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DERRIDA AND THE DANGER OF RELIGION

David Newheiser

This paper argues that Jacques Derrida provides a compelling rebuttal to a secularism that seeks to exclude religion from the public sphere. Political theorists such as Mark Lilla claim that religion is a source of violence, and so they conclude that religion and politics should be strictly separated. In my reading, Derrida's work entails that a secularism of this kind is both impossible (because religion remains influential in the wake of secularization) and unnecessary (because religious traditions are diverse and multivalent). Some attempt to contain the disruptive force of religion by excluding it from the public sphere, but Derrida argues that one may endure instability for the sake of something more important than safety. Although Derrida admits that religion is dangerous, he demonstrates that it is nevertheless an indispensable resource for political reflection.

In the academy and elsewhere, there is widespread anxiety concerning the danger of religion. Because some people commit acts of violence in the name of their religion, it can seem that religion is at odds with the pluralism of modern democracies. Whereas the public sphere ought to be open in principle to everyone, religious commitments appear to be mutually incompatible and inaccessible to outsiders. Many worry that, even when they refrain from physical violence, religious traditions divide the body politic through idiosyncratic dogma. Since whatever consensus used to exist around religion seems to have shattered, some conclude that it should not play a role in secular politics.

Political theorists often focus on public discourse, asking whether it is appropriate to appeal to religious reasons in political debate (see Rawls 1993; Audi 2000). Mark Lilla's contribution is distinctive insofar as he situates this question within a wide-ranging intellectual history that attends to the psychological effects of religion. Following Thomas Hobbes, Lilla acknowledges that religion offers comfort in the face of a threatening world, but he observes that it introduces a deeper source of anxiety—because divine judgment is a threat worse than death, religious belief

carries a terrifying authority. In Lilla's view, religion sets in motion a vicious cycle: fear breeds religious fanaticism, fanaticism inspires violence, and this violence in turn amplifies the insecurity that encouraged fanaticism in the first place. For this reason, according to Lilla, it is necessary to strictly separate religion and politics.

Jacques Derrida rarely appears in the anglophone debate over religion and politics, but I believe he rebuts a programmatic secularism that aims to exclude religion from the public sphere.[1] Like Lilla, Derrida believes that religious traditions are sometimes the source of violence, and he agrees that politics should not be dominated by theocratic authority. However, although Derrida shares Lilla's concerns, he notes that many of those who aim to reject religion still depend upon a theological heritage. In parallel with recent scholarship on secularization, Derrida argues that religious patterns of thought and practice remain operative within disenchanted modernity, which suggests that the secular and the religious cannot be separated. Derrida rarely addresses secularism directly, but I will argue that his work entails that a programmatic secularism is both impossible and unnecessary.

Derrida's contribution to the debate over religion and politics is not widely recognized, in part because it is oblique. Derrida is best known for his claim that every system is disrupted by the differential play of its constituent elements. Many readers take Derrida to be talking about texts, but the point is also political: on his account, every individual is constituted by their relation to others, and so identity is never pure. In keeping with this approach, Derrida discovers the influence of religion in unexpected place; in his view, just as everything is bound up with that which is different, ostensibly secular texts and institutions are shaped by a religious heritage. Where Lilla treats religion primarily as an explicit source of authority, Derrida argues that the influence of religious traditions is subtle, subterranean, and surprisingly persistent. Although Derrida rarely addresses the debate over religion and politics, his work indicates that attempts to exclude religion from politics are bound to fail.[2]

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[1] The term "secularism" is used in various ways. The secularism I take Derrida to be against is a programmatic secularism that forbids overt religiosity in the public sphere; this is distinct from a procedural secularism that prohibits the state from preferring one religious group other others. Where programmatic secularism seeks to exclude religion from the public sphere, procedural secularism preserves the neutrality of the state in order to allow all parties (religious and otherwise) to intervene politically. As I argue below, Derrida affirms secularism in this second, restricted sense. For more on this distinction, see Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011, 8–9; Williams 2012, 2–3.

[2] Derrida suggests that to speak of "religion" in general is already misleading insofar as the term is often used to superimpose Christian assumptions onto other traditions (Derrida 2001a, 74; 2002a, 44–45). In this paper I use the term

In my view, Derrida's relation to religion is widely misunderstood. Where some commentators claim that he is hostile to determinate religious traditions, I will argue that Derrida's account of the differential play of meaning enables him to draw upon religious traditions that are not his own.[3] Derrida argues that revolutionary politics and religious eschatology are both directed toward a future that cannot be envisioned in advance, and he interprets justice and democracy as messianic in this sense. Extending his earlier work on temporality, he claims that orientation to what is to come requires a disciplined openness to the unexpected. Whereas it is tempting to assume that the values we currently hold are simply correct, Derrida holds out hope for a justice that transcends our present understanding. Insofar as messianism energizes the struggle for transformation, Derrida demonstrates that religion remains a powerful resource for political reflection.

I think it is a mistake to focus on the place of religious reasoning in the public sphere: following Derrida, I aim to suggest that the debate over religion and politics hinges upon ethics rather than epistemology. Where secularism and theocracy both promise relief from unrest, Derrida describes an ethics of hope that acknowledges its insecurity but presses forward nonetheless. Derrida agrees with Lilla that religion destabilizes rational reflection by introducing something beyond immanent calculation; the difference is that Derrida sees such transcendence as politically indispensable. Lilla aims to contain the disruptive force of religion by excluding it from the public sphere, but Derrida indicates that one may endure instability for the sake of something more important than safety. On Derrida's view, the cost of perfect security would be the closure of the unexpected, which includes the possibility of both trauma and transformation. Because religious traditions open imagination to a justice that transcends the status quo, Derrida suggests that politics would be impoverished without them.

"religion" when referring to its function in the debate I am engaging, but (following Derrida) I prefer to refer to particular traditions when speaking in my own voice.

[3] Although Derrida does not adhere straightforwardly to any religious tradition, he is not a polemical atheist (see Derrida 1993, 155). Late in his career his relationship to Judaism becomes increasingly explicit. He writes, "To say 'I am Jew,' as I do, while knowing and wanting to say what one says, is very difficult and vertiginous. One can only attempt to think it after having said it, and therefore, in a certain manner, without yet knowing what one does there, the *doing* preceding the *knowing* and remaining, more than ever, heterogeneous to it" (Derrida 2007, 28; see Hammerschlag 2010, 201–60).

- The Great Separation -

Lilla's argument for the separation of religion and politics is subtle and engaging. Although he acknowledges that some believers say that one should patiently wait for God's kingdom to come, Lilla claims that the faithful are inevitably tempted to bring the kingdom into being by force. In his view, eschatological desire is highly volatile: "Heresies, false prophecies, peasant revolts, massacres, genocides, self-immolations—the history of messianic movements bulges with them" (Lilla 2007a, 243; see 2001b). This problem is compounded by the fact that, insofar as the demands of revelation are inaccessible to unaided reason, they are not subject to the prudent evaluation that might satisfy a neutral observer. Lilla observes, "If God has commands regarding activity in the world, they will be inscrutable to outsiders and impervious to reason. In such a mindset the theological imagination becomes free to ponder extreme possibilities" (Lilla 2007a, 252). For this reason, he concludes, religion is a danger that cannot be mitigated.

Lilla claims that the sixteenth century wars of religion demonstrated that religion is politically corrosive. He writes, "Christian fanaticism and intolerance incited violence; violence set secular and religious leaders against one another; and the more violent and fearful political life became, the more fanatical and intolerant Christians became" (2007a, 57; see also 83).[4] According to Lilla, modern political philosophers concluded in response to this pattern that it was necessary to set politics upon a different foundation. In their view, he says, "A decent political life could not be realized within the terms set by Christian political theology, which bred violent eschatological passions and stifled human development" (Lilla 2007a, 217–18). Rather than entering the tortuous debate about God's nature and intentions for the world, these philosophers decided that political reflection should be separated from theological considerations.

This is what Lilla calls "the Great Separation," which he traces to Hobbes.[5] Hobbes claims that, because nonhuman animals lack the temporal awareness to discover the causes of their pleasure and pain, the sum of animal happiness consists in immediate pleasure. Unfortunately for us, humans have the capacity to reflect on causal relations we have observed in the past, which allows us to form hopes and fears concerning the future. Hobbes writes, "Man, which looks too far

[4] Lilla's account of the wars of religion is overly simplistic; see Cavanaugh 2009.

[5] There is reason to think Lilla exaggerates Hobbes's hostility toward religion; for an alternative reading, see Martinich 1992, 13–15.

before him, in the care of future time, hath his heart all the day long, gnawed on by fear of death, poverty, or other calamity; and has no repose, nor pause of his anxiety, but in sleep" (Hobbes 1991, 76). Because humans are conscious of time, we recognize that momentary happiness is inevitably fragile and are therefore consumed by the future.

Hobbes argues that people gravitate to religion in order to secure the future through supernatural aid; the problem, in his view, is that the future remains uncertain. He writes, "There is no natural knowledge of man's estate after death…but only a belief grounded upon other men's saying that they know it supernaturally, or that they know those, that knew them, that knew others, that knew it supernaturally" (Hobbes 1991, 103). Hobbes observes that, unless one has supernatural knowledge firsthand, beliefs about the afterlife rely upon someone else's authority. For this reason, he says, religious belief is not faith in God but "Faith in men onely" (Hobbes 1991, 49). In Hobbes's view, religion is dangerous because it conflates divine authority with leaders who remain all too human.

Late in *Leviathan* Hobbes imagines a reader who wonders why he dwells so long on religion in a work devoted to politics. Hobbes explains that the mystifications of Aristotelian philosophy, mediated by scholastic theology, are a threat to political order. He writes, "For who will endeavour to obey the Laws, if he expect Obedience to be Powred or Blown into him?...Or who, that is in fear of Ghosts, will not bear great respect to those that can make the Holy Water, that drives them from him?" (Hobbes 1991, 465; see also 260; 1839, 167, 171). The problem is that religion introduces a source of authority that could compete with the state: if someone thinks that a priest possesses supernatural powers and divine authority, this may lead them to rebel against political authority. Because Hobbes thinks the authority of the sovereign is absolute, he concludes that this would be disastrous.

Lilla writes, glossing Hobbes, "The reason human beings in war commit acts no animal would commit is, paradoxically, because they believe in God. Animals fight only to eat or reproduce; men fight to get into heaven" (Lilla 2007a, 84–85). Although religion is not the only source of violence, Lilla claims that it is particularly problematic insofar as it places one's ultimate fate at stake. Because religion provides a focal point for the generalized anxiety of temporal existence, it offers some comfort in the face of vulnerability. However, since this comfort is

unreliable, anxiety may bubble up unpredictably, thereby destabilizing political order. For this reason, Lilla concludes that religion and politics should be strictly separated.

- The Persistence of Religion -

Like Lilla, Derrida believes that religion is dangerous. Derrida frequently engages religious texts, often with appreciation, but at the same time—sometimes in the same sentence—he distances himself from religion. Where Derrida's early work associates religion with metaphysics, his later work worries about its political implications. He interprets ongoing conflict in the Middle East as a "war of messianic eschatologies" (Derrida 1994, 73); he laments that "these three monotheisms fight over [Jerusalem]...they make war with fire and blood…, each claiming its particular perspective on this place and claiming an original historical and political interpretation of Messianism" (Derrida 1995, 70). Because the fact that various parties are convinced that the Messiah is on their side intensifies the conflict between them, Derrida shares Lilla's anxiety about the destabilizing effects of eschatology.

Because Derrida's attitude toward religion is palpably ambivalent, it could seem that he agrees that religion and politics should be separated. In 1994, writing during the Algerian civil war, Derrida insists upon "the real dissociation of the theological and the political," explaining that "our idea of democracy implies a separation of state and religious power; that is, a radical secularism [*laïcité*] and a flawless tolerance" (Derrida 2002e, 122). On the face of it, this might seem to endorse the programmatic secularism of the French state, which limits religious expression in the public sphere. However, Derrida immediately adds that this tolerance "protect[s] the exercise of faith and, in this case, the freedom of discussion and interpretation within every religion. For example, and in the first place here: in Islam, the different readings of which, both exegetical and political, must be allowed to develop freely" (Derrida 2002e, 122). In Derrida's account, one function of the religious neutrality of the state is to allow religious communities to reflect in freedom upon how to intervene politically.

Two years later, in 1996, Derrida reiterates his hope for a secular government in Algeria, but once again he emphasizes that such a government would not be opposed to Islam but rather "*laic* and open to social, cultural, and religious (etc.) pluralism" (Derrida 1997b). When he returns to the case of Algeria in 2002 his complaint against Islamist politicians is not that they brought religion

into politics but that they threatened to suspend democratic elections (Derrida 2005c, 31–34). In my reading, Derrida affirms a procedural secularity that prohibits the state from preferring one religious group over others, but this does not entail that he endorses a programmatic secularism that seeks to exclude religion from the public sphere.

It would be odd for Derrida to insist that religion and politics must be separated, for he frequently shows that the influence of religion persists when it has supposedly been expunged. To take one example, Derrida argues that both sides in the debate over the death penalty rely on the legacy of Christianity. On the one hand, Albert Camus argues that the Christian belief in an afterlife is necessary to sustain the death penalty; for this reason, Camus blames Christianity for its continued existence. On the other hand, Derrida notes that Victor Hugo opposed the death penalty by appealing to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ; according to Hugo, Christianity is the antidote rather than the disease. This indicates that Christianity has the capacity to inspire both support for and opposition to the death penalty, but Derrida goes even further: "If one reflects that…Christian monotheism is also a humanist immanentism, a belief in the mediation of God made man…Camus's discourse…would be more Christian, more Christlike, than he thought" (Derrida 2014, 209). Although Camus's opposition to the death penalty aimed to reject Christianity in favor of humanism, Derrida suggests that this humanism is already implicit in the Christian account of Jesus Christ. In Derrida's reading, Camus's anti-Christian critique of the death penalty repeats a Christian gesture.

Derrida finds the same dynamic at work in Hobbes. He writes, "Many expert commentators on Hobbes…believe it necessary to insist on the modernity of their concept of sovereignty, insofar as it is supposed to be, precisely, emancipated from theology and religion and would supposedly have finally landed on purely human soil, as a political and not a theological concept, as a non-theologico-political concept. But things seem much more complex to me" (2009, 53).[6] Derrida goes on to explain that, although Hobbes claims that the state has an anthropological origin, he nevertheless portrays the sovereign as standing in God's place. Since Hobbes calls God "the Soveraign of all Soveraigns," there is reason to think that human and divine sovereignty form a pair, each modeled upon the other (Hobbes 1991, 260). For this reason, Derrida suggests, "This

[6] On this point, Derrida agrees with Carl Schmitt (see Derrida 2004, 91–92; Schmitt 1985, 36). For a helpful analysis of Derrida's late work on sovereignty, see Leitch 2007.

humanistic or anthropologistic modernity of the institution of sovereignty and the state retains a profound and fundamental theological and religious basis" (Derrida 2009, 54). In Derrida's view, humanism and religion are not simply opposed; on the contrary, if sovereignty is a theological concept, Hobbes does not separate religion and politics as strictly as Lilla says.[7]

Like Hobbes, Lilla worries about religion because he takes it to assert an authority that could compete with political authority. Lilla writes, "If we take seriously the thought that God is a person with intentions…then a great deal can follow. The intentions of such a God are not mute facts. They express an active will. They are authoritative. And that is where politics comes in" (Lilla 2007a, 22). In Lilla's view, if a person believes in God, they will feel themselves constrained to submit to God's will, and it is in this way (he thinks) that religion is relevant to politics. Like Hobbes, Lilla worries that divine sovereignty will displace political sovereignty, but this is only possible if they are the same kind of thing. Lilla recognizes that modern political philosophy was formed in conversation with Christianity, but he characterizes this process as "a backward-looking struggle" (Lilla 2007a, 18). If Derrida is right that sovereignty is a theological concept, it is misleading to portray the relation between Christianity and modernity as purely oppositional. Where Lilla claims that "modern liberal democracy…is a post-Christian phenomenon" (Lilla 2007b), Derrida shows that religion remains influential even among those who set out to reject it.

Derrida argues that many of the central concepts of modern politics—tolerance, globalization, forgiveness, and secularization itself—have a theological genealogy (Derrida 2003, 127, 130; 2001a, 66; 2005b, 160; 2001b, 31; 2005d, 116).[8] For this reason, he writes, "The opposition between sacred and secular is naïve…The very idea of the secular is religious through and through—Christian really" (Derrida 2005b, 142; see 2001c, 67; 2005c, 28). Although modernity is often portrayed as the gradual fading of religious particularity in favor of universal reason, Derrida claims that "the Enlightenment remains a Christian phenomenon" (Derrida 2001a, 66). In his view, the fading of Christian hegemony in the modern period expresses an impetus toward universality

[7] Lilla writes, "As for Hobbes, though, I don't take his theology seriously as theology. Whether he believes all the biblical citations and theological arguments he presents or not, his own argument stands alone. That's all I'm concerned with" (Casanova et al. 2013, 28). Methodologically speaking, this seems irresponsible.

[8] I think Paul Kahn is correct: "That political concepts have their origin in theological concepts is, to most contemporary theorists, about as interesting and important as learning that English words have their origin in old Norse" (Kahn 2011, 3). However, I take it that Derrida's point is not simply that political concepts have a theological origin; instead, he suggests that they continue to operate theologically. For this reason, as Kahn himself argues, in order to understand modern politics it is necessary to draw upon theological modes of analysis.

that originates with the biblical writer Paul (see Derrida 2003, 130; 2002d, 374–75).[9] In Derrida's view, "dechristianization will be a Christian victory" (Derrida 2005a, 54; see 2001a, 66–70; 2014, 244–45; 2002a, 78–79; Kearney and Derrida 2004, 7); after all, he observes that the death of God (in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ) is a central motif of Christian thought. Where Lilla treats religion primarily as a source of overt authority, Derrida argues that the influence of religion persists in an unconscious register.

- The Impossibility of Secularism -

Derrida suggests that, insofar as religion insinuates itself into contexts that seem to be secular, a strict separation between religion and politics cannot be achieved by fiat. Although Derrida does not develop this claim in detail, his analysis intersects with recent scholarship on secularization. José Casanova notes that "any discussion of the secular has to begin with the recognition that it emerged first as a theological category of Western Christendom" (Casanova 2011, 56; see also 1994). As Casanova goes on to explain, in medieval Europe "secular" referred to clergy who lived in the world among lay Christians, whereas "religious" referred to clergy who withdrew to cloistered life. In this context, to "secularize" meant to relocate someone or something from the monastery to the wider world. Casanova argues that the modern process of secularization responds to this medieval dualism between the secular and the religious (Casanova 2011, 56). This gave rise to a distinctively Christian form of secularization, as various reform movements (from the Middle Ages to the Reformation) demanded that all Christians should pursue holiness, not only the "religious" elite (Casanova 2011, 56). Casanova concludes that, far from being neatly opposed, "the religious and the secular are mutually constituted through sociopolitical struggles and cultural politics" (Casanova 2011, 63). Where some assume that the secular and the religious are given quantities that stand opposed, Casanova shows that the boundary between them is constantly renegotiated.

Along similar lines, Talal Asad argues that the secular and the religious were invented together to serve political ends (Asad 2003, 191–92). He writes, "In this movement we have the construction of religion as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one's spare time. This

[9] In similar fashion, Charles Taylor argues that Christian reform movements contributed to the disenchantment of the world by seeking to submit all of life to an exceptionless code (Taylor 2007, 51, 87).

construction of religion ensures that it is part of what is inessential to our common politics, economy, science, and morality" (Asad 1993, 207). Where it is tempting to take the category of religion as obvious, Asad claims that it too is a recent construct—one that is designed precisely to exclude it from mechanisms of power. For this reason, in Asad's view the distinction between the secular and the religious is unstable. He writes, "The secular, I argue, is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)" (Asad 2003, 25; see also Mahmood 2009). Asad and Casanova agree that there is some sense in which ours is a secular age, but their work demonstrates that secularization remains bound up with a religious heritage.

Derrida rarely comments on secularism directly, but his early work provides philosophical support for the view that the secular does not simply supplant the religious.[10] Derrida argues that every present element is related to what is different and that every structure is disrupted by the play of elements which elude attempts to create perfect coherence (Derrida 1982, 13). These claims are framed in relation to the functioning of symbolic systems, but they respond to an ethical problem: in Derrida's diagnosis, people assert that they are certain because instability is unsettling (Derrida 1978, 279). In response, Derrida insists that such security is unreliable. In his view, every thing is constituted by a complex web of relationships, which entails that there is no stable point of reference that could ground a complete and coherent system. This suggests that the attempt to exclude religion from the public sphere is impossible in principle: where secularism assumes that the secular and the religious are strictly separated, Derrida argues that such purity is unattainable, for everything is adulterated by that which is different.

Although Derrida's early work often focuses on symbolic systems, his account of the differential play of meaning is already political, for the claim that relations with others are intrinsic to existence applies to people as well as to texts (see Derrida 1988, 136; 2005c, 39). In Derrida's view, we are each caught within a web of relations that we cannot comprehend. This porous impurity is exemplified by the unconscious, which is central to Derrida's understanding of tradition. He writes,

[10] Derrida's most extensive reflections on secularism are found in comments that he delivered at a colloquium hosted by the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici in 1996; they have been published in Italian but are unpublished in English or French (Derrida et al. 1998; Derrida 1996). In "The Eyes of Language" Derrida discusses a letter from Gershom Scholem to Franz Rosenzweig on the secularization of the Hebrew language, but the essay does not explain Derrida's own views on the subject (Derrida 2002b).

"That we *are* heirs does not mean that we *have* or that we *receive* this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or that, but that the *being* of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not" (Derrida 1994, 68; see 1982, 20). In Derrida's account, we are shaped by a past that we did not choose and of which we are not fully aware. For this reason, even the source of our own instincts and convictions is opaque to us. This provides a philosophical explanation for the situation that Casanova, Taylor, and Asad describe: on Derrida's terms, we ought to expect that secularization depends upon a religious heritage, for the past persists on the periphery of awareness.

Where secularists and traditionalists both treat religion as a univocal source of dogmatic authority, Derrida recognizes that religious traditions are diverse and multivalent.[11] He argues that, because every tradition is internally divided, fidelity requires active reinterpretation (Derrida 1994, 18). Like Lilla, Derrida affirms the legacy of the Enlightenment; however, Derrida does not think the light of reason is simply opposed to the darkness of religion—for the reasons I have described, he thinks Western modernity is more complex and ambivalent than this story suggests (Derrida 1991). Although Derrida thinks that we are shaped by traditions we did not actively choose, he argues that we are responsible to test and reinterpret the traditions in which we find themselves. In his view, our task is to sift the sources of our selves and societies, which overlap and diverge in complex ways. In my reading, Derrida suggests that it is possible neither to abandon religion in one leap nor to return to the idealized piety of the past.

- Messianic Politics -

Although Derrida's does not directly engage the debate over religion and politics, I have argued that his early work suggests that attempts to exclude religion from politics are bound to fail. Where this point is primarily descriptive, Derrida also draws constructively upon religious traditions in

[11] Compared to Derrida, Lilla's understanding of religion seems strangely constrained. Lilla writes, "Traditional theology makes objective truth claims….Before Rousseau, whenever Christian theologians disputed these matters they took their assertions to be absolutely true on the basis of reason and revelation, independent of man" (Lilla 2007a, 123–24). The trouble is that this concern for "objective truth claims" reflects a post-Enlightenment context. Early Christian authors certainly believed their theological claims to be true, but they did not specify truth in terms of objectivity (in contrast to subjectivity) or absoluteness (in contrast to relativity)—these are modern categories. It may be relevant that Lilla was at one time an evangelical Christian; even though he has repudiated evangelical doctrine, he seems to think it correctly represents Christianity as a whole (see Lilla 1980; 2005). However, the history of Christianity is more diverse than modern evangelicalism allows.

order to illuminate politics.[12] Derrida's later work centers upon a cluster of political concepts that Derrida interprets in terms drawn from Judeo-Christian tradition. He writes, "The effectivity or actuality of the democratic promise, like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event and of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated" (Derrida 1994, 81). Here Derrida plays upon the fact that the French term for "future" (*avenir*) is a homonym with *à-venir*, which means "to come." For him, this coming names the irruptive futurity of justice as encounter with the other (see Derrida 2002c, 256). Against those who claim that democracy is already achieved, Derrida argues that it is a hope for the future rather than a present possession. This is not simply because every existing system of government is to some extent undemocratic—according to Derrida, democracy is unrealized in principle and not only in fact. Whereas some hopes await the realization of a clearly conceived ideal, Derrida claims that the promise of democracy requires us to critique every existing political regime and our understanding of democracy itself. (After all, as others have argued, democracy is defined by its openness to contestation.) For this reason, Derrida takes democracy to be a promise that closely resembles biblical traditions of eschatological expectation, which are oriented toward a future that transcends present understanding.

Although Derrida worries that eschatology is dangerous, he argues that it requires a circumspection that mitigates the threat of violence. He writes, "Ascesis strips the messianic hope of all biblical forms, 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" (Derrida 1994, 211).[13] In Derrida's account, religious messianisms hope for a particular outcome, but at the same time they are oriented toward a future that remains unknowable. For this reason, although some assume that eschatology is necessarily dogmatic, it contains an inbuilt requirement for self-critique. Insofar as Derrida does not endorse the messianic vision of a particular religious tradition, he occupies a different position from that of

[12] Paul Kahn argues that modern political theology is a descriptive rather than a normative exercise. In his view, the persistence of the sacred entails that it is necessary to draw upon theological categories in order to understand politics, but this does not entail a normative stance in relation to theological claims (Kahn 2011). Derrida goes further: in my reading, he draws upon religious sources for the purpose of normative reflection.

[13] It is possible to read this quote as recommending that religious traditions should be negated (from the outside, as it were), but I think it is best read as suggesting that this ascetic negativity is internal to religious messianism.

their practitioners. However, Derrida recognizes that religious eschatologies incorporate both the affirmation of particular expectations and an indeterminate openness to the future. In similar fashion, Derrida's account of democracy works with a determinate conception of democracy while holding that conception open to revision.[14]

Many commentators worry that Derrida offers nothing but a nebulous indeterminacy, unable to affirm anything. Lilla expresses a widespread anxiety: "If deconstruction throws doubt on every political principle of the Western philosophical tradition…are judgments about political matters still possible?" (Derrida 2001a, 179).[15] Insofar as Derrida's insistence upon relentless critique risks dissolving the principles on the basis of which decisions could be made, we might worry that he undermines the practical reflection that is often urgently important. Some argue that, if democracy and justice are perpetually to come, it becomes impossible to resist particular instances of injustice. This objection is reinforced by some of Derrida's most influential interpreters, who claim that Derrida differs from his religious interlocutors insofar as he exhibits a purer indeterminacy. John Caputo argues that "the *à-venir* of [Derrida's] 'messianic in general' is completely open-ended," which contrasts (according to Caputo) with the determinate desires and expectations of religious messianism (Caputo 1997, 129; 1999, 198). If this were so, Derrida would be no better than the religious enthusiasts Lilla opposes, abandoning sober reflection in favor of a vacuous transcendence.

In my view, however, Caputo's appeal to the "messianic in general" and his insistence upon indeterminate purity are at odds with the central themes of Derrida work.[16] Although Derrida's messianicity requires the critique of every expectation, this does not entail that one must exist in total indetermination: not only would that be politically perilous, such purity is impossible on Derrida's terms. As I have argued, Derrida claims that we are always embroiled in a heritage we did not actively choose. Accordingly, he acknowledges that his account of messianic hope is not purely indeterminate—on the contrary, it is itself indebted to particular traditions. By the same token,

[14] Michael Naas and Andrea Cassatella claim that Derrida aimed to critique (Naas 2007) or exclude (Cassatella 2015) theological influence upon politics. However, they exaggerate the distance between Derrida's account of messianism and classic Christian thought. In contrast, I have argued that Derrida saw the theologico-political not only as a problem but also as a valuable resource. In my view, Derrida recognizes that religious traditions are diverse to the extent that some of them stand in an indiscrete relation with his project (see Carlson 1999, 247–48).

[15] Lilla develops his critique of Derrida separately from his critique of religion, but they are closely related (see Lilla 2001a, 190).

[16] I have developed this argument at greater length in Newheiser, n.d., chap. 3. By the same token, my argument also undermines Martin Hägglund's assertion that Derrida opposes religious commitment, always and as such (Hägglund 2008).

Derrida observes that the concept of "democracy" is associated with a particular form of politics. He writes, "Did we not have some idea of democracy, we would never worry about its indetermination. We would never seek to elucidate its meaning or, indeed, call for its advent" (2005c, 18). On Derrida's account, democracy requires negotiation between particular hopes and indeterminate hope, filling out the former with specific desires for the future while allowing the latter to prevent those aims from co-opting the aura of ultimacy. For this reason, contra Caputo, Derrida's messianic democracy is structurally indistinguishable from the messianisms found in some religious traditions.[17]

In my reading, the point of Derrida's messianic politics is not to proscribe particular religious or political commitments but rather to insist that every commitment remains open to future development. Lilla is therefore wrong to claim that deconstruction dissolves the possibility of judgment. In Derrida's view, rather than paralyzing action, uncertainty is the only context in which responsible judgment is possible (see Derrida 2005c, 145). Lilla claims that "there is an unresolvable paradox in using language to claim that language cannot make unambiguous claims" (Lilla 2001a, 173). However, if one acknowledges that some claims are not perfectly transparent, then the problem evaporates. Lilla writes that "[Derrida] simply cannot find a way of specifying the nature of the justice to be sought through left-wing politics without opening himself to the very deconstruction he so gleefully applies to others" (Lilla 2001a, 183). In fact, this is the point of Derrida's program. Derrida insists that every conception of democracy (for example) remains subject to deconstruction, but this does not mean that the concept must be abandoned. On the contrary, Derrida's reflexive negativity serves to hold particular conceptions of democracy open to revision. Where Lilla seems to assume that any obscurity obliterates the possibility of judgment, Derrida draws upon religious traditions in order to describe a self-critical hope that sustains political commitment.

[17] Derrida wavers between the claim that the messianicity he describes is prior to particular religious traditions and the claim that the abstract structure is only thinkable in the wake of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. He writes, "The problem remains—and this is really a problem for me, an enigma—whether the religions, say, for instance the religions of the Book, are but specific examples of this general structure, of messianicity….The other hypothesis—and I confess that I hesitate between these two possibilities—is that the events of revelation, the biblical traditions, the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, have been absolute events, irreducible events which have unveiled this messianicity" (1997a, 23).

- Instability, Anxiety, and Hope -

I have argued that Derrida's account of the differential play of meaning entails that the secular cannot successfully exclude its religious other (because nothing can), and his treatment of tradition helps to explain why religion remains unconsciously influential even when it has been explicitly rejected. Where some political theorists argue that religious discourse should be excluded from the public sphere—because it violates the strictures of "public" or "secular" reason (Rawls 1993; Audi 2000)—Derrida's account of democracy implies that it is inappropriate to predetermine deliberation through a rule of this kind. Where secularism seeks to ensure the safety of the public sphere (see Stout 2004, 80), Derrida's messianic politics demonstrates that another disposition toward danger is possible. In my view, Derrida's work suggests that the epistemological question concerning the justification for political arguments is secondary to an ethical issue concerning dispositions toward danger.

According to Lilla, the problem with religion is not simply that it is a source of authority that is inaccessible to some citizens. Like Hobbes, he thinks religion carries an emotional power—born from fear and exhilaration—that destabilizes individual lives and, through them, the world. Lilla writes, "Hobbes…was not wrong to think that messianic passions can destroy the religious and political lives of those subject to them" (Lilla 2007a, 243). In Lilla's view, once redemption is promised, the results are unpredictable; however circumspect official doctrine might be, eschatological passion will unleash violence. He writes, "Eschatological language breeds eschatological politics, no matter what dogmatic limits theologians try to impose on it" (Lilla 2008, 285). According to Lilla, political theology is a danger even when it is private, for it unleashes passions that refuse to be contained by ordered rationality.

Hobbes defines religion as "*feare* of power invisible" (Hobbes 1991, 42), and he recognizes that fear is an unpredictable force. In order to mitigate its danger, Hobbes insists upon the priority of unambiguous rationality. He writes, "The Light of humane minds is Perspicuous Words, but by exact definitions first snuffed, and purged from ambiguity; Reason is the *pace*; Encrease of *Science*, the *way*; and the Benefit of man-kind, the *end*" (Hobbes 1991, 36). On this view, linguistic ambiguity is the source of conflict and rebellion, and so anything less than perfect clarity is politically perilous. Hobbes continues, "And on the contrary, Metaphors, and senslesse and ambiguous words, are like

ignes fatui; and reasoning upon them, is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention, and sedition, or contempt" (Hobbes 1991, 36). In order to preserve the priority of calculative rationality, Hobbes excludes a gratuity that surpasses self-interest, a justice that exceeds contractual obligation, and a religion that transcends comprehension (Hobbes 1991, 23, 59, 64, 91, 105). Derrida agrees that love, justice, and transcendence are dangerous; however, he does not conclude that they must therefore be abandoned.

Lilla claims that "fragility is a disturbing prospect" (Lilla 2007a, 6), and surely he is right. Insofar as the desire to find a stable basis for political life responds to this experience, secularism addresses a genuinely distressing anxiety. However, where Lilla assumes that we must choose between security and violence, Derrida describes a different response to fragility. Instead of insisting upon rational stability, Derrida describes an ethics of hope that endures uncertainty for the sake of the future. Because the messianic exceeds the limits of reason, it should be handled with care, but Derrida claims that this instability is best embraced in order to preserve the possibility of a justice that transcends our present understanding. Derrida's work suggests that the reason religion is dangerous is the reason it is indispensable: it opens our imagination to a beyond that has not yet come into view.

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