

Reinterpreting Religious Studies

Derrida, Deconstruction, and Detours

By David Golding

One scholar of religion noted that religious educators typically divide their discourse along two lines: religious education as a single tradition approach and religious education as an interfaith, pluralist, multicultural, generic, or integrated approach.¹ While modern scholars who engage in the study of religion typically follow the latter, the overall discourse about religion is prone to levels of enfaithing which such scholars would want to keep in check, especially when involved in critical academic work. Even when explicitly secular, religious studies must assume some point of contact with religion, in the least through approaching religious texts or expressions to viably study anything. Religious studies, then, occupies a unique place within the academic tradition, one in which secular modes of thought combine with non-secular expressions in order to make sense of religion. To seek to understand religion in non-religious terms—or within a non-religious framework, one that moves away from enfaithing rhetoric and toward objective analysis—redacts religious expression, places names and concepts on it, and advances modern (as opposed to premodern or postmodern) protocols of knowledge. Scholars must debate whether one interpretation is more worthy than another because they necessarily maintain an outsider position and therefore cannot hold an objective analysis while wholly engaging the religion. The tradition of critique as a means for adjusting and sifting through these manifold interpretations

has become a staple of much of the discourse surrounding a generic, integrated, and pluralist approach to religious studies.²

As a (re)interpreter of religion, Jacques Derrida has provided an alternative to critique in his deconstruction method that may serve scholars of religion well in a postmodern academy.³ If the study of religion seeks to interpret and understand religion as honestly as possible, deconstruction then offers one way toward finding insights about religion that maintain an objectivity and generic quality while noticing and affirming the ambiguities that arise within religious phenomena and their contingent lines of inquiry. Regardless of the place deconstruction has or will find in the academy, and whether or not it ultimately can allow the scholar a look into religion from an unbiased yet truthful perspective, it certainly offers a feasible and alternate path toward achieving the goals of religious studies and may yet prove to progress the discipline. The work of Derrida as opposed to Enlightenment thinkers forges a path through forced contradictions and, in the words of one Derridean scholar, “embraces the impossible.”⁴ When the fundamental term of the discipline—“religion”—is so continuously debated, and a consensus may be an impossibility, perhaps advancing ideas as examinations of Self via a detour through Other provides an alternative grounding for better understanding the phenomenon of religion despite the challenges that face contemporary religious scholarship.

Known as the “father of deconstruction,” Derrida personified the French school of thinking that undermined many of the traditional standards of classical education.⁵ His work, though initially philosophical in genre and form, eventually turned toward religion, and in the 1990s Derrida began a series of forays into the study of religion from a poststructuralist perspective. He was born to a Sephardic Jewish family in 1930 in French Algeria during an age of rampant anti-Semitism, which for him culminated in the Vichy regime’s occupation of France and its colonies. He would later comment on his Jewish heritage and some of his early struggles of getting an education as an Algerian-Jew as being a curiosity that prompted some of his initial work in problems of religious discourse.⁶ Prominent French thinkers influenced his early philosophical work, at least by association; his first day of classes brought him into personal contact with Althusser and Foucault, a point that many contemporary postmodernists acknowledge. Derrida taught philosophy at the

Sorbonne from 1960–64 and returned to his alma mater, *École Normale Supérieure* where he taught his pathbreaking critical theories for the following two decades.⁷

Within one year he published three books which established the foundations of deconstruction theory—*Writing and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Of Grammatology*. The latter, in particular, became what many consider Derrida’s most important work, and served to introduce his thought to a large audience. In it, Derrida attacked binary systems and particularly the Western academy’s implicit trust in them. He gave the binary of signifier/signified special attention. According to Derrida, signification, broadly conceived, always refers to other signs. One can never reach a sign which refers only to itself. “Writing is not a sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true,” he wrote.⁸ Recognizing the implicit infinite referral embedded in a word/sign, he argued that one could never arrive at meaning itself through signifiers, casting language as the chief culprit of perpetuating presumptions of coming to or trusting meanings and definitions. Words always carry traces of previous meanings and also suggest other words which sound similar to the one in use.⁹ True to the West’s ethic of control, the modern academy assumes too much when figuring that it can derive a determinable thematic meaning from a text. This persistence in forcing definitions of signifiers Derrida called “logocentrism” or “metaphysics of presence.” “Derrida contends that all Western philosophy is based on the premise that the full meaning of a word is ‘present’ in the speaker’s mind,” wrote Stuart Sim, “such that it can be communicated, without any significant slippage to the listener.” Logocentricity, for Derrida, is the assumption that words can unproblematically communicate meanings already present in the individual’s mind “such that the listener, or reader, receives them in the same way the speaker/hearer intended.” This belief is an illusion; *différance* always intrudes into the communication to prevent completeness of meaning.¹⁰

Différance (or *differance*) refers to a pun Derrida used to describe a kind of catachresis that pervades language and is one key component of his overall deconstruction method. The French word *différence* inherently disrupts the signifier/signified binary Derrida worked to deconstruct; it refers both to “differ” and to “defer.” Derrida explains that for a signifier to *differ* from another signifier, it must also *defer* the meaning it produces. Thus, the signifier

takes the place of the signified. “Logocentrism imagines there is a pure concept, an idea. But where is this to be found? The signifier supplants it.” The signifier alone is present in writing or speech; the imagined presence of the meaning as a pure idea is deferred, postponed, relegated by the signifier, “which is all we can bring before us, or isolate for inspection.”¹¹ *Différance* in French behaves similarly: one cannot detect its meaning with speech alone; the word must be written for its meaning to be apparent. To Derrida, what was revealed at this point was the inherent indeterminacy of meaning. At all times, in all words, difference applied.¹² Destabilizing binary systems, showing how the signified invaded the signifier, and describing this moment of difference all came together in Derrida’s overall attempt to trace the other in the selfsame. In this sense, *Of Grammatology* challenged modern knowledge protocols fundamentally, and cast doubt on the reliance of language, to say nothing of broad conceptualizations and systematic approaches to science and scholarship. Although *Of Grammatology* has been “endlessly misread, misquoted, and denounced,” this work which “delivered a resounding challenge to the entire tradition of Western philosophy” has yet to be justifiably debunked or refuted, according to one influential literary scholar.¹³

Since the publication of Derrida’s definitive works in deconstruction, several scholars of religion have responded with their own deconstructions of religion, explorations into the implications of deconstructivism on religious studies, and theoretical developments following Derridean poststructuralist methodologies. Important works include Derrida’s own *The Gift of Death* published in 1992, and several other studies by John D. Caputo, Richard Rorty, Jean-Luc Nancy, Mark C. Taylor, and Charles Winquist. *The Gift of Death* represented Derrida’s deconstruction of “secrecy” and “responsibility.”¹⁴ Interestingly, he found in commentaries on religion by Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard a medium for the interplay between such binaries as secret/knowledge and responsible/irresponsible.¹⁵ His conclusions presented here encouraged the contributions from other scholars of religion and continue to form a basis for a growing trend in poststructuralist perspectives within the discipline.

Between 1992 and his death in 2004, Derrida had explored “religion without religion,” and advanced in deconstructivism what Caputo referred to as a kind of religion in its own right.¹⁶ In many ways, Derrida personified

postmodernism. He affirmed much of what postmodernists and poststructuralists seek by heavily criticizing the classical and modern concepts of reality and reason, to the point even of turning on postmodernism and finding fault with its fundamentals. He consistently and emphatically maintained a level of indeterminacy about himself by refusing a concrete definition of deconstruction and differance and by resisting the modern temptation to coherently package his thought into a systematized theory. His modesty about his own importance to philosophy and postmodern thought, to one of his admirers, was disarming—indicative of his commitment to disrupt the assumptions of post-Enlightenment academics.¹⁷

Deconstruction in action marks a departure from traditional thesis–evidence–conclusion discourse that may be of use when treating current issues in (post)modern religion. New Atheism, in particular, has introduced a fresh and popular critique of religion in recent years to which many voices have clamored for response. Writers such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett—called by some “The Four Horsemen of the Apostasy”¹⁸—rail against religion in general and raise many social and scientific criticisms against faith and religious traditions.¹⁹ These four particular authors point out how society at large considers denunciations of religion taboo, not recognizing (except for perhaps Sam Harris) how they have installed a hierarchic dualism into their own criticisms of religion. All too often, religionists counter neo-atheists with similar installations of the binary, trying instead to privilege religion over science, or at least in terms of science. Until practitioners of this debate recognize their own double-binds, they may go on *ad infinitum* without ever destabilizing the other or coming to consensus. Deconstruction, in this instance, points out the catachreses in the debate, and highlights the constitutive effects each side engages in when attempting to form a “side” or a “position” against the other. Because the issues surrounding neo-atheist debate impact the religious climate in developed nations, and because fundamental questions of what constitutes religious experience re-circulate within the conversation, scholars of religious studies may find interesting and compelling insights in more popular media and in broader cultural expressions.

In general, deconstruction technique attacks the hierarchic dualisms used often in Western modes of discourse by displacing the binary system. One

term in the system is always valued while the other is subordinated. “There can be no third term in a binary structure, and no mediation between the two terms.” The privileged term is given a logical priority and a positive value; the second term is thus denied an existence of its own and is merely the negation of the first term. Derrida’s strategy in deconstructing the binary is two-fold: reverse the hierarchy by re-valuing the de-valued and displace the binary by locating the subordinate term into the heart of the dominant one. Without displacing the binary, the critic only reinstalls the binary and no deconstruction has actually taken place. Displacement brings out the differance of the privileged term, showing how what has been privileged stands on shaky ground in the moment it constitutes itself. In this moment, the valued is invaded by the other and undervalued term; displacement makes explicit the dependence of the subject on the other.²⁰

In the case of New Atheism, opponents of religion try to dismantle the binary but in the end dismantle nothing. They want to rid the world of religion but place themselves in opposition by constituting the binary of science/religion and privileging science and reason above religion and faith. For Derrida, to truly dismantle the dualism neo-atheists must also displace and seek to find convincing and inextricable elements of the other in the selfsame; they must locate “science” into the heart of “religion” while favoring the former term. Should neo-atheists show how religion is fully scientific, in both religion’s and science’s own terms, then they would effectively deconstruct the binary and be able to move past the binary into a more qualified understanding of the “religion” it seeks to dismantle. On the other hand, for scholars of religion, deconstructing this binary of science/religion on the terms of the neo-atheists reveals possible avenues in the discussion over what constitutes religious activity and belief.

Students of religion find interest in this thing called “religion”; they seek to understand the term as it is practically used and to learn the outcomes and expressions of religion that may inform one’s understanding of the world and universe. After centuries of debate, these students now have come to terms with how problematic the term “religion” actually is in their discourse. For Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens, “religion” occupies a superior place in the minds of most people. Science and reason get subordinated by religion because millions more practice religion than practice science. Because science

embraces reason and empiricism, it deserves the privileged status religion has had. Neo-atheists argue for scientism to replace religion on the grounds that theirs is a methodology rooted in sure footing whereas religion is ambiguous, tenuous, arbitrary, and fantastic.²¹ If something can be known, science will eventually uncover that thing, though it may take centuries or millennia. In Dawkins's words, "there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world" and that if something appears to lie beyond the natural world, "we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural."²² While religious studies as a discipline has various meanings for the term "religion," neo-atheists without hesitation identify it within the natural world as an observable phenomenon; science must categorize religion so, or it cannot know religion. Its own method requires it to observe and catalog what is observed, otherwise it would fall outside of natural reason and be incomprehensible and impossible, thus negating all that neo-atheism and science stand for. The indecision on the one hand is inextricably decisive on the other.

Yet, for most religionists, religion offers even greater knowledge than what science is able to observe which draws them to religion in the first place. God, the eternities, spirit can all be verified through various means, usually by some miracle or after a trial of faith. For science, the origin of the universe is disputed and contested, based entirely in theory and ever working toward consensus.²³ The most ambitious scientific projects aim to explain what religionists in many cases take for granted, using particle accelerators to mimic conditions at the Big Bang. The belief that there is a supernatural and that such can be known propels many religions. Just twenty years ago an interconnected world of personal computers and gigabit data transfer speeds quite literally was considered supernatural technology, yet is standard fare today as billions of people connect to the Internet every year. Science has its own supernatural phenomena, without which it could not progress; bringing the supernatural to the natural is precisely what gives science life. Science must affirm the supernatural, that objects exist outside of its current limits of knowledge, and it must seek the supernatural and press itself beyond its frontiers. As it constitutes itself as other and distinct from religion, science creates a space for belief in the supernatural and relegates religion to that space. But in this moment of rendering religion as other, as unnatural and concerned with the immaterial, science itself is invaded; science has identified

observed realities that it has yet to explain in its own terms. In a way, science confirms that it cannot fully explain religious phenomena, but instills in itself the confidence that by its own explanations, it may one day do so satisfactorily. All the while science continues moving toward hypotheses asking probing questions about the universe without full capacity to realize the experiments needed to draw definitive conclusions. It becomes impotent, lacking, but filled with awe and deference for the powers of nature it cannot fully explain. Indeed, science must worship nature to be science; all of its thought, all of its work must be bent on coming to terms with the actuality of nature, the complexities that remain unknown and not yet verified, but at the same time, must emulate nature and reproduce nature in controlled experiments.

In this moving through unexamined nature, science must incorporate very disparate voices: biology, sociology, psychology, neurology, chemistry are all brought together in attempts to explain human behavior, for instance. Where one asserts a conclusion, another pushes back with various other data. Back and forth, without consensus, with varying systems of knowledge all under the banner of scientific knowledge, all conforming to the scientific method.²⁴ The only truths that receive general acceptance are, ultimately, the most simple truths: “gravity” is what pulls one toward the earth. In trying to live up to the ambitious task of explaining everything in the universe in natural terms, itself is inconsistent and disparate, with only basic statements to offer. Yet, science opposes religion because of its arbitrary and whimsical features. Science must be certain when it draws conclusions, it must withstand criticism, duplication, and application, yet remains always-already criticized within itself, duplicated and applied in religion.

Dividing science/religion into a binary, then, becomes problematic. To be science, it must be less than nature, must be an odyssey through what is unknown in nature to bring the unknown to knowledge. Religion, however, invades this space on the neo-atheists’ own terms. Religion concerns itself with matters of faith, with unexplained phantasms of experience, with supernatural phenomena, all without verifiable claims to truth. In the act of worship, theists behave in deference to their own conceptualization of deity; in the act of experimentation, scientists behave in deference to their own conceptualization of nature.

Recognizing science in the selfsame benefits the study of religion, at least as its practitioners seek to understand those reacting to and participating in neo-atheism. Religion must assert experience that verifies the beliefs of its followers. Without any level of experience, the religion remains undefended, a set of ethics, a mythology, a philosophy. Here, too, it invokes the scientism from which it distances itself—it seeks duplication, replication, application of an homogenous set of experiences or allowed expressions in the lives of believers or followers. When displaced, religion becomes one with science, the two coming together in the human will to knowledge and discovery. For the one, coming into contact with the transcendence of the supernatural and divine marks the moment of discovery; for the other, coming into contact with the supernatural is the expectation of technology and the progress of science. Both have faith that all will be resolved in their own terms one day, though they differ over the terms.²⁵

If anything, a cursory deconstruction of New Atheism reveals some of the problematic assumptions the Four Horsemen perpetuate in their assessment of religion. Can “religion” be reduced so simplistically, or “science” for that matter? But in so categorizing and establishing binaries and hierarchies in their enforcement of the science/religion opposition, these neo-atheists unsettle their own conception of science and allow room for it to be brought on a par with religion. How often have those in the study of religion been guilty as well of the religion/science description? Deconstruction does not rewrite the argument but it does allow for a non-critique to unearth ways binaries creep into the discourse and ways what is seen as other occupies a place in the self. Derrida encourages us to take detours through the other while taking stock of ourselves along the way. In the case of neo-atheism and religious studies in general, rather than try to glean arguments from the debate that may advance one perspective over another, deconstruction points out ways that what we often consider opposites or separate entities do involve selfsame and problematic assumptions, and that meaning still eludes us.

Can one really argue an interpretation of religious expression, or does “religion” still escape us? If so, perhaps looking for binaries embedded in the discourse and displacing them might still make sense of the religious expression without argument and live within the ambiguities without assuming to know them or categorize them, yet still improve one’s

understanding of the religion. As an interpreter of religion—and perhaps due to his place as a consummate postmodernist he might even be a re-interpreter looking back on where the study of religion has come—Jacques Derrida’s insights in binary displacement, logocentrism, and differance clearly open up possibilities where religious meaning has proved complex, dynamic, and a challenge for empiricists and modern systematic thinkers. Regarding hermeneutics and biblical criticism, deconstruction already has made strides in attempts to destabilize former problematic conclusions drawn from modernist readings of scriptural texts; other sub-fields in the discipline may likewise take on new methods and interpretations as deconstruction continues to be practiced.²⁶ If religion is, as Harold Bloom suggests, founded upon miracle and supernatural revelation that ever dodges hard-rock empiricists, then poststructuralist modes of discourse and detours of the self through other may end up being the only ways of doing justice to religion and its expressions.²⁷

¹ Barbara Kameniar, “Shaking Religious Education: A New Look at the Literature,” *Religious Education* 102:4 (2007), 403.

² *Ibid.*, 404–06.

³ Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 80.

⁴ Carl Raschke, “Loosening Philosophy’s Tongue: A Conversation with Jack Caputo,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 3 no. 2 (2002), http://www.jcrt.org/archives/03.2/caputo_raschke.shtml.

⁵ Jonathan Kandell, “Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, Dies at 74,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2004.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 226–27.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans., 43.

⁹ Sim, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹¹ Belsey, 83.

¹² Sim, 5.

¹³ Belsey, 74.

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- ¹⁴ Rei Terada, "Scruples, or Faith in Derrida," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106 no. 2 (Spring 2007), 237–39.
- ¹⁵ Adam Kotsko, "The Sermon on Mount Moriah: Faith and the Secret in *The Gift of Death*," *The Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008), 44–61.
- ¹⁶ Raschke, 5.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ray Olson, "The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism by Edward Feser," *Booklist*, October 1, 2008, 16.
- ¹⁹ Meera Nanda, "Spirited Away," *New Humanist* 121 no. 3 (May 2006).
- ²⁰ Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.
- ²¹ Alvin Plantinga, "The Dawkins Confusion," *Christianity Today* 13 no. 2 (2007), 21.
- ²² Cf. Stanley Fish, "Atheism and Evidence," *New York Times*, June 17, 2007, <http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/06/17/atheism-and-evidence>.
- ²³ William Lane Craig, "God Is not Dead Yet," *Christianity Today* 52 no. 7, 22.
- ²⁴ Plantinga, 21.
- ²⁵ Cf. Dinesh D'Souza, review of Stanley Fish's deconstruction of New Atheism, http://townhall.com/columnists/DineshDSouza/2007/07/16/stanley_fish_deconstructs_atheism.
- ²⁶ Mark Mason, "Exploring 'the Impossible': Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, and the Philosophy of History," *Rethinking History* 10 no. 4 (December 2006), 501–02.
- ²⁷ Harold Bloom, "The Early Revelations" in *The Mormons*, directed by Helen Whitney, DVD, disc 1 (Boston: Frontline and American Experience; WGBH Education Foundation, 2007), 9:32–10:26.