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The Religion (without Religion) of the Living (without Life): Re-reading Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge"

Abstract:

This article offers a reading of Jacques Derrida's account of "religion" and "life" in his seminal essay "Faith and Knowledge." Applying Derrida's *aporetic* structure of "X without X" to his remarks on religion and life in "Faith and Knowledge," this article suggests that underlying Derrida's endeavor to "think religion abstractly" is a radical re-conception not only of religion as "religion without religion" but moreover a re-imagination of life as "life without life" that breaks away from the traditional metaphysical understandings of life and religion.

Keywords

Derrida, religion, life, survival, abstraction, "Faith and Knowledge"

The religion of the living – is this not a tautology?

Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," §40.¹

1. Introduction

This article offers a reading of Jacques Derrida's account of "religion" and "life" in his seminal essay, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." Derrida's seminal essay, published in French in 1996, based on a paper presented at a 1994 conference on religion on the island of Capri on the

1) Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 85 (hereafter referenced parenthetically as FK in text with page numbers). Throughout this article, Weber's translation of "chora" is replaced with "*khōra*" following earlier translations of Derrida's other works.

nature and role of religion, is often regarded not only as a landmark contribution to the “turn to” or “return of” religion in contemporary continental philosophy,² but also as a central piece of Derrida’s entire philosophical oeuvre.³ Following the “tautological” connection between “life” and “religion” that Derrida explicitly draws in “Faith and Knowledge,” (FK, 87-87) this article offers an interpretation of Derrida’s seminal essay in light of his much-debated notion of “religion without religion,”⁴ and considers whether the *aporetic* structure of “X without X” found throughout Derrida’s vast corpus is applicable to the notion of “life” or “the living”: whether the “life” that Derrida envisions in his “abstraction” of religion is a kind of “life without life” that is free or “abstracted” – “without” – the traditional metaphysical religious yearning for immortality.⁵

Before applying the “X without X” structure to consider Derrida’s account of life, this article firstly examines the various “contexts” mentioned in “Faith and Knowledge.” Suggesting that the structural motif of “X without X” runs through Derrida’s formulation of the messianic as “messianicity without messianism” and *khōra* as “place without place” in “Faith and Knowledge,” this article argues that Derrida’s rendition of messianicity and *khōra* as the context of a “desert in a desert” where the abstraction of religion takes place in the first half of his essay is to set up a stage (or indeed “context”) for the discussion of “life” in the essay’s second half, where Derrida presents an account of “life” and “sur-vival” which anticipates his later reflections on life and death in *Learning to Live Finally*: Derrida’s final interview conducted a few months before his death in 2004.

2. The Abstraction of Context as “X without X”

Throughout “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida makes frequent references to the conference where he originally presented this essay, providing the reader with meticulous details of the conference setting – from its geographical location on the Italian island of Capri and the specific date of the conference, to the shared Judaeo-Christian background of the participants and the European languages they all speak, to recounting the very moment of the conception of the conference theme of “religion” months before the Capri meeting. As Michael Naas remarks in *Miracle and Machine*, his important commentary on “Faith and Knowledge”:

To read a text of Derrida it is often necessary to begin by considering the context and the occasion for which it was written, the time and place it was first read or published, the anticipated audi-

2) On the significance of Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge” for the “(re)turn to religion” in continental philosophy, see de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, ix–xi, 3–31; Lambert, *Return Statements*, 3–6, 13–14, 134–58.

3) See Häggglund, *Radical Atheism*, especially 107–163, for a powerful exposition of Derrida’s “conceptual logic” of “autoimmunity” derived from Derrida’s account of “autoimmunity” in “Faith and Knowledge.” See also de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, 16. “‘Faith and Knowledge,’ his most explicit discussion of theme of religion to date, allows Derrida to bring together different threads that run through his numerous earlier writings.”

4) Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 49.

5) The conception of life in “Faith and Knowledge” is often associated with the notion of “auto-immunity” that is also key to the same essay, as powerfully argued in Martin Häggglund’s important study, *Radical Atheism*. However, as Elson and Sherbert point out, Häggglund’s account of Derridean’s concept of life as ‘sur-vival’ or living-on ultimately presupposes a ‘binary logic’ which overlooks not only the complexities of Derrida’s “X without X” structure but also the way in which “Derrida clearly connects autoimmunity to the movement of survival, and the movement of survival to the structure of messianicity borrowed from religion.” Elson and Sherbert, “A Religion of the Event,” 379. Whereas Häggglund focuses on immortality as the central trait of religion and thereby argues that Derrida commits to a radical atheism, this article argues that while “living” and “life” is key to Derrida’s understanding of religion, Derrida does not see immortality as a definitive trait of religion and thus the rejection of immortal life does not necessarily entail the “radical atheist” rejection of “religion” per se. See Elson and Sherbert, “A Religion of the Event,” 376–79; Elson and Sherbert, “Polemical Introduction,” 14–21, 53; and Bielik-Robson, “The Marrano God,” 9–10.

ence, the expectations Derrida would have had of his audience, and the expectations he would have expected his audience to have of him ... the context for these works inevitably become part of the works themselves.⁶

According to Naas, in “Faith and Knowledge,” like many of his other works, “Derrida points to the context and pragmatic conditions of the essay, as if these programmed to some extent the content of the essay itself.”⁷ Yet whilst he is cautious to make the reader aware of the particularities of the context in which he discusses “religion,” Derrida specifically states at the outset of this essay:

How “to talk religion”? ... perhaps one must pretend for an instant to abstract, to abstract from everything or almost everything, in a certain way ... perhaps one must first withdraw to a desert, or even isolate oneself on an island... Perhaps it would be necessary in addition to *situate* such arguments, limit them in time and space, speak of the place and the setting. (FK, 42–43)

Here Derrida appears to be simultaneously advocating a radical abstraction from all contexts while presenting the contexts – “the place and the setting” – for the reader to contextualize – “to *situate*” – his own discussion of “religion.”

Before analysing the numerous “contexts” which Derrida mentions in his seminal essay, it is worth briefly examining some of Derrida’s other works in the mid-1990s when “Faith and Knowledge” was written to *contextualize* this seminal essay. The Capri conference took place on the 28 February, 1994; Derrida’s publications around this time include “*Khōra*,” “*Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)*” and *Specters of Marx* in 1993, and *Politics of Friendship* and “Force of Law” in 1994.⁸ Notably, all of these works include some discussion of quotation marks, but for our purposes here we shall just highlight the two works that are most obviously related to religion and theology, namely “*Sauf le nom*” and “Force of Law.”⁹

In “*Sauf le nom*,” it is said that “placing the thesis in parenthesis or in quotation marks ruins each ontological or theological proposition,”¹⁰ whereas in “Force of Law” Derrida asks: “Why does deconstruction have the reputation, justified or not, of treating things obliquely, indirectly, with ‘quotation marks,’ and of always asking whether things arrive at the indicated address?”¹¹ Perhaps a reason why deconstruction might have such a reputation may be found in Derrida’s classic 1971 essay “Signature Event Context,” which states: “Every sign, ... spoken or written, ... can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable.”¹² In other words, things are *abstracted* from their original context by quotation marks – quotation marks *de-contextualize* an object as it “breaks with every given context.” Putting something in quotation marks is essentially a kind of abstraction: Indeed, as Derrida puts it in “Faith and Knowledge,” quotation marks are placed around a word “in order to *abstract and extract* it from its origins” (FK, 59 my emphasis).

6) Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 22.

7) *Ibid.*, 23.

8) For a list of Derrida’s publications, interviews and conferences from 1993 to 1995, see Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 333–35.

9) For discussions of quotation marks in Derrida’s other 1990s works, see Derrida, “*Khōra*,” 97; *Specters of Marx*, 62; *The Politics of Friendship*, 36, 44–45, 113.

10) See Derrida, “*Sauf le Nom*,” 67, see also 71, 81.

11) Derrida, “Force of Law,” 224, see also 268, 271, 289.

12) Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” 12.

However, in “Signature Event Context,” Derrida notes that whilst putting something in quotation marks “break[s] with every given context,” it also “engender[s] an infinity of new contexts... . This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring.”¹³ Whilst quotation marks may abstract an object from its original context, it does not mean that the object would be completely free from all contexts. Rather, the quotation marks effectively *re-contextualize* the object into a *new* context.¹⁴

In light of this, if we re-examine the full essay title of Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge” which weaves together titles of canonical texts in the philosophy of religion by Hegel, Bergson, and Kant, we may notice that Derrida has subtly added quotation marks to the word “religion” which were absent in the original canonical book titles. As Kevin Hart notes:

Derrida ... has no doubt that “religion” should be placed in inverted commas... And so quotation marks are imposed. It is as though Derrida has realized that the word “religion” must be held with pincers, or as though the word has just realized that Derrida has taken it up and so raises its eyebrows in astonishment.¹⁵

By subtly adding quotation marks to the word “religion,” Derrida is already carrying an abstraction of “religion” in the title of his 1994 essay: indeed, if we recall the statement from “*Sauf le nom*” quoted earlier – that placing a notion in quotation marks ruins a theological proposition, then we can say that by putting “religion” in quotation marks, Derrida is abstracting “religion” from its normal or original “theological” context – as Derrida puts it himself: “uprooting the tradition that bears, in atheologizing it” (FK, 57).

This abstracting move of “uprooting” and “atheologizing” religion is in line with the first paragraph of “Faith and Knowledge” where Derrida sets out his agenda “to talk singularly of religion today” by abstracting religion “from everything or almost everything” (FK, 42). But such an abstraction, as the second part of the passage from “Signature Event Context” suggests, inevitably brings about a *new* context for the abstracted item. This endeavor to re-contextualize or indeed to *abstract*, as Christopher Elson and Garry Sherbert point out, is precisely that which underlies Derrida’s deployment of the “X without X” structure: “This gesture of the without, the logic of *sans*, the ‘X without X,’ is not a simple negation of a word’s old meaning, but reinscribes a word onto what may be a ‘revolutionary’ new meaning, or context.”¹⁶ To “abstract” and re-contextualize religion – making it an abstract “religion *without* religion” – is not to simply negate religion per se: instead, it is to reinscribe or indeed recontextualize religion in a new “abstract context,” giving religion a “revolutionary” new meaning.¹⁷

But what is this new “abstracted context” for Derrida’s abstracted “religion”? A possible answer may be found at the end of the essay’s first paragraph, where Derrida states: “Perhaps one must take one’s chance in resorting to the most concrete and most accessible, but also *the most barren and desert-like*, of all abstractions”

13) Ibid.

14) See Derrida, “Afterword,” 136: “One of the definitions of what is called deconstruction would be the effort to take this limitless context into account, to pay the sharpest and broadest attention possible to context, and thus to an incessant movement of recontextualization. The phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan ... of deconstruction (‘there is nothing outside the text’), means nothing else: there is nothing outside context.”

15) Hart, “Absolute Interruption,” 189–90.

16) Elson and Sherbert, “Polemical Introduction,” 10.

17) This is somewhat contrary to Häggglund’s forceful assertion that Derrida is a “radical atheist” whose philosophy is incompatible with religion; see the brief discussion of Häggglund’s impressive work in note 5 above.

(FK, 42). Furthermore, as Derrida states in §3: “To play the card of abstraction ... perhaps one must first withdraw to a desert, or even isolate oneself on an island” (FK, 43). Derrida’s imagery of the “desert” here, as James K. A. Smith points out, is “a kind of metaphor for a level of abstraction or universality which is disconnected from all particularities of place and history.”¹⁸

While the imagery – or indeed “context” – of the desert is one which appears in many religious traditions,¹⁹ the discussion of the desert in “Faith and Knowledge” also refers to the mysterious notions of “*khōra*” and the “messianic” which are Derrida’s two “names” of “the desert in the desert.” Although the phrase “desert in the desert” makes its first appearance in “Faith and Knowledge” in §9, its main discussion occurs in §§20–25 where Derrida discusses *khōra* and the “messianic” as the two “names” given to the desert of “religious trait or retreat, of its abstraction or of its subtraction” (FK, 55). It is in the discussion here where Derrida introduces “the messianic” as the first name of his “the desert in the desert” in the structure of “X without X”:

First name: the messianic, or messianicity without messianism. This would be the opening to the future or to the coming of the other ... without horizon of expectation ... At issue there is a “general structure of experience” ... This abstract messianicity belongs from the very beginning to the experience of faith ... that is irreducible to knowledge ... Without this desert in the desert, there would be neither act of faith, nor promise, nor future (FK, 56-57).

This formulation of “abstract messianicity” in terms of “X without X” not only follows Derrida’s earlier discussion of “the messianic without messianism” in *Specters of Marx*,²⁰ it is also mentioned again by Derrida at another conference seven months after the Capri meeting, where he notes that “the general structure of messianicity, as the structure of experience ... [is] the groundless ground on which religions have been made possible.”²¹

While *khōra* is described in “Faith and Knowledge” as that which “would situate the abstract spacing, place itself” (FK, 57), just as the messianic is depicted as “the groundless ground” or indeed “ground without ground,” in Derrida’s other writings from the early 1990s, *khōra* – Derrida’s “second name” for the “desert in the desert” – is explicitly presented in the motif of “X without X” (FK, 57). For instance, in “*Khōra*,” *khōra* is said to be “outside of all quotation and all precise reference” as “a place without a place,”²² while it is described in “*Sauf le nom*” as “body without body, absent body but unique body and place of everything.”²³ *Khōra* is a place without a place but one which “gives place” to other places: It is “not just a place among others, but perhaps place itself, the irreplaceable ... and unplaceable place.”²⁴ Or as described in “Faith and Knowledge,” *khōra* is the “place itself,” that which situates “abstract spacing” (FK, 57).²⁵

18) Smith, “Re-Kanting Postmodernism?,” 561.

19) See Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” 47. Additionally, Derrida’s imagery of the desert (island) also refers to the context of the quasi-deserted island of Capri where “Faith and Knowledge” was initially presented. See Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 22–5, 172–73.

20) Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 74, 82, 92.

21) Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” 23.

22) Derrida, “*Khōra*,” 104, 109.

23) Derrida, “*Sauf le Nom*,” 56.

24) Derrida, “*Khōra*,” 111, see also 95–100, 109–11.

25) Cf. Derrida, “*Sauf le Nom*,” 57: “The desert is also a figure of pure place... Not objective nor earthly, place comes under no geography, geometry, or geophysics.”

Formulated as abstract structures – or indeed abstract “contexts” – of “X without X,” Derrida’s characterization of *khōra* and the messianic desert may be understood in terms of his task “to think abstractly” in “Faith and Knowledge.” As Hent de Vries notes: “The thought of this desert – of *a desert in the desert*, which is given or which gives only in the absolute and most abstract desertification of thought – could help to *prepare another thought*, may help *prepare another space*, no longer restricted to a fixed ground, matrix or receptacle.”²⁶ Just as *khōra* is a place without a place that “gives place,” here the thought of the desert as an image of abstraction “gives” new thought and new space – new space for thought or even new thought of space: Derrida’s “desert in the desert” is an abstract context or even a context of abstraction – an abstraction which “gives abstraction” to other contexts, a context which abstracts contexts from others. Being an “abstract context” – or indeed a “ground without ground (groundless ground)” or “place without place,” Derrida’s desert is also a “context *without* context” in the sense that it is the most abstract of places and contexts, a state of abstraction from which one cannot abstract further.²⁷ The abstract structure of “X without X” is something which “grounds” – or even “contextualizes” – thought and experience: Derrida’s “X without X” is in this regard not dissimilar to Kant’s transcendental account of the conditions for human cognition.²⁸

As Kevin Hart points out, the “X without X” formulation of Derrida’s two “names” of the desert – “messianicity without messianism” and *khōra* as “place without place” – is inherited from Kant’s critical formulation of “purposiveness without purpose.”²⁹ As Derrida suggests in *Specters of Marx* and further explicates in “Marx & Sons,” his “messianicity without messianism” is a universal “quasi-transcendental structure.”³⁰ Indeed, in “Faith and Knowledge” Derrida speaks of the messianic in terms of a “general structure of experience” characterized by “the opening to the future to the coming of the other ... as a singular event” (FK, 56).³¹ As such, one may say this messianicity without messianism is cast in *temporal* terms, while *khōra* is described as “a place without place” or “*place itself*” – it is depicted in *spatial* terms.³² If this “Kantian” interpretation is plausible, one may understand Derrida’s two names of the desert – messianicity and *khōra* – as parallel to the two Kantian transcendental forms of intuition of time and space – what may be called the boundaries or *limits* (*Grenzen*) of reason in Kant’s critical philosophy.³³

As mentioned earlier, the subtitle of “Faith and Knowledge” contains the title of Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.³⁴ In addition to putting “religion” in quotation marks, in his essay subtitle we find that Kant’s original title is also subtly altered by Derrida from “Religion *within* [*innerhalb*] the Limits of Reason Alone” to “Religion *at the* [*aux*] Limits of Reason Alone.” As Kevin Hart observes, this alteration in

26) de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, 111 (emphasis added).

27) Cf. Milesi, “Fo(u)nts of Etymology”, 361: “the reflection or inflection of this ‘within’ (desert within the desert) must then also be heard and ‘mirrored’ paradoxically as an abstracting ‘without’.”

28) For a discussion of how the notion of “withoutness”, “emptiness” or indeed “nothingness” is presented as a transcendental term in a pre-Kantian sense in contemporary continental philosophy, see Leung, “The One, the True, the Good... or Not.”

29) Hart, “Without Derrida.” 426; cf. Derrida, *Demeure*, 89–92.

30) Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 251, 255; cf. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 212.

31) See also Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 210–11; and Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 284–85.

32) Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 153–54, 237.

33) Cf. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 111: “I made use of the metaphor of a *boundary* [*Grenze*] in order to fix the limits of reason [*die Schranken der Vernunft*] with respect to its own appropriate use.”

34) Kant’s passage mentioned in the preceding note is part of the conclusion of his *Prolegomena*, titled “On determining the boundary of pure reason” (*Von der Grenzbestimmung der reinen Vernunft*) – which echoes his later work *Religion within the Limits* [*Grenzen*] of Reason Alone (*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*). See *ibid.*, 102.

Derrida's title "foreground[s] the question of what happens at a limit."³⁵ Whilst Hart thinks that this means "religion" is understood by Derrida as "formed at the limit of ethics and revelation,"³⁶ perhaps we may take a step further and say that "the limits of reason" here is in fact *the context* in which Derrida wants to "talk religion." If such a reading is possible, then perhaps it is plausible to regard "the desert in the desert" – the most *abstract* context – as a meta-context or a second-order context, a "context of context" (or indeed "a context *without* context" as suggested earlier) not unlike the transcendental conditions of abstract temporality or spatiality in Kantian philosophy.³⁷

This brings us back to the adaption of Kant in Derrida's essay subtitle. For Kevin Hart, the subtly added quotation marks in Derrida's essay subtitle "indicate that a negative theology of religion has already started," and "religion" bracketed by the quotation marks may well be a reference to Levinas' characterization of "religion" as "a relation without relation."³⁸ Perhaps this thought of religion as "a relation without relation" is carried out by Derrida in his very attempt to think religion abstractly *at* – not just *within* – the "limits" of reason which is deemed impossible in Kantianism.³⁹ To recall a quote from *Given Time* Derrida published a few years before Capri:

One can think ... only the impossible, according to the measure *without* measure [*mesure sans mesure*] of the impossible. If one wants to recapture the proper element of thinking ... it is perhaps according to the measure without measure of this limit [*limite*] that it is possible, possible as relation *without* relation [*rapport sans rapport*] to the impossible.⁴⁰

From various abstract "contexts" of the messianicity without messianism and the "ground without ground" that is *khōra* repeatedly discussed in the main body to the subtle adaption of Kant's work in his essay title and subtitle, we can see that the *aporetic* if "quasi-transcendental" structure of "X without X" is lies at the heart of Derrida's attempt to "think religion *abstractly*" in "Faith and Knowledge."

35) Hart, "Absolute Interruption," 187.

36) Ibid., 190.

37) See Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 43: "In addition...to the numerous references to limits in the passages explicitly treating Kant (§§11–12, 14–16, 36, 41), there are, first, the limits of time, space, and format for treating such a serious question as religion within a certain number of pages, the necessity of producing on the topic of religion 'a short treatise' (§2) within 'the merciless limits of time and space' (§4; see §§3, 9, and 33). These limits of time and space are not just the Kantian conditions of experience but a matter of "economy, the necessity of treating the question of religion 'in a limited number of words' because of the constraints of time, space, and, yes, publishers (§35)." The two names of the desert in the desert, as Naas (ibid., 154) further remarks, are for Derrida "a rethinking of time (in the form of a messianicity that opens the future beyond all time as presence), [and] space (in the form of *khōra* as a groundless ground that lets things take place without or before being situated in space)."

38) Hart, "Absolute Interruption," 193; cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80. See also (FK, 99): "If belief is the ether of the address and *relation to the utterly other*, it is 'to be found' in the experience itself of *non-relationship* ... the hypersanctification of this *non-relation* or of this transcendence would come about by way of desacralization ... perhaps even by way of a certain 'atheism,' in any case by way of a radical experience of the resources of 'negative theology'" (my emphasis added).

39) See Hart, "Religion," 61: "Where Kant commends a programme in which it is possible to please God without relying on dogma, Derrida affirms that which exceeds all programmes and answers to the impossible. Kant proposes an experiment: to think religion *within* the limits of bare reason. Derrida attends to an experience: religion *at the* limits of reason alone."

40) Derrida, *Given Time*, 29, translation slightly modified. In *Given Time*, "relation without relation" is not only discussed in terms of whether it is possible to think the "limit" of the *impossible* (see ibid., 13–14, 27–31, 39–41), but furthermore described as an *aporetic* term of "familiar foreignness" (ibid., 7) – anticipating Derrida's further development of "relation without relation" in *The Gift of Death* (*Donner la mort*), his sequel to *Given Time* (*Donner le temps*), as the relationship with the absolute other, namely God. See Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 66, 72–73.

3. The Abstraction of Religion as “Living without Life”

After examining the significance of the “X without X” structure in “Faith and Knowledge” in the first half, in the remaining parts of this article we shall consider how what Laurent Milesi calls the “abstracting without” applies to Derrida’s treatment of life in his 1994 essay, particularly §40 where Derrida notes that there is a “tautological” relation between religion and life.⁴¹ To quote §40 at some length:

The religion of the living – is this not a tautology? ... [Religion’s] mechanical principle is apparently very simple: life has absolute value only if it is worth *more than* life [*la vie ne vaut absolument qu’à valoir plus que la vie*]... . It is sacred, holy, infinitely respectable only in the name of what is worth more than it ... that which is worth more than so-called natural life. Thus, respect of life in the discourses of religion as such concerns “human life” only in so far as it bears witness, in some manner, to the infinite transcendence of that which is worth more than it. The price of human life ... this price is priceless [*ce prix n’a pas de prix*] ... This dignity of life can only subsist beyond the present living being ... whence, the religiosity of religion. This excess above and beyond the living, whose life only has absolute value by being worth more than life, more than itself [*dont la vie ne vaut absolument qu’à valoir plus que la vie*]... . It is there that the possibility of religion persists: the *religious* bond between the value of life, its absolute “dignity,” and the theological machine, the “machine for making gods”. (FK, 85, 87)⁴²

According to this important passage, “religions” (or at least the great monotheisms) have valued life only by valuing something more than life, what Derrida calls an “infinite transcendence” (FK, 87).

This phrase “*more than life*” (plus que *la vie*) is one which notably re-appears in Derrida’s final interview given in 2004,⁴³ *Learning to Live Finally*, where he reflects on the ethos of his life’s work on “deconstruction”:

Deconstruction is always on the side of the *yes*, on the side of the affirmation of life. Everything I say ... about survival as a complication of the opposition life/death proceeds in me from an unconditional affirmation of life. This surviving is life beyond life, life more than life, [*La survivance, c’est la vie au-delà de la vie, la vie plus que la vie*], and my discourse is not a discourse of death, but, on the contrary, the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving over death, because survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible.⁴⁴

This notion of “sur-vival” or “living-on” as a structure of “*more than life*” was already evidently on Derrida’s mind around the time of the Capri conference and the writing of “Faith and Knowledge,”⁴⁵ when Derrida remarked in a 1995 interview with Gianni Vattimo (Derrida’s co-editor of the Capri conference proceedings):

41) Milesi, “Fo(u)nts of Etymology,” 361.

42) As Milesi points out, Derrida’s assertion that the “price” of human life is “priceless” is precisely an “X without X” iteration of “price without price” (“Fo(u)nts of Etymology,” 363).

43) Cf. Derrida’s remarks in his 2000–2001 *Death Penalty* seminars: “The value of human life, by definition, that which gives value to human life, is worth more than life: what gives value to life is what in life is worth more than life.” Derrida, *The Death Penalty*, 40, see also 41, 96, 100.

44) Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 51–52.

45) See Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 270.

I think about nothing but death, I think about it all the time. . . . I never stop analysing the phenomenon of “survival” as the structure of surviving, it’s really the only thing that interests me, but precisely insofar as I do not believe that one lives on post mortem. And at bottom it is what commands everything – what I do, what I am, what I write, what I say.⁴⁶

And indeed in “Faith and Knowledge” itself, we find Derrida identifying the “mechanics” of religion as nothing less than what he calls “the principle of life and of sur-vival” [*pincipe de vie et de sur-vie*] (FK, 87).⁴⁷

But contrary to the transcendent supernatural Godlike principle of Life with a capital L found in the traditional religion or the great monotheisms (FK, 51),⁴⁸ Derrida’s notion of sur-vival is an alternative structure of “*more than life*” which gives life value and affirms life in an immanent natural way. As opposed to an abstract metaphysical ideal of “Life” which Derrida describes as “safe and sound, intact, unscathed” in “Faith and Knowledge”(FK, 85-86),⁴⁹ this notion of “survival,” as Derrida later notes in *Learning to Live Finally*, is one which specifically facilitates “the affirmation of a *living being* who prefers living and thus surviving over death.”⁵⁰ The “more than life” of Derridean survival is “not Life with the capital L . . . but life of the singular living: finite, precarious and thus always inescapably “scathed.”⁵¹ What we find in Derrida’s “abstraction” of religion is thus nothing less than an attempt to break the bond between the valuation of life and the (onto-)theological belief in an infinite transcendent principle – something “*more than life*” (FK, 87).

It is such an alternative conception of “*more than life*” as an immanent affirmation of the value of life is that which Derrida seeks to uncover in his abstraction of religion from its “theological” context – “uprooting the tradition that bears, in atheologizing it” (FK, 57), to think “religion without religion-as-*religio*.”⁵² In his attempt to “abstract” religion or think “religion” in abstraction – or even to think “religion without religion,”⁵³ what Derrida envisions in “Faith and Knowledge” is nothing less than a reconfigured “religious” – or “religious without religion-as-*religio*” – mode of affirming the value of life that is not grounded in on some (onto-)theological structure of “infinite transcendence”: one in which human life does not require some transcendent Life with a capital L to affirm its value and secure some form of immortal existence (FK, 57). To expand the structure of “X without X” to Derrida’s account of life, we may say that Derrida’s notion of “sur-vival” is nothing other than an account of “life *without* Life.” The abstract structure of “survival” as “life without life” is that which is uncovered when religion is “abstract[ed] from everything or almost everything” (FK, 42), when religion is abstracted from theology and metaphysical transcendence – when religion becomes “religion *without religio*”: no longer merely a tautological “religion of the living” but a “religion of living *without Life*.”

Although Derrida envisions “sur-vival” as an immanent natural phenomenon of “living without Life,” as a structure of life “more than” and indeed “beyond” life, “survival” can nonetheless said to have “excess above and beyond the living” [*excès sur le vivant*] – although not in a supernatural fashion (FK, 87). As Derrida puts it in *Learning to Live Finally*: “life *is* living on, life *is* survival. To survive in the usual sense of the term means to

46) Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, 88.

47) The notion of “sur-vival” is also mentioned elsewhere in §40 as well as §§36, 39, 44.

48) “‘monotheism’ signifies no less faith in the One, and in the living One, than belief in a single God.”

49) See also 42, 48, 61, 63, 77, 83.

50) Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 52 (emphasis added).

51) Bielik-Robson, “The Marrano God”, 8.

52) Milesi, “Fo(u)nts of Etymology”, 363.

53) Cf. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 49; Milesi, “Fo(u)nts of Etymology”, 360, 363.

continue to live, but also to live *after* death.”⁵⁴ But as we saw earlier, Derrida explicitly says that he is interested in survival “precisely insofar as [he does] not believe that one lives on post mortem,”⁵⁵ what would the excess of life as “sur-vival” or “living-on” mean for Derrida?

In the “Exordium” of *Specters of Marx*, where Derrida discusses how one can “learn to live,” “*living-on* [sur-vie]” is defined as “a trace which life and death would themselves be but traces and traces of traces.”⁵⁶ The structure of “sur-vival” envisioned by the later Derrida is thus intrinsically related to his earlier work on the “trace” in writing, as Naas remarks:

While we do not live after death in another world, while we are not resurrected for another life or in another life, “we” do sur-vive or live on for a time after death through the traces we produce and the marks that make us visible to others ... through traces that, as we have seen, are readable and attributable to us only insofar as they are repeatable in our absence.⁵⁷

Indeed, already in “Signature Event Context” (1971), Derrida argues that “For a writing to be a writing it must continue to “act” and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written ... because he is dead.”⁵⁸ This account of the “*death* of the author” effectively anticipates Derrida’s remarks on his own (life and) death over three decades later in *Learning to Live Finally*:

The trace I leave signifies to me at once my death, either to come or already come upon me, and the hope that this trace survives me. This is not a striving for immortality; it’s something structural. I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, “proceeds” from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing.⁵⁹

Later Derrida’s reflections of death in his own *writing* is not only a continuation of his early work on writing but moreover a way of living – indeed a way of *living his death*. The practice of writing and leaving “traces” is “the phenomenon of ‘survival’ as the structure of surviving” that preoccupied Derrida at the time he wrote “Faith and Knowledge.”⁶⁰

As argued in the first part of this article, Derrida’s reflections on “religion” and “abstraction” in “Faith and Knowledge” is an attempt to think – or indeed, *re*-think – the transcendental structures of experience. The “structure of surviving” that preoccupied Derrida in the 1990s is none other than a structure that transcends – or even *survives* – the Kantian limits of time and space. If Derrida’s messianicity without messianism and *khōra* are, as argued earlier, revisions or re-conceptions of the Kantian transcendental idealities, then it may be accordingly posited that Derrida’s two quasi-Kantian transcendentalities together constitute the transcen-

54) Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 26.

55) Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, 88.

56) Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xx.

57) Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 270.

58) Derrida, “Signature Event Context”, 8.

59) Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 32–33.

60) See Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, 88.

dental conditions in which life survives and lives-on: as “(quasi-)transcendentals,” messianicity and *khōra* are not simply general structures of experience, but more specifically *conditions for sur-vival*.⁶¹

This brings us to the final “X without X” structure in “Faith and Knowledge” – the “bottom without bottom” in the concluding §52:

At the bottom without bottom of this crypt [*Au fond sans fond de cette crypte*], the One + *n* incalculably engenders all supplements... . On the bottom without bottom of an always virgin impassibility, *khōra* of tomorrow in languages we no longer know or do not yet speak. This place is unique... The dispersion of ashes is not even promised there, nor death given. (FK, 100)

As Geoffrey Bennington suggests, Derrida’s notion of “the One + *n*” or “the more than One *plus d’Un*” can be idiomatically translated as “no end.”⁶² As “*khōra* of tomorrow” (note that *khōra* is a spatial term whilst “tomorrow” is obviously temporal) – the “context” in which “the quasi-spatiality of *khōra*” and “the quasi-temporality of messianicity” are brought together, the crypt represents a spatial-temporal transcendental condition that has “no end,” a time and place that has an “end without end”: It is a “bottom without bottom.”⁶³

The “bottom without bottom” of the crypt is the unique “place (without place)” – or indeed *context* – where life can *live-on*, where it can sur-pass – or indeed sur-vive – the limits of death.⁶⁴ As Derrida writes some twenty years earlier in “*Fors*” (1976), his most thorough treatment of the notion of “crypt,” a crypt is “a topographical arrangement made to keep (conserve-hidden) the *living dead*... . The inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but *as dead*.”⁶⁵ While Derrida acknowledges that survival sits at the border – or indeed *limits* – between life and death as “a complication of the opposition life/death,” he is keen to emphasize that his formulation of sur-vival is nothing less than “an unconditional affirmation of life.”⁶⁶ To recall Derrida’s remarks in the very final section of his final interview *Learning to Live Finally* – in a sense, his last words: “This surviving is life beyond life, life more than life ... the affirmation of a living being who prefers living and thus surviving over death, because survival is not simply that which remains but the most intense life possible.”⁶⁷ Whilst Derrida’s later unconditional affirmation of life seems to differ slightly from his earlier account of the “living dead” inhabitant of the “crypt” in “*Fors*,” the powerful opening statement of Derrida’s 1976 essay is nonetheless very illuminating for our interpretation of the “crypt” in “Faith and Knowledge.” Derrida opens “*Fors*” with two questions: “What is a crypt?” and “What if I were writing on one now?”⁶⁸ Following this, we may indeed ask: *What if* the crypt that Derrida mentions in “Faith

61) See the interpretation of messianicity and *khōra* as signs that “there is still time” and “still space available” in Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 275.

62) See Bennington’s translator’s note in Derrida, “Et Cetera,” 304, note 27.

63) Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 237. See also *ibid.*, 238: “To follow Derrida’s thinking with regard to *khōra* is to understand that there can never be a final word ... but always, so long as there is time, another supplement and another opening, another text or another iteration, another ending.”

64) Cf. Derrida, “Living On: Borderlines,” 125, 122: “the crypt ... preserves the dead, at the same time living and dead, beyond life and beyond death ... over life and of life, life after life and after death, at the same time between life and death in the crypt, more than life, when it’s over (*and over again*), reprieve and hypervitality, a supplement of life that is *better* than life *and better* than death ... a living-on that is better than truth ... truth beyond truth, truth beyond life and death.”

65) Derrida, “*Fors*,” xxxvi, xxi.

66) Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 51–52.

67) *Ibid.*, 52.

68) Derrida, “*Fors*,” xi.

and Knowledge” is precisely that which he is *writing on*? In other words, is “writing” – indeed the essay “Faith and Knowledge” itself – some kind of “crypt” for Derrida? Is the “crypt,” to allude to *Learning to Live Finally* again, none other than the trace which Derrida leaves, the place where he *lives his death*?

To write, to leave a trace, is to *sur-vive* and indeed to affirm life and its excess over death. As Armando Mastrogiovanni puts it: “the Derridean corpus, what remains of Jacques Derrida, is the trace of that living being’s affirmation of life, itself a number of yeses to life surviving, ‘life beyond life,’ in writing.”⁶⁹ If writing is indeed what Derrida means by the “bottom without bottom” or indeed “end without end” of the “crypt,” then no wonder Derrida introduces the second half of “Faith and Knowledge” not only as the “*Post-Scriptum*” (writing that comes *after* – or even “survives” – original “end” of writing), but specifically if bizarrely as “*Crypts*” (FK, 60), as if the writings in “Faith and Knowledge” are crypts which allows Derrida’s name to live on.⁷⁰ As “traces” in “Faith and Knowledge” as well as Derrida’s other writings, the “crypt” is the *context* where Derrida seeks to “*live his death*.”⁷¹

In this regard, the crypt is a quasi-transcendental context that has not only an abstract “time without time” of messianic quasi-temporality and “place without place” of *khōratic* quasi-spatiality but a “bottom without bottom” quasi-immortality “without assignable end,” a unique place where the “dispersion of ashes is not even promised ... nor death given” (FK, 100).⁷² The abstraction of contexts carried out in the first half of “Faith and Knowledge” provides a *new* context – the *abstract* (quasi-)transcendental context of a “bottom without bottom” – for Derrida’s *new* conception of life as *sur-vival*. Perhaps Derrida’s structure of *sur-vival* is as not simply a *new* conception of life but also an *abstract* conception of life, that “*sur-vival*” is none other than the structure of the *abstract* life or the *abstraction* of “life” – the survival of life beyond the immediate context of living into a *new* context, namely “the crypt.” The crypt is the quasi-transcendental condition under which *sur-vival* is possible, the “time without time” and “place without place” where life *sur-passes* death – where one lives on with a “life without life.”⁷³

4. Conclusion

In “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida carries out his expressed task to “think religion abstractly” by way of an “abstraction” of religion to an “abstract” context – or indeed some “context without context” – formulated in terms of a series of abstract “X without X” structures, “uprooting” and “atheologizing” religion from its traditional metaphysical if ontotheological fascination with “infinite transcendence” into a new abstract version of “religion *without* religion-as-*religio*.” For Derrida who submits that religion is always tautologically “of the living,”⁷⁴ what this effort in “atheologizing” or “abstracting” religion opens up is nothing less than a radical rethinking or indeed *abstracting* of “life”: To think life *abstractly* with “an abstracting ‘without,’” as an “X without X” structure, in abstraction from – “without” – its metaphysical ontotheological conception in traditional religion.⁷⁵

Underlying Derrida’s task to “think religion abstractly” in “Faith and Knowledge” is thus a twofold re-conceptualization and re-contextualization of “life” and “religion”: To abstract religion and life from their

69) Mastrogiovanni, “The Death Penalty,” 184–85.

70) Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 46; cf. Derrida, “*Sauf le Nom*,” 42, 45–47, 60–61.

71) Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 33.

72) See also Naas, *Miracle and Machine*, 237–38.

73) Cf. Derrida, “Living On: Borderlines,” especially 106–8.

74) Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” 85.

75) Milesi, “Fo(u)nts of Etymology,” 361; see also (FK, 57).

traditional “context” of the religious yearning for some immortal Life of “infinite transcendence,” simultaneously freeing religion from traditional religion-as-*religio* (“religion without religion”) and life from Life (“life without life”). As Derrida remarks on the “X without X” structure in a different but not unrelated context: “life has freed itself from life; one might just as well say that life has been relieved of life ... released from itself. A life without life ... ‘To live without living.’”⁷⁶ To think religion abstractly, to think that which is tautologically “of the living” in an abstract “context without context” as a “religion without religion,” is to also think of life in a new abstract context where it becomes an *aporetic* “life without life” or “living without life.” It is this “living without life,” this abstract “life without life” that sur-passes and indeed *sur-vives* the limits of life and death which Derrida seeks to affirm unconditionally throughout his life’s work, and indeed the abstract form of “life” that is at work and cryptically lives-on in the traces of the writing Derrida has left us.⁷⁷

76) Derrida, *Demeure*, 89. See also *ibid.*, 64, where Derrida remarks with reference to Hegel’s *Glauben und Wissen* (from which Derrida derives his title of “Faith and Knowledge”): “One can only survive it without surviving it. If one wanted to speak here of resurrection through the experience of a Christlike passion, there would be no Christology, no speculative Good Friday, no truth of religion in the absolute knowledge of Hegel... Already in the life without life of this *survivance*, henceforth, as it were, fictional, all knowledge will tremble, and with it all testimonial statement in the form of knowledge.”

77) Derrida and Birnbaum, *Learning to Live Finally*, 51–52.

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