

# Religion and Violence, by Hent de Vries

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

This thoughtful, well-researched book seeks to develop and apply a distinctive philosophical approach to reflection on religion--an approach that goes beyond the traditional methods of confessional theologies, secular religious studies and cultural anthropology. Hent de Vries is a philosopher who holds the chair of metaphysics at the University of Amsterdam and is the director of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. He is interested in the manifold ways in which religious and theological perspectives pervade contemporary culture, shaping notions of the modern state, immigration, hospitality, friendship, ethics and politics. This inheritance involves a complex and ambiguous relationship between religion and violence--a relationship that needs to be dealt with. But religion also offers importance resources for addressing pressing issues like welcoming immigrants into increasingly multicultural societies, de Vries argues.

In *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (1999), de Vries explored the ways in which recent philosophers have turned and returned, sometimes in a surprisingly innovative manner, to religious elements in thought and culture. Nonetheless, de Vries is not seeking a return to traditional faith. In his contribution to *Post-Theism: Reframing the Judeo-Christian Tradition* (2000), he charged that theism and its traditional institutional expressions are in a state of "obsolescence," and he characterized contemporary culture as posttheistic. While he concludes from this analysis that traditional theology is no longer credible, he does not want to leave the study of religion to a traditional secular model. Instead, he seeks a path beyond the alternatives of theism and atheism, a new way of drawing upon the resources of religions for understanding and shaping contemporary society and culture without making confessional commitments.

De Vries's method is heavily indebted to Jacques Derrida's deconstructive style of reading. Like Derrida, he questions previously unquestioned assumptions, developing a logic that undermines all transcendental foundations, and insisting on a

leap of faith not only in religion but in the knowledge of any reality. Religion is "the relation to the other that does not close itself off in a totality." The hope of Derrida and de Vries is to tease out unthought and unsaid implications of earlier religious perspectives.

Much of the discussion proceeds by way of interpretations of other scholars' interpretations of various thinkers. De Vries analyzes Derrida's perspectives on Kant's views on the place of philosophy and censorship in the modern academy and its relation to society, noting implications for contemporary discussions of pluralism and multiculturalism. He explores Derrida's reflections on Kant's and Levinas's thoughts on hospitality and friendship, with an eye to the intense European debate over immigration. At each turn, violence is in some way unavoidable. An absolute nonviolence would itself be violent.

Like Derrida, De Vries is wary of any closure or final decision. Derrida's "affirmation" of religion is a "postulation that knows no fixity, firmness, or closure" (in French, no *fermeté* or *fermeture*). As befits this method, there are numerous pointed paradoxes along the way: "Only in the interruption of the ethical can responsibility, both practical and intellectual, be thought and exercised at all." Hospitality and hostility go hand in hand. The openness of religion "is inevitably an openness to the best and the worst." Concepts and images are unstable signifiers: "Words . . . spin out of control."

The central paradox that dominates the discussion in *Religion and Violence* is that though religions are inextricably bound up with violence, they offer valuable teachings on friendship with strangers. They issue an indispensable challenge to welcome the other as other. De Vries's central hope is expressed in Kant's and Derrida's image of turning counterfeit money into gold. The historical religious traditions can be viewed as counterfeit money; but simply to dismiss their value would be a crime against humanity. If they are practiced in a new posttheistic context, they can become purified and transformed into true gold.

Perhaps the weakest aspect of this hope lies in the admission that a deconstructive logic "rides waves already in motion." The major religious leaders who have addressed violence from religious perspectives, even while acknowledging the terrible ambiguity of religion in history, were all willing and able to use their religious traditions to ride against the waves of their societies. Those who used religion to take a firm stand and oppose certain attitudes and behaviors include Gandhi in South Africa and India, Martin Luther King Jr. in the U.S., Nelson Mandela in South

Africa and Pope John Paul II in Poland. In the posttheistic world of Derrida and de Vries, paradoxes mount upon paradoxes, and all firmness risks washing away on the waves.