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# Derrida's *Laïcité*

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THE CONTROVERSY IN FRANCE IN 2003 AND 2004 SURROUNDING A proposed law banning the wearing of headscarves and other “conspicuous signs of religious affiliation” in primary and secondary public schools triggered a very lively debate about the place of religion in French educational institutions and in French society more generally. The rallying cry for many supporters of the ban was the French notion of *laïcité*.<sup>1</sup> Though often translated as “secularism,” *laïcité* entails more than just the separation of church and state and the protection of French institutions from religious dogma and authority. It involves the promotion of a certain civic and republican ideal of French politics, culture, and, perhaps especially, education.

In what follows, I would like to suggest that Jacques Derrida, a product of the French educational system and for much of his life a citizen of the French nation-state, was strongly committed to this notion of *laïcité*, or rather—because I can already hear the objections—to a reworked, enlarged, *deconstructive* notion of *laïcité* that has itself been submitted to critique, its

own theologico-political origins exposed through a radical desacralization that leads, in the end, not to a reason divorced from religion but to the origins of religion itself.<sup>2</sup> If I thus frame my homage to Derrida in terms of the question of *laïcité*, it is in order to provide both a larger context for Derrida's critique of the theologico-political and to focus attention on an aspect of Derrida's work that has received less attention than it ought. For while many commentators have rightly argued that over the past couple of decades Derrida's work became more explicitly political and more focused on politico-ethical issues, what has been less noticed is the accompanying critique of the theological origins of these political or politico-ethical issues. Indeed if one had to point to a single motivating force behind almost *all* of Derrida's work over the last two decades (and in many cases well before), it might just be his commitment to a critique of what he considered the pervasive and still unthought or unthematized conflation of religious concepts and the supposed secularism of the modern nation-state. What motivated Derrida's work was thus less of an attempt to promote an ideology of secularism or *laïcité* in France, the United States, or elsewhere, but the imperative to submit to critique and to *clarify* the hidden and often overlooked relationship between the political and its theological origins—origins that, after more than 200 years of Enlightenment thought, still inform and define political institutions and their founding concepts. To invoke the title of Jean-Luc Nancy's project, what motivated Derrida for at least the last two decades (though one could argue that this is as old as deconstruction itself) is a certain "deconstruction of Christianity"<sup>3</sup> or, as Derrida preferred to call it, a deconstruction of the "Abrahamic filiation," a deconstruction that took aim at both the theoretical underpinnings of the theologico-political and the policies and institutional practices supported by it, not only in France but also (and perhaps especially) in the United States.<sup>4</sup> This deconstruction of the Abrahamic filiation was carried out, however, as I will argue, not in the name of *laïcité* as it is commonly understood in France, or secularism as it is understood in the United States, but in the name of what I will call an originary, or, better, a radical secularity that inscribes faith (though not religion) at the very origin of the sociopolitical and thus, as Derrida argues, at the very origin of all sovereignty.

For in Derrida's insistent critique of the theologico-political, the concept that came under the most scrutiny was surely that of sovereignty. Indeed it did not take the recent publication of a volume by Derrida entitled *Sovereignties in Question* (2005b) to know that sovereignty had been, for some time, a privileged theme in Derrida's work. Whether Derrida was looking at discourses on the self, the nation-state, or God, whether he was addressing questions of individual identity formation, politics, or theology, the question of "sovereignty" was at the center of his analysis. Whether understood in relation to its theological origins in a sovereign God or to its philosophical origins in egological ipseity or self-mastery, sovereignty appears to be at the root of many of the philosophical concepts Derrida wished to reread and many of the contemporary ethical and political issues he wished to rethink. Hence Derrida's analyses of phenomena as seemingly diverse as democracy, globalization, the death penalty, cosmopolitanism, tolerance, hospitality, and even monogamy (which I'll save for the end as a tease) were all motivated by what he perceived to be the unavowed influence of a theologico-political notion of sovereignty upon our philosophical concepts and discourses as well as our ethical and political practices.

Before going any further, let me try to answer a potential objection to the thesis I am trying to support. While I don't think anyone will dispute the claim that Derrida's work during the past two decades became more explicitly political and that it often involved a critique of the theological origins of political concepts, it might also seem that Derrida's work became more religious during this very same period in texts such as "Circumfession," "Faith and Knowledge," "Denials," and *The Gift of Death*, to name just a few. Whether or not one takes this interest to have been motivated or nourished by Derrida's continuing dialogue with Levinas, it is hard to ignore the fact that questions of faith and religion emerge in so many of Derrida's texts on hospitality, witnessing, the gift, messianicity without messianism, and so on. Indeed a certain religious language seems so omnipresent and developed in his work that it would be easy to conclude that Derrida too took that famous "religious turn" of French phenomenology. How are we to square this turn, or this apparent turn, with what I wish to characterize as Derrida's radical secularity or reworked and originary

*laïcité*? The apparent contradiction will disappear only when we make the case for an originary or radical secularity that includes a critique or questioning of religious dogma *by means of* a more primordial or originary faith that first opens up the dimension of *both* religion *and* the state, *both* faith *and* knowledge. In other words, Derrida's secularity has to be considered not in complete opposition to religion, but in relation to a faith that first opens up religious experience, a faith in the coming of the event or the other that Derrida believes to be at the origin of every relation worthy of its name. If *laïcité* or secularism is thus not a very good name for a type of thinking that first opens the dimension of faith, it is perhaps because it is at once still too tainted by its theologico-political origins *and* still too divorced from the originary faith that makes it possible.<sup>5</sup>

Derrida's originary *laïcité* or radical secularity helps explain, I believe, his choice in both authors and themes over the last couple of decades. For example, Derrida's frequent return to Carl Schmitt, from *Politics of Friendship* onward, can be explained in large part by Schmitt's thesis concerning the theological origins of political sovereignty. Though Derrida wants, in many places, to distance himself from Schmitt's prescriptions regarding this topic, it seems to me that he generally accepts Schmitt's diagnoses. As Schmitt succinctly puts it in *Political Theology*:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts . . . whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver. . . . The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the *miracle* in theology. (2006, 36; emphasis mine)

What interests Derrida about Schmitt is his claim that sovereignty is always related to the sovereign exception to suspend rights and laws and that this relationship between sovereignty and exceptionality is inextricable—even in modern democracies—from the theological notion of a sovereign God. “Analogous,” says Schmitt, to a “*miracle*”—a word that will return, as we will see, in Derrida's own text. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Schmitt's—and thus Derrida's—diagnosis of sovereignty, it is hard to contest that it is this conjunction of sovereignty and theology in Schmitt that

interests Derrida. In an interview in *For What Tomorrow . . .* (2004) Derrida makes this unmistakably clear:

Without this category of exception, we cannot understand the concept of sovereignty. Today, the great question is indeed, everywhere, that of sovereignty. Omnipresent in our discourses and in our axioms, under its own name or another, literally or figuratively, this concept has a theological origin: the true sovereign is God. The concept of this authority or of this power was transferred to the monarch, said to have a “divine right.” Sovereignty was then delegated to the people, in the form of democracy, or to the nation, with the same theological attributes as those attributed to the king and to God. (2004, 91–92)

It is thus necessary, says Derrida in the same interview, “to deconstruct the concept of sovereignty, never to forget its theological filiation and to be ready to call this filiation into question wherever we discern its effects. This supposes an inflexible critique of the logic of the state and of the nation-state” (2004, 92).<sup>6</sup>

Though one may thus disagree with this understanding of modernity and argue that Western political thought is not nearly as beholden to or informed by these theological notions as Derrida claims, it is difficult to claim that such a critique of the theologico-political does not play a significant, motivating, even determining role in Derrida’s work. In so many of Derrida’s texts of the past few decades, deconstruction became almost coextensive with the deconstruction of an unthought and still-operative theological heritage in Western political thought—that is, with a critique of “the theological and hardly secularized principle of the sovereignty of nation-states,” a sovereignty “of ontotheological origin, though more or less secularized in one place and purely theological and non-secularized in another” (2002b, 166; 2003b, 111). It thus appears today that Derrida was fully engaged in the “prudent, patient, differentiated, strategically complex deconstruction of political onto-theology” that he himself once called for (2002d, 14).

Central to this critique of theological sovereignty is the claim that sovereignty is, in essence, always indivisible, unshareable, and unlimited—a

sovereignty, then, whose first figure would be the indivisible, unshareable, and unlimited sovereignty of God. The theological notion of indivisible sovereignty is thus at the very heart of the deconstructive project, whether this be the sovereignty of the self, the nation-state, or God. This deconstruction is not simply a theoretical project to be undertaken or not, but a process already underway in every attempt to think or put into practice a division, sharing, or limitation of sovereign power. Hence Derrida moves perpetually between the prescriptive and the constative, telling us that the “onto-theological foundations [of democratic sovereignty] *must* be deconstructed” and that this deconstruction “has been underway for a long time, and it will continue for a long time” (2003b, 115, 131).

Derrida was thus relentless in his questioning of the sources and effects of this theological filiation in our ethical and political discourses and practices. This deconstruction of the theologico-political notion of sovereignty was central to Derrida’s rethinking of not only democracy (in works such as *Rogues*), but of more specific political practices and institutions. In a series of lectures and seminars on the death penalty, for example, Derrida wished to expose the theological vestiges of a notion of sovereignty that asserts its powers, cruelty, and exceptionality most visibly in putting citizens to death, or, in the case of war, sending them off to face death. A vocal opponent of the death penalty<sup>7</sup> (particularly in the United States), Derrida demonstrated not only the way the canonical philosophical discourses of Hobbes and Kant, for example, try to justify the death penalty through scripture but, more importantly, the way “the essence of sovereign power as political power but, *first of all, as theologico-political power*, presents itself, represents itself, as the right to pronounce and execute a death penalty. Or else to grant pardon: in an arbitrary, sovereign fashion” (2002d, 34; emphasis mine). Derrida’s emphasis, not on the immorality or inhumanity of the death penalty, but on the ultimately theological basis for the state’s arrogation to itself of this exceptional right, helps explain why Derrida’s four paradigmatic cases for the death penalty—Socrates, Jesus, al-Hallāj, and Joan of Arc—are all cases in which the condemned was accused of impiety or worshipping false gods. Each had a message that was at once political and theological; in opposing the state, each brought to light what

Derrida calls the “phantasmatico-theological” essence of sovereignty; each was thus condemned in the name of a certain transcendence for worshiping or claiming a relationship to another transcendence or a countertranscendence (2002d, 18). In each case, then, writes Derrida, the blasphemer must be “brought back down to earth, led back to the laws of the city or the Church or the clergy or worldly organization—and that is the politics of the State. . . . This condemnation is carried out at once *in the name* of transcendence and *against* transcendence” (2002d, 37). The cases of Socrates, Jesus, al-Hallāj, and Joan of Arc are thus exemplary of the state’s opposition to any claim of a counterrelationship to the sacred within the state. Such a claim cannot be tolerated—not because the state, even a secular state, is opposed to any and all claims of transcendence, but because, as a theologico-political formation itself, it cannot tolerate a counterclaim to its theological origins. Without being able to develop this here, it could be said that Derrida was ultimately interested in the way the death penalty is used by the sovereign or the state to take or sacrifice natural life in the name of an excess or hyperbolization of life, that is, in the name of a certain transcendence. Again, whether one agrees or disagrees with Derrida’s analyses, it is pretty clear, I think, that it is a deconstruction of the theologico-political origins of sovereignty that is motivating them.

Derrida thus discerns traces of the theologico-political in everything from discourses on globalization, where the Abrahamic and especially Christian filiation “of the concept of the world” and the “ethico-politic-juridical concepts” related to it tend “to regulate the process of globalization or *mondialisation*” (2002b, 164), to literature, which Derrida calls “a remnant of religion, a link and a relay of the sacrosanct in a society without god” (1999, 208). Derrida’s analyses of democracy in *Rogues*, of hospitality or forgiveness, work and globalization, and even literature, must thus all be read as part of the same patient, differentiated deconstruction of politico-theological notions such as life, sacrifice, transcendence, sovereignty, and even salvation. At the end of *Rogues*, for example, Derrida is concerned with an unavowed relation between democracy and the Judeo-Christian idea of salvation, a salvation that, he argues, needs to be distinguished from the unconditionality of the other or the event—that is, from an unconditional

that is neither sovereign nor sacred. Having followed a continual relationship throughout the tradition between god or the gods and democracy (from Aristotle's description of the truly virtuous man as a god among men to Rousseau's people of gods to Heidegger's famous reference to a god who can save us in the *Der Spiegel* interview), Derrida wishes to oppose the democracy to come (with all its messianic overtones) to any notion of a sovereign or sacred saving power within the political, that is, to any notion of Judeo-Christian salvation.

The effect of this is to open up an essential difference between sovereignty and the unconditional, between any kind of saving *power* and the weak *force* of the democracy to come, just as, elsewhere, Derrida will want to open up a difference between the theological notion of resurrection and living-on (2005a, 110–14). For example, in his short preface to *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, Derrida contests a certain Christian notion of resurrection, refusing to reject it outright but trying instead to transform it through a notion of living-on without sovereignty (that is, without egological ipseity), a “resurrection,” if you will, that structures life itself and would thus precede every actual death. Whereas the democracy to come would thus be like the historically determined, secular analogue of a transcendent saving force, living-on would be, so to speak, like the secular counterpart of resurrection, a living-on that would be a structural possibility—though one that would never be assured—for every living being capable of leaving a trace. Derrida thus speaks of the *adieu* addressed to the other as “a farewell that resigns itself to welcoming [*saluer*], as I believe every farewell worthy of its name must, the always open possibility, indeed the necessity, of a possible non-return, of the end of the world as end of all resurrection” (2003c, 11).

Under the aegis of the “theologico-political,” then, Derrida attempts to bring about not a more radical secularization of political thought, but rather a clarification of the theological origins of political concepts, beginning with the concept of sovereignty, which is always related, for Derrida, to the decisive exceptionality of a sovereign subject and thus, in the end, to a sovereign god. It is because of the theological filiation of sovereignty, and even in democracy in the figure of “the people,”<sup>8</sup> that Derrida ultimately

worries at the end of the first part of *Rogues* whether the democracy to come might be understood as, or translated into, a “god to come” (2005a, 110–14). If such a translation were possible, it would require a rethinking of such a god in terms of everything a *sovereign* god must *not be*—that is, as a god who is vulnerable, divisible, powerless, and so on—in short, a god who has undergone deconstruction, a radically *secular god*, if you will.

Though it would be silly to attribute this radical critique of the theologico-political to biography, it no doubt played a crucial role, from Derrida’s unique experience growing up in colonial Algeria to his education in French institutions, where a certain republican, secular ideal was no doubt espoused. In “Abraham, the Other,” Derrida speaks of a certain “uprooting” in his upbringing or education, a *déracinement* that was the result of being an Algerian Jew, at once French and not-French therefore, undecidably French, an uprooting that he would later cultivate, he says, through the thought of a “New International” beyond cosmopolitanism, the thought of the desert in the desert, *khōra*, messianicity without messianism, and so on (2003a, 29). Estranged from both the Christian and Muslim communities in Algeria, though also, to a certain extent, from the Jewish community, Derrida’s suspicion of communities in general began, in large part, with his suspicion of religious communities. When Derrida thus came to be suspicious of the philosophical discourses on community or communism, it was often the religious, eschatological undertones of these discourses that drew Derrida’s attention and critique. And the same would hold true for certain evangelistic critiques of those discourses, for example, as we see in *Specters of Marx* (1994), Francis Fukuyama’s neo-evangelistic liberalism and his eschatological vision of the end of history.

Derrida thus had an extraordinarily developed sense of smell, so to speak, for the theological assumptions or presuppositions, undertones or underpinnings, of philosophical, political, and ethical discourses. The French would say that he had “*du pif*” for the legacies of a sovereign God in the most seemingly secular discourses and institutions. In many texts, for example Derrida’s interview on 9/11, even concepts that seem to have developed out of an enlightenment tradition *opposed* to religious dogma are considered suspect for their theological origins. Hence cosmopolitanism, which would appear

to move beyond the nation-state and beyond the particularities of ethnicity and religion, is marked, in Derrida's eyes, by its Judeo-Christian history, from Saint Paul to Kant, and by the notion of a world-state that would be in its concept "theologico-political or secular (that is, secular in its filiation, though secretly theologico-political)" (2003b, 130). This does not mean that we must not support such a cosmopolitan spirit, but it does mean that we must not do so without also submitting it to critique. Derrida concludes:

If we must in fact cultivate the spirit of this tradition (as I believe most international institutions have done since World War I), we must also try to adjust the limits of this tradition to our own time by questioning the ways in which they have been defined and determined by the ontotheological, philosophical, and religious discourses in which this cosmopolitical ideal was formulated. (130)

What Derrida calls the democracy to come or messianicity without messianism would be, it seems, an attempt to cultivate cosmopolitanism's international spirit, its drive toward universality, while at the same time, and precisely in the name of that universality, submitting any kind of international or cosmopolitan *ideal* to critique. Hence Derrida's democracy to come would attempt to move beyond cosmopolitanism itself, beyond the notions of world citizenship or world citizens defined as "lawful 'subjects' in a state or legitimate members of a nation-state" (130). In going beyond cosmopolitanism in this way, the democracy to come would go "beyond the 'political' as it has been commonly defined," beyond a political determined by a theological conception of sovereignty and beyond a conception of the world as what needs to be saved or redeemed (130).

This critique of citizenship and sovereignty was not to be carried out, it must be emphasized, to the exclusion of initiatives to expand citizenship and extend rights and protections to more and more people throughout the world. Derrida's response to those in need of rights and citizenship would surely not be to proclaim the sovereignty of the nation-state to be a phantasm to be dispelled and citizenship a theologically determined concept to be abandoned. On the contrary, one must extend the rights and protections

of citizenship to as many as possible *at the same time* as one submits these notions to critique. And the same could be said about most other Enlightenment concepts: they must be clarified, supported, and expanded at the same time as their theological origins are questioned.

Hence even a principle such as religious tolerance (a secular concept if ever there was one, since it would seem to be motivated by a belief that the state must protect the individual rights of citizens to practice the religion of their choice and, thus, that the state must not be in the business of endorsing or supporting any particular religion) is, for Derrida—and not just in practice but in *theory*—theological in its origins and inspiration. In the 9/11 interview, Derrida hesitates to subscribe to the notion of religious tolerance because of its Judeo-Christian provenance. Because it is always granted from a position of power, from the side of the “reason of the strongest,” tolerance is a “form of charity, a form of Christian charity, even if Jews and Muslims might seem to appropriate this language as well.” Tolerance is thus “a supplementary mark of sovereignty, the good face of sovereignty, which says from its height to the other: I am letting you be, you are not insufferable, I am leaving you a place in my home, but do not forget that this is my home” (127). For Derrida, then, tolerance is not a condition of hospitality but “the opposite of hospitality” or, at best, “a conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality” (127–28), which is to say, in Derrida’s idiom, hardly a hospitality worthy of its name. We would thus need to be extremely circumspect in using this notion of *tolerance*, since it is not as value neutral and secular as it might seem. Referring to Voltaire’s famous article on tolerance in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, Derrida writes:<sup>9</sup>

We would have to be extremely vigilant, it seems to me, in interpreting this heritage. I would be tempted to say “yes and no” to each sentence, “yes but no,” “yes, although, however,” and so forth . . . The word “tolerance” is first of all marked by a religious war between Christians, or between Christians and non-Christians. Tolerance is a *Christian* virtue, or for that matter a *Catholic* virtue. The Christian must tolerate the non-Christian, but, even more so, the Catholic must let the Protestant be. . . . Peace would thus be tolerant cohabitation. (126–27)

Again, this is not to say that tolerance is not to be preferred to intolerance or that it should not be promoted in the state, but it is to say that we need to remain vigilant with regard to the Christian origins of the discourse that supports it. For “it is a discourse with religious roots; it is most often used on the side of those with power, always as a kind of condescending concession” (127). While Derrida argues that we must thus “be faithful to the memory of the Enlightenment” and “not forget certain exemplary models [from Voltaire to Zola to Sartre] in the struggle against intolerance,” we must at the same time question “the very concept of tolerance” (125).

Because Western political concepts have been most heavily marked and influenced by Judeo-Christian theology, it is no surprise that it is this theology and its influence on political concepts that is most often at the center of Derrida's critique. But Derrida's vigilance with regard to dubious theologisms in politics did not stop with Judeo-Christianity. Again in the 9/11 interview, Derrida says that what he finds unacceptable about the Bin Laden “strategy” is “not only the cruelty, the disregard for human life, the disrespect for law, for women, the use of what is worst in techno-capitalist modernity for the purposes of religious fanaticism,” but an impoverished notion of the future put in the service of a “dogmatic interpretation . . . of the Islamic revelation of the One” (113). Invoking secularization and yet issuing a caution with regard to it, Derrida argues:

Nothing of what has been so laboriously secularized in the forms of the “political,” of “democracy,” of “international law,” and even in the nontheological form of sovereignty (assuming, again, that the value of sovereignty can be completely secularized or detheologized, a hypothesis about which I have my doubts), none of this seems to have any place whatsoever in the discourse “Bin Laden.” (113)

Though the secularization of sovereignty might not yet be complete (though it might still be marked by the theological even if it were complete, radicalized, perfected), Derrida seems to bank on another secularization or another *laïcité*, one that, as we will see in a moment, would not simply purify the state of all faith but seek out the original faith or originary engagement at

the origin of *both* the state *and* religion. Today's institutions of international law and human rights must thus be championed for the way they promote secularization in the more limited sense of the term *in the name* of what we might venture to call a *laïcité* to come, perhaps even a Messianic *laïcité*, or better, a radical secularity without secularism.

To show just how far this secularizing thought goes in Derrida, consider his final interview, published in *Le Monde* in August 2004 and republished as a little book by Galilée under the title *Apprendre à vivre enfin*, that is, as *Learning to Live Finally*.<sup>10</sup> In that interview, Derrida appears to endorse—without any real provocation to do so—polygamy or, rather, multiple civil unions either with the opposite or the same sex, simply because the notion of monogamous, heterosexual civil unions seems to be a theological holdover from heterosexual religious marriage. Asked about why, in June 2004, he supported the celebration of a gay marriage in the French town of Bègles—a marriage that was later declared illegal and nullified by the French courts—Derrida explains his support not by reference to equality or equal rights or discrimination, but by reference to the unacknowledged theological origins of the concept of marriage in the state. He argues:

“Marriage” as a religious, sacred, heterosexual value—with a vow to procreate, to be eternally faithful, and so on—is a concession made by the secular state to the Christian church, and particularly with regard to monogamy, which is neither Jewish (it was imposed upon Jews by Europeans only in the nineteenth century and was not an obligation just a few generations ago in Jewish Maghreb), nor, as is well known, Muslim. (2007)

Derrida thus supported this gay or same-sex “marriage” because of what he considered to be the unjustified theological origins behind the state’s sanctioning of heterosexual marriage alone. But because the concept of marriage is itself of theological origin, Derrida ultimately suggests, as many others have done, doing away altogether with the religious concept of “marriage” in France’s civil codes and replacing it with “civil union.” Marriages would be performed in churches, temples, and synagogues, and

civil unions by state officials in public institutions. The state would thus no longer “marry” anyone—whether homosexual or heterosexual—though it would legitimate both opposite-sex and same-sex civil unions.

But, for Derrida, this would still not go far enough. In order to purge the civil union of even more of its theological heritage, in order to distinguish *civil* union from *religious* marriage, Derrida takes the further step of endorsing not just same-sex civil unions but, more provocatively, *multiple* civil unions, whether between partners of the opposite sex or the same sex or both. Derrida argues:

By getting rid of the word and concept of “marriage,” and thus this ambiguity or this hypocrisy with regard to the religious and the sacred—things that have no place in a secular constitution—one could put in their place a contractual “civil union,” a sort of generalized *pacs*,<sup>11</sup> one that has been improved, refined, and would remain flexible and adaptable to partners whose sex and number would not be prescribed. As for those who want to be joined in “marriage” in the strict sense of the term—something, by the way, for which my respect remains totally intact—they would be able to do so before the religious authority of their choosing. (2007)

One can see how a thoroughgoing critique of the theological origins of political concepts and institutions—in this case marriage—leads Derrida to this position. Once civil union and religious marriage have been distinguished, all the theological attributes typically attached to the latter—including heterosexuality and monogamy—must, in all good logic, be removed from the former.<sup>12</sup>

Hence Derrida's flair for sniffing out the theological origins of seemingly secular concepts, from cosmopolitanism to tolerance to civil union, knew practically no bounds. Indeed, in one of the rare places where Derrida considers this secularization for itself, it is rejected as being *itself* too theological. At the end of “Faith and Knowledge” Derrida speaks of the *naïveté* involved in simply becoming an advocate of *laïcité*. The reason for this is that *laïcité* is itself defined in relationship to the theological, indeed, to Christianity. Derrida writes:

If belief [*croyance*] is the ether of the address and relation to the utterly other, it is to be found in the experience itself of non-relationship or of absolute *interruption* (indices: 'Blanchot,' 'Levinas' . . .). Here as well, the hypersanctification of this non-relation or of this transcendence would come about by way of desacralization rather than secularization or laicization, concepts that are too Christian; perhaps even by way of a certain 'atheism,' in any case by way of a radical experience of the resources of 'negative theology'—and going beyond even this tradition. . . . It designates disenchantment as the *very resource of the religious*. . . . Nothing seems therefore more uncertain, more difficult to sustain, nothing seems here or there more imprudent than a self-assured discourse on the age of disenchantment, the era of secularization, the time of laicization, etc. (1998, 64–65)

But it is here, in this hypersecularization or hyperdesacralization, that things become more complicated and, to my eyes, more *promising*. It is here that a hyperdesacralization of the political, of religion, and even of the secular, becomes or leads to a hypersanctification of the nonrelation of a certain transcendence. As I suggested in the beginning, Derrida's vigilant secularizing of theological concepts goes hand in hand with a claim that at the very origins of not only religion but science as well is a kind of originary faith. "Believe what I say as one believes in a miracle," writes Derrida in the same passage of "Faith and Knowledge" (83–84). What Derrida means by this is that every testimony, even a perjurious one, is in effect preceded by this plea or this promise: "believe in me as you would believe in a miracle." Whether or not what I say is true, whether or not I know it to be true, every testimony, every bearing witness, every appeal to my experience, even in science, asks the other to believe in what I say as one believes in a miracle. This is not the miracle that comes from the sovereign who declares a state of exception, as in Schmitt; it is not a miraculous exceptionality, but the miracle—the event—of every performative, even the least exceptional, the most ordinary or banal, indeed, the most secular.

Once we recognize that every act of language presupposes a responsibility in the form of a *sworn faith*, an "I promise the truth," an "I engage myself to address the other," then we have, in Derrida's words, "engendered God

quasi-mechanically" (1998, 27). Even a secular oath cannot but produce, invoke, convoke, or engender this unengenderable God, that is, God as *already there*, even before being. The unengenderable is thus perpetually reengendered as God is *called* to witness, the *present-absent* witness, says Derrida, of every oath. Hence a certain faith is inscribed into the very heart of what one would take to be secular knowledge—the knowledge, say, of the university or of the state, as opposed to the faith of the church.

There thus appears to be no contradiction in Derrida between this claim of a fundamental faith that would precede all testimony and all science and a thoroughgoing critique or deconstruction of the theological origins of so many seemingly secular institutions. Indeed the former would even be necessary for the latter. Hence it should come as no surprise that Derrida can, in the very same section of "Faith and Knowledge," at once affirm the sworn faith of every response and reject the notion of secularism because of its theological origins. Derrida in fact claims that we will actually fail to understand religion today if we continue to believe in the opposition between reason and religion, or techno-scientific modernity and religion—that is, if we continue to remain in a *certain* Enlightenment, within a certain anti-religious, dogmatically secularizing filiation that runs from Voltaire and Marx to Nietzsche, Freud, and beyond. We must instead ask how technoscience *supports* religion rather than opposes it and show that religion *and* reason have the same source, a common source—the testimonial engagement [*gage*] of every performative, which commits or engages one to respond *before* the other and *for* the performativity of techno-science.

"*Belief*," says Derrida, "is the *ether* of the address and the relation to the utterly other": it is thus the very experience of nonrelation and of absolute interruption, a belief that is at the origin of both faith and knowledge, and so is always related to a certain reason. It is perhaps worth mentioning in passing that this notion of a reason that does not exclude faith, that is the result of a radical desacralization, might have led to a fruitful conversation between Derrida and the best-known critic of his supposedly secular or secularizing thought, a critic who is not only well known but universally known, though not specifically as a critic of Derrida. I am speaking of Pope Benedict XVI, formerly known as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who, on June

6, 2004, the sixtieth anniversary of D-day, wrote an article in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* entitled “In Search of Freedom: Against Reason Fallen Ill and Religion Abused” in which he argued that, in a world where reason has become detached from God, from faith, “all that remains is reason’s dissolution, its deconstruction, as, for example, Jacques Derrida has set it out for us” (2004). The criticism here is clear: Derrida belongs to the long line of secular thinkers from Voltaire to Nietzsche who detached reason from faith and who thus led to a crisis of both reason and faith in the twentieth century. Now, it is hardly my intention to show that the Pope is (or at least was as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger) a poor reader or interpreter of Derrida. Indeed I probably would not have mentioned the Pope at all had he not drawn attention to himself not so long ago (in September 2006) with what were taken to be some inflammatory words with regard to Islam. I mention him because, despite their enormous differences, I think there might have been—a bit, perhaps, like the conversation Derrida imagines between Heidegger and the theologian at the end of *Of Spirit*—the possibility of a dialogue between Derrida and Ratzinger. For what Derrida and Ratzinger shared is an interest in the relationship between religion and science, a renewed or enriched notion of reason that would not be divorced from faith. “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida’s title, could actually be the title of Ratzinger’s entire intellectual project, as I know it, an attempt to develop an enriched reason that goes beyond mere technical reason. While Derrida and Ratzinger would surely disagree over how to characterize or achieve this enriched reason, with Ratzinger speaking of a *logos* in conformity with God’s reasonable nature, and Derrida, in *Rogues*, for example, speaking of a form of the “reasonable” that goes beyond the merely rational, I think there would have been reason for a conversation on this subject between them. Were such a conversation to take place, were Ratzinger now to pursue this conversation alone, he might see that reason’s deconstruction is not the same as reason’s dissolution, and that a deconstructive reason might be more promising than a return to Greek *logos* for the kind of interfaith dialogue the Pope himself was seeking to promote in his perhaps ill-advised quotation of a fourteenth-century Byzantine Emperor in his dialogue with an educated Persian on the subject of faith in Christianity and Islam. And,

strangely, the Pontiff might have found in Derrida a *more hopeful* voice than his own. For while Ratzinger's discourse is one of crisis and dissolution, coupled with a call for reform and conversion, Derrida's secular thought, his unique brand of *laïcité*, argues for a kind of originary faith at the origin of both religion and science not simply as they *should be* but in some sense as they *already are*. Instead of diagnosing a crisis of European reason and proposing a reform or rehabilitation of it, Derrida wishes to demonstrate the faith—which would not be Jewish or Christian or Muslim—that makes science and religion possible in the first place and that is at the origin of our belief in these *today*.

Thus, what Derrida's critical enterprise appears to promote is a certain *laïcité* without theological dogma but also without the dogmatism of secularism, a *laïc* notion of democracy, hospitality, or living-on that would not be defined through (or even in opposition to) the theologico-political heritage, but that would act as a critical or deconstructive lever within these. This *laïcité* led Derrida not to some dogmatic separation of church and state, but to a radical critique of the "theologico-political" in the name or under the aegis of an unconditionality (the other, the event, justice) that exceeds and ultimately disrupts all sovereignty. It thus entails both a critical examination of the state in its theological origins or heritage and a notion of *justice* that would be the very force behind this *laïcité* and the nonteleological end toward which it moves.

An originary or radical secularity, then, or secularity without secularism: I am not happy with any of these formulations. I suggest them only because they mark this tension between the origin of the world and a particular opening or formulation of the world—much as, in many of Derrida's texts of the last two decades, the name "Europe" marks *both* a historical space and the universalizing movement that goes beyond this space. I retain these terms because of the origins of the word *secular* in the Latin *saecularis*, meaning worldly, belonging to an age or generation. And I retain them because in *our* world, in *this* world, this political climate, the word secular needs to be, I believe, won back from those discourses on the right that equate it with godlessness and immorality. Rather than think

of the secular as that which is *without* God and *without* morals, we need to think of it as that which is *without* dogmatism, whether religious or not, though not at all without faith and responsibility—indeed, as that which opens the very dimension of faith and interrupts every attempt to reduce faith to dogmatic belief. Derrida’s thought is of this world in this sense, and while the secular had its origins in a particular world, an originary or radical secularity points to the roots of that world in the coming of the other and an originary profession of faith—a radical secularity, then, *without* secularism. The “without” would thus have to be understood in the sense that Derrida understands it in the phrase “messianicity without messianism.” In *Marx & Sons* he explains:

It no longer has *any* essential relationship with what we might mean by messianism, which means at least two things: on the one hand, the memory of an historically determined revelation, whether Jewish or Judeo-Christian, and, on the other, a relatively determined figure of the Messiah. Messianicity *without* messianism excludes, in the purity of its very structure, these two conditions. Not that one must reject these, not that one must necessarily denigrate or destroy the historical figures of messianism, but these are possible only against the universal and quasi-transcendental backdrop of this structure of the “*without* messianism.” (2002a, 73)

If messianicity without messianism points toward a universality unhinged from any determined messianism, a radical secularity without secularism would point toward an origin of the world *without* either religious or secular dogmatism, an origin of the world that would be—in its response to the other—something like a *secular leap of faith*. A leap, as in Kierkegaard, beyond all epistemological and ethical codes and assurances but also, like the miracle we spoke of earlier, a leap that first engages all knowledge and ethics, a leap not in a world but a leap *to* a world, or rather, a leap that opens the world—miraculously.

Near the end of Derrida's interview on 9/11, Giovanna Borradori asks Derrida whether he isn't following Kierkegaard in his skepticism toward the Kantian *as if*, and Derrida responds:

No doubt, as always. But a Kierkegaard who would not necessarily be Christian, and you can imagine how difficult that is to think. . . . I always make *as if* I subscribed to the *as if*'s of Kant (which I am never quite able to do), or *as if* Kierkegaard helped me to think beyond his own Christianity, *as if* in the end he did not want to know that he was not Christian or refused to admit that he did not know what being Christian means. (In the end, I cannot quite bring myself to believe this, indeed I cannot quite bring myself to believe in general, that is, what is normally called "to believe.") (2003b, 135)

"*As if* Kierkegaard helped me to think beyond his own Christianity": that is, I would like to believe, not quite a principle of deconstruction, not quite one of its articles of faith, but one of its performative fictions—reading Plato *as if* Plato were to help us think beyond his own Platonism or Kierkegaard to think beyond Judeo-Christianity; to read Kierkegaard, then, in terms of a leap of faith that would no longer be Christian and would exceed, as Derrida puts it, "what is normally called 'to believe.'" Not a faith or a belief in secularism, then, but something like a secular belief, a belief in this nonrelation that my response to the other opens up, the radical secularity at the origin of faith and knowledge, religion and science. Call it what you will (there is perhaps no right name), but the name at least inscribes us in a world and calls us to a secular vocation, to a political mission—especially here in the United States—where nothing less than the world is at stake.



#### NOTES

1. This notion of *laïcité* is a nominalization of the adjective *laïc* or *laïque* dating from around 1880, a notion enshrined in the French Constitution of 1958. Here is Article 1 of the constitution: "La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale."

Elle assure l'égalité devant la loi de tous les citoyens sans distinction d'origine, de race ou de religion. Elle respecte toutes les croyances. Son organisation est décentralisée."

2. Though Derrida himself, to my knowledge, never entered into the debate surrounding the so-called "headscarf ban," at least one of his friends (and former students) did—Régis Debray, a member of the Stasi Commission appointed by French President Jacques Chirac to study the questions raised by the ban. Debray explains his support of the ban in *Ce que nous voile le voile: La République et le sacré*. In the summer of 2004, Derrida and Debray appeared together on French television for a lengthy one-on-one interview. The "headscarf ban" was never addressed directly during that program, though many of the premises for the debate were.
3. I am alluding here, of course, to Jean-Luc Nancy's long-awaited project, the first volume of which has recently appeared under the title *La Déclousion (Déconstruction du christianisme, 1)* (2005).
4. The premises for this deconstruction of the theologico-political are evident already in Derrida's 1976 essay on the American "Declaration of Independence," where it is shown how God functions in that founding political document as the final instance or authority—the "Supreme Judge and Sovereign"—able to unite constative and performative, statement and prescription, in order to guarantee that "these united Colonies are *and of right* ought to be free and independent states" (Derrida 2002c, 51–52; emphasis mine). Derrida's reading of sovereignty as essentially theologico-political is central to that text, and it is a constant refrain in *Rogues*, both in Derrida's analysis of the philosophical tradition's treatment of democracy and in the uniquely American alliance of democracy and religion.
5. I see no contradiction, then, between the thesis I am arguing for here and that developed by John Caputo in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997). Indeed, the subtitle of Caputo's volume—"religion without religion"—might well be another way of naming what I call here an "orginary secularity."
6. See also Derrida (2002b, 164–65).
7. Derrida says he wanted to think about the death penalty in order, "hopefully, to change things" (Derrida 2002d, 38).
8. See "God Bless America!" (2004), Samuel Weber's excellent essay on the theologico-political character of "the people" in the U.S. Constitution.
9. See Jean-Luc Nancy's long-awaited project, the first volume of which has recently appeared under the title *La Déclousion (Déconstruction du christianisme, 1)* (2005).
10. English translation in Derrida (2007).
11. The word *pacs* is an acronym ("Pacte Civil de Solidarité") for the provision adopted into French law in 1999 that allows both heterosexual and same-sex couples to enter into civil contracts or, translated literally, a "civil pact of solidarity."
12. Of course, it is difficult to know at this point what legitimates the notion of civil union at all—indeed, whether it is not itself, in whatever form, informed by a quasi-religious notion of the "family."

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