / Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly, / We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and / death, / But had thought they were different; this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

⁴⁸ From Pascal's *Pensee* 412: "Men are so inevitably mad that not to be mad would be to give a mad twist to madness." As Deleuze says, "How could we not reach the point at which we can only spell letter by letter and cry out in a sort of schizophrenic death, but no longer speak at all?" (Deleuze 1990, 157). This is the "ridiculousness of the thinker" (157), what Deleuze and Guattari call in *Anti-Oedipus* the cracks and fissures in the "plane of immanence" and the "Body Without Organs" (the mind) - where space and thought, the logical space of reasons (as Wittgenstein called it), is riddled with Derridean "gaps" and Deleuzian "holes" - "holey space."

⁴⁹ Deleuze 1990, 64.

Kantian world of “things in themselves.”⁵⁰ This is virginity without blemish, “‘untouchable,’ beyond reach” by counterfeiters and con men, seducers and scholars.⁵¹ This veil, this hymen, guards a kingdom of purity that can “never be reached, touched or trodden by translation.”⁵² But we now live after “the linguistic turn” (or *metacritique*). This is no longer a simple matter of Kantian concepts: of “intuitions,” of a “unity of apperception,” or “synthetic *aprioris*.” No, this is really about a veil of words that covers and obscures, that not only blocks but guards, “hides, shelters, protects.”⁵³ With sword and pen. Now, even the sense, the veil is unreachable: “one would never again reach the thing itself, one would above all never touch it. Wouldn’t even touch the veil behind which a thing is supposed to be standing.”⁵⁴ And how can we touch the veil? – the veil of sense which lies between the thing and the thought? Is it not but another word? And how do we touch a word? Run our fingers over the cold rough stone and feel the chisel marks that were left so long ago? Or perhaps we could trace where God ran his own finger burning the words into stone forever. “To touch ‘that’ which one calls ‘veil’ is to touch everything.”⁵⁵ It is language after all that expresses the whole of human existence – all our hopes, dreams, desires and disappointments.

The believer wants to see behind the veil, to see into the “Holy of holies.” The believer wants to see the Ark of the Covenant with their own eyes, the Cherubim, the chiseled stones of Law, the Staff. There was something about ancient relics that draws the believer: to see a thorn, or a splinter, that could have been, might have been... Why have so many faithful for so many years traveled to look, to see, to worship and revere – *relics*? The believer wants to see the glory of Moses shining face. A face that shone so brightly we are told, that he had to wear a veil. And what is truth, text and history? Veils of truth? Veils of texts? “A history of veils”?⁵⁶

What is it that hangs suspended between us and the world, us and the truth, us and God? Is it our senses? The senses that both separate and connect us? Or is it the words that both separate and connect us? Derrida loves to use his phrase “the double bind.” Like the words of the Law that both condemn and command. Is there some other faculty? A sixth sense that more perfectly connects us? Like Rudolf Otto’s *fascinatus*: a *numen* that provokes awe within us? Is that *It*? Has God given us an extra-ordinary means, a special tube, pipe, conduit, avenue, sense, faculty, intuition that the neurologists hold out promise of discovering? A

⁵⁰ Derrida 2002,124.

⁵¹ 125.

⁵² 123.

⁵³ 315.

⁵⁴ 313.

⁵⁵ 313.

⁵⁶ 322, 324.

sort of collapsing of Kant's third critique back into the first critique such as Otto attempted? There are the *apriori* faculties of space, time *and* the sublime – that overflows and overwhelms all the other senses. All of these are routes around the veil. Sneaky little secret ways, to circumvent, get around the barrier, the veil or the hymen and achieve the pure virginal existence untainted by the copy and the simulacrum.

How do we get to that resurrection that Derrida still dreams of? – “Of course, I still dream of resurrection.”⁵⁷ How do we get to that being born again, that awakening, enlightenment, revelation, of pure knowing? Zen or Christian, it matters not. The suicide bombers - "martyrs" if your will - continually go to their deaths. The reason? They want to be closer to God. They want to get past, around, through the veil and stand in the Holy of holies before pure truth, in the presence of God. Derrida admits he dreams of resurrection. He admits “I am lost,” and that he is “weary, weary, weary,” that he is “fed up with veils,” “fatigued of the truth... fatigued like truth,” like his metaphor of the effaced coin, of a value that is always being rubbed away by use the same way coins eventually lose their engravings and inscriptions only to be replaced by that shallow mystery, that shallow value of what could be, what might have been.⁵⁸ Truth itself is fatigued, because “the history of the veil, and all its folds, explications, complications, explicitations, of its revelations or unveilings.”⁵⁹ We are mesmerized by the magician Derrida, that master of the language, that master of the veil. His is a life of “intoxication” (Spivak) and a passion for this veil. Forever stitching and restitching upon it. But finally comes this cry, “My God what am I dreaming?”⁶⁰ As John Caputo says, “There is in Derrida what one might call a certain overreaching, trespassing aspiration, what I have been calling here, all along, a dream, or a desire, a restlessness, a passion for the impossible, a panting for something to come. This passion is not a determinable wish or will for a definable goal or foreseeable objective... It is not a search for something plannable and foreseeable, the fulfillment of which can be steadily approximated... There is in Derrida, in deconstruction, a longing and sighing, a weeping and praying, a dream and desire, for something... beyond the horizon of possibility, beyond what we can sensibly imagine.”⁶¹ There is a desire to see, to reach beyond the veil. That phrase of Derrida's to “sensibly imagine” is Deleuze's own sense (meaning) of “sense.” What can we do with so formidable of a barrier, but yet so clearly a connection? This is a “desert no-where” where we are left with only a passion of the impossible, a certain “Jewish

⁵⁷ 351.

⁵⁸ All of these quotes are found between pages 318 -324.

⁵⁹ 323.

⁶⁰ Caputo, John. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press. 1997. Page 333.

⁶¹ Caputo 1997, 333.

Augustinianism."⁶² Or perhaps, an endless circumscribing by way of biblical metaphors of what is simply (and complexly) biblical faith. After all the writer of the book of Hebrews says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."⁶³ So perhaps it is not really faith that Derrida has, because there is no *assurance* of things hoped for, at least not in the sense of a sure-ness, of being certain. Luther was not the first to push faith into certainty, the biblical writers do it themselves. But where does the line lie? – between faith and certainty? – between the things seen and *not seen*? Where does *undecidability* lie between faith and certainty (or more theologically, faith and knowledge). What creates this *double bind*, this *double writing* that calls forth both the seen and the not seen? Paul says, "For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." And stunningly Paul says, "For in this hope we were saved."⁶⁴ Between the things seen and the not seen, between the conviction and the assurance, "*falls the shadow.*"⁶⁵ Assurance: not quite certainty and certainly not hopelessness.

Hope is like that, like patience – "It is its own reward." Thus this kind of faith is more like hope, it is more like an unshakeable conviction that is its own assurance in the face of uncertainty: a "restlessness" and "longing" as Caputo describes it. Neither Christian nor Jewish exclusively, but rather both. Hope is the cry of the Psalmist who stands outside the temple, outside the holy of holies which only the High Priest is allowed to enter, and yet asks of God but one thing, "To stand within his temple [inside the veil] to behold his glory" Hope is the supplication of Habakkuk who waits upon the Presence (of God) and asks "...how long..."⁶⁶ But this is not just a Jewish hope, it is Christian as well – a groaning of all creation; a sigh deeper than words. This is the secret of the word "Abba."

And thus we return to the ancient question. How do we say the word "God?" The Hebrew had their unutterable consonants, a God who says only "I am who I am," a God so terrible, so patriarchal, so wrapped in glory that we can never look upon His Face. When is such a "God" no longer (just) "God?" And why is "'God' not 'God'"? How do we write such a "God" without writing G-O-D? In the writing there is not hope or faith but certainty. There is the certainty of the word. A word we can see and spell and know. Even the first chapter of the Gospel of John tells us of a word form God that is made know among men and dwelt among them. Was this not "God?" Was not that the word, the divine *logos*? Was it not in those three letters that the fullness of God's presence was not pleased to

⁶² 333.

⁶³ Hebrews 11:1

⁶⁴ Romans 8:24

⁶⁵ T.S. Elliot, *The Hollow Men*

⁶⁶ Habakkuk 1:2

dwell? Paul warns us off, and Derrida quotes him to good effect: "...the written code kill...", it is a "ministry of death."⁶⁷ In certainty (writing) there is death, in hope (spirit) there is life.

And thus we have the death of God. In fact several circumlocutions from Luther to Hegel, but finally announced by Nietzsche. The writing of God is the death of God. The letters neither point to God nor does God inhere in the letters. There is, only, "God." But this should not bother us so because the "fullness of God" was pleased to dwell in his Son who was murdered anyway, so God has long since been dead. "But why ponder such painful matters? *Assuming that one does not have to...*"⁶⁸

And so we write religion. We write of old religions with Gods long since dead. And more importantly we write of new religions, with new "Gods." These "Gods" are better "Gods." They are more socially responsible, more environmentally friendly, more circumspect of race and gender, less patriarchal. Better "Gods" (with a wink and a nod). And how do we write these new religions with the new "Gods"? Still we have to learn how to write religion properly. Still we must write religion.

III. The Hymen/Veil of Religion

*"The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force, for all the prophets and the law prophesied..."*⁶⁹

Clearly Derrida is second to none (except for perhaps Giles Deleuze) in his mastery of the metaphor in the service of philosophy. In fact one of his earliest (and now overlooked) essays was written to this very issue - "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." In another very early essay, "The Question of Style" Derrida creates one of his first metaphorical fictions to make a "point" - the pen as dagger, or more precisely, the stylus: "Sometimes only a pen, but just as well a stilet, or even a dagger."⁷⁰ A stylus was an instrument used by the ancient scribes to inscribe on wax or soft stone. Eventually with the evolution of parchment and ink, writing as we know it came to be. But at some time in history we might imagine a stylus that both cut and wrote, a time in history such as the present.

We use the pen to write, to leave marks on the paper; we use the dagger to cut

⁶⁷ (Derrida 2002, 347) See also 2 Corinthians, Chapter 3.

⁶⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*. 1955. Chicago: Henry Regnery Co. page 220.

⁶⁹ Matthew 11:12

⁷⁰ "The Question of Style," as found in *The New Nietzsche*. Edited by David B. Allison. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 1988. Page 176.

and leave marks in the flesh of the animal. We write, we cut. It is the flesh that both “unites and differentiates.”⁷¹ Like the blank page that we write upon, or the hymen of virginity. “...the blank is the polysemic totality of everything white or blank *plus* the writing site (hymen, spacing, etc.) where such a totality if produced, this *plus* will... find one...representing nothing in the blankness or margins of the page.”⁷² This blankness is where we must write religion. The blank is space of non-sense where there is no meaning. “...the blank, like the hymen, re-marks itself forever as disappearance, erasure, non-sense.” As Deleuze says, this is a difference without second, difference qua difference, a “non-Hegelian identity.”⁷³ This hymen, this veil, this whiteness of the page, is what exists as “the spacing that guarantees both the gap and the contact” (261). It binds and separates the words, the meaning: r e l i g i o n. “Does this spot fit into its white surrounding?”⁷⁴ Without the gaps there would be no meaning. In the gaps there are still the folds of the meaning-less. Like folds in a brides veil, or the folds in the hymen. “The hymen is not the truth of an unveiling. There is no *aletheia*, only a wink of the hymen... the structure of the and/or, between *and* and *or*.”⁷⁵ This is Deleuzian *sense*: neither/nor, either/or, a difference that is never decidable, never an identifiable identity – a fold in the tissue of sense, in time, a fold in the plane of immanence.

We have a blank page, white on white. Then we write: r-e-l-i-g-i-o-n. We leave gaps between the letters and between the words and between the lines. *It* looks perfect. Like *It* belongs there. “We might also say: ‘Everything fits into itself...’ We...imagine that there was a blank left for it.”⁷⁶ These spaces, these gaps seem to belong. They seem to be demanded – places that must remain unwritten upon in order to give shape to that which has been written. And so how do we read the gaps and spaces? Or are they to remain unread? Or should we read between the lines? – read in the gaps and blanks? And what if we were to write between the lines and in the margins? Can we do that?

After what is said there will always be the unsaid. The things thought, but not mentioned. The memories of a time past, of questions left hanging, of hard accusations and a guilt too terrible to bear. There are passions too inappropriate to give air to. There are subtexts and undercurrents – dark things in underground *labyrinths*, dwarfs squatting on shoulders.

“If you truly love God, if you really believe in Him, then you would not sin. You would

⁷¹ Derrida, Jacques. “The Double Session,” as found in *Dissemination*. Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1981. Page 252.

⁷² Derrida 1981, 252.

⁷³ 252.

⁷⁴ Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations*. 1955. New York: Macmillan. Prop. 216.

⁷⁵ Derrida 1981, 261.

⁷⁶ Wittgenstein 1955, prop. 216.

not have sex with your girlfriend. Just pray and if you are sincere he will give you strength. (--That is, if you are truly a believer...)” – But am I truly a believer? Why won’t God help me? Everyone says He will help me? Maybe I am not truly a Christian. I still want to have sex with my girlfriend. I must not be a true Christian. They say just pray about it and God will take the desire away. Maybe I am not praying rightly. I must be praying wrongly. Right and wrong. This desire, this damned desire...

It is in this whiteness, “white on white” that for Derrida symbolizes the blankness of the unsaid.⁷⁷ And it is not *just* the said that disseminates many meanings (“polysemy”) – but what is left unsaid. “Truth is plural.”⁷⁸

Just like religion.

So are the experiences of a young evangelical really at the root of this text? Do we then *penetrate* to the grounding of meaning, the original impulse? Or are my reflections, my memories of why I came to the academic study of religion “the simulacrum that can also be play-acted: while pretending to turn around and look backward, one is also in fact starting over again, adding an extra text, complicating the scene, opening up with the *labyrinth* a supplementary digression, which is also a false mirror that pushes the labyrinth’s infinity back forever...”⁷⁹

No wonder play is infinite.

It is against this pale background of pure whiteness that we write our many meanings – the many meanings of religion. We write r-e-l-i-g-i-o-n. Eight letters against a blank background. Now we have an instantiation of *logos*: word, concept, description, definition, reason, transcendence. And so we write. Like little stitchings in a veil. Stitching that “at once pierces and joins.”⁸⁰ We write, we bring together meaning, we “string together” meanings. But more than that, we *desire*. We are, after all the “desiring machines” as Deleuze says in the opening page of his *Anti-Oedipus* – “eating,” “shitting,” “fucking.” And what does the academic scholar of religion desire? Are they perhaps desire-less? I do not know what Woman desires, but Man’s desire I know: “Man’s desire is to know.” At least that is what Aristotle said in his opening page of the *Metaphysics*. Thus Derrida switches his metaphor from veil to hymen. “The hymen ‘takes place’ in the spacing between desire and fulfillment.”⁸¹ And this virginity is the unwritten page upon which we write “religion.” Thus the hymen is the word, which

⁷⁷ Derrida 1981, 260.

⁷⁸ Allison 1988, 187.

⁷⁹ Derrida 1981, 27.

⁸⁰ 240.

⁸¹ 212.

represents “the confusion between the present/and the non-present” a medium between the two...” It is a “consummation of differends, the continuity and confusion of the coitus, that merges with what it seems to be derived from: the hymen as protective screen, the jewel box of virginity, the vaginal partition, the fine, invisible veil which, in front of the hystera, stands between the inside and the outside of a woman and consequently between desire and fulfillment.”⁸² Hymen or veil, it makes little difference to Derrida. Both represent the barrier that joins and divide. More often it is the division that interests us. Like the hymen that separates virginity, or the veil in the temple that separates the Holy of Holies from inner and outer. Either way we desire to penetrate, to tear, to rip because this hymen/veil, this unwritten blank page, this “lack...void...break...has been given the value of a...transcendental signifier: the self-presentation of truth (veiled/unveiled) as *Logos*.” To transverse this hymen/veil, to transverse it by writing, scratching, tearing, cutting, is the very act of religion. “The styled spur traverses the veil... it tears it in order to see or produce the thing in itself...”⁸³ It is the enfolding of itself upon itself. It is the transgression of “religion.” “Religion” therefore transgresses itself. As if in a dream. “It is the hymen that desire dreams of piercing, of bursting, in an act of violence that is (at the same time or somewhere between) love and murder.”⁸⁴ Would it be safe to say that “religion” dreams of that most impossible and heinous crime—the rape of itself? In a rare instance Derrida mixes his metaphors, “Perpetual, the rape has always already taken place and will nevertheless never have been perpetrated. For it will always have been caught in the foldings of some veil.”⁸⁵ We are caught in this never-never land between the desire and fulfillment of the hymen and the veiling/unveiling of the curtain that hangs in the temple. As Derrida says in his final paragraph of “A Question of Style,” we will never gain “...a true sense of the text...the meaning, or the truth...production and produced...presence and the present...”, all we have are sharp instruments that both write and cut, scribble and tear. And what is it that they seek to get at, these holders of sharp instruments and stylus? “...it tears open in order to see or produce the thing in itself...” But this is an impossibility, a mirage, a lie. To use Derrida’s metaphors, it is no more possible to write “religion” - the ‘thing,’ the ‘it’ - than it is to rape oneself. And to force the pen to write *religion*, to thrust it forward relentlessly in this mad passion, is to write *religion* as a phallus centered word (“phallogocentrism”). “But the pen, when you have followed it to the end, will have turned into a knife.”⁸⁶

And if this act of writing religion is not some kind of attempted self rape then

⁸² 212 and following.

⁸³ Allison 1981, 188.

⁸⁴ Derrida 1981, 213.

⁸⁵ 260.

⁸⁶ Derrida 1981, 300.

perhaps we should compare it to castration, another favorite metaphor of Derrida's: "Castration – always at stake – and the self-presence of the present."⁸⁷ Is this what it means to write r-e-l-i-g-i-o-n: self rape or self castration? The impossible calling (back to Heidegger) that is always/never answered? When Derrida says that there is "relation between a... brandished erection and a certain head... that is cut off" he is writing of the execution by guillotine of the Duke of Orleans whereby the severed head attempts to speak but no words come out. The head is placed on a stake, a pole and carried, brandished, before the happy crowds. The king is there, but not there. He can no longer order them around, his Patriarchy is dead, his power emasculated. But Derrida is actually using a metaphor for a metaphor of another metaphor. From our attempt to capture religion in the writing of "religion," the presence-of *in the* present-in, we have a picture of *self* rape/castration: "religion" writing "religion." Then we have a picture of the head of the king cut off and held erect like a penis before the cheering crowds – he tries to talk ("the head severed but still alive, the mouth open upon the only word that cannot be pronounced or captured") but he cannot speak [of religion?] – placed on an erect pole, still gushing blood but saying nothing. Brandished before the cheering crowds of the American Academy of R-e-l-i-g-i-o-n-s in a Plenary Address. The self rape/castration is complete.

IV. The Writing of "Religion" is the Transgression of "Religion"

Often Derrida writes of these happy stichters of the veil. He also writes of sewing sails and stitching upon them also. These are points of view, opinions, commentary. Not everyone wishes to traverse this veil/hymen/sail to cut or to tear.⁸⁸ Not everyone desires to pierce and penetrate. Some do.

The veil and the curtain have a long history in Judeo-Christianity. Exodus 26:31-33 reads as follows (RSV): "And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen; in skilled work shall it be made, with cherubim; and you shall hang it upon four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, upon four bases of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in thither with the veil; *and the veil shall separate the holy place from the most holy place.*" Fine twined linen, barely a tissue, with almost no thickness, of no thicker than Deleuze's playing card, separating and yet joining the holy and the most holy. Perhaps something could even be seen, dimly.

⁸⁷ 302.

⁸⁸ A word about the sail, without rupturing the text above. The sail is a helpful metaphor, because after we have done our little stitchings on it, our embroidery, we stretch it tight on the rigging, and guide it into the wind. Not only do we scoot around in our little boats (a Sunfish perhaps?) by means of the wind the fills our sail, but we fly our colors, and people know us by the identifying marks, ciphers and signs on our sails. Like writing books and moving up the ranks of academia. Books on this, books on that, books full of wind with our names on them, books on "Religion."

Moses' face is also veiled when he comes down from Sinai because he has seen the glory of the Lord and his face reflects that glory (Exodus Chapters 33 and 34). Most interesting, is not just Paul's commentary upon this event but how much Derrida uses a Christian interpretation of a Jewish story. Paul writes of Moses' veil and what it represents for the Jews: "a veil lies over their minds." This veil remains un-lifted for the Jews - because of a "hardening of the mind" (2 Corinthians 3:13ff.). One wonders if Paul is alluding to the Synoptic Gospels where the sky grows dark at the crucifixion and a great earthquake rents the curtain in Herod's temple. He does not mention the tearing of the curtain but he clearly states that only Christ can lift the veil (or tear it open).

So now I return full circle to my original question; 'What does it mean to write religion?' And my answer? The writing of *religion* - the word - is a transgression, a transgression against everything called "religion." As for the "thing" of "religion," the "it," the *logos*, the "you will be like God," - is *the* transgression. "It" is the thought, the notion, the belief and *the* transgression. Deleuzian "sense" (or *sin/n* - always the plus one, the One + n, as Derrida says in "Faith and Knowledge"), is Derrida's hymen/veil, a between-ness, a always/never, a disunity/unity - all are different ways of circumscribing the Biblical metaphors of the veil which cloaks the most holy, the glory of God. The attempt to write "religion" will always be the attempt to pass through that veil. But we cannot. The sword of fire that bars our way back to the original - *original* innocence, paradise, the Garden of Eden, eternal life - is a flaming sword that "turns every way" (Genesis 3:24). But still we stitch, we embroider, pleat and sew with our pens and pencils, chalk and keyboards. With pointed little daggers, stylus, needles we poke and push, stitch and sew on this veil what we covet, what we desire and what we crave. In a word: our passions.

We have, and always will, write the transgression of religion, for the writing of religion is *its* transgression.

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