**Review Essay**

**RELIGION'S MACHINE**

**JOHN P. MANOUESSAKIS**

*Boston College*


*“Today once again, today finally, today otherwise, the great question would still be religion and what some hastily call its ‘return.’”* (Derrida 39)

The collection of essays *Religion*, edited by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, makes available to a broader readership the proceedings of a seminar that took place at Capri on February 28, 1994. Besides the editors, participants included Hans Georg Gadamer, Maurizio Ferraris, Vincenzo Vitiello, Aldo Gargani, and Eugenio Trias. The volume opens with a seminal essay by Derrida called “Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone.” The title hints at the three major philosophical texts that Derrida engages with in his thought-provoking reading: “Faith and Knowledge” alludes, of course, to Hegel’s homonymous *Glauben und Wissen*; the “Two Sources of Religion” is a reference to Henri Bergson’s *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*; and finally, the third component of the Derridarean title unmistakably points at Kant’s *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. These are the three philosophical inheritances that, among others, become the major fabrics around which Derrida meticulously weaves his text.
Significantly, Derrida constructed his essay as a machine, that is, with the impressive symmetry and accurate function of a mechanism; but also as a machine that works independently, that is, automatically. Here is how he describes the genesis of this text in his own words:

Let us choose, then, I told myself, a quasi-aphoristic form as one chooses a machine, the least pernicious machine to treat religion in a certain number of pages: 25 or few more, we were given; and, let us say, arbitrarily, to de-cipher or anagrammatize the 25, 52 very unequal sequences… (40)

His essay consists, indeed, of fifty-two “joinings” that simulate the links of a chain, as the one refers to its next, according to a certain technique of scriptural hermeneutics known as a catenae of scripts. Instead of scripts, Derrida employs twenty-three crypts that follow twenty-seven italicized paragraphs (Italics); between these two the document is divided into equal halves.

The importance of this document (as well as of its interlocutors later in the volume) cannot be fully assessed within the restrictions of the present essay. We have singled out, however, one theme that we intend to discuss at some length below precisely because it is of such concern to Derrida throughout his text: “it is this mechanics, this machine-like return of religion, that I would here like to question” (14). “The return of religion,” then, is the phantasm that again and again haunts this essay (and with it, the rest of Religion); “the return of religion” as a question, as a problem, and as an aporia returns more and more violently upon this text – a philosophical text, to be sure, and perhaps more than once (and more than one) since we already counted three different philosophical currents in its substratum. Before we ask, then, where religion returns and what kind of religion it is that is returning, we should pose a different set of questions. How and when, for example, is it that religion becomes a question for philosophy and what are the implications of a discourse on religion which claims, nevertheless, not to be religious?

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To answer questions like these, we will need to turn to the expertise of Hent de Vries, whose Philosophy and the Turn to Religion is the first volume of a philosophical trilogy that also includes the newly published Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). For de Vries not only asks the questions we just anticipated above (and many others), he also attempts to chart a