

PREACCEPTANCE DRAFT:

The Definitive Version was published in *Critical Inquiry* 47.1 (2020), 135-137.

<https://doi.org/10.1086/710911>



“DERRIDA AND SECULARIZATION”

an introduction to Jacques Derrida, “Christianity and Secularization”

- David Newheiser -

Jacques Derrida presented “Christianity and Secularization” at a 1996 colloquium to mark the publication of a collection he coedited under the title *La Religion*.¹ Alongside three other contributors to the collection—Gianni Vattimo, Vincenzo Vitiello, and Maurizio Ferraris—Derrida reflected, for the first time at length, on secularization as a historical process. By questioning the category of religion, this essay clarifies the ambivalence that characterizes Derrida’s longstanding interest in religious traditions.

Derrida’s writings on religion tend to focus on Jewish and Christian authors who blur the boundaries of religious belonging. Derrida was evidently drawn to the self-critical dimension of these traditions, but in his early writings he rarely called the category of religion into question. That changed with Derrida’s contribution to the collection celebrated in Naples, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone.”² As the scare quotes in the title signal, this essay argues that the word *religion* is marked by its Latin genealogy. In Derrida’s analysis, the term imposes a European, Christian frame of reference in the name of pluralism and peace.

Whereas “Faith and Knowledge” is (by Derrida’s own account) telegraphic and abstract, “Christianity and Secularization” is more direct. Following indications in the earlier essay, Derrida argues that Enlightenment critiques of Christianity often appeal to a more originary or authentic Christianity. In his view, Immanuel Kant and Voltaire exemplify the process of secularization insofar as they dispense with Christianity in the name of a deeper fidelity to the tradition. According to Derrida, insofar as secularization surreptitiously maintains a Christian heritage, it mirrors the term *religion* by claiming a neutrality that it does not possess.

Against this background, “Christianity and Secularization” revisits the concepts that orient Derrida’s earlier writings on religion. As he observes, his earlier work treats the messianic as a universal structure of experience, an orientation toward the future that does not depend on any

¹ *La religion: Séminaire de Capri sous la direction de Jacques Derrida et Gianni Vattimo*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Jacques Derrida (Paris, 1996). See also Derrida, “Christianity and Secularization,” trans. David Newheiser, *Critical Inquiry* 47 (Autumn 2020): 0-000.

² See Derrida, “Foi et savoir: les deux sources de la ‘religion’ aux limites de la simple raison,” in *La religion*, pp. 9-86.

religious tradition.³ Derrida notes that this gesture is secularizing insofar as it abstracts from religious particularity while being shaped, nevertheless, by the Abrahamic religions. In contrast, Derrida suggests that the Platonic term *khōra* is conceptually prior to the religious. Whereas concepts such as messianism and negative theology remain marked by religion precisely because they have a secularizing momentum, *khōra* points to a desecularizing possibility.⁴

Even as he distances *khōra* from religious revelation, Derrida specifies that he intends neither to endorse nor to critique religion. This undercuts two influential interpretations of Derrida, which assimilate him either to an indeterminate “religion without religion”⁵ or to a “radical atheism” opposed to religion as such.⁶ “Christianity and Secularization” suggests that both readings impose a false univocity on Derrida’s engagement with religious traditions. Instead, as Derrida observes in conclusion, he draws constructively on particular religious traditions that he does not claim as his own.

In this essay, Derrida aims (as usual) to open possibilities that are presently unimaginable. He worries that terms such as *religion* and *secularization* will surreptitiously determine what can be thought, but this does not prevent him from thinking with the traditions they name. It is for this reason that, throughout his career, Derrida exhibits a simultaneous unease and affinity with religious traditions: in his analysis, secularization is both problematic and promising, a challenge and an opportunity.

³ See Derrida, *Spectres De Marx: L'état De La Dette, Le Travail Du Deuil Et La Nouvelle Internationale* (Paris, 1993).

⁴ See Derrida, “Comment Ne Pas Parler: Dénégations,” in *Psyché: Invention De L'autre* (Paris, 1987), pp. 535–95 and “*Khōra*,” in *Poikilia: Études Offertes a Jean-Pierre Vernant* (Paris, 1987), pp. 265–96.

⁵ See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, Ind., 1997).

⁶ See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, Calif., 2008).