

## Derrida and the Messiah

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conversations

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They had a whole semester of semiotics under their belt, swimming in the deep end of postmodern theory. Foucault, Lacan, Lyotard, Derrida--they had read and discussed them all. By some fluke of history they even had a guest lecture from the post-structuralist queen of intertextuality, Julia Kristeva. Later in the year, Linda Hutcheon (one of the finest and most eloquent of the postmodern literary critics) was due to address the class. And their professor figured that it might be a good idea to have me come in and talk to the class about religion and postmodernity. Me. Preceded by Kristeva, followed by Hutcheon. Called upon to address this group of seasoned, Gen X, semiotically attuned postmodernists.

So I started with a rather innocent question that produced precisely the results that I expected.

What happens when postmodern thought and culture interface with religion?

"Religion gets deconstructed."

What do you mean?

"Well, a Foucauldian analysis uncovers the implicit power grab involved in any and all religious truth claims, demonstrating that religion is just a front for a regime of truth that will marginalize all dissent as it imposes its orthodoxy on everyone."

(This answer might be impenetrable to the average reader, but it's completely lucid to a postmodernist.) Anyone else?

"Wouldn't Lyotard's 'incredulity toward all metanarrative' also be the death knell of at least the three western monotheistic religions?"

Why is that?

"Well, they all tell pretty tall tales, don't they? The stories that they tell all make universal claims for themselves, and in a postmodern context it is pretty hard to believe any such claims."

"Yeah," added another student, "these religions, and probably all religions, fall into the trap of totality thinking. And a postmodernist would insist (and I would agree) that that kind of thinking simply legitimates violence. It would seem that the history of religious wars proves the point."

"And if we were to bring Derrida into the discussion," added yet

another, "then it becomes pretty clear that religion is the carrier of a metaphysics of presence par excellence. Religion banks on nothing less than the presence of 'God,' or the divine, or whatever. And then when you think about the importance of the 'Word' in religion--you know, the whole 'revelation' thing--Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism is pretty devastating."

So the clear consensus in the class was that when religion is confronted with postmodernity, religion gets a pretty serious beating. And if you were to read an awful lot of postmodernists--especially ones who teach on the eastern seaboard of the United States of America--it would seem that this kind of deconstructive dismissal of religion is pretty common.

Now there are two problems with this. The first is that this critique of religion seems to be quintessentially modern. After all, it was the Enlightenment that told us that religion would inevitably recede into the recesses of our cultural memory as the secular spirit progressively triumphed in history. But I thought that deconstruction was a post-Enlightenment, post-modern, and therefore a post-secular movement. How can it then be so easily employed to further the secularist agenda?

Second, if postmodernity is so clearly deconstructive of religion, then why do so many postmodern cultural expressions seem preoccupied with religious motifs, spirituality and even "God"? There is the famous Douglas Coupland quote from *Life After God*:

My secret is that I need God--that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.

And maybe we weren't too surprised when U2's Pop album was simply loaded with songs of spiritual longing like "Playboy Mansion," "If God Will Send an Angel," and "Wake Up Dead Man." But hasn't anybody noticed, had the students in this semiotics class not noticed, that the Smashing Pumpkins' Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness was also spiritually preoccupied? In "bullet with butterfly wings" Billy Corgan sings that while he cannot believe that he can be saved, nevertheless, his deepest desire is to have a relationship with God like Jesus did:

tell me i'm the only one tell me there's no other one  
jesus was an only son tell me i'm the chosen one Jesus  
was an only son for you

Does anybody notice that this is a prayer? Or consider "fuck you

(an ode to no one)," with its lyrics "you can't bring me back / cause i give it all back to you." Isn't this song a desperate and passionate cry into the void, a call to an unknown God? Who else can this ode be directed to?

The professor had also assigned this class David Lodge's novel *Small World*, no doubt because of its delightful dismantling of the pretense of much contemporary literary criticism. But had anyone noticed that the author likens professional conferences to medieval Christian pilgrimages? And might this not suggest that an important interpretive clue to this novel is to read the protagonist's quest for the woman who has captured his heart and imagination as nothing less than a spiritual pilgrimage?

My point was simple. If postmodernity is the end of religion, then it is rather curious that religious themes and motifs stubbornly reappear in cultural products that are self-consciously postmodern.

The problem is that "the end of religion" and "the death of God" are modernist, Enlightenment dogmas. They are the ultimate conclusion of the modernist blind faith in human autonomy. In the hubris of a modernist worldview, the voice of God and the experience of spirituality gets drowned out by the self-assured, arrogant voice of "rational men." The self-centered Cartesian ego finds it necessary to eradicate anything that might be a threat to or a limit on its imperialist self-expression. Hence, God must die. That is the modernist pretense! Anything that was truly postmodern, however, would want to dismantle this imperialist, other-denying ideology of modernity. Therefore, I suggest that we consider the movement called "deconstruction" not to be the logical result of the secularizing tendency of the Enlightenment, but a post-secular movement that moves beyond the Enlightenment debunking of religion. Deconstruction is post-secular not only because its practitioners recognize (at long last!) that the Enlightenment vision is itself a religion, but because they cannot keep from hoping for a Messiah.

All of which brings us to Derrida, one of postmodernism's most influential thinkers. Born into a non-observant Jewish home in Christianized Algiers; named "Jackie" after the movie star, Jackie Cooper; raised on Rue Saint Augustin. Jackie Derrida. Jacques Derrida. A Jew who did not circumcise his own sons. But a Jew nonetheless. And a Jew in a struggle with the Messiah.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. To understand deconstruction, we need to know what deconstruction is not. Derrida is no nihilist. Deconstruction is not a theoretical cover for a simplistic nihilism out to destroy and tear down just for the hell of it! Derrida says that what gives deconstruction its movement is "constantly to suspect, to criticize the given determinations of

culture, of institutions, of legal systems, not in order to destroy them or simply to cancel them, but to be just with justice, to respect this relation to the other as justice." Justice has always been the ethical drive behind deconstruction. It is what deconstruction affirms.

Derrida's foremost North American interpreter (his beloved disciple), John Caputo, notes that "every deconstructive analysis is undertaken in the name of something, something affirmatively un-deconstructible." And Derrida is candid about what that un-deconstructible something is: "Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible. Deconstruction is justice." If everything were deconstructible, there would be no point to deconstruction. Why deconstruct? To make space for justice, which can be defined for deconstructionists as hospitality to the other.

But there is an important distinction to be made here. Justice is not law. Law, for Derrida, is an instantiation, construction, or determination of justice. This means that any and all law is always deconstructible in the name of justice. What then is justice? This is very difficult to say, and I certainly do not speak as a Derrida expert on this. But as far as I can make out, justice, for Derrida, is an undeconstructible call that is the basis for the deconstruction of law. Justice simply ceases to be justice as soon as we think we have "got it" and instantiated it in positive law.

We then might well ask whether it is possible to have a determinate justice. And the Derridean answer is, no. This is the "im-possibility" (the hyphen is a favorite device of deconstructionists to bring out the multiple resonances of words--in this case, emphasizing possibility even while denying it). The im-possible call to justice is undeconstructible because it exceeds, or is the basis of, any deconstruction of actual, achievable futures and positive laws. But it is precisely this im-possibility that gives deconstruction its passion.

Now what has all of this to do with the matter of postmodernity and religion? Well, as soon as we hear the language of impossibility from a child of Abraham (no matter how far that child has wandered), we do well to overhear biblical overtones. Is anything impossible for God? asks the angel when news of a son for post-menopausal Sarah is greeted with laughter. And when a Jew, raised on Rue Saint Augustin and rooted in the prophets of Israel, speaks of justice and passion then we know that matters religious--indeed, matters of undeconstructible faith--are lurking nearby.

Derrida does not disappoint. He tells us that while religion, like law, is deconstructible, faith, like justice, is "something that is

presupposed by the most radical deconstructive gesture. You cannot address the other, speak to the other, without an act of faith, without testimony." In other words, to speak to another is to ask the other to "believe in me" or "trust me." Such faith, says Derrida, is "absolutely universal." And this universal structure of faith is an undeconstructible that Derrida calls the messianic structure or messianicity. We do well to hear Derrida out on this:

As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come; that is the opening of experience. Someone is to come, is now to come. Justice and peace will have to do with this coming of the other, with the promise. Each time I open my mouth, I am promising something. When I speak to you, I am telling you that I promise to tell you something, to tell you the truth. Even if I lie, the condition of my lie is that I promise to tell you the truth. So the promise is not just one speech act among others; every speech act is fundamentally a promise. This universal structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future, for the coming, and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with justice--that is what I call the messianic structure.

This messianic structure, or messianicity, has everything to do with faith. Indeed, Derrida confesses that "there is no society without faith, without trust in the other." But messianicity is no more to be confused with messianisms than is justice to be confused with law. Like law, messianisms are an identification in time and history of the messianic structure. Messianisms say that the Messiah has appeared at this time, in this tradition, in this person, with this name.

Such messianisms, like all claims of law to have embodied justice, must for Derrida remain deconstructible, because the messianic is an im-possible, indeterminate structure of experience. For him, the non-presence of the Messiah is the very stuff of promise. Again, Caputo interprets Derrida: "The coming of the Messiah, the messianic coming, is not to be confounded with his actual presence in recorded history, with occurring in ordinary time, with actually showing up in space and time, which would ruin everything....The Messiah is a very special promise, namely, a promise that would be broken were it to be kept, whose possibility is sustained by its impossibility."

But Derrida has a problem which many readers will quickly grasp. Are the religions of the Book just specific manifestations of the general structure of messianicity, or are the events of revelation in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions "absolute events,

irreducible events which have unveiled this messianicity"? Naturally, Derrida wants to claim that they are only manifestations at best. Any particular, historical appearing of the Messiah would have to be deconstructed. The problem, however, is that any experience of messianicity, of promise, of hope, of faith, indeed, of that which is undeconstructible, is always determinate. But what deconstruction requires is a non-determinate messianicity, a weak messianism that will not claim too much for itself. Caputo says, "It does not give content to its faith and hope, but it retains the form of faith and hope." This is an impossible, contentless, and indeterminate messianicity--because any determinate Messiah, Derrida suspects, spells war.

So Derrida is on the horns of a dilemma--torn between messianicity and messianism. And then he perceives another possibility. A more profound and, I think, a more spiritually honest possibility. Again, we need to cite him at some length. And if you honored Douglas Coupland's request that you be in a quiet place when he told you about his need for God, then I suggest that you take a similar stance in reading what follows. Derrida suggests that perhaps the Messiah is not simply the one that he is constantly waiting for:

But the Messiah might also be the one I expect even while I do not want him to come. There is the possibility that my relation to the Messiah is this: I would like him to come, I hope that he will come, that the other will come, as other, for that would be justice, peace, and revolution--because in the concept of messianicity there is revolution--and, at the same time, I am scared. I do not want what I want and I would like the coming of the Messiah to be infinitely postponed, and there is this desire in me.

Here is where Derrida is, I think, most honest. Why is Derrida (and perhaps an entire generation) so resistant to a determinate Messiah? Just because such determinations often make for war? Just because of a penchant for universality over singularity? Just because of an incredulity toward all metanarrative, a suspicion of all totality thinking and a denial of any determinate presence? No! Derrida wants a formal, contentless messianicity because it is, in fact, more comfortable and less scary than an embodied Messiah who comes--as other--with peace (not war) and real instantiated justice (the poor hear the good news, the hungry are fed, the rich are toppled from their thrones, the trees and the hills sing for joy). Such a Messiah requires a decision, a decisiveness, a determination that suspends--indeed deconstructs--postmodern undecideability.

There is no messianicity apart from a Messiah. There is no formal

structure of promise apart from an embodied revelation, an incarnation, of messianic promise and fulfillment. Human life and deconstructive justice require such determinations, and such determinations require the risk of faith.

We are waiting for someone to come, for the opening of experience, says Derrida. Indeed, the constant word, the sentiment that pervades deconstruction, says Caputo, is "come, viens." This fearful invitation, this call, this impassioned cry to the Messiah to come is at the spiritual heart of postmodernity. Even though such a coming scares Derrida, the Messiah must come, because the terror cannot go on. There must be a justice rooted in hospitality--a real, embodied justice, a healing river of justice.

Biblical faith has a response for such an honest longing, even when that longing is made tentative by fear. For Scripture responds to the human heart crying out for justice to come, for healing to come, indeed for the Messiah to come, with its own invitation (Rev. 22: 17, 20):

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come."

And let everyone who hears say, "Come."

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The one who testifies to these things says,

"Surely I am coming soon."

Amen, come soon, Lord Jesus.

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