This is a book about Jacques Derrida. In it I try to open up some new ways to read his philosophy by focusing on his emphasis on religion and politics toward the end of his career, and then using this to develop a more materialist reading of Derrida. I have had a lot of inspiration for this project, including the work of John D. Caputo, Catherine Malabou, and Karen Barad. My contention is that Derrida’s thought remains important; it cannot be relegated to the dust-bin of some late-twentieth-century linguistic idealism and subjectivist constructivism that just plays with language. This has always been the wrong understanding of Derrida, from its earliest incarnation, but this bad reading has been reasserted with some of the newer theoretical currents in the twenty-first, such as Speculative Realism, New Materialism, and Object-Oriented-Ontology, not to mention the political Lacanianism of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou.

Here I do claim that something changes in Derrida’s work, but this shift cannot be described precisely as a “turn.” Using Malabou’s idea of a motor scheme, an organizing image of thought or root metaphor that expresses the broadest information of a time period or epoch, I suggest that Derrida’s philosophy works mostly within the motor scheme of writing. At a certain point, however, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, this cultural-intellectual-technological scheme of writing evolves into a motor scheme that Malabou describes as one of plasticity. For Derrida, the works of the 1990s and early 2000s are different because they are written in some ways as a response to and expression of this change of scheme. In effect, the
concerns of ethics, politics, and religion emerge into the foreground as writing becomes more and more backgrounded. Michael Naas gets at the heart of what animates Derrida’s work with the title of his important book, *Miracle and Machine*, because Derrida is explicitly more engaged with the tension between belief and responsibility as a kind of singular, miraculous living event and the repetition of a kind of machinic technicity that exposes this life to a form of death from the beginning.

We struggle to read Derrida because something is different and we are not sure what it is. I think that Malabou’s notion of a motor scheme and her distinction between writing and plasticity as motor schemes are important heuristics for helping us understand Derrida. I am less invested in as sharp a distinction as Malabou makes with this change in scheme, but I am using it to explore what it would mean to read Derrida beyond the scheme of writing. Malabou collapses the two “sides” of Derrida’s later work, the responsibility of the living being and the mechanical repetition that gives death, into her understanding of neurobiological form, which is characterized by plasticity. For his part, Derrida increasingly adopts a biological metaphor of auto-immunity to make sense of religion and politics, most significantly in his explicit essay on religion, “Faith and Knowledge.” This notion of auto-immunity exceeds any simple or even extended sense of writing.

I claim, then, that something changes in Derrida’s later work that is not simply a “turn,” but a more background context of and for his work, which is well articulated with Malabou’s idea of a motor scheme. There is a kind of transition from an intellectual motor scheme based on writing in a broad sense to one based on what Derrida sometimes characterizes in terms of the machinic, teletechnology, or technoscience, and Malabou calls plasticity. Arthur Bradley calls this situation an “originary technicity” in his book on technology from Marx to Derrida. This transformation in the 1980s and 1990s changes how Derrida writes and how he is read in his later work. Caputo is one of the first American readers to really appreciate this, although he presents his interpretation more in terms of religion than in terms of plasticity or technicity. But I think that many of the arguments about Derrida’s engagements with religion and with politics in his later work are tied to this shift in one way or another. It’s not that Derrida changes his philosophy; he is clear about how consistent his interests, ideas, and themes are across his career. Rather, something has changed in the background or the cultural and intellectual context of how we read him.

My interpretation, however, is not just about getting the correct exegetical sense of Derrida’s works. It also consists of an intervention concerned with developing a constructive understanding of Derrida that shows his con-
continuing relevance for contemporary philosophical discussions, including those concerning New Materialism, speculative realism, ideas about ecology and the natural sciences, and object-oriented ontology. That is, within a new intellectual context in the twenty-first century, we need new resources and new ways of seeing how his thought is important and relevant beyond simple polemics (whether pro or anti). Here is where I constructively engage Derrida with Jacques Lacan, to a certain extent, and also with Caputo’s radical theology, with Malabou’s biological materialism, and with Barad’s understanding of quantum physics as a materialist hauntology.

To read and think about Derrida beyond the motor scheme of writing is to engage with the religious and political significance of his later work. I want to take this one step further and argue that working through these political and religious themes opens the possibility for a more materialist interpretation of Derrida. Derrida certainly kept a critical distance from materialism; he does not use this term in a positive sense. At the same time, I think that the non-reductionist materialism expressed in terms of New Materialism offers important tools to understand Derrida. In some ways, I am appropriating Derrida as a new materialist, but I don’t think that deconstruction proscribes such an entanglement.

Here I will specify the arguments and themes of the specific chapters of the book, before returning later in the introduction to this topic of New Materialism. The first chapter, “Reading Derrida Reading Religion,” is a more straightforward account of religion in Derrida’s philosophy. In this chapter, I provide an introductory and background analysis to set the stage for the rest of the book. I discuss Derrida’s work as a whole, although I do not engage it comprehensively or systematically. I argue that religion is a constant element of Derrida’s work, even as the treatment of religion shifts in his later work. Chapter 2, “Surviving Christianity,” focuses more specifically on the idea of the deconstruction of Christianity, including how Jean-Luc Nancy makes the deconstruction of Christianity the main theme of deconstruction in general, and how Derrida both endorses Nancy’s project and keeps his distance from it. I suggest as a conclusion that it may be better to mourn Christianity while surviving it than to simply try to overcome it, which ironically perpetuates a triumphalist Christianity. I also consider Derrida’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, which opens onto a discussion of Gil Anidjar’s impressive book Blood.

In Chapter 3, “Political Theology Without Sovereignty,” I engage Derrida’s later work more directly, and place it in contact with the tradition of political theology. Much of Derrida’s later philosophy involves a critique of the notion of sovereignty, which is understood in generally Schmittian terms. Insofar as political theology rotates around sovereignty, Derrida...
wants nothing to do with it. At the same time, if we think about political theology in distinction from sovereignty, then it is possible to read Derrida’s thought in terms of a political theology without sovereignty. I suggest that much of Derrida’s later philosophy consists of an implicit engagement with Schmitt, and offers ways to think about political theology that do not presuppose a Schmittian paradigm, partly by drawing on the work of Jeffrey W. Robbins.

Chapter 4, “Interrupting Heidegger,” reconsiders the theme of sovereignty by way of an interruption, by considering how Derrida uses the poetry of Paul Celan to contest Heidegger. In particular, I focus on Derrida’s essay “Rams,” where he analyzes a poem by Celan, “Vast Glowing Vault,” as a way to call into question Heidegger’s three theses concerning the concept of world from his lecture course on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. For Heidegger, the stone is without world, the animal is poor in world, while the human being or Dasein is characterized as world-building. Derrida quotes Celan’s final line, “The world is gone/I must carry you” as a way to challenge Heidegger’s theses. So many of Derrida’s later reflections return to his complication and contestation of these Heideggerian theses, including his engagements with animality. Finally, at the end of his last seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Derrida returns to Heidegger and considers the sovereignty of death as something that both supersedes and explodes our ideas about human sovereignty.

Lacan is an important resource throughout this book, and I claim that Derrida is an extremely careful as well as critical reader of Lacan. In Chapter 5, “Derrida, Lacan, and Object-Oriented Ontology,” I use Lacan’s thought to bring Derrida into contact with Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology as a way to reflect on philosophy of religion “at the end of the world.” The promise of recent philosophies of SR and OOO is their engagement with the physical sciences, and their understanding of objects as extremely complex entities with their own properties and qualities apart from human conscious perception and language. At the same time, some of these philosophies go too far in their attempt to eliminate human subjectivism, and in their critiques of poststructuralism. I think it is more interesting to read philosophers such as Derrida, Lacan, and Deleuze creatively, in more speculative and object-oriented ways, than to read OOO over against poststructuralism. In this chapter, I discuss Timothy Morton’s book and idea of *Hyperobjects*, and use this conception to think about philosophy of religion at the end of the world. For Morton, a hyper-object is a very strange object, and it helps us think about how Lacan’s object *petit a* is also an object, and how we can imagine OOO as *aOO (a-oriented ontology)*. Furthermore, for Derrida, and picking up on the
theme of objects in the world introduced in Chapter 4, we can pay more attention to the third of Heidegger’s objects, the stone or the natural object, which Heidegger says completely lacks a world. Derrida contests all of Heidegger’s theses, and he spends a lot of time specifically on the theme of the animal in his later work, but Derrida does not really elaborate on this specific thesis of the stone. OOO offers resources to draw out this underdeveloped theme of Derrida, the rejection of how Heidegger characterizes the object, a stone, and the possibility for expanding the context and horizon in which we read and think about Derrida’s philosophy.

After this critical and constructive engagement with OOO, I then turn in three consecutive chapters to explicitly treat the (for me) three most significant contemporary interpreters of Derrida, each of whom takes Derrida’s philosophy to new places and new contexts that are in some sense beyond writing (as is OOO). Caputo is the most important contemporary philosopher of religion in the United States, and after his influential book on *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, he has pivoted to take up the challenge of radical theology. Although Caputo’s interpretation of Derrida has become a standard and even stereotypical understanding of the religious aspects of Derrida’s philosophy, against which newer readings of Derrida, such as Martin Hagglund’s argue, I claim that Caputo’s interpretation is more complex than it may sometimes appear. Caputo radicalizes a certain reading of Derrida, not against Derrida, but in a profound affirmation of a religion without religion, and this attends to something that does change in Derrida’s later work. Caputo uses his sophisticated understanding of Derrida’s philosophy to develop his own, radical Derridean theology, based on the concept of the event in *The Weakness of God*, and then the notion of “perhaps” in *The Insistence of God*.

From Caputo I turn to the philosophy of Catherine Malabou. In many ways, Malabou provides the framework for my understanding of Derrida, with her distinction between a motor scheme of writing and a motor scheme of plasticity. Furthermore, I think that she is perhaps the most brilliant and creative contemporary philosopher in her own right, and she takes Derrida’s philosophy in important and unforeseen directions. Chapter 7, “Deconstructive Plasticity,” traces the work of Malabou beyond Derrida as she develops a biological materialism that is informed by deconstruction even as it transforms our understanding of deconstruction. Malabou’s signature term is “plasticity,” and she engages with brain plasticity and later with biological evolution and epigenetics in her work in important ways. Derrida’s terms include mechanics, automaticity, tele-technology, and techno-science, and the two elements of this generalized technicity are what Michael Naas calls miracle and machine, which can be distinguished
but cannot be fully separated. Malabou collapses both of these elements into her conception of form, and the inherent plasticity of form includes its own “miracle” of auto-annihilation or destructive plasticity.

The last chapter, “Quantum Derrida,” takes up the work of Karen Barad on quantum physics, including quantum field theory, and shows how she develops an understanding of “hauntological materialism” that is indebted to Derrida. Here I explain how the phrase “every other is every other,” or tout autre est tout autre, can be viewed in a quantum theoretical context, not simply an ethical or religious context. Each of the last three chapters contributes to a more materialist understanding of Derrida. In the Afterword to this book, “The Sins of the Fathers—A Love Letter,” I reflect a little more personally on the issues of gender and patriarchy as they relate to philosophy, a topic that Derrida also addressed. Here I consider how Derrida came to serve as a kind of father figure for me, and how this is a symptom of the perpetuation of what Derrida calls “phallogocentrism.” From a consideration of fathers and substitute father figures, including Caputo and my own teacher, Charles Winquist, I turn to more directly consider and reflect on the ideas of women philosophers such as Malabou, Julia Kristeva, Bracha Ettinger, Catherine Keller, and Katerina Kolozova. Here is another context in which Derrida’s philosophy matters in ways that push us beyond writing and call for another paradigm, which for me is a paradigm of New Materialism.

To summarize, this book argues that we need to engage Derrida’s later philosophy not from the standpoint of a turn, but from a new materialist perspective that treats politics and religion as material and spiritual practices. For Derrida’s philosophy, there is a change, but it is not a simple change of theme or perspective. It is more a change of context. With Malabou, I argue that in the 1980s and 1990s we can see a shift from a motor scheme of writing to a motor scheme that she calls plasticity. If we want to be more faithful to Derrida’s words, we could use a term such as machinic, automaticity, or teletechnology; or, following Arthur Bradley, we could call Derrida’s post-writing motor scheme an “originary technicity.”

Whether we want to call it technicity or plasticity, a careful consideration of Derrida’s work attends to this shift that wrenches his philosophy out of an explicit context of writing. Writing is always already material, and Derrida was never a linguistic or transcendental idealist, but this new perspective opens up new ways to read Derrida’s work afresh. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, religion and politics intersect and interact in a kind of political theology, even though Derrida wants to avoid this term because of its association with sovereignty in the work of Carl Schmitt.
In the twenty-first century, English-language studies of Continental philosophy have become more aware of and engaged with mathematics and the natural sciences with the work of Malabou, Alain Badiou, Bruno Latour, Quentin Meillassoux, François Laruelle, and the subsequent Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontologies of Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, Levi Bryant, Timothy Morton, and others. I think this return to the natural sciences is important and necessary, but it risks caricaturing previous representatives of post-structuralism, such as Derrida, Deleuze, and Lacan. As I argue in Chapter 5, I think some of the newer realisms and OOOs go too far in their efforts to avoid subjectivism and subjectivity, and I think that they are more productive when read along with Deleuze, Lacan, and Derrida rather than against them.

My preferred theoretical perspective is New Materialism as opposed to Speculative Realism or OOO. New Materialism gives us tools to think about and better understand the complex relations among science, energy, money, power, politics, philosophy, and religion in the early twenty-first century. New Materialism is not a reductionist materialism, but a materialism based on body as theorized by feminism and cultural studies and energy as theorized by chaos and complexity sciences. Influenced by the philosophies of Alfred North Whitehead, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze, some of these theorists include Rosi Braidotti, William Connolly, Manuel DeLanda, Jane Bennett, and Isabelle Stengers.3

This New Materialism is sometimes described as a neo-vitalism, but if it is vitalist, it does not appeal to any transcendent immaterial or spiritual power, but stresses the vital immanence of material processes. In this book, I am suggesting that rereading Derrida in terms of New Materialism is fruitful, and this is the case in both Catherine Malabou’s biological materialism and Karen Barad’s work on quantum physics. Religion, politics, and ethics are complex material processes, and sovereignty, if there is such a thing, is not a unified entity but a distributed process that occurs along the edge of chaos in the form of a singularity. A singularity is not simply a determinate entity; it is a significant transformation or threshold where a new arrangement occurs as a result of a bifurcation or change.

With New Materialism, I am employing a theoretical perspective on Derrida’s later philosophy that also can be characterized as a religious or spiritual materialism. Derrida does not endorse the term “materialism” because he views it in the older reductionist sense, but I think that there is a case to be made for reading Derrida as a new materialist. We could say that Derrida specifically avoids the word “materialism” for good and bad reasons. To the extent that one would think about a positive idea of
materialism in Derrida’s work, we might associate it with the notion of pure empiricism that he uses to think about a limit of and an outside to metaphysics, philosophy, and language. In “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida claims that empiricism is “the dream of a purely heterological thought at its source. A pure thought of pure difference.” He says that we have to not renounce this dream of empiricism but to find another way to think about it.

What is crucial about this New Materialism for me is that it is a non-reductionist materialism; it employs ideas from the sciences and science studies, but it is not a form of scientism, which is something Derrida wants to avoid. It is above all not an atomic materialism. The New Materialism does not depend on any sort of dualistic relationship between what we call matter and what we call spirit. In the book I wrote with Jeffrey W. Robbins, Religion, Politics and the Earth, this spiritual materialism is based on energy transformation, where energy is at once fully material and fully spiritual. Here we more explicitly draw on Deleuze, and Deleuze and Guattari’s thinking of the Earth, in connection with Hegel’s idea of Substance becoming Subject in the Phenomenology of Spirit. We suggest a transition from anthropocentrism to a thinking of and from the Earth. Earth here becomes thought of not just as substance, but precisely as subject, and we are at least in part an effect of the Earth. This is a Deleuzian interpretation of Hegel, where we posit a “Geology of Morals” that asks “Who Does the Earth Think it is?”

This new religious materialism, like most forms of New Materialism, is more explicitly influenced by Deleuze than by Derrida. But I am arguing that it is possible, and in fact important, to think about Derrida’s philosophy from a more new materialist perspective. Rosi Braidotti, who coined the term “neo-materialism” in the 1990s, says that she wants to distinguish a materialist strand of post-structuralism from the more hegemonic linguistic strand of post-structuralism. “Thus ‘neo-materialism’ emerges as a method,” Braidotti states, “a conceptual frame and a political stand, which refuses the linguistic paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power.” This materialist strand is more informed by Georges Canguilhem, Michel Foucault, and Deleuze, whereas Derrida is usually seen as the major representative of the linguistic strand of post-structuralism.

From the perspective of the 1990s, especially in the English-speaking world, these two strands of post-structuralism indeed seemed oppositional and incompatible, but I think that they are less so now. Even if Derrida and Deleuze used very different languages, we have a much better sense of their complementarity. I don’t think we need to rescue Derrida from this
linguistic paradigm, but instead to see how the so-called linguistic paradigm was already a material paradigm, and that it functioned and functions far more broadly than is usually assumed. The linguistic turn seems excessive today to many scholars and philosophers, although we ignore the complexities of language at our peril, and we need to be careful not to lose sight of the many insights developed by poststructuralist thinkers not only about language but also about reality. Malabou’s philosophy helps greatly in this effort to overcome the opposition between a linguistic and materialist poststructuralism. This is because she is more explicitly working in the tradition of Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida, but she engages deconstruction with her new biological materialism in a way that crosses the two strands of poststructuralism that Braidotti identifies.

Both deconstruction and New Materialism go from human activities and interactions all the way down to the subatomic level. For Karen Barad, the self-touching of virtual particles that intra-act in quantum field theory is a queer example of tout autre est tout autre, and it expresses what she calls a hauntological materialism that is partly inspired by Derrida. Like Barad, I am envisioning Derrida as a theorist of deconstruction operating at a quantum level, not simply on large-scale actions such as human ethics and language. For the feminist theorist Vicki Kirby, who has both influenced and been influenced by Barad, “deconstruction discovers itself in enterprises such as cybernetics, biology, and chemistry.” In her book Quantum Anthropologies, Kirby asserts that “language is not a second-order representation or model of an absent world, but rather, an ontological energy through which the world makes itself known.”

Derrida is not a philosopher of materialism, but New Materialism is a viable perspective from which to engage Derrida. In an article on “Matter and Machine in Derrida’s Account of Religion,” philosopher of religion Michael Barnes Norton argues that attention to the machinic nature of religion in Derrida’s work helps us think about the intrinsic materiality of religion and other processes. According to Norton, religion is a material practice, and the machinic material practice of religion can be viewed in both positive and negative terms. Like Derrida, John D. Caputo is ambivalent about the term “materialism,” although he does use it in The Insistence of God. Here Caputo argues that his positive idea of “cosmo-poetics could be formulated in terms of a ‘religious materialism.’” Here, religious materialism is about refusing—or deconstructing—the opposition between matter and spirit, form and force, body and brain.

In an essay on “Becoming Feces,” radical feminist theologian Karen Bray cites Derrida’s two columns from Glas, one on Hegel and one on Jean Genet. While the Hegelian column represents a desire for mastery and
absolute knowledge, “Derrida’s Genet column, the fecal column, runs alongside and betrays this search for mastery over ‘unconscious’ organic agencies.” Bray imagines a new materialist, dishonored God “that becomes both brain and shit, vibrates in the material powers of decomposition and recomposition; and occupies with us and feels the black rage.”\textsuperscript{11} In this respect, she affirms a metabolic materialism of resistance that is informed and inspired by Derrida’s work, among others, including feminism, queer theory, and affect theory.

In the case of Malabou’s philosophy, her materialism concerns the notion of form, and I appreciate how she opens up and explains form in a complex and plastic manner. I do not subscribe to any simple opposition between form and force or energy. Malabou grounds force within form, whereas I see form more as a product of energy transformation. For me, New Materialism is fundamentally about energy. What is energy? Energy is a strange sort of object, and it stretches what we mean by object almost to the breaking point. Matter and energy are convertible at the square of the speed of light. In complexity theory, we see a phenomenon called self-emergence, where new objects emerge at thresholds of singularity sometimes called the edge of chaos. The Belgian scientist Ilya Prigogine calls certain kinds of dynamic systems that can be sustained far from equilibrium “dissipative structures.”\textsuperscript{12} These dissipative structures temporarily resist the overall tendency toward entropy so long as they are fueled by a continuous flow of energy.

Just as he doesn’t write about materialism, Derrida also does not write explicitly about energy. What or where is energy for Derrida? I think there is a more direct connection between energy and force. For Derrida, force is a vital and necessary concept with which to think the limits of language. In his essay “Force and Signification,” Derrida contrasts the title of his essay with a book on structuralism called \textit{Form and Signification}. Here Derrida protests the “aesthetic which neutralizes duration and force” between two phenomena.\textsuperscript{13} Later, in a brief reflection on Hegel’s phenomenology, Derrida claims that “force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is.”\textsuperscript{14} I prefer the word “energy” to that of “force,” but I think that we need to attend to the operation of the idea of force in Derrida’s work. We could say that there is an underground current from Derrida’s “Force and Signification” to his “Force of Law.” Force is a kind of energy, a transformative energy, and Derrida mostly attends to the way that force disrupts language and dislocates meaning.

We could also, however, naively attempt to think force as energy more directly. Kirby’s book helps us do just that, with her insistence that deconstruction is intrinsically tied to physical reality, and that language is an
ontological energy. Carl Raschke also contributes to this perspective in his book *Force of God* when he says that “the Derridean undecidable amounts to an engagement with the force of the other.” For Raschke, the predominance of political theology means that every force is—provocatively—at least potentially a force of God. Energy is force, forces, and these forces make us—they are us. These energy forces are at one and the same time fully material and fully spiritual. Here is where materialism, religion, and politics, including the themes and concerns of political theology, intersect. And Derrida remains one of our most powerful and provocative resources to think about this intersection.