

de Vries, Hent. *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*.* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xxiii + 443 pp; cloth, \$64.00; paper, \$26.95—This book deals with an alleged turn to religion in an era of “post-theism” (p. xiii). It emphasizes “the intrinsic connection between religion and violence” (p. xv), though the operative notion of “violence” is virtually identical with “any and every kind of influence or causation whatsoever,” including rational persuasion, except, perhaps, where respectful of human freedom (Ch. 2). The author begins with Kant, then discusses Kierkegaard, but mainly dialogues with contemporary continentals like Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Carl Schmitt

If you relish paradoxes, this is the book for you. The writings quoted are full of them; the book is largely about “a category beyond all categories” (pp. 181, 329, 349), “atemporal temporality” (p. 183), “the radical possibility of the impossible itself” (p. 189), the “concept without concept” (p. 191), “the myth of the myth, the metaphor of the metaphor” (p. 273), “hospitality-without-hospitality, brotherhood-without-brotherhood, messianicity-without-messianism” (p. 310), “relation without relation” (pp. 325, 342), “ethics beyond ethics” (p. 333), and “the One plus or minus One, no longer exactly One, or more than One” (p. 356). The author and his protagonists seem to conceive of God only as “wholly other;” nothing constructive can be said about God except perhaps that the wholly other really isn’t wholly other because it is wholly-other-than-other (pp. 158, 175-186, 281-282, 313, 388).

If you don’t relish paradoxes and can’t distinguish them from contradictions and similar nonsense, this book is probably not for you. You might think that these people have converted all philosophizing into their much discussed “Babel” (pp. 266-273). You might wonder: Why isn’t “paradoxical thinking” or “radical thought” just a lame excuse for sloppy thinking, or no thinking at all. Have these people turned all language into poetry, or into metaphors so radicalized that all words mean everything, anything, and nothing at all? For them, are all words substitutable infinitely for every word (pp. 352, 263, 394n)? For them do all words have transcendental meanings having nothing to do with living languages? For them do all words mean their opposites—non-violence is violence, hospitality is inhospitality, friendship is enmity? Shades of George Orwell! As Derrida puts it, “There is Babel everywhere” (p. 272).

What they say is so confusing (and confused?) that we may be quite uncertain about whether we agree or disagree with them. Do they simply take the mystification route to the obvious? Perhaps they only intend to affirm more plainly expressed truisms like: there is an awful lot that we don’t know; there are no philosophical certainties or absolute beginning points; we official philosophical custodians of rationality do not agree about what reason is or what it authorizes us to believe; we can never completely transcend the limitations of our own time and place; when we try to avoid ontology or metaphysics, it inevitably slips back in; many concepts mean nothing without their polar opposites; every affirmation implies a negation; human nature is deeply corrupt; the worst within us lies barely submerged below the surface and threatens constantly to erupt; our benevolence is often self-serving and deceptively exploitative; we never perfectly realize our ideals; concepts like “religion,” “violence,” “friendship, and “responsibility,” are open-ended and can never be defined completely with absolute precision; and historical religion has often condoned violence. If this is all they are saying, who could disagree? They are not the first to identify such conundrums. Yet, they seem to think that they are probing, if not fathoming, much deeper mysteries, though what they are escapes me.—Rem B. Edwards, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN