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Faith and Knowledge, Reconsidered: Modern Religion and the “Time of Life”

Almost twenty-five years have passed after the publication of Jacques Derrida’s 1996 seminal essay, “Faith and Knowledge: Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone,” one of the most important, but also most enigmatic post-secular texts of late modernity. Six articles in this issue are devoted directly to Derrida’s essay. The other two can also be read along them as dealing with broadly conceived post-secular issues. They all can be brought under the traditional heading of “faith and knowledge” – simultaneously in recognition of Derrida’s title and in opening a wider perspective on *fides et ratio* today (a few decades after the famous 1994 Capri seminar on religion). Derrida participated in the seminar with his 2000 essay (*Glauben und Wissen*), on the same subject, along with the equally famous intervention of Jürgen Habermas.

The main theme of Derrida’s take on the confrontation between *fides* and *ratio* is the analysis of the relation between modern philosophy/knowledge and modern religion/faith: a complex co-dependence which challenges Hegel’s conviction that philosophy had managed to sublimate religion completely and allowed for the survival of its most valuable contents in a new rational form.¹ *Pace* Martin Hägglund’s thesis, (according to which Derrida’s philosophy should be classified as “radical atheism” in the Hegelian vein),² the essays in this volume present Derrida’s thinking on religion as far more ambivalent, leaning toward not so much atheism as radical iconoclasm which does not annul the idea of divinity, but rather *hides* it away from sight. As Derrida often admits, radical apophatic iconoclasm often goes hand in hand with an atheistic approach, but it nonetheless should not be mistaken with the latter: it is rather an *a-theism* which mistrusts open theological discourse,

1) “Faith already has the true content. What is still lacking in it is the form of thought”: Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3 (*The Consummate Religion*) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 148.

2) See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism. Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

but, at the same time, is not ready to give up on God or “the holy” completely. For Derrida, this saying “Yes” to the hidden God through saying “No” to the religious idols goes hand in hand with the Marrano “minimal theology,”³ which he embraces in the conclusion of his essay. The cryptic allusion to the “Spanish Marranos,” – the fifteenth century Sephardi *conversos* who were forced to convert to Christianity, seemingly forgot and dispersed their secret faith in the Jewish God – serves here as an analogy for the relation between *fides et ratio*. Meanwhile, we all modern people converted to semi-atheistic rationality, this sublation of faith did not occur in the triumphant Hegelian manner. Just like the Marranos who were Christian, apparently and on the surface, remained Jewish “in the secret of their hearts,” so does modern rational philosophy harbor a hidden dimension of a non-sublated faith: a stubborn fideistic remainder that refuses to dissolve in the element of *ratio*.

The faith, therefore, is always there despite all the efforts to eradicate it. Yet, when it survives in this secret, Marrano, subterranean manner it is no longer the same as the premodern religion with all its overt cults, sacred spaces, and rituals. For Derrida, such demise of religion in its traditional orthodox forms does not indicate a condition of traumatic loss or enforced self-reduction: the disappearance of faith, understood as cultic piety, does not ring with tragic tones. On the contrary, Derrida would say that it harbors a saving potential for what Hegel, in his version of *Glauben und Wissen*, calls *die Religion der neuen Zeiten*, “the religion of modern times.” Just as Marranism appears to Derrida as “Judaism’s one chance of survival,”⁴ so, in its universalized variant, it also emerges as a saving mediation between faith and knowledge: between traditional theism, which openly declares its faith in the living God and modern Enlightenment with its secular culture of aggressive *laïcité*. Derrida’s universal Marranism, therefore, offers itself as a dialectical third between the two warring antitheses. Neither theistic nor atheistic, it inscribes itself in the yet uncharted territories of what Gershom Scholem tentatively called “non-secular secularism”⁵: a new post-secular variant of religiosity, qualitatively different than the premodern forms of faith, but yet unsure about its novelty. The modern universal Marrano – as Derrida portrays himself⁶ – *lives* through these aporias and turns them into a new way of religious life in the time of the world/*saeculum*, which never “gives up on Enlightenment.” Thus, even if theological absolutism of old traditions seems gone for good, Abrahamic religions are not fated to die together with the “death of God,” conceived as the eternal Absolute. The Marrano faith in God, who withdraws from sight and erases his image in order to survive in the folds of modern “onto-theology,” sets a new pattern for the Hegelian “religion of modern times.”

Derrida’s essay is a vast and many-faceted meditation on *die Religion der neuen Zeiten*, which Hegel identified with the deep sense of mourning: “The feeling that God himself is dead is the sentiment on which the religion of modern times rests.”⁷ For Hegel, the “death of God” is an ambiguous condition: on the one hand, it reflects the melancholic essence of the reformed Christianity which Hegel himself embraces – on the other, however, opens the doors to the development of modern atheism which later on will associate the “death of God” with Nietzsche’s “two words” (*Gott ist tot*). For Derrida who, in his variation on *fides et ratio* theme, begins to

3) Hent de Vries’ phrase – “minimal theology” – fits here perfectly well, while it evokes the Benjaminian picture of the ugly dwarf of theology, who must be hidden from sight, but who nonetheless pulls the strings of all serious discourses of modern times. Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theology. The Critique of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

4) Jacques Derrida, “A Testimony Given...,” in Elisabeth Weber, *Questioning Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 42.

5) Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis. Selected Essays*, ed. Werner Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 283.

6) See Derrida’s Marrano “circumfession”: “I confided it to myself the other day in Toledo, [that] is that if I am a sort of marrano of French Catholic culture (...) I am one of those marranos who no longer say they are Jews even in the secret of their own hearts, not so as to be authenticated marranos on both sides of the public frontier, but because they doubt everything, never go to confession or give up Enlightenment.” Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*, in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 170–71.

7) G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977), 134.

experiment with a new concept of a non-normative Marrano religiosity, “the feeling that God himself is dead” means something else: it does not announce a demise of God pure and simple, rather a complex operation of sending God to the crypt or his secret *en-cryption*. One of the main tenets of Derrida’s essay is the analysis of – to paraphrase Walter Benjamin – the faith in the age of mechanical reproduction. At the end of the second millennium, religions triumphantly return in the process of “globalitization” (*mondialatinisation*), in the form of loud hyper-visible fundamentalisms, spreading their “good news” through all the possible channels of tele-evangelism and forcing us all, the believers and infidels alike, to witness their “miracles” through the medium of the globally operating “machine.” But Derrida locates the true “religion of modern times” in the opposite move: a retreat from visibility, an encryption so deep that makes even the name of God unmentionable, or – in other words – *radical iconoclasm*. Contrary to the tele-evangelist tendency of religion turned into a one big magical spectacle, Derrida champions the invisible self-withdrawing God who secretly survives as the non-sublatable remainder of *fides* within *ratio*.

In Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge,” all religions of the Greco-Judeo-Christian alliance oscillate between hyper-visible *images* of a triumphant indemnity, which religious fundamentalism brought back from the magical past on the one hand, and the “self-effacing” traces of extreme vulnerability, left by the other nocturnal source called *Khôra*, which hides from sight and resists representation. The deconstructive reading, which Derrida undertakes, merely enhances this inner oscillation and gives voice to its “weaker” kenotic pole, hidden behind the glorious *insignia* of divine triumph and power. Just as *Khôra* is “demnity” itself, the very opposite of the whole and sound representations of the pleromatic *deiws/deities*; and just as Jesus, laid down in the crypt and not to be dragged out of it again, is the epitome of the self-deconstructed modern Christianity; so is also Jacob, Derrida’s name bearer, the Hebrew patron of survival as a way of life absolutely contrary to the naturalistic “pagan” image of vital health. With Jacob’s history of deceit, betrayal, and struggle with God, which left him with a limp, he is the Derridean human hero personifying the impure *scathed life*: life which knows mutilation, brokenness, brush-with-death, flow of time, damage, yet stubbornly lives/limps on, having faith – *la foi originaire* – in the gift of finite life which accepts the “given time” and no longer dreams about immortality.⁸

“Faith and Knowledge” is thus something more than just a post-secular analysis: it is also Derrida’s own private demonstration of how to keep and practice *fides* in the age of globalatinized mechanical reproduction – or, in other words, how to navigate between the Scylla of the religious fundamentalist “machine” with its fake magic “miracles,” on the one hand, and the Charybda of the instrumental rationality, leaving no room for anything incalculable that would demanding of us a credit of faith, on the other. What does it mean for us, modern rational people, to *have faith in* something at all? Is this just a flat voice – an old phrase that lost its meaning – or, as Derrida wants to claim: still reverberates with the deep sense of a “spiritual investment,” an energy of *foi originaire* which can never be fully replaced by *ratio* because it conditions it as the “always already,” most originary expression of human life? And is it not precisely this “originary faith” that comes to the fore in the seemingly most enlightenmental declaration of “having faith in reason”? The multifarious dimensions of the modern *crypto-faith* cause Derrida to strike an analogy with the “Spanish Marranos” and their secretly preserved “crypto-Judaism”: the crypto-faith, operating from the hidden crypt within the modern, seemingly secular and atheistic self, constitutes a force without which no reason could establish itself as a ruling principle. *To have faith in ...* is not an empty locution; it is still suggestive of the power of religious desire which does not disappear, and only becomes en-crypted, hidden, invisible, deprived of any overt representation. It is still there, a secret engine of all our credits and investments.

8) See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

In that sense, Derrida's essay is in an invitation to get involved in the novelty of the post-secular age personally, and instead of observing the return of religious fundamentalisms from afar, engage in private experiments with the non-normative "religion of modern times" and challenge the former not with the atheistic *ratio*, but with a different, heterodox and idiosyncratic forms of crypto-*fides* in which, as Derrida asserts, modern thought, both philosophical and literary, abounds (if we only know how to search for right traces/clues). Few essays in this issue attempt such a post-secular meditation.⁹ In the opening text, "A Certain Way of Thinking: Derrida, Weil and the Philippi Hymn," Stuart Jesson juxtaposes Derrida's intellectual tarrying through the aporias of faith with the heterodox private Christianity of Simone Weil. While Weil constructs her non-normative Christian "way of thinking" around the symbols of *kenosis* that go beyond Christian orthodoxy, including ancient Greece and the heterodox strains of Judaism, Derrida similarly builds his religious meditation on the kenotic traditions, starting from the Platonic *Khôra* and ending with various "deaths of God," by no means limited to the Christian tragedy of the cross. Jesson takes up this aporetic-kenotic "certain way of thinking," which creatively deviates from the orthodox Christian dogmas, and confronts it with Martin Hägglund's critical thesis according to which every religion is based on the essentially "chronophobic" attitude that longs for "the unscathed" (*l'indemne*) and ultimately negates all negativity, finitude, and time. In Jesson's Weil and Derrida inspired reading of Paul's Philippi Hymn, *kenosis* of Christ is not a fall from the pleromatic divinity, but a proper expression of the always already "scathed" God. In Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge," the name for such wounded, scathed and thus "chronophilic" deity is *Khôra*. Something changed in the modern perception of divinity: God, no longer the untouchable eternal Absolute, assumes a finite vulnerable form and begins to live in time.

"Against Autoimmune Self-Sacrifice: Religiosity, Messianicity, and Violence in Derrida's 'Faith and Knowledge' and in Classical Rabbinic Judaism," the second essay by Daniel H. Weiss, continues Jesson's argument leveled against Hägglund: not all religions are based on the chronophobic, finitude-denying cults of the unscathed, which demand of their believers the sacrifice of their unworthy finite lives. Following Derrida's intuition that the more essential defining feature of religiosity than the "cult of the unscathed" is a certain form of restraint – *le trait du re-trait*: a scruple and withdrawal in the face of the other – Weiss argues that such a change of emphasis occurs precisely in the rabbinic Judaism in its transformation from the pagan-cultic to the "restrained" form of religious thinking which looks kinder at the scathed finite life and, because of that, problematizes the validity of sacrifice for God's sake. What Derrida and Weil perceive as fulfilling itself in the motif of Christian *kenosis* – the radical *metanoia* in thinking of God as no longer hostile to the idea of finitude – has thus its parallel in the rabbinic Judaism, the first openly anti-martyrological religious tradition.

The third essay by King-Ho Leung, "The Religion (without Religion) of the Living (without Life): Re-reading Derrida's 'Faith and Knowledge'," once again returns to Hägglund's equation between religion and the desire for immortality in order to challenge it by Derrida's alternative take both on religion and life. According to Leung, the key to the understanding of Derrida's interpretation of "religion" is the process of abstraction: hence the word itself so often appears in Derrida's writings in inverted commas. Derrida's abstraction of religion constitutes an inversion of what he perceives as the common mechanism of the religious sublimation, that is, the religion of abstraction: a detachment from the ordinary life and world which creates the idea of an eternal *ab-solutus*: The Supreme Being untouched – "unscathed" – by anything finite, beyond any change or harm. By opposing religion's flight into the "icy regions of the absolute," the reverse maneuver abstracts "religion" from its traditional theological rooting in the discourse of the Absolute and re-attaches it to life – always scathed and

9) The Thematic Section of the issue was created with the support of NCN Opus 13 Grant: "The Marrano Phenomenon: The Jewish 'Hidden Tradition' and Modernity," registered in the OSF system as 2017/25/B/HS2/02901.

finite – from which it originally came as the “religion of the living.” What thus Derrida calls in the Blanchotian manner “religion without religion” has its parallel in what Leung calls “life without life”: an abstraction from the theological abstraction, which returns the notion of life to its earthly dimension, deprived of the immortal component – a simple *survival*, immersed in the “time of life.”

Marta Olesik’s essay, “Abstraction Made Flesh: Immediacy of the Body and Religious Experience. Derrida, Hegel and Georges de la Tour,” is also devoted to the Derridean formula of abstraction, which it reads in the lights of the Hegelian “negation of negation,” lying also at the origin of the Blanchotian logic of *X sans X*. According to Olesik, Derrida’s abstraction of abstraction releases flesh – the material finite bodies of this world – from the dependence on the theological realms of higher meaning. By negating the negation of finitude, implied by the absolutist theology, Derrida cuts the leash which holds the material world in a negative contrast to the divine Absolute, and lets the flesh lose in the gesture of the Hegelian *Freilassen* which allows matter to desert from the theological “army of metaphors” and, in this act of desertion/alienation, find its freedom. While Olesik sees Derrida’s approach as both promising and failing in respect to the issue of bodily immediacy, she sees the perfect incarnation of the Abstraction Made Flesh in the baroque paintings of Georges de la Tour, which depict bodies in a spectral manner, neither dead nor alive. Thus, escaping the conceptual grid imposed by the theological discourse that, as Leung’s essay demonstrates, demands that life must always be conceived as life immortal and the “death of God” must have its continuation in the resurrection of the divine spirit. In Olesik’s interpretation, de la Tour is the first portrait painter of the Derridean *survie*: the deserted life no longer desiring theological eternity. Once again, therefore, there returns the crucial motif of Derrida’s analysis of the “religion of modern times”: the chronophilic liberation of time as the proper element of the material universe.

Joanna Hodge’s essay, “Number (s) of Future (s), Number (s) of Faith (s): Call it a Day for Religion,” focuses on the role of numbers in Derrida’s text. Hodge makes no connection with the Judaic hermeneutics of *gematria*, she rather insists on its significance in relation to the notion of calculability, first formulated by Heidegger and absolutely crucial in Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge” which, according to Hodge, can be read as a late variation on the former’s “Time of the World-Picture.” The manipulative spirit of calculation, ubiquitous in all forms of tele-evangelizing fundamentalisms, could be seen as producing the ultimate Bergsonian “machine for making gods,” putting on a full display a “pagan residue” – the cult of the unscathed – presently claiming the officially non-pagan “religions of the holy” (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Focusing on Bergson and Husserl – the two implicit presences in “Faith and Knowledge” – Hodge, similarly to Weiss, wishes to mobilize the tradition of the holy with its ethical restraint in the face of the other against the pagan traditions of the sacred with its cult of the infinite power.

The last – but certainly not least – essay in the Thematic Section is Adam Lipszyc’s “Broken Latin, Secret Europe: Benjamin, Celan, Derrida.” It also takes up the issue of the pagan residue within the Abrahamic traditions and opposes it by siding with anti-mythic disenchantment which, as the author argues, belongs to the very core of Derrida’s severely iconoclastic understanding of religion: saying “Yes” to the hidden God, by saying untiring “No” to all idols. Far from being an anti-religious tool used by militant atheistic enlightenment, disenchantment becomes thus the secret engine of the Derridean messianicity which has no other gods before *Khôra*: the self-effacing “desert” that can never be revealed, in other words dragged into the openness of public discourse, shown, displayed, and turned into the center of a cult. By staging an analogy between Walter Benjamin’s concept of “secret Germany,” then Celan’s idea of “secret language,” and finally Derrida’s “secret religion” Lipszyc builds a powerful argument in favor of “open secrecy” which, being neither concealed nor revealed, escapes the conceptual grids and, because of that, can deconstruct and subvert the orders based on full openness: be it a blinding revelation of the sacred idols, or a transparency of the democratic public sphere. The secret, being neither noumenal nor phenomenal, forms thus another – fluid, an-archic, singular – dimension

of life which, when exposed either to the light of faith (revelation) or to the light of knowledge (reason), stagnates in rigid gender, ethnic, and religious partitions. The Derridean secret religion – the messianicity of *Khôra* – can never be purified in that manner: it will always contain a resistant grain of sand (or dirt), which makes it closer to *litterature au secret* with its respect for singularity than to modern onto-theology which dissolves all singular and secret into generality of a concept. Hence, according to Lipszyc, Derrida’s non-normative religious meditation on *Khôra* brings him into the vicinity of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and a “literary theology”: the true matrix of all modern post-secular meditations.

The praise of “literature in secret” ends the Thematic Section, but continues in the next essay, James Anderson’s “A Few Theses on Art, Alienation, and Abolition,” in the apology of art as a breeze of freedom in the conditions of universal incarceration. Following Herbert Marcuse, Anderson claims: “Art, as a relatively self-contained work expressing human imagination and is capable of exciting our senses and eliciting affect as well as understanding, remains alienated – or, estranged and fundamentally-if-qualitatively separate or autonomous – from everyday existence. For that reason, art can enliven and alter our understanding of quotidian life and taken-for-granted assumptions, institutions, and arrangements structuring our reality.”

Similarly to Derrida’s concept of religion as abstraction that detaches itself from the everyday existence, and thus grants a vantage point from which it is possible to subvert the worldly *status quo*, Marcuse’s concept of art too contains a seed of critical alienation capable of re-imagining the actual social conditions which the author perceives – in a quite Gnostic manner – through the metaphor of imprisonment. Art’s creative freedom, estranged from the universal predicament of incarceration, offers a concrete positive utopia (in the Blochian sense) and thus also a hope to transcend the “prison-industrial complex (PIC).” Once again, we find here the Hegelian mechanism of the “negation of negation,” which Marta Olesik already detected in Derrida’s “abstraction of abstraction”: art’s alienation from the alienated social reality can pave the way toward a free dealienated life.

The last essay, Matthew Z. Donnelly’s “On the New and the Novel: An Adventure in The Temporal Logics,” is, as it itself announces, a Whiteheadian “adventure” in the idea of creativity and freedom and their strict connection to time: “logics of creativity sets out to *feel* time on the way to feeling newness and novelty. This feeling, and the corresponding expression of the transformed feeling ... is an inescapable, ontologically self-grounding structure of (at least) our cosmic epoch.” By combining process ontologies of Whitehead and Bergson, Donnelly reveals the transcendental conditions of creativity as a dynamic matrix of transition from the possible to the actual and vice versa, in which time plays a crucial role. This appreciation of time, which author sees as characteristic of “our cosmic epoch,” corresponds well with the discussion on chronophobia and chronophilia of various religious formations which emerged so strongly in the Thematic Section. Our epoch, modernity, is *chronophilic* and this sympathy for time – in pre-modern epochs perceived univocally as the devilish agent of destruction – requires not only new perspective on religion, but also metaphysics and ontology.

Something indeed changed in the modern perception of God, world, and human being. The revolutionary discovery that the “time of life” is not just a temporary nuisance in the journey from and back to the eternal Absolute – but an element of creativity, invention, and open-endedness of the messianic process of becoming – marking the chronophilic transformation of modern metaphysics: deeply convinced that time matters. Nothing better shows the new role of time than Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge,” which, for that reason, should indeed be considered as a paradigmatic post-secular meditation on the “religion of new times.”



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