

# UNIVERSALITY AND HISTORICITY: ON THE SOURCES OF RELIGION

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## ABSTRACT

One of the central questions of Jacques Derrida's later writings concerns the sources of religion. At times he gives explicit priority to the universal dimension of religion. In other places, however, he considers the primacy of faith in its concrete, historical context. This paper will clarify Derrida's relationship to universality and historicity by first comparing his notion of "messianicity *without* messianism" to that of Walter Benjamin's "weak Messianism." After drawing out these differences, I will focus on Derrida's later writings. I will show that much of the ambiguity of Derrida's thinking on religion can be resolved by turning to his work on *khōra*, the Greek word for "space" or "matter." The rhetoric of *khōra* can allow us to think through a twofold logic, one that includes the universal/historical distinction and exceeds its alternatives.

### *The Two Veils: Revelation and Revealability*

In his later writings, Derrida openly struggles with the distinction between *messianicity*, as the possible condition of religion, and *messianism*, as any given historical—which is to say Judeo-Christian or Islamic—faith. The opposition itself raises the issue of what comes first logically or conceptually: the historical determination of faith or the formal condition of faith? Can we think of messianicity before any messianism? Or is it only through concrete messianisms that messianicity comes to be known as such? While Derrida never devotes his single attention to this question, the problem arises in *Specters of Marx*, *The Gift of Death*, *Politics of Friendship*, *Archive Fever*, and his other major monographs, essays, and interviews during the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> In his essay "Marx & Sons," for example, Derrida writes,

I find it hard to decide whether messianicity without messianism (*qua* universal structure) precedes and conditions every determinate, historical figure of messianism (in which case it would remain radically independent of all such figures, and would remain heterogeneous from them,

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making the name itself [“messianicity”] a matter of merely incidental interest), or whether the possibility of thinking this independence has only come about or revealed itself as such by way of the ‘Biblical’ events which name the Messiah and make him a determinate figure.<sup>2</sup>

Derrida’s notion of messianicity presents us with a universal experience of the promise, a general openness to the future that, while traceable in all historical messianisms, is irreducible to any single one. The notion of messianicity asserts the purely formal arrival of the future without specifying the content of “whom” or “what” arrives. In this sense, messianicity is very similar to what Martin Heidegger, following a tradition that goes back to Immanuel Kant,<sup>3</sup> calls *Offenbarkeit* (“revealability”), the schematic possibility of religion, which is to be distinguished from *Offenbarung* (“revelation”), or religion as a historical actuality.

For the most part, Derrida’s thinking on the messianic is very close to Heidegger’s outline.<sup>4</sup> A slight point of discrepancy arises when Derrida considers the alternative that revealability only exposes itself, becoming an object of thought or experience, through revelation alone. He considers the possibility that universal messianicity is conceptually dependent on particular messianisms, in the way that the biblical events and other revealed events in history give the idea of messianicity concrete shape and form. Derrida questions whether it is even possible to sustain the thought of an *a priori* messianic independently of any particular, historical religion. But a deeper, and more troublesome, question is whether revelation and revealability exhaust the possibilities of thinking through the sources of religion. The issue I will explore here is whether we can think an event or experience that relates to neither of the *two veils* of revelation and revealability. If Heidegger posits revealability as older, more originary, and thus prior to revelation, can we think something older than revealability, something conceptually prior to the very opposition between messianicity and messianism? Can we think an event, an experience, determined neither by universality nor by historicity? Derrida himself is highly tentative on the matter.

### *Thinking with Religion*

To begin, we must step back and rethink some common assumptions: Is the messianic a pure potentiality that no determinate religion can ever fill out? Are all historical messianisms failed attempts to actualize the future *à-venir* (“to-come”)? More often than not, Derrida defines

the messianic as a “general structure of experience”: “This messianic dimension does not depend on any messianism. It does not follow any determinate revelation. It does not belong properly to any Abrahamic religion.”<sup>5</sup> This is exactly the type of arid formalism that is often associated with deconstruction. But Derrida is anything but conclusive on the matter, and this should give us pause. To be specific, he is anything but certain as to whether the messianic is fully separable from determinate messianisms. Derrida entertains the possibility that only *with* the religions of the Book and the Messiahs that punctuate their histories can we conceive of an abstract messianicity. In *Specters of Marx*, for example, Derrida asks whether the messianic is the “originary condition” or the “abstract desertification” of historical messianism: “If the messianic appeal properly belongs to a universal structure, to that irreducible movement of the historical opening to the future, therefore to experience itself and to language . . . how is one to *think* it *with* the figures of Abrahamic messianism?”<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Derrida notes how Heidegger frames a very similar problem in the previously mentioned distinction between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*:

Heidegger always seems to make the possibility of revelation into a deeper, older and therefore independent structure of existence, on the basis of which revelation in the religious sense, and this or that historical religion, become, secondarily, possible, and take determinate form. One is tempted to oppose to this powerful, classical argument at least one question: *what if it were only by way of the (historical) event of revelation that the revelation of revealability, as such, manifests itself?* (*MS*, 268)

Derrida admits, “I have no answer to the question posed in this form” (*MS*, 255). How are we to choose between the two? What are the consequences of this choice? In what follows, I will show the importance of history and inheritance in Derrida’s later thought. As a means of better understanding Derrida’s indecisive turn to the question of historicity in religion, I will first outline Walter Benjamin’s notion of the *weak* messianic power of the past. While Benjamin’s concept of messianism is without overt religious form, it is still structured explicitly around themes of historical particularity and is therefore different from Derrida’s attempt to define a universal messianic. But the difference between Derrida and Benjamin is instructive, for it helps to clarify Derrida’s relationship to questions concerning the universal and historical sources of religion.

*History, Memory, and Weak Messianism*

In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin’s idea of a “weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim,” stands as an injunction for every generation, including our own, to remember the unrecorded gaps of history.<sup>7</sup> According to Benjamin, the truly revolutionary force of messianism is not to be found in the future, or in the desire for coming salvation, but is rather to be found in the past. For Benjamin, the historical materialist—not the prophet—is the true redeemer of humankind, for he concerns himself with remembering the forgotten others (texts, movements, figures) of earlier times. Benjamin’s weak messianism is therefore involved in a work of mourning: “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (*TPH*, 255). The historical materialist cultivates an intimacy with history, one based on a desire to remember, to remain committed to, the truth of the past. Indeed, in Benjamin’s work there is a close link between memory and truth.

Recently, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur argues that the task of remembrance, like philosophy, demands an epistemic dimension: “The search for truth determines memory as a cognitive issue. More precisely, in this moment of recognition, in which the effort of recollection is completed, this search for truth declares itself. . . . Let us call this search for truth, faithfulness.”<sup>8</sup> Benjamin’s weak messianism likewise involves active faithfulness to the past, and this desire for the truth of the past is inseparable from its ethical engagement to save past others from being forgotten. To remember is to fulfill the promises of past generations, not simply by creating responses or effects in the present, but in keeping such promises open and thus alive to the future. Mourning history, especially the history of the oppressed, thus amounts to fulfilling what we might call the structure of hope, which is, in its simplest form, an openness to the future. Inasmuch as political oppression, violence, or disappointment fosters the messianic promise of emancipation, memory serves to keep this promise alive. Only by faithfully remembering the forgotten others of history will their promises be saved and, in a sense, redeemed. Ricoeur is truly indebted to Benjamin when, in common spirit, he writes, “We need, therefore, a kind of parallel history of, let us say, victimization, which would counter the history of success and victory. To memorize the victims of history—the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten—should be the task of all

of us at the end of this century.”<sup>9</sup> For Benjamin, it is precisely the ideas of historical progress, success, and victory that must be abandoned for messianic historiography to be successful.

To get a fuller depiction of Benjamin’s messianism we should bring some of his non-theological influences into the discussion. For these influences, we have only to go back as far as Proust, Freud, and Bergson. In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” for example, Benjamin shows the significance of *mémoire involontaire* for all three of the above-mentioned writers, but Proust’s treatment of this idea interests Benjamin particularly.<sup>10</sup> For Proust, *mémoire involontaire* is in direct contrast to voluntary memory, which serves the conscious will of the intellect. Voluntary memory is chiefly characterized by its weakness, as when we try to remember details of our childhood but receive only faint impressions of the past. According to Proust, the past is “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object” (*MB*, 158). Despite all of Proust’s efforts to recollect his childhood, one bite of pastry sends him back to his days in Combray with unusual vividness. *Mémoire involontaire* is substantially more lucid than voluntary memory because its impact on consciousness comes from outside the sovereign subject. Without any pressure from the intellect, certain tastes, sounds, or smells can impress themselves upon the self and draw consciousness back into its own personal history.

Benjamin uses the notion of *mémoire involontaire* to explore an entirely new framework of temporality. The immediate correspondence between the material object and the past memory cannot be explained by linear “clock” time. For Benjamin, the clock is really the embodiment of our belief in homogenous chronology. But the calendar is quite different. The calendar, unlike the clock, uses blank spaces to indicate the remembrance of holidays. “Even though chronology places regularity above permanence,” Benjamin writes, “it cannot prevent heterogeneous, conspicuous fragments from remaining within it. To have combined recognition of quality with the measurement of quantity was the work of calendars in which the places of recollection are left blank, as it were, in the form of holidays” (*MB*, 184). We call those moments in history that cannot be marshaled into quantified series “days of remembrance,” days that stand out by virtue of their *unrepeatability*.

In the “Theses,” Benjamin shifts his discussion of the distinctive temporality represented by calendars to the context of social revolution. Messianic memory operates in the same way as *mémoire involontaire*, but the conditions now involve material culture rather than

individual objects of sense perception. Instead of the personal impressions of one reclusive individual, we are now dealing with a phenomenon of social reach: the cultural anxiety generated by the threat of Fascism, for example. Crises on a social scale can trigger involuntary memories of a collective sort. “Historical materialism,” Benjamin writes, “wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers” (*TPH*, 255). Cultural anxiety thus illuminates, if only for a moment, a structure of history “whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” (*TPH*, 261). *Jetztzeit*, or “now-time,” asserts a retroactive force over the present, filling the present with history, in the same way that *mémoire involontaire* floods consciousness with the past. For Benjamin, revolutionaries take advantage of these moments of social tension in order to do away with the notion of progressive chronology altogether: “The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action” (*TPH*, 261). This accounts for the introduction of a new calendar, which serves to memorialize the emergence of historical consciousness: “The great revolutions introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera. And, basically, it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of historical consciousness” (*TPH*, 261–62).

We can now see that Benjamin’s weak messianism remains a messianism, a particular, though a-theological, revelation. This accounts for Derrida’s strong reservations toward Benjamin’s thought, as he writes:

I wonder if Benjamin does not link the privileged moments of this ‘weak messianic power’ [*eine schwache messianische Kraft*] to determinate historico-politico phases, or, indeed, crises. . . . Thus there would be, for Benjamin, critical moments (pre-revolutionary or post-revolutionary), moments of hope or disappointment, in short, dead ends during which a simulacrum of messianism serves as an alibi. Whence the strange adjective ‘weak.’ (*MS*, 253)

By linking historical consciousness to moments of cultural danger, Benjamin’s messianism remains fundamentally dependent on concrete historical events, even if those events are, in fact, ruptures within

history. For this reason, Derrida's own emphasis on messianicity *without* messianism places his thought at a significant distance from Benjamin's. From Derrida's standpoint, Benjamin's weak messianism is problematic in its implications. Though Benjamin presents us with a powerful ethic to turn to the forgotten others of history, there is a sense in which this turn to the past can lose sight of the *avenir* ("future") and, more importantly, the future *à-venir* ("to-come"). The introduction of a new calendar is also difficult, for that could entail the alleviation, rather than the reconfiguration, of the present debt to the past. Benjamin's messianic historiographer takes flight to history and performs what he calls a "tiger's leap into the past," but this leap risks becoming an attempt to bridge the contingency of the present with the totality of history (*TPH*, 261). Such a leap runs the risk, as all leaps do, of comedy. Indeed, the ethical turn to history and the comic leap to the past are really two sides of the same coin, as Marx shows in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." Marx compares the two French revolutions according to these different forms of cultural memory—one according to the tragic spirit, the other, the comic specter. As he famously writes: "The awakening of the dead in those revolutions therefore served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given tasks of imagination, not of taking flight from reality; of finding once more the *spirit* of revolution, not of making its *ghost* walk again."<sup>11</sup>

The lesson we can draw here is that the turn to history, to particular events, to revelations (or revolutions) in secular or religious form, should not lose itself in the past. As much as we need to truthfully remember the history of the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten, as Benjamin and Ricoeur propose, we also need to be selective in our affirmation of the past. Thinking *with* historical messianisms does not mean retrieving the past indiscriminately. We need to choose what legacies will continue into the future. This is the position Derrida adopts in *Specters of Marx*. "Inheritance is never a *given*," he writes, "it is always a task" (*SM*, 54). And the process of critically selecting our inheritance, of sifting through the various spirits and specters of our particular social histories, is the very process of mourning.

### *Inheriting Otherwise*

Still, Benjamin's writings raise difficulties that cannot be immediately cast aside. We clearly have an ethical duty to mourn the past, to think

with the ghosts and specters of history, but how can we prevent this mourning from becoming a mere parodying of the old? How do we remain faithful to the injunction of memory and at the same time affirm the future to-come? The answers to these questions form the beginning of Derrida's notion of inheritance, to which I now turn.

For Derrida, the solution is to push our engagement with history beyond the epistemic and even the ethical dimension. As Ricoeur proposes, we need to remain faithful to the truth of the past; and as Benjamin insists, we need to recollect those who are at risk of being forgotten. But in each case, we need to remember the future. The difference between Benjamin's "weak" messianism and Derrida's "abstract" messianicity is not that the former remains bound to manifest historical crises while the latter is *a priori* without contact to social, religious, or cultural determinations. Rather, the difference consists in two alternative ways of inheriting.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin's messianic historiography serves to represent the totality of the past in order to memorialize the forgotten others of history. Inheritance, for Benjamin, thus provokes a retroactive awakening of the past within the present in times of revolutionary danger when the image of the past—of oppressed people—risks being permanently lost in the "progress" of historical movement. For Derrida, however, our duty to the past, to the injunction of memory, does not consist in remaining fixed to particular traditions, oppressed or un-oppressed. We must recollect the past in order to repeat the *different*, to affirm the greatest difference in the past, or the past with the greatest difference. Mourning the difference of the past involves a kind of exorcism "not in order to chase away the ghosts," Derrida cautions, "but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome" (*SM*, 175). For Derrida, inheritance involves affirming the return of the past, but this return is, paradoxically, a time to-come, a time different from anything known to history: "Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*" (*SM*, 10).

The issue, to put it simply, is not how to do away with history or to abandon the past, but how to open the past up to the future, which is another way of repeating the radically different. Keeping an eye on Marx, Derrida proposes, "between the spirit and the specter, between tragedy and comedy, between the revolution on the march and what installs it in parody, there is only the difference between two masks. . . .

One must take another step. One must think the future, that is, life. That is, death" (*SM*, 113). As a double affirmation of the past and the future, Derrida's idea of messianicity allows us to think against the grains of historical progress, to remember the past in times of political danger; but more significantly, Derrida wishes to inherit those images, texts, and movements of the past most open to the future. That is why, in *Specters of Marx*, the heritage of Marxism that Derrida affirms above all others is the spirit of the promise, the messianic salutation of the future: "Now, if there is a spirit of Marxism which I will never be ready to renounce, it is not only the critical ideas or the questioning stance. . . . It is even more a certain emancipatory and *messianic* affirmation, a certain experience of the promise that one can try to liberate from any dogmatics and even from any metaphysico-religious determination, from any *messianism*" (*SM*, 89). The emancipatory promise is therefore the most heterogeneous spirit of Marxism because it is the most universal, the most open to the future. Messianicity in the abstract, as a transcendental experience of the promise, the future, the "perhaps,"<sup>13</sup> emerges from the gaps, ruptures, and discontinuities embedded in material history even though it does not represent or repeat those discontinuities as such. For Derrida, to inherit the messianic is to inherit otherwise.

### *The Aporia of the Religious*

I am now in a better position to interpret the opposition that has concerned me so far—between universality and historicity. The opposition does not lend itself to many alternatives. If we stress the priority of universality, then we cannot avoid defending a kind of arid formalism that critics have often, and sometimes uncritically, identified as deconstruction. If we stress the priority of historicity, then we risk being caught in the meshes of historical materialism that, even when complemented by an ethical turn (*viz.*, Benjamin), can close itself off from the experience of the promise, the future, the "perhaps." We are thus faced with what Derrida calls an *aporia*, or what amounts to a paradoxical impasse between messianicity and messianism. Even in an interview as recently as the 2002 conference for the American Academy of Religion, Derrida maintained an apprehensive stance on the issue. At a crucial point in the dialogue, Kevin Hart advanced the question of the "relative priority" of Heidegger's distinction between revelation and revealability: "Does revelation precede revealability," he asked,

“making conditions of manifestation apparent only after the fact? Or are conditions of revealability in place before a revelation occurs? I would like to invite you to reflect on this distinction. Is it a clear alternative? Or should it be understood, as you hint now and then, as an aporia?”<sup>14</sup> Derrida’s response is telling for its uncertainty:

My difficulty with Heidegger’s very strong, very rigorous argument has to do with the possibility that revelation is not simply something that comes to confirm and to fulfill a revealability. Revelation is something that reveals revealability. It is something, an event. Revelation is always an event: an event that, in fact, breaks something, so that revealability, *Offenbarkeit*, is open. Revealability is opened by revelation: that’s putting it the other way round. *But I was not satisfied by this other order, either.* I would try to think the relation between the two in a different way. And I don’t know which way. . . . So I’m trying to think something that removes the event that one calls revelation from the scheme of the veil, revelation, revealability. (*EF*, 44; my emphasis)

Derrida’s response to Hart’s question—which is also, fundamentally, a nonresponse—highlights a number of interesting points. First, Derrida agrees that the *Offenbarung/Offenbarkeit* distinction is aporetic (*EF*, 43). And second, he agrees that aporias should be overcome: “as you know, the aporia for me doesn’t mean simply paralysis. No way. On the contrary, it’s the condition of proceeding, of making a decision, of going forward” (*EF*, 43). Yet third, when it comes to offering a decision, a step forward, he hesitates: “I would try to think the relation between the two in a different way. *And I don’t know which way*” (*EF*, 44; my emphasis). Derrida cannot decide. But as he has stressed elsewhere many times, the true moment of decision only comes when all decisions seem impossible.

### *The Rhetoric of Khōra*

We are now confronted with our greatest difficulty, not how to think the messianic *with* or *without* messianism, revealability *with* or *without* revelation, but rather how to think prior to this very opposition. Can we think an event, an experience, prior to the difference between universality and historicity, prior to the difference between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*? This concluding section will allow me to offer a meditation on what lay beyond the aporia of the religious.

At most, Derrida’s texts provide suggestions, hints, and possibilities for a way to step beyond the antinomy in question, but Derrida himself

has no clear solution to the problem. He even responds to this “indecisive oscillation” by asking, “between revelation and revealability, *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*, between event and possibility or virtuality of the event, must it not be respected for itself?” (*FK*, 14, 31–32). If by “respected for itself” Derrida means left alone and unworked through as an unsolvable paradox, then I would disagree. But he further suggests that this respect could be the condition of a “new tolerance,” which could also be a new, or renewed, concept of hospitality (*FK*, 32). Perhaps this explains why Derrida’s nonresponse to Hart’s question is “the best response” and still a “sign of responsibility.”<sup>15</sup> I would therefore like to begin by asking: Does the aporia between the two veils not depend on a *non-veil*, an event or experience that is fundamentally different from the logic of unveiling common to both revelation and revealability? Is this non-veil, this radically secretive event or experience not what Derrida, following his reading of Plato, calls *khōra*?<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, *khōra* is strongly related to Derrida’s early formulation of *differance*, but I would not say the two names are synonymous. As early as 1968, Derrida predicted the name “*differance*” would be carried off by unforeseen textual permutations, hinging itself to another chain of terms that, he stressed, will *never* be theological.<sup>17</sup> Why, out of all of Derrida’s neologisms does the rhetoric of *khōra* fulfill, without fulfilling in any absolute sense, this prediction? “*Khōra*” and “*differance*” share the characteristic of untranslatability, but unlike “*differance*,” *khōra* is not an intentional spelling mistake or neologism. *Khōra* is a Greek word (κῶρα), which is moreover tied to a series of abstract terms—“space,” “matter,” “receptacle,”—and metaphors—“mother,” “nurse,” “winnowing-machine,”—without being reducible to any single one of them. In the *Timaeus*, Plato himself openly struggles in describing κῶρα as neither intelligible nor sensible, neither eternal nor temporal, neither being nor becoming. And while κῶρα remains secretly foreign to the being of Platonic metaphysics, Plato never describes κῶρα as a form of transcendental emptiness. Κῶρα is not the Good, which Plato describes as “beyond being,” nor, for that matter, does κῶρα resemble anything that might be called the “hidden God” of apophatic theology.<sup>18</sup> Given these considerations, the rhetoric of “*khōra*” does a better job than “*differance*” in performing a crisscross of two apparently exclusive forms of logic: the logic of incorporation (“both/and”) and the logic of exclusion (“neither/nor”). *Khōra* is hinged to the ancient Greek heritages of language, history, and experience, but at the same time,

it continually differs and defers itself from any tradition, Greek or non-Greek. *Khōra* is therefore “something secret,” but a secret that, paradoxically, “does not conceal itself” (*P*, 26). Derrida continues, “It remains inviolable even when one thinks one has revealed it. Not that it hides itself forever in an indecipherable crypt or behind an absolute veil. It simply exceeds the play of veiling/unveiling, dissimulation/revelation. . . . And the secret will remain secret, mute, impassive as *khōra*, as *Khōra* is foreign to every history” (*P*, 26–27).

Derrida’s thinking on *khōra* marks an even further break away from Heidegger’s emphasis on revealability as the possible disclosure of Being.<sup>19</sup> Derrida goes so far as to argue that, since *khōra* “belongs neither to sensory being nor to intelligible sense, neither to becoming nor to eternity, *khōra* is no longer a discourse on being” (*K*, 113). *Khōra*, moreover, is prior to the opposition between actuality and potentiality that still determines the distinction between messianicity (as universal potentiality) and messianism (as historical actuality):

[*Khōra*] does not give place as one would give something, whatever it may be; it neither creates nor produces anything, not even an event insofar as it takes place. It gives no order and makes no promise. It is radically ahistorical, because nothing happens through it and nothing happens to it. . . . *Khōra* is nothing positive or negative. It is impassive, but it is neither passive nor active. (*HAS*, 107)

Unlike “messianicity,” a name still anointed with the tradition of Messiahs, *khōra* allows us to think beyond even revealability, which, however formal, still bears the impress of the revelation that comes to open it. Continuing with the language of clay-work, we might say that if messianicity is the purely intelligible schema of the promise shaped by specific religious sensibilities, then *khōra* is the place or matter that receives both the content of these impressions and their structural forms. *Khōra* carries characteristics of both revelation and revealability without becoming entirely one or the other. As a conceptualization of place “without” place, or matter “without” matter, *khōra* allows us, if only by way of its strange rhetoric, to think through the topography of Derrida’s “religion without religion” and the distance separating the universality of revealability from the particularism of historical faith.

We can now return to Derrida’s suggestion that renewed hospitality is nothing other than respect for the aporia of the religious. This respect, I propose, finds its clearest expression in Derrida’s discussion of “Come,” the performative call of hospitality.<sup>20</sup> The “Come” of

hospitality is the basic “promise before the first word” Derrida speaks of, the promise that conceptually precedes all relationships, even if, chronologically speaking, the specified and determined word will come first (*HAS*, 73). “Come,” as the possibility of experiencing the other, is already the recognition of the other’s alterity, is already, we might say, a response to the *other’s* call. This is the way Derrida, following Levinas, understands it. “Come” calls the other at the same time as it receives the “Come” of the other. Or, put differently, the “yes” to the other is already the “yes” of the other.<sup>21</sup> The consequences of this are not immediately self-evident. If “Come” welcomes the alterity of the other, then this affirmation is already in the process of mourning the other. By receiving the call of the other, “Come” implicitly relates to the other as an absolute singularity, unique and finite. All friendship, all love carries within it the knowledge that, one day or another, the other will not come forth, arrive, or respond. Death traverses the very passage of hospitality to the other. Hospitality is precisely this double recognition of the other as infinite, *tout autre*, and as finite, an other that *will die*.<sup>22</sup> But death is still only a figure of *khōra*, which is the “absolute nonresponse,” and the “silence” heterogeneous to all speech and response (*P*, 31). We might as well call the secret of *khōra* “life,” for life and death are but two movements, perhaps two masks.

The inseparability of messianicity and messianism follows the same logic of the most intimate relations to the other. Just as the welcoming call to the other can never be fully separated from the other’s prior call, messianicity can never be completely distinguished, even analytically, from any given messianism. Nor, for that matter, can we think of a determinate messianism, such as any of the religions of the Book, that does not hold features of the universal opening to the future, the promise, the “perhaps.” This explains the aporetic tension Derrida discusses in relation to messianism, as a constructed and determinate faith, and messianicity, as a deconstructed, and hence indeterminate, faith. Both draw and presuppose the other at the same time as they repel and exclude the other. In “Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum),”<sup>23</sup> Derrida outlines this tension rhetorically with the figure of the Tower of Babel: “To let passage to the other, to the totally other, is hospitality. A double hospitality: the one that has the form of Babel (the construction of the Tower, the appeal to universal translation, but also the violent imposition of the name, of the tongue, and of the idiom) and the *deconstruction* of the Tower of Babel” (*SN*, 80). But the deconstruction of Babel really amounts to a radicalization of Babel: a movement toward

the formalization of a “universal community” that is, in truth, more universal than Babel itself, as it affirms the conditions that make it possible. Both the construction of Babel—the imposition of a tongue, a name, an idiom—and its deconstruction still occupy, and are received by, a place, *khōra*:

[T]he Babelian narrative (construction and deconstruction at once) is still a (his)tory. Too full of sense. Here the invisible limit would pass less between the Babelian place (event, *Ereignis*, history, revelation, eschatoteleology, messianism, address, destination, response and responsibility, construction and deconstruction) and “something” without thing, like an indeconstructible *Khōra*, the one that precedes itself in the test, as if they were two, the one and its double: the place that gives rise and place to Babel would be indeconstructible, not as a construction whose foundations would be sure, sheltered from every internal or external deconstruction, but the very spacing of de-construction.” (*SN*, 80)

Messianicity draws all theologies, strong or weak, to this desert, this common place of disjunction, *khōra*, and only because of *khōra* can messianicity work out the deconstruction of an originary “Come” issuing itself to the other. As an event or experience that never promises anything (not even the formal structure of the promise), which gives nothing and never occurs within time or history, *khōra* is simultaneously the condition of possibility of hospitality, its construction, and its condition of impossibility, its deconstruction. Between the event of revelation as a determinate set of beliefs, prayers, and hopes, and revealability as the formal possibility and opening of belief, prayer, and hope; between the religious construction and its generalized possibility or deconstruction, we have the spacing of *khōra*.

The rhetoric of *khōra* thus allows us to think through the interplay between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*, revelation and revealability, without permitting the reduction of one to the other. We can now see that Derrida’s later views on history, inheritance, and the rhetoric of *khōra* affirm the universal and the historical as fundamentally entwined and interwoven. For Derrida, there is no way to abolish the difference between the two; nor is there a way to separate them absolutely.

#### *Epilogue: Philosophy, Religion, and the Event*

We only have a *philosophy* of religion if we can analytically separate the universal characteristics of religion from the various historical instances of religion in the world. Without that separation, we could

at best lay claim to an anthropological discourse on religion, one that understands each religion contingently in terms of its particular cultural background. Now that we have worked through a new way of understanding Derrida's relationship to revelation and revealability—using his own discussion of *khōra*—I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of the philosophy of religion.

What Derrida wishes to announce with the thematic of *khōra* is an event that ultimately affects everything and everyone, which is the event or experience of the *tout autre*. And, for Derrida, the *tout autre* remains indeterminate, which means we cannot positively determine “whom” or “what” the other is, when it will arrive, and so forth; nor can we negatively determine the other or say that the *tout autre* is beyond or above being. Even God, perhaps God most of all, as a part of the aporia of the religious, is not, as we might think, the final exit out of this problem.<sup>24</sup> For Derrida, God is not an actuality that transcends the universal/historical distinction, but is, in fact, vulnerable to the schema of revelation and revealability. The event of the *tout autre*, for Derrida, is what challenges the difference between transcendental possibility and historical manifestation: “if you see it coming, it is not an event,” Derrida affirms in his interview with Hart. “One has to think of an event,” he continues, “that affects every living being—human, animal, God—without any essential revelation or essential revealability. And to that extent the pair of concepts, *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit*, is not useless but it remains secondary by way of thinking what an event is” (*EF*, 44). Revelation and revealability will always be inadequate in thinking the *tout autre*, which is why more than any construction or deconstruction of religion we need *khōra*, which is “older” than historical faith—older even than the formal possibility of faith.

What does this tell us about the *possibility* or *impossibility* of the philosophy of religion? If the aporia of the religious entails that every positive revelation bears trace of a universal opening to the future, then we can rightfully speak of an intelligible structure of religion, and hence, a philosophy of religion. But if the formal possibility of religion is only ever inherited and understood through positive religions, texts, or figures, then the philosophy of religion will never gain total independence from particular historical revelations. As much as we need to inherit those features of religion most open to formalization, we can never separate or universalize religion completely. Here, the task of philosophy, if we can speak of its task, is to maintain hospitality at

the borders separating philosophy and religion. Perhaps this task is without end, perhaps not. The important thing is that only in terms of hospitality can we understand religion philosophically. If Derrida has a philosophy of religion, and I believe he does in a very qualified sense, then it is one premised on an open engagement with revelation in its universal and historical forms.

#### NOTES

1. While the aporia of universality and historicity passes through politics, theology, and religion, I will be mainly concerned with the latter of these—what I will call the aporia of the religious. In the following discussion, however, I hope to raise questions that encompass and concern all three.
2. Jacques Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 254–55, in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s “Specters of Marx,”* ed. Michael Sprinker, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 1999), 213–69 (hereafter cited as *MS*).
3. See, for example, section VII of Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 122.
4. While Hent de Vries first made me aware of the connections between Kant, Heidegger, and Derrida on the revelation/revealability opposition, his treatment of this issue remains periphery at best. See his *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 64–65. For a more focused discussion of this opposition in relation to the debate between Derrida and Marion on the status of the gift, see Robyn Horner, “Aporia or Excess? Two Strategies for Thinking r/Revelation,” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood & Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), 325–36.
5. Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” 18, in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo, trans. Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1–78 (hereafter cited as *FK*).
6. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 167 (hereafter cited as *SM*).
7. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 254, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253–64 (hereafter cited as *TPH*).
8. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 55.
9. Paul Ricoeur, “Memory and Forgetting,” 10–11, in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney & Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), 5–11.
10. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, 155–94 (hereafter cited as *MB*).
11. Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” 596, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 594–617 (my emphasis).
12. For a detailed discussion of the differences between Benjamin’s and Derrida’s conceptions of messianism, see my paper, “Dialectic of the Past/Disjuncture of the Future: Derrida and Benjamin on the Concept of Messianism,” *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2004) 99–114.

13. Derrida describes the “perhaps” as “the unheard of, totally new experience” which “engages the only possible thought of the event—of friendship to come and friendship for the future.” See his *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 29.
14. Kevin Hart, “Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” 43, with John Caputo & Yvonne Sherwood, in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, 27–50 (hereafter cited as *EF*).
15. On the responsiveness and responsibility of the nonresponse, see Jacques Derrida, “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering,’” 19, in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 3–31 (hereafter cited as *P*).
16. On Derrida’s reading of *khōra* in Plato’s *Timaeus*, see *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 160–61; “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” 103–7, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward & Toby Foshay, trans. Kent Frieden (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 73–142 (hereafter cited as *HAS*); and *Khōra*, in *On the Name*, 89–127 (hereafter cited as *K*).
17. Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” 7, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–27.
18. I discuss the relations between “God,” apophysis, and deconstruction in my paper “Impossible Passions: Derrida and Negative Theology,” *Philosophy Today* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 171–83.
19. Heidegger still understands *khōra* in terms of revealability, or as the clearing that makes the manifestation of being possible. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, for example, Heidegger writes: “Might *khōra* not mean: that which abstracts itself from every particular, that which withdraws, and in such a way precisely admits and ‘makes place’ [*Platz macht*] for something else?” (*K*, 147n). While it is true that Derrida himself at times seems to make such an association, I propose that *khōra* is neither revelation nor revealability for the reasons discussed.
20. For Derrida’s discussion of the “Come!” of the Johannine Revelation and its resonance with the apocalyptic tone of the Enlightenment, see Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, 26–71.
21. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 35.
22. See Jacques Derrida, “By Force of Mourning,” 176, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Critical Inquiry* 22 (Winter 1996): 171–92.
23. Derrida, “Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum),” trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., in *On the Name*, 35–85 (hereafter cited as *SN*).
24. This seems to be the approach taken by Richard Kearney. Relying on what we might call the traditional conception of *khōra* as a clearing within Being, Kearney is both close and considerably distant from Heidegger’s thinking when he substitutes “Being” for “God,” thus arguing that *khōra* makes room for God’s non-metaphysical “presence.” See especially the concluding chapter, “God or *Khōra*?” in Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2002), 191–218.