
TOPIC:
ENGAGING THE RELIGIOUS



BRILL

Research in Phenomenology 39 (2009) 167–183

Research
Phenomenology
brill.nl/rp

Returning to God after God: Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur

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Abstract

This essay discusses the anatheist option of returning to God after the atheistic critique of the traditional God of ontotheology. It begins by reviewing the contributions that Levinas and Derrida have made toward this position and the atheistic criticisms of Freud and Nietzsche. The work of Paul Ricoeur is then discussed, showing how the atheist critique is a necessary moment in the development of genuine faith that involves a renunciation of fear and dependency as well as a reaffirmation of life and a return to existence. Kearney goes on to discuss how this return to God is possible, considering the ethical position that makes it possible, the reinterpretations of biblical traditions that it entails, the relationship between the anatheist philosopher and the theologian, and revival of God as an enabling God.

Keywords

Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur, anatheism, atheism, eschatology

The so-called “religious turn” in contemporary French philosophy was deeply informed by three main thinkers schooled in the phenomenological tradition—Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Ricoeur. While the “religious turn” debate, given common currency by the pioneering volume edited by Dominique Janicaud and Jean-François Courtine, is generally associated with a conversion of secular and scientific phenomenology to some form of theological theism, it is curious how these three precursors of the movement held that any philosophical approach to theism must engage with atheism as its authentic and indispensable counterpart. These precursors were partial to what I would call an “ana-theist” movement involving a double and supplementary gesture of abandonment and retrieval of God. This view holds that one cannot begin to return to a new—“messianic” or “eschatological”—sense of the holy until one has left the old God of metaphysical causality

and theodicy behind. God cannot advene until we have resigned our attachment to divine omnipotence. God cannot come until we have said our final adieu.

I. Levinas' A-Dieu

Writing in the shadow of the Holocaust, the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, who lost many of his family in Dachau, speaks of the necessity to reject the infamous God of power who could allow such horrors.¹ In this sense he sees atheism as a salutary distancing from idolatrous fusion with the Totality of Being, a separation whereby each person discovers its own radical interiority as a self, an "I." This is the basis of freedom and responsibility. "One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated—eventually capable of adhering to it by belief. The break with participation is implied in this capability. One lives outside of God, at home with oneself; one is an I." And he goes on: "The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist. By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I."² Without this movement of atheistic separateness, the other as irreducibly alien and strange cannot be recognized as *other*. And that, for Levinas, rules out the possibility of a genuinely religious relationship with God understood as absolute Other. We must, Levinas concludes accordingly, be *contre-dieu* before we can be *à-dieu*—in the double sense of taking leave from the old God as we turn to (*à*) a coming God. This is the precondition of reopening our "home" to the radically alien. It is from an atheist moment of interiority within the self that we may open out towards the exteriority of the stranger: "Only if it starts from me as a separated being and goes as a host to the Other, welcoming the Other as guest, only in this manner can an eternal return within the interiority of the circle of being be escaped. For when I turn to the Other interiority turns into exteriority."³ It is in this context that Levinas holds that the gift of Judaism to humanity is atheism—namely, separation from God so as to encounter the other as absolutely other.

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *Between Us* (London: Athlone Press, 1997).

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 58.

³ John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas, The Genealogy of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 67.

II. Derrida's Messianicity

Another philosopher of Jewish formation, and close colleague of Levinas in Paris, Jacques Derrida, adds a further inflection to this contemporary debate. Though his early work does not address his own Jewish background, with the publication of the autobiographical *Circumfession* in 1993 Derrida spoke increasingly of this aspect of his thought, recalling how he had been expelled from school because of the anti-Semitic laws of the Vichy government in Algeria where he grew up. As the title of this testimonial work suggests, the mark of circumcision on his flesh is something that ultimately needed to be confessed rather than denied. A series of works allude to Derrida's increased attention to the tragic implications of the Holocaust, notably *Cendres* (1991) and *Shibboleth: For Paul Celan* (1986), as well as his debt to the Levinasian notion of radical alterity recorded in his obituary work, *Adieu* (1996).

But one of Derrida's most important contributions to the ana-theist question comes, I think, in a late essay, *Sauf le Nom* (1993), where he speaks of how we may save the divine "name" by refusing to determine its content. This abstentionist gesture, this discretion about naming the divine, borders on a certain style of a-theism, a way of saving the name of God by not naming God at all. But we are not dealing here with militant anti-God talk, any more than we are dealing with a subtle apologetics for apophatic theology (what we *cannot* say about God while believing in God). Derrida seems, in fact, to be excavating a space for what might be called "mystical atheism." And while he does not use the term, he does point to a curious reversibility between mysticism and atheism. Avowing that he "rightly passes for an atheist," Derrida still calls our attention to a moment of radical receptivity that he terms "messianic"—a moment when one abandons all inherited certainties, assumptions, and expectations (including religious ones) in order to open oneself to the radical surprise, and shock, of the incoming Other.

In *Sauf le Nom*—meaning both saving and exempting the divine name—Derrida goes so far as to suggest that a genuine desire for God presupposes a certain vacillation between atheism and theism. "The desire of God, God as the other name of desire," he writes, "deals in the desert with radical atheism." And he adds: "The most consequent forms of declared atheism will have always testified to the most intense desire for God. . . . Like mysticism, apophatic discourse has always been suspected of atheism. . . . If atheism, like apophatic theology, testifies to the desire of God . . . in the presence of *whom* does it do so?"⁴

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)," trans. John P. Leavey Jr., in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 80, 36–37. Originally published as *Sauf le nom* (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

Derrida might be said to be offering here a post-Holocaust translation of Meister Eckhart's prayer to God to rid him of God. Unless we let go of God as property and possession, we cannot encounter the Other as radical stranger. Such a Derridean desire of God, as "desire beyond desire," is an important theo-erotic dimension of what we call anatheism. The felt absence of the old God (the God of death) ushers in a sense of emptiness that may provoke a new desire, a seasoned desire for the return of the Other God—the divine guest who brings life.

It must be admitted, however, that Derrida's deconstructive ascesis of traditional messianisms and religions ultimately calls for a "religion beyond religion" that can scarcely give a name to God at all. At times, it seems as if Derrida is embracing a notion of "messianicity" beyond the concrete, historical messianisms of the Abrahamic tradition—a messianicity that serves less as a sacred, incarnate presence in the world than as an abstract structure for the condition of possibility of religion in general, that is, religion understood as an endless waiting with no sense of what kind of divine (or undivine) Other might appear. There is no room here for a "discernment of spirits." No real option of a hermeneutics of interpretation or commitment to holy, rather than unholy, ghosts. (For deconstructors all gods appear to be ghosts.) There seems to be no possibility, in other words, of reading the face beyond or through the name. Faith in messianicity, for Derrida, seems at times to mean a radical absence of any historical instantiation of the divine—no epiphanies, songs, testimonies, no sacred embodiments or liturgies. In the name of a universal openness to any other at all (*tout autre est tout autre*), Derrida's "religion without religion" seems to have no visage to speak of, no embodied presence in space and time. "Ascesis strips the messianic hope of all biblical forms," as he says, "and even all determinable figures of the wait or expectation; it thus denudes itself in view of responding to that which must be absolute hospitality, the 'yes' to the 'arrivant(e)', the 'come' to the future that cannot be anticipated. . . . [T]his hospitality is absolute only if it keeps watch over its own universality."⁵

But such messianic universality is only guaranteed, it seems, at the cost of particularity; it forfeits the flesh and blood singularity of everyday epiphanies. "If one could 'count' on what is coming," says Derrida, "hope would be but the calculation of a program. One would have the prospect but one would no

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 168. My thanks to Neal DeRoo for bringing these passages to my attention.

longer wait for anything or anyone.”⁶ The messianic, by contrast, is a waiting without any horizon of expectation. Ascesis without epiphany. Derrida refers to this abstention as an “epoché [bracketing] of the content” of faith; so much so, I think, that faith becomes an empty waiting, what he himself calls the “formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism.”⁷

In sum, faith serves here as a purely transcendental move, a “formal structure of promise” that does not call for realization or incarnation in the world of particular beliefs. So that if—for mystical ascesis—the “epoché of content” could be said to serve as a *provisional* moment before the return to the world of everyday belief and service, for Derrida this suspension of content seems to be a *nec plus ultra*, a point of no return. Here messianicity becomes, arguably, so devoid of any kind of concrete faith in a person or presence (human or divine) that it loses any claim to historical reality. Which leaves me with this question: does not deconstructive “faith” risk becoming so empty that it loses faith in the here and now altogether?

I think this is something that could never be said of Benjamin, for example, whose “weak messianism” promoted the idea of a mystical stranger—the weak Messiah—who may break open the continuum of history at any time: what Benjamin calls the irruption of a mystical “now” (*Jetztzeit*). Likewise, regardless of Derrida’s profound debt to his mentor Levinas, his purely formal messianicity prevents him from embracing Levinas’ ethical commitment to the “face” of the other—the widow, the orphan, and the stranger—as the trace of God. Unlike Benjamin and Levinas, therefore, Derrida’s approach to the messianic hovers in the antechamber of messianism. He explores rather than embraces the ana-theist option. His saving the Name does not entail a return to the Named. At best, it is an “endless waiting in the desert.”⁸ A waiting for a Godot who never comes.

⁶ Derrida, *ibid.*, 169.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸ On the question of messianism and eschatology, see also Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” in *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 139f. And see our related analysis of epiphanic and eschatological time in Gaston Bachelard’s philosophy of the Instant as a gap within discontinuous time (*pace* Bergson’s temporal continuum or *durée*) (R. Kearney, “Bachelard and the Epiphanic Instant,” in *SPEP Supplement, Philosophy Today* 52 [Fall 2008]: 38–45).

III. Ricoeur's Post-Religious Faith

Ricoeur, a close colleague of Levinas at Nanterre and teacher of Derrida at the Sorbonne, spoke of faith as “the joy of yes in the sadness of no.” He famously described his own Protestant faith as a “chance converted into destiny by a constant choice.” Nothing about God, he argued, could be taken for granted. On the contrary, having lived for five years in German captivity during the war, Ricoeur knew that there could be no return to faith that did not fully acknowledge the dark traversal of the abyss. He also recognized that the trenchant critiques of religion, delivered by atheists like Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche—whom he called the three great masters of the hermeneutics of suspicion—had to be taken with the utmost seriousness.

In his pioneering essay, “Religion, Atheism, Faith,” Ricoeur develops several points about a post-critical faith. He speaks of the “religious meaning of atheism,” suggesting that an atheistic purging of the negative and life-denying components of religion needs to be taken on board if a genuine form of faith is to emerge in our secular culture. Assuming the role of “philosopher” rather than “preacher,” Ricoeur seeks to indicate certain possibilities of such a post-atheistic faith, rather than fill in details of what such a faith might mean in a confessional or liturgical context. The discourse of the philosopher is always, he says, that of the perpetual beginner, a “preparatory discourse.” And he adds that this is timely in our period of contemporary confusion, “where the true consequences of the death of religion perhaps still remain concealed,” requiring a “long, slow and indirect preparation.”⁹

Two aspects of religion that call for radical critique, in this view, are *taboo* and *alibi*. Under the first heading we have the archaic religious feeling of fear, or more particularly, fear of divine punishment and expiation. Under the second, we find the need for protection and consolation. Ricoeur defines religion, accordingly, as a “primitive structure of life which must always be overcome by faith and which is grounded in the fear of punishment and the desire for protection.”¹⁰ In this context, atheism discovers its true justification as both destructive and liberating. For as it exposes the dissimulating mechanisms of religious fear and infantile dependency—thereby destroying its destructiveness—it can emancipate new possibilities of existing. And one of these possibilities, suggests Ricoeur, involves a faith situated beyond accusa-

⁹ Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, Faith,” in *The Conflict of Interpretation* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 441. For his cited quotes on faith: as joy, see *Fallible Man* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967), 215; as choice, see *Critique and Conviction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 145.

¹⁰ Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, Faith,” 441–42.

tion and escapism. In this manner, atheism may be said to emancipate religion from itself, opening the promise of a living faith curled within the shell of historical religion. That at any rate seems to be Ricoeur's wager regarding a "post-religious faith."

Under the first category of taboo, Ricoeur invokes the salutary critiques of both Freud and Nietzsche. Unlike other philosophers—e.g., British empiricists or Enlightenment positivists who attack religion on scientific grounds as unprovable—Freud and Nietzsche developed a new kind of atheistic critique: namely, the claim that religion is a cultural representation of disguised symptoms of fear and need. In this way they did not bother with arguments for proving or disproving the existence of God but concentrated on deconstructing religion operative in forms of prohibition, accusation and punishment. They thus advanced a critical hermeneutics of suspicion directed towards the *illusions* of religion, determined to unmask the *hidden* motivations of piety. This critical hermeneutics took the form of a genealogy resolved to expose religions as symptoms of a conflict of underlying forces that need to be laid bare. Nietzsche identified the main ulterior motive as a disguised "will to power," Freud as a perverted expression of libido resulting in "obsessive compulsion" and neurosis. The aim of Nietzsche's genealogical readings was to show that the so-called "ideal" realm of religion is in fact "nothing": a cover-up for a denial of life, an illusory projection of a supersensible world driven by the calumny of this earth. The aim of Freud's psychoanalytic exposé, for its part, was to show that religion operates on the basis of a delusional "phantasm of the primal Father" responding to our infantile dependency. The answer, Freud suggested in his book on Leonardo da Vinci, was a "renunciation" of this Illusory Father, constructed as a double fantasy of fear and protection. Only by means of such a radical mourning of the divine superego, only by letting go of this phantasm of absolute authority and refuge, could the origin of values be restored to itself, that is, to Eros in its eternal struggle with Thanatos.¹¹

So Nietzsche and Freud, in their respective voices, announce the "death of God." But the question (once again) is: which God? Ricoeur suggests it is the God of onto-theology, and that such a God deserves to die. The term "onto-theology" was brought into common parlance by Heidegger to refer to the metaphysical concept of a highest and most general Being abstracted from the lived world. In Western intellectual history it often coincided with a moralizing deity of accusation and condemnation. Atheistic critique set out to accuse the accusation and condemn the condemnation. It sought to unveil the

¹¹ See Freud's famous conclusion to *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962), 92.

nihilism at the core of the religious delusion, to reveal the superego's *lack* of power, the ideal world's collusion with nay-saying and death. Or as Nietzsche put it, when something is leaning, give it a push. Atheism, in this sense, is a way in which the illusions of religion self-destruct, exposing themselves for what they truly are: *nothing*. And so dies the omnipotent God of onto-theology understood as Emperor of the World. So also dies the omniscient God of "self-sufficient knowledge," which places the "powerful over the good and law over love and humility that are superior to law."¹² And along with the omnipotent and omniscient God goes the omnipresent God who condones evil as well as good. So dies, in short, the Omni-God of theodicy, invoked to justify the worst atrocities as part of some Ultimate Design. This is the God rightly dismissed, in our day, by Richard Dawkins when he invites us to imagine a world with "no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian Partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ-killers', no Northern Ireland 'troubles,' no 'honor killings,' no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money ('God wants you to give till it hurts'). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing some of it."¹³ After the hermeneutics of suspicion has done its work, it is no longer possible to return, in Ricoeur's words, to "a moral life that would take the form of naïve submission to commandments or to an alien or supreme will, even if this will were represented as divine." That is why he urges that we acknowledge as a positive good the critique of ethics and religion undertaken by the school of suspicion. From it, he argues, we learn to understand that "the commandment that gives death, not life, is a product and projection of our own weakness."¹⁴

* * *

If atheism remains simply a negation, however, it runs the risk of being reactive rather than active. The rebel falls short of the prophet. The accusation of accusation, while necessary, may fail to return to a reaffirmation of life, that is, a recognition that all things in our secular universe are in fact, already and

¹² Max Scheler, "Love and Knowledge," in *On Feeling, Knowing and Valuing* ed. H.J. Bershady (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 160.

¹³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner Books, 2008), 23–24.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, "Religion, Atheism, Faith," 447.

always, potentially sacred at heart. Nietzsche did, to be sure, speak of an “innocence of becoming” and embraced the “eternal recurrence of the same.” And it is easy to forget that the “madman” who declared God dead began his declaration with the words “I seek God.”¹⁵ But by declaring the “will to power” to be the primary truth of existence, Nietzsche remained confined within a voluntarist universe: a world where even the reaffirmation of life becomes a sort of personal mythology, a willful lyricism of animus, a fantasy of how things might be, albeit this time on the side of yea-sayers rather than nay-sayers.

Hence the option, for Ricoeur as for Levinas and Derrida in their distinctive ways, of what I am calling anatheism. And I stress the word option rather than necessity. Anatheism offers the possibility of belief after atheism. It allows for a return to a post-religious theism in the wake of Freud and Nietzsche. For Ricoeur, the philosopher, as responsible thinker, remains suspended between atheism and faith, between the secular and the sacred. But as such, a critical hermeneutic opens up a space where the “prophetic preacher” may envisage a retrieval of a liberated faith within the great religious traditions. Ricoeur imagines in this context a “radical return to the origins of Jewish and Christian faith,” a journey at once “originary and postreligious,” which speaks to our time.¹⁶ The philosopher dreams of a prophet who would realize today the liberating message of Exodus 20:2 (RSV) that exists prior to the law: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Such faith speaks of freedom and proclaims the Cross and Resurrection as invitations to a more creative life, a belief that articulates the contemporary relevance of the Pauline distinction between Spirit and Law and interprets “sin” less as the breaking of taboo than as the refusal of life. In such a scenario, sin would be exposed as a life lived fearfully “in the infernal cycle of law, transgression and guilt.”

But the philosopher can only dream of such a faith. It is the business of post-religious believers to realize it. The philosopher occupies an “intermediate time” between mourning the gods who have died and invigilating the signs of a new return. While looking forward to a “positive hermeneutics” that would be a recreation of the biblical kerygma—the prophets and the primitive Christian community—the philosopher cannot, says Ricoeur, enter that promised land. For the philosopher’s responsibility is to “think,” that is, “to

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, para. 341, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Penguin, 1954), 93–94.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, Faith,” 448; and for the following discussion of sin, 444.

dig beneath the surface of the present antinomy until he has discovered the level of questioning that makes possible a mediation between religion and faith by way of atheism.”¹⁷

I think Ricoeur’s argument here is deeply atheistic. It suggests that to think religiously is to think post-religiously. And it acknowledges that the best an atheist philosopher can do is to disclose a site where the freedom of our will is rooted in a listening to a “word” of which one is neither source nor master. This attention to a primordial event of word and meaning is the fitting vocation of an atheist who, at least when philosophizing, provisionally brackets out metaphysical questions of “God” and “religion.” It is a form of existential hearkening to the coming and going, the being and nonbeing, of meaning prior to any confessional or institutional identification of the nature of that word. But in attending to this landing site, this disposition to listen and receive (often in silence) from something beyond one’s own mastering will, the atheist philosopher can prepare the ground for believers who may later wish to release the kerygma of their faith from the prison-house of obligation and trepidation.

Listening philosophically to the word of existence may thus help us listen theologically to the word of God, without confounding the two. For existential listening, in Ricoeur’s view, allows us to restore our originary affirmation of life, our primordial desire to be: a desire that preexists the many distortions that have made it a stranger to itself. Such hearkening invites us to start all over again, from the beginning. Repetition. Recapitulation. *Anakephalaiosis*. The word of existence—which affirms the goodness of being in spite of its multiple estrangements—speaks according to the grammar of *ana*. “This affirmation must be recovered and restored,” as Ricoeur says, “because (and here the problem of evil emerges) it has been alienated in many ways. This is why it must be regrasped and reinstated. The task of ethics is thus the reappropriation of our effort to exist. Since our power has been alienated, however, this effort remains a desire, the *desire to be*.”¹⁸ Without this ana-ethical turning and returning to existence, the option of ana-theist faith is not possible. There is, insists Ricoeur, something that precedes the order of will and obligation, and this something is nothing else than “our existence in so far as it is capable of being modified by word.”¹⁹ In sum, atheism may be said to express both an existential desire and an eschatological faith.

¹⁷ Ibid., 448.

¹⁸ Ibid., 447–48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 454. See also our analysis of the ana-erotic paradigm of mystical experience as a return to a second desire beyond desire in “The Shulammitte Song: Eros Descending and Ascending,” in

A certain “gap” will always remain between the philosopher’s endless exploration of new beginnings in existence and the practitioner’s proclamation of a return to the word of God. But in spite of this gap, concedes Ricoeur, a certain “correspondence” may appear between a theology that retrieves its own origins and a philosophy that embraces atheism’s critique of religion.²⁰ Anatheism might be described as an attempt to respond to this correspondence. Ricoeur himself does not use this term, but I believe he prepares the ground for a recovery of God after God. This is how he summarizes his dream of what such a recovery might entail: “It would return to the roots of Judeo-Christian faith while also being a new beginning for our time. . . . It would be a faith that moves forward through the shadows, in a new ‘night of the soul’—to adopt the language of the mystics—before a God who would not have the attributes of ‘Providence,’ a God who would not protect me but would surrender me to the dangers of a life worthy of being called human. Is not this God the Crucified One, the God who, as Bonhoeffer says, only through his weakness is capable of helping me?” He concludes his essay on religion and atheism thus: “The night of the soul means above all the overcoming . . . of fear, the overcoming of nostalgia for the protecting father figure. Beyond the night, and only beyond it, can we recover the true meaning of the God of consolation, the God of Resurrection.”²¹

Nothing is lost in anatheism. Or rather, what is lost as possession can be retrieved as gift, revisited after the salutary night of atheistic critique—just as Job received back all that he lost, and Abraham received back Isaac, and Jesus received his life after death. Even the loving “father” of creation may be anatheistically retrieved as a symbol of life. For if Biblical religion represented God as a Father and atheism bids us renounce the fetish of the father, anatheism suggests that, once overcome as idol, the image of the Father may be recovered as symbol. A symbol generous in its semantic and gender implications. “This symbol,” suggests Ricoeur, “is a parable of the foundation of love; it is the counterpart, within a theology of love, of the progression that leads from simple resignation to poetic life.” Whence his summary of the religious meaning of atheism: “An idol must die so that a symbol of being may begin to speak.”²²

A Theology of the Passions, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 306–40.

²⁰ Ricoeur, “Religion, Atheism, Faith,” 455.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 460.

²² *Ibid.*, 467. See also Ricoeur, “The Critique of Religion,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Charles Regan and David Stuart (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 213f. Ricoeur talks of returning to a second naïveté of authentic faith after the dogmatic prejudices of one’s first naïveté have been

IV. Last Testaments

Almost forty years after this radical reflection, Ricoeur returns to the question of death and resurrection in his final testament, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort* (2007), written as he was dying. The author here blurs the distinction between the philosopher and the preacher and confides in his reader with unprecedented candor. His confidences, in my view, amount to the confessions of an atheist. Speaking of a certain kind of “grace” accompanying the experience of death, Ricoeur notes that “it is not important for this moment of grace that the dying person identifies with a particular religion or confession. Indeed maybe it is only when faced with death that the religious becomes one with the Essential and that the barriers dividing religions (and non-religions like Buddhism) are transcended. Because dying is trans-cultural it is also trans-confessional and trans-religious.”²³ Admitting his basic suspicion of “immediacy and fusion,” Ricoeur makes one exception for “the grace of a certain dying.”²⁴ Ricoeur talks about this grace as a “paradox of immanent transcendence,” of an especially “intimate transcendence of the Essential which rips through the veils of confessional religious codes.”²⁵ To encounter such authentic grace one must, Ricoeur writes, forgo the will for one’s own personal salvation by transferring this hope onto others.

Here again we confront the basic scriptural paradox that “whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it” (Lk 17:33). Or to put it in James Joyce’s terms, “without sundering there is no reconciliation.” In this context Ricoeur offers a startlingly refreshing reading of the Eucharist as a celebration of blood-as-wine, transubstantiation being taken as a sign of life and sharing rather than a token of sacrificial blood-letting.²⁶ The Eucharistic commemoration of the giving of one’s life—“Do this in memory of me”—thus becomes an affirmation of the gift of life to and for the other rather than an anxiety about personal physical survival after death. In other words, when Christ said “it is finished,” he meant it. He was offering up his

purged. He speaks accordingly of debunking false religious fetishisms so that the symbols of the eschatological sacred may speak again. Anthony Steinbock sketches a similar move in his distinction between a genuine “vertical” experience of the sacred and “idolatrous” misconstruals of this in *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 211–40.

²³ Paul Ricoeur, *Vivant jusqu'à la Mort* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2007), 45.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 90. See also James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1968), 195.

own personal life, in a second gesture of kenotic emptying (the first being the descent of divinity into flesh), so as to give life to others, in *both* service (Lk 22:27) *and* sacrament: the breaking of bread at Emmaus, the cooking of fish for his disciples in the form of the risen servant, and ever after, down through human history, in the guise of feeding the “least of these.” Ricoeur concludes his terminal testament with this remarkable note: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. Hence the link between *death-rebirth in the other* and *service as gift of life*. Hence also the link between service and feast. The Last Supper conjoins the moment of dying unto oneself and the service of the other in the sharing of food and wine which joins the man of death to the multitude of survivors reunited in community. And this is why it is remarkable that Jesus never theorized about this and never said *who* he was. Maybe he didn’t *know*, for he *lived* the Eucharistic gesture, bridged the gap between the imminence of death and the community beyond. He marked a passage to glory (through suffering and death) without any sacrificial perspective.”²⁷

What Ricoeur is rejecting here, it seems to me, is the notion of Christ’s death as a scapegoating ritual of periodic bloodletting to propitiate a divine bloodlust. He is *not* rejecting Christ’s act of “sacrificing” his life out of love for others. Ricoeur’s intention is, I believe, deeply anatheistic in its return to a post-sacrificial Eucharist of sharing with the stranger, the other, the uninvited guest.

The fact that Ricoeur calls himself a “Christian who writes philosophically” rather than a “Christian philosopher” seems to me significant here. For in so doing, he is acknowledging the importance of a gap that allows us to freely and imaginatively revisit, and at times retrieve, the often forgotten resources of traditional religion.

* * *

But there is one last question I wish to ask of Ricoeur: what exactly does he mean when he speaks of God as a *dieu capable*? Always one to oppose schismatic oppositions, Ricoeur suggests that the critical encounter between the categories of Greek ontology and biblical theology involved in the translation of Exodus 3:14, opens up new resources for understanding the nature of the divine as being-capable or enabling. (Indeed he might well agree with Derrida that between the “tragic” being of Athens and the “messianic” alterity

²⁷ Ibid., 91.

of Jerusalem, there is “philosophy.”)²⁸ Noting the traditional rendition of the Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh* as “I am who am,” Ricoeur is more interested in alternative renditions like “I am who may be” or “I am who will be with you.” The latter acknowledges a certain “divine dynamism” in the Hebrew formulation that in Greek and Latin amplifies the existing range of understanding ontological categories of being and can-being.²⁹ Of particular interest here are the connotations of promise, becoming, and futurity that the Exodic formula contains. Ricoeur is intrigued by the fertile tension emerging from the crossing-over of Greek ontology and Biblical theology. “It is truly the verb ‘to be’, but in none of the senses found in the Greek,” he writes. “There is a sort of enlargement of the meaning of being as a being-with, or being-faithful, that is, the being as accompaniment of a people, another dimension of being.”³⁰ When Aristotle says there is a variety of meanings of being, he had not, says Ricoeur, imagined the being of Exodus 3:14. Ricoeur endorses a mutual amplification of ontologies in the various translations between Greek and Hebrew.

Here, finally, we encounter what we might call an *eschatology of the possible* shared by philosophers and theologians alike. Eschatology is, by Ricoeur’s own admission, his intellectual and spiritual “secret.”³¹ It usually arises at the end of certain hermeneutic analyses (e.g., *Freud and Philosophy*) in a relatively allusive fashion. The term “eschaton” serves as a limit-horizon for Ricoeur’s work in both philosophy and theology, as suggested by his embrace—in his late work *Thinking Biblically*—of a medial position between “philosophical theology” and “theological philosophy.”³² This latter-day acknowledgment of an eschatological *posse* marks something of a departure from Ricoeur’s earlier

²⁸ See Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, translated and edited by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 131. The full quote is: “No philosophy responsible for its language can renounce ipseity in general, and the philosophy or eschatology of separation may do so less than any other. Between original tragedy and messianic triumph there is *philosophy*, in which violence is returned against violence within knowledge, in which original finitude appears, and in which the other is respected within, and by, the same.”

²⁹ Ricoeur, “From Interpretation to Translation,” in *Thinking Biblically* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 331f. See also Ricoeur, “La croyance religieuse. Le difficile chemin du religieux,” in *La Philosophie et l’Éthique*, vol. 11 (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002), especially the section entitled “L’homme capable, destinataire du religieux,” pp. 207 et seq.

³⁰ Ricoeur, “A *Colloquio con Ricoeur*,” in Fabricio Turoldo, *Verità del Methodo* (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2000), 254.

³¹ Ricoeur, “The Poetics of Language and Myth,” in *Debates in Continental Philosophy*, ed. R. Kearney 99 et seq.

³² Ricoeur, *Colloquio*, 255.

reservation—what he called his “methodological asceticism”—regarding the intermingling of philosophy and theology.³³

In an intriguing essay on the Song of Songs in *Thinking Biblically*, entitled “The Nuptial Metaphor,” Ricoeur pushes his eschatological secret to the point of rhapsodic avowal.³⁴ Here we find the eschatological potential of the divine responding to the liturgical power of the human in the form of a theo-erotic crossing. Commenting on verse 8:6 of the Song—where the shortened and unprecedented allusion to God (*shalhevetyah*) appears as *yab*—Ricoeur notes that the famous “seal of alliance” inscribed on the human heart is to be understood as both wisdom and desire.

Under the apple tree I awakened you
There where your mother conceived you
Set me as a seal upon your heart . . .
For love is as strong as death . . .
Its flame a flash of sacred fire [*shalhevetyah*]. . . .
(Song of Songs 8:5–7)

³³ Ibid., 255.

³⁴ Ricoeur, “The Nuptial Metaphor,” 265f. See Ricoeur’s final reference to our notion of divine *Posse* in one of the last “Fragments” of *Vivant Jusqu’à la mort*, 129–30. This occurs in the context of Ricoeur’s discussion of Marc Philonenko’s reading of the Our Father. Remarking that we are concerned in this prayer less with a statement about God’s being (the fact that God *is*) than with an invocation to action and doing, Ricoeur sees here a movement beyond a traditional metaphysics of being to an eschatology of “possibilisation.” “Une invocation s’adresse à un Dieu qui peut ce qu’il fait [italics added]. Dans les demandes en tu, il est demandé à Dieu de faire qu’il règne. . . . Peut-être un Dieu du *posse* (Richard Kearney). La vision eschatologique est celle d’une complétude de l’*agir*” (pp. 129–30). Returning to his oft-repeated desire for a hermeneutical rereading of Aristotle’s dialectic of possibility and actuality, Ricoeur notes that Christ’s appeal to the Father takes the form not just of wish but of expectancy, an act of trust in the accomplishment of action (*agir*). Here Ricoeur sees a “coupling” of capacities, human and divine, seeking to be realized in a “coupling” of actions. “Forgive us as we forgive others,” etc. “Le *comme* opère verbalement ce que la symétrie inégale des deux agir opère effectivement” (p. 130). Ricoeur concludes with an eschatological reinterpretation of Aristotle’s ontology of potency and act, involving a new hermeneutic “coupling,” with its own radical charge of semantic interanimation and innovation: “Telle serait la possibilisation d’une énonciation en terme d’agir. Non grec. Mais possibilité d’une réécriture du verbe être à la façon d’Aristote. Être comme *dunamis-energeia*. L’agir rend possible cette réécriture de l’être grec. Comme déjà Exode 3, 14–15. Voir *Penser la Bible* sur “Je suis qui je serai” (p. 131–32). In this final reflection on the eschatological “capacity” for pardon, Ricoeur conjoins his ontological and theological insights into the transformative power of the “possible.”

Here, suggests Ricoeur, we have a discreet eschaton that respects the incognito of an intimate *corps-à-corps* where human and divine desires traverse each other. In this nuptial traversal the “I can” of human being finds its correspondent in the “You can” of sacred love. *L’homme capable* and *le dieu capable* respond to each other in an act of daring complicity and co-creation. And it is no accident, I suspect, that Ricoeur chooses the term “metaphor” to describe this divine-human exchange, for metaphoricality is precisely that “tensive” power of language that comes alive in the crossing of ostensible opposites—immanent-transcendent, sensible-intelligible, finite-infinite. Reading this text, one realizes that for Ricoeur the divine is “capable” precisely because it is *eros* as well as *agape*: a dynamic potency (*dunamis*, *conatus*, *appetitus*) that expresses itself as a desire that is less lack than surplus: an eschatological desire to make human being more capable of new genesis, incarnation, and natality. *Désir à être* rather than *manque à être*. Desire beyond desire. Atheist desire as a love that answers desire with more desire—and death with more life. In such a process of mutual traversal, desire surely reveals “God” as another name for the “more,” the “surplus,” the “surprise” that humans seek.

So what are the implications of such a “capable God” for concrete questions of living and dying? Such an eschatological *posse*, for Ricoeur, implies a God of enabling service rather than of sacrificial blood-letting; a divinity who is willing to efface its own being for the sake of giving *more* being to its beloved creatures. In this sense we may speak of a God beyond religion (in the sense of confessional absolutism), or at the very least of an inter-religious or trans-religious God. I think Ricoeur comes close at this terminal juncture to his Paris friend, Stanislas Breton, who espoused a form of mystical kenosis whereby divinity becomes “nothing” in order that humanity can become more fully human.³⁵ The notion of divine *posse*—of an enabling God who says “You are able!”—repudiates all forms of theodicy and theocracy by returning power and responsibility to humans. And it is interesting that on this point, Ricoeur specifically invokes the great Rhine mystics who “renounced themselves” for the sake of opening to the Essential, to the point of being, in their contemplative detachment, incredibly active in the creation of new orders, in teaching, in traveling and tending to the forgotten of this world. By being

³⁵ Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross*, trans. Jacqueline Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

available like this to the Essential, they were motivated to “transfer the love of life onto others.”³⁶

God thus becomes, for Ricoeur, a God *after* God, a God who no longer is but who *may be* again in the form of renewed life. Such a divinity is “capable” of making us “capable” of sacred life; and it does so by emptying divine being into nonbeing so as to allow for rebirth into more being: life more fully alive. In this option for natality over mortality, the dichotomy between before and after death may be refigured. The space of anatheism opens onto this “may be.” But it is a space of free possibility—beyond impossibility; it is never a *fait accompli* but a wager to be made and remade again and again.

³⁶ Ricoeur, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort* 76. Other significant contributions to the “God after Metaphysics” debate—which emerged in the wake of the “religious turn” in phenomenology (Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Michel Henry) and in deconstruction (Derrida)—include the recent work of thinkers like John Caputo, John Manoussakis, and Mark Taylor. These thinkers have explored the idea of a messianicity without metaphysics, calling this, paradoxically but tellingly, a “religion without religion.” Caputo’s own notion of the “weakness of God” stems from a reading of Christian kenosis in light of a deconstructionist complicity between mysticism and atheism that, as noted above, was already identified by Derrida in *Sauf le Nom*. Manoussakis and Taylor develop somewhat different conclusions to their respective books, both titled *After God*, the former veering in a more theistic direction, the later in a more atheistic one.