

Religion 667 - Fall, 2007 - Syracuse University
Topic: Derrida and Religion
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The premise behind this course is that there is a suggestive notion of “religion” in the work of Jacques Derrida locatable in the cluster of concepts surrounding the “affirmation” of the “unconditional” or the “undeconstructible,” including ideas like the “unconditional without sovereignty,” the “weak force” of the unconditional, the “possibility of the impossible,” expressions that Derrida sometimes suggests can be used to describe “God.”

Sessions 1-3: To establish this idea we need to get a good footing in the so called “early” Derrida, which to a certain extent is Derrida *tout court* (period!). The most economical way to do this is to take up *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 1-164. I will add a few things from those days about the relation to Levinas in “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). While the idea will be to get the “nuts and bolts” of deconstruction straight I will point out: how the aporetics of the “proper name” anticipates the aporetics of the unconditional and the impossible in the so called later writings; how the binarity of “Christian and Jew” is implicated in the binarity of “speech and writing;” how the words “God” and “theology” tend to function in those early texts as terms for closure as opposed to the later texts in which the name of God is the name of an opening, of a desire beyond desire .

Session 4: I will then turn straight to the so-called “later” Derrida in which the issues of the unconditional and of religion become thematic. The turning point essay is “The Force of Law” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) where the notion of the “undeconstructible” is first announced.

Sessions 5-6: The autobiographical/Augustinian texts, like *Circumfession* in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) are crucial. While “Circumfession” is the text I will focus on in class I encourage you to take a look at (1) “A Silkworm of One’s Own” (*Acts of Religion*); (2) *Monolingualism of the Other*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); and (3) “Typewriter Ribbon” in *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), which are on reserve.

Session 7: Another crucial element is added with the well known notion of the messianic without messianisms in *Specters of Marx*; trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). I am assigning 3 chapters of this text, but you might also will find some help in “Marx and Sons,” in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed . Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), on reserve.

Session 8: The pivotal 1996 essay “Faith and Knowledge” (*Acts of Religion*) which we will try to treat in some detail. There is a lot here and this is a good paper topic.

Session 9: I am especially impressed by Derrida’s notion of “the impossible” which has deep religious resonance. Although omnipresent in Derrida’s later work, I will take up the exposition in *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Ch. 8, “As If It Were Possible...” is particularly helpful.

Session 10: Derrida interviews especially well, and there are several helpful interviews with him on religion: *A Taste for the Secret*, with Mauricio Ferrari, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001); “Epoche and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 27-50; “The Becoming Possible of the Impossible: An Interview with Derrida,” in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003) (on reserve).

Session 11: the treatment of “forgiveness” in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge , 1997)

Session 12: the concept of “hospitality” in “Hostipitality” in *Acts of Religion*.

Session 13-14: I am all along leading up to the theme of the “unconditional without

sovereignty” found in *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) and “The University without Condition” in *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

Course Requirements

- (1) Seminar Participation (20%)
- (2) 2 Research Papers (40% each) (4,000-4,500 words each):

Paper #1:

In this paper you may take up any of the texts or issues up to and including *Specters of Marx*. If you are interested in the “early” Derrida—the works of the 1960s and 1970s—and their implications for religion, this is the paper to do that. You might also—either for this paper or paper #2—want to work on the question of Derrida and mystical theology, which I have chosen not to cover in the lectures.

Oct. 2. Statement of topic

Oct. 30 Paper due

Paper #2:

In this paper you may take up any of the texts or issues discussed in class from “Faith and Knowledge” to the end. Here I do not want papers on the “early” Derrida—unless you want to do your second paper on the question of Derrida and mystical theology, which spans the whole of Derrida’s career.

Nov. 13. Statement of topic

Dec. 14 Paper due

Office Hours (HL 506)

I have scheduled office hours—Tuesday, 3:45-5:30, Wednesday, 1:00-4:15—but you should, for safety's sake, make an appt in advance by email at johncaputo@comcast.net.

Reserve Room

I have placed the following books on reserve for you:

Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978)

Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)

Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995)

Derrida and Negative Theology, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshan (Albany: SUNY, 1992)

Ghostly Demarcations, ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999).

Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 27-50

A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus, ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003)

Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997.)

John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession, eds. John D. Caputo & Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

Questioning God, eds. John D. Caputo, Michael Scanlon, Mark Dooley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

God, the Gift and Postmodernism, eds. John D. Caputo & Michael Scanlon (Bloomington:

Indiana University Press, 1999.

Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999)

Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *Impossible God: Derrida's Theology* (Hants, England: Ashgate, 2003).

Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, Vol. 39, No.3 (September, 2006).

Syllabus

- August 28 Orientation; *Of Grammatology*, Part I.1-2, pp. 1-73.
- September 4 *Of Grammatology*, Part I.3 - II.1, pp. 74-140
- 11 *Of Grammatology*, Part II.2, pp. 141-164
- 18 "The Force of Law," Part I, in *Acts of Religion*, pp. 228-58
- 25 "Circumfessions" in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, §§1-30, pp. 1-157.
- October 2 _____. §§31-59, pp. 158-315
- 9 *Specters of Marx*, chs. 1, 3 & 5.
- 16 "Faith and Knowledge," *Acts of Religion*, pp. 40-101.
- 23 *Paper Machine*
- 30 (1) *A Taste for the Secret*; (2) "Epoche and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida" in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, pp. 27-50; "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible: An Interview with Derrida," in *A Passion for the Impossible*, pp. 21-50
- November 6 *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*
- 13 "Hostipitality," *Acts of Religion*, pp. 356-420
- 20 Thanksgiving
- 27 *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Preface, xi-xv; Part I, pp. 1-114
- December 3 *Rogues*, Part II, pp. 118-end. "The University without Condition" in *Without Alibi*, pp. 202-37.