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The Phenomenology
of Prayer



PERSPECTIVES IN
CONTINENTAL
PHILOSOPHY

The Saving or Sanitizing of Prayer

The Problem of the Sans in Derrida's Account of Prayer

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In his book, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, John Caputo proposes the following hypothesis:

What if theology were to confess itself no longer able to save the name of God? What if, beyond the economy of sacrifice, it were to give up the name of God to translatability without return? What if it were to pray without (*sans*) knowing where to direct its prayers, without its sense of destinal assurance, without trusting that its prayers up to heaven rise? What if it were to have faith without faith, *foi sans foi* (maybe even *foi à sang froid*), the *sans* serving to save faith from dogmatism, to believe without quite knowing in what it believed, so that it had to ask, “what do I love when I love my God?”¹

This project or hypothesis is based on a series of moves made by Derrida over the past few years on the possibility of a religion without religion, faith without *faith* (as in the *Faith*, the *Credo*, or *der Glaube*), a messianism without a Messiah, or a praying without (*sans*) direction or addressee. Though each of these possibilities will get some attention in this essay, I shall focus on Derrida's (and Caputo's) claim that this directionless praying, which does not possess recognizable limits concerning its addressee (if one even exists), is the essential element of all praying—even the essential element of the religious life itself. In particular, while recognizing the valuable in-

sights to be found in Derrida's rudderless and wayward prayers,² I shall argue that we should hesitate before according such prayers pride of place. For such a move may lead us to a blindness toward or even an exclusion of some fruitful extensions or variations of our understanding of prayer and thus to a impoverished understanding of determinate religion and of human finitude.

The key to these blind spots or exclusions lies in the difficulty of properly determining the nature of this absolute praying, insofar as it is understood as the essential element of all praying, that is, as a sort of transcendental condition for the possibility of true prayer. It is a question that has been broached in one way or another by a number of thinkers, including both Caputo and Derrida. It concerns the transformation of this minimal condition, this quasi-transcendental principle (as Derrida calls it),³ into a concrete and particular (singular) praying/prayer or determinate religion—even if it is *only* a praying or a religion without religion or a praying or religion in the desert.⁴ This problem is raised by Derrida and Caputo in terms of the following hermeneutical question: Is this disenfranchised character of prayer a transhistorical condition or is it a just a unique example or expression of prayer? This question raises an even more important one: If we take this quasi-transcendental condition to be an historical, singular event—as, I think, Caputo does⁵—then how are we to understand its relation to historical, determinate, and particular praying? In what follows, I argue that it is in large part the transforming of this transcendental condition into a determinate possibility (a historical event) that allows for the double exclusion or blindness noted above.

The first exclusion: Might not such a position tempt one to believe that Derrida is truly ready for canonization? On this view, a person who prays the prayers of his or her community—the prayers of petition or confession, say—would feel a bit left out or second class. Such a person would be regarded as too proud or perhaps not quite fearful enough. In other words, such persons, who seem to be praying in a more determinate fashion, would be lacking a certain sangfroid. In contrast, a sort of fearlessness is more clearly evidenced in Derrida's blind prayers, which, lacking any direction, seem to reach out bravely into the unknown. Following Kierkegaard, Derrida points to the relation between uncertainty (what is *secret*) and absolute, unconditioned passion for the other—even the absolute Other.⁶ Caputo points to this connection in his commentary on Derrida's *Passions*: "It is only when the 'come!' calls for something it cannot

know or foresee that the come really has passion.”⁷ Here passion is pushed to its “highest pitch,” in a sense similar to Kierkegaard’s understanding of the incalculable passion of faith.

A second exclusion: Does not this privileging leave other human endeavors somewhat further from grace? Would not such a prayer be directed to a God “who has nothing to do with knowing and unknowing?” It seems as if this slight possible genuflection in Derrida’s direction risks losing sight of the necessary openness produced in any prayer whatsoever. As Chrétien notes, even to petition God is “to recognize in the act itself that one is not the origin of every good and gift and to recognize in the act itself Him whom we address for who He is.”⁸ Equally, this privileging of the wounded aspect of our relationship to the other, insofar as it may absorb other aspects of prayer, may leave out fruitful analogies with other modes of being human. It would represent a sort of jealousy that would have the paradoxical effect of limiting difference, tempting us to withhold redemption from other human dramas.

This foreclosing, as a temptation to absolute exemplification, also manifests itself in the ambivalent term used by Derrida, “messianicity” (*messianicité*), a term that is meant to capture this wounded character of prayer as a form of radical temporality. As a condition of our praying as finite human subjects, Derrida speaks of a looking forward to or expectation of an absolute justice and peace, which is inaugurated (invented) by a Messiah who, however, can never come. As Derrida points out, if one takes this messianic promise as sort of transcendental condition (or even as a quasi-transcendental condition) for the possibility of any true praying at all, then it is structurally impossible for such a messianic prayer to be answered without the destruction of prayer itself. In such a world all things would be known, all things would be present. This follows if we maintain something like the Kantian transcendental model. It would seem that such a structural messianicity would make it impossible for any particular religion or religious expression or evocation to bring us within or toward such a horizon (especially if it is not even a horizon). If we say that this condition was experienced or that such an experience provided for a singular determinate religion, this would seem to implicate one in a paralogsism of the Kantian sort; namely, the substituting of a structural condition for a singular event that it structures.

James K. A. Smith has taken up this question of Derrida’s “Kantianism” in his essay, “Re-Kanting Postmodernism?: Derrida’s Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone.” Smith notes a number of

ways in which Derrida explicitly takes upon himself the mantle of the Enlightenment, generally, and Kant, specifically, in articulating the hope for a “universal religion”:

For Derrida, like Kant, such a religion is ultimately a matter of ethics or justice, such that the “religion” which Derrida discloses is remarkably similar to Kant’s “moral religion,” including the tie that binds it to democracy. Further, this plays itself out within a framework which understands the relationship between faith and knowledge in a manner we might describe as “hyper-Kantian,” faulting even Kant for failing to radically think religion within the limits of reason alone—for not being enlightened enough.⁹

We can see the seeds of Smith’s ultimate conclusions in this passage. Smith’s basic concern is with Derrida’s apparent desire for a universal religion that distinguishes itself from all particular or dogmatic faith. We can also see here the foundation for his critique, namely, Derrida’s “hyper-Kantianism,” that is, his support of reason over faith. Though my investigations here reflect similar concerns about Derrida’s notion of universal religion, I think that Smith’s critique, insofar as it is based on the faith/reason question, misses the radical character of Derrida’s critique of dogmatic religion and of Kant. A brief look at how Derrida describes his relationship to particular religions and his hope for a universal religion, especially as it relates to Kant and Christianity, will help us to see the extent to which Derrida does follow in the footsteps of the Enlightenment and Kant while at the same time showing how his project differs sharply from Kant and the old faith/reason distinction, and this will better prepare us for a closer examination of the question of prayer.

One of the major beliefs that Derrida shares with the Enlightenment critique of particular religions is his concern for the violence that springs up from dogmatic convictions. Whether it be the “secret pathologies” of which Kant was so suspicious or the “enthusiasm” bred by sacred rites that concerns Jan Patocka, Derrida, too, worries about the inhospitality and even violence that lead to wars of religion and death. Following Kant and Patocka, however, he sees possibilities for universalizing the Christian account that would strip faith of the need for unique dogmatic revelation:

Christian themes may be drawn together around the idea of the *gift* as the gift of death, the limitless gift of a particular sort of

death: infinite love (the Good as the goodness which is infinitely self-forgetting), sin and salvation, and repentance and sacrifice. What is brought about by and links all of these significations, in an internal and necessary manner, is a logic, which at its heart (and this is why we can still, up to a certain point, call it a “logic”) does not require *a revelatory event or the revelation of an event*. This logic does not need to think about a particular revelatory event but only of the possibility of such an event. This is a major difference, which allows one to participate in such a discussion without referring to a dogmatic, institutional religion. It also allows one to propose a genealogy, which reflects on the possibility and essence of religion without being an article of faith.¹⁰

We can see here that Smith seems to be right in his genealogy that links Derrida’s hope for a religion without religion to certain fundamental Enlightenment dreams and aspirations, but before turning directly to how these relate to the specific question of prayer, we need to examine more closely Smith’s claim that this move by Derrida should also be seen as a kind of “hyper-Kantianism” that favors reason over faith.¹¹ This critique, for which one finds a good deal of evidence in *Faith and Knowledge*, goes too far, in my view, and risks missing the radical character of Derrida’s critique of Kant and even of Patocka.

The radicalization of Kant by Derrida is not in the direction of reason or some sort of rationality, even if one were to call it a “deconstructive” rationality. Rather, the move that must be made if we are to protect the world from the violence of enthusiasm is toward a more radical passivity—a passivity that is rooted in an encounter with the other (even the Wholly Other) that breeds no violent inclinations (or martyrs) while still engendering strict moral obligation to the other:

There is no face-to-face or exchanging of glances [*de regard échangé*] between God and me, between the other and myself. God looks at me [*me regarde*], but I do not see him; though it is from this look that looks upon me that my responsibility begins. Thus, in effect, there comes to be or is discovered the “this regards me” [*ça me regarde*], which causes me to say: “This is my concern, my business, my responsibility,” though not in the Kantian sense of an autonomy over that which I do in complete liberty from a law that I give myself. Rather this claim of re-

sponsibility operates within the heteronomy of the “this regards me” even where I see and know nothing and where I lack initiative; where I lack the initiative over that which commands me to make decisions, which, nevertheless, are my own and which I alone must accept.¹²

It is precisely the desire to avoid the pitfalls of the classical distinctions cited here that provokes Derrida to redefine the fundamental nature of the condition that would make a universal religion without specific dogma possible. The paradoxical character of this condition is precisely, however, that which makes it equally an uncondition, that is, as we noted above, it is only quasi-transcendental.

Calling it “quasi-transcendental” is meant to warn us to keep a “safe distance” from the abyss that marks the danger of either seeking after such transcendental illusions or from becoming mired in dogmatic religions or faiths.¹³ Despite Derrida’s and Caputo’s clear warnings, one sees signs or traces of such a conflation. This futural horizon may in some sense “come.” One may be in a position to speak about the *messianic* as a sort of real horizon or possibility about which something, even if it is rather negative, can be said and said truly. Here, for example, is a verdict rendered recently by Derrida about this advent of the other: It will be “the end of the end of history, everything will begin again without a useless shroud.”¹⁴ Here (though in an admittedly difficult passage in a very difficult book), Derrida dreams a rather determinate, if radical, dream of a life without the constraints of a grasping subject who is always trying to peek under the veil of being, trying to speculate about his or her ultimate future in order to see what is really going on, or even one who tries to take a look under the shroud covering his or her own death in order to gain control or mastery over it. Such a de-centered and dissolved subject would no longer seek to possess and preserve his or her property, what is *proper* (the holy or the pure), or even that most proper of property, his or her own life. Here in this desert, in this deserted space, one might find a pure religion, a kind of real resurrection in the here and now that has nothing to do with surviving death but rather concerns a sur-viving of our grasping subjectivity.¹⁵ Would not this hope resemble Kant’s dream of a religion (the invisible church) within the limits of *reason* (or ultimate passion) alone?

Are we truly to say that this religion of the philosophers is the aim or end of religion? Can we claim this even if we are here speaking of a religion without religion, which is an opening, a desert in which a

thousand blossoms may bloom? It is not clear how this ankhôrite or desertlike religion, with its prayers that always appear lost, could truly be the proper destination or end of prayer (or, as Caputo suggests in *Prayers and Tears*, a praying suitable for the *fin de siècle*). As Derrida himself insists in *Faith and Knowledge*, religion has (at least) two roots; namely, the belief or faith in the absolute Other to come, and a sense of the holy, the pure in our midst.¹⁶ Even if we accept some aspects of the story that lays significant blame for religious carnage and violence on an idolization or fetishizing of our lands, temples, and rites (an idolizing that attempts to keep pure and holy things that were/are never truly or absolutely such), we need to recognize this desire for holiness. We need to recognize the presence of the divine in our midst as equally religious, as another aspect of our finitude.

Certainly, praying for one's daily bread implicates the finite character of our desires and moves us out of our own sense of rights and propriety. We pray that our daily bread comes, please (I pray you—*Je vous prie*)! In this way, uncertainty is opened up in our sense of self and our sense of mastery that puts into question the very thing for which we ask and makes possible the coming of something else. Yet this absolute end, which is not a determinate end and which may aim at a final *Verdict*—with a capital “V”—which disrupts our conceptions of what is pure or holy does not simply destroy, it seems to me, the small and not so small determinate verdicts that come to us from the other. I think that we do better to insist that the ultimate or final *Verdict* is better understood as a transcendental condition (no matter how quasi-transcendental). In doing so, we shall be less likely to find in our stumbling, all-too-human petitions, confessions, and praise something to be replaced by a pure/simple desertlike faith. And one hopes that we shall be encouraged to reflect more deeply and seriously on how these two verdicts are related.

It seems to me that we cannot avoid speaking of the essentially mediated and hermeneutical character of our existence. The other that purely (merely?) *confronts* us as a given is not yet a gift, precisely because its status as aneconomic, something outside my area of control, is not yet brought out. It is precisely prayer that enacts this by testifying to the belief that what confronts me is not my own doing, not under my control. It is in the wounded word of prayer that the giftedness of the given is testified to in the faith of the believer. This enactment is precisely the performative noted by both Derrida and Caputo.¹⁷ Such performing, however, is always limited in its translat-

ing and transfiguring by the given situations of everyday life, something that seems to be lost at times in our rush to pronounce that deconstruction is “faith itself”¹⁸ and also, therefore, nondeconstructible.¹⁹ The performing of prayer is grounded in some conception of God or the Other. As Graham Ward points out, Job’s and Augustine’s questioning of God preceded from particular views about the Divine, even as their questioning transfigures and opens up spaces for new encounters with this Other.²⁰ The risk of omnidirectionality and omnipositivity, the “amen!” that is reduced to an all-encompassing, “Yes! Yes!” (*Oui, Oui*), risks a lack of engagement.²¹ Such a fear of engagement may be endemic to a culture currently shaped in many ways by the “death of God,” but any movement that can be called “religious” — even if it is a religion without religion — must perform something determinate.

As Caputo himself reminds us (though I think not quite forcefully enough): “So Derrida’s empty, desert-like messianic is determinately situated at the end of this century and is turned toward an ‘absolute surprise’ and the possibility of the impossible that *does* after all — what would not? — reflect certain determinate circumstances even as it conceives itself as a ‘radicalization . . . in the tradition of a certain Marxism.’”²² It seems we need to see the wounded aspect of prayer in the light of a dynamic interaction that occurs between *that which* received the wound and the direction of healing implicit in the idea of the wound itself. As Ricœur notes in his essay on the limits of phenomenology in the sphere of religion: “Religion is like language itself, which is itself only realized in languages. . . . This monumental fact condemns phenomenology to pass along the humble roads of a hermeneutic and more precisely through a hermeneutic that is textual or scriptural.”²³

As a limited example of this hermeneutic, I would like to conclude with an examination of a famous encounter with God by a Hebrew prophet. The idea of the prophet has been used by some recent theologians and philosophers of religion as an important example of a religiosity that runs counter to the theological and liturgical pretensions of determinate religion. The story is told that the prophets of old are best understood as deconstructive voices who challenged the dogmatic pretensions of the local people, denounced the local people’s ritual practices and observances, and proclaimed an ultimate and unknowable messianic future that is always to come. While we certainly see evidence of this in the outcry of an Amos or Isaiah for example, we must also consider that prophet proclaimed

by the Deuteronomist to be unsurpassed insofar as he saw God “face-to-face” (however metaphorically we may take this) in his tremendous majesty and mystery *and* gave the determinate Law, which formed a people. I will conclude, therefore, with an examination of one of Moses’ most important encounters with God, as recounted in the third chapter of the book of Exodus.²⁴

A religion without religion would take this story as centered (or decentered) around God’s apparent rejection of Moses’ desire for a name for God, a master name that would seal the deal with both the Israelites and the Egyptians: “And God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am (I shall be who I shall be).’ And He said, ‘You shall say this to the children of Israel: *I am* has sent me to you’” (Exod. 3:14). On this account, Moses is then sent off with his tail between his legs and told to free the captives! On the one hand, I have argued that we should embrace this account insofar as it points to a problematic sense of our subjectivity and our desire for such master names. We *should* be concerned by how we use and understand such names, for the possession of such master name would seem to make further prayer and action unnecessary. If you had such a name, you would need nothing else—nothing more would or could be said. We would have the absolutely holy and pure in our possession and thus would have the satisfaction of all our desires.

On the other hand, we need to recognize that we are starting in the middle of the story. God did in fact give Moses a name, and the event did in fact take place on holy ground, even if it was in the land of Midian. Moses was given a perfectly good name: He was before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What is more, he was confronted by a voice, the sort of voice that demands that slaves be freed. Now certainly this is not the Great Judgment, the final Verdict, and, in many ways, as Caputo points out so nicely: Thanks be to God!²⁵ Nevertheless, it is a verdict of sorts, insofar as it sets out a determinate ground for action—even religious action. It founds yet again the people of Israel—another chapter in this long story. The verdict would not be a pure/mere revelation of God’s secret nature but would, rather, speak to the alliance or covenant enacted between Moses and God. If we understand this encounter in this way, it can also be seen as a covenant that may be brought about between each one of us and the other (even, as in this case, the *absolute Other*, God), insofar as this alliance, no matter how fragile, is made possible and maintained by the very space realized in praying and listening. It is

made possible for us by our rereading of and thus testifying to the story that leads up to Moses and that continues up to the present.

It is clear, I think, that we need to be more careful, ask more questions, and be more open to the silences and aporia that encircle this quasi-transcendental account of a pure “yes, yes” to an absolute (non)coming. We need to allow these questions and concerns to hover before us in order that they might alert us to possible occlusions of the other that such a desire for a religion without religion might engender toward the everyday comings and goings of our lives and to a potential disgust with the temporary holy places in which we find rest. Certainly, we are called to be aware of this ideal or quasi-prayer, this absolute prayer that would give or pledge everything over to the other as if in one go—a prayer that would give to this unknown *you* “everything, time and death, the food out of my mouth, without return.”²⁶ However, in practice such an unperformable or quasi-performable performative might invoke a sort of self-hatred. Though there is a long-standing tradition in some theologies that edges toward such absolute mistrust, any theology must account for the fact that we enact (and must as finite creatures so enact—this dis-solving, this dis-positioning of the self within the dual demand of the religious life that keeps an eye on the future without disdaining the gifts of the present. Such a religious life can truly say “Well come!” in thanksgiving over the coming of a simple loaf of bread, over the miracle of the Exodus from Egypt or the emancipation from slavery in any time. On this view, we are called in each situation, each day, to say “Amen” to the daily tasks and gifts of life. This *amen* is not a simple “let it be” to an impossible advent but a thankful, fearful *amen* to the duties and gifts uniquely laid before each one of us. Thus Moses said to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob regarding the specific task of freeing the Israelites, Yes! *Amen*—that is, if perhaps Moses spoke French, “*Qu’il soit ainsi!*”—let it be so!