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Robbins - De-Nominating Religion and Postmodernism - JCRT 2.2

## De-Nominating Religion and Postmodernism: A Conversation between Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida

A review of *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); \$19.95.

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In the Fall of 1997 at Villanova University, a major international conference devoted to the theme of 'Religion and Postmodernism' was held.<sup>1</sup> A record of the proceedings from this conference has been published recently in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, a collection of essays edited by John D. Caputo and Michael Scanlon. This volume includes twelve essays from a distinguished body of philosophers and theologians, as well as responses from Jacques Derrida. The introduction states that the purpose of the conference was "to discuss the question of religion at the end of the millennium" (1); and while many contributors of note are included in this volume (e.g., John D. Caputo, Richard Kearney, Merold Westphal, David Tracy, Mark C. Taylor, Edith Wyschogrod, Françoise Meltzer, and John Dominic Crossan), clearly the significance and chief value of this text lies in the clarity it gives to what has become an entrenched debate between Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and their followers.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the dialogue that took place between Derrida and Marion at this conference was the first public exchange between these two enormously significant thinkers in the field of religion and postmodernism. The review that follows, therefore, will focus exclusively on this exchange, which is represented in the collection by Marion's essay, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology'" with a response from Derrida (20-53), and a roundtable discussion between Marion and Derrida, moderated by Richard Kearney (54-78). Through these various exchanges, what will become evident is that the differences between Marion and Derrida do not represent choices either for or against religion, but rather, two distinct denominations of religion in the spirit of postmodernism.

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3. It is a special irony, perhaps even a contradiction, that the differences between Derrida and Marion have so often been pitted in the form of a contest, or as a matter of agreement and disagreement. It is even more of an irony when one considers the matter of dispute—namely, "negative theology," whether there is such a thing, and if so, how it might *best* be named,

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<sup>1</sup>Largely due to the success of this first gathering, there has since been a second "Religion and Postmodernism" conference held at Villanova University in the Fall of 1999, and another planned for Fall 2001. The 1999 conference focused primarily on the new school of radical orthodox Christian theology. The 2001 conference will be devoted to postmodern readings of St. Augustine's *Confessions*.

<sup>2</sup>For example, see Jean Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, Thomas A. Carlson, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

which is certainly not to say *most understood*. For with “negative theology,” as both Derrida and Marion will attest, perhaps belatedly but no less assuredly, one passes beyond all forms of predication, whether in the affirmative or negative, and instead, passes into a form of discourse that is “purely pragmatic.”<sup>3</sup> Such a pragmatic discourse, according to Marion, operates with “no ground, no essence, no presence” (“On the Name,” 37). If such is the case, it follows that there is little or no ground for correction, but rather a constant negotiation of tastes refined and confirmed, of the metaphors of prayer and praise, and, most importantly in this case, of a *theo*-logic which is neither apologetic, dogmatic, nor skeptical. A purely pragmatic discourse, in other words, which offers no assurances. With nothing stable and secure, however, it makes deciphering differences especially difficult. Such indecipherability, I might add, leaves the lengthy and highly specialized conversation between the one (Derrida), who as Caputo reminds us, “rightly passes for an atheist” (“Introduction,” 1), and the other (Marion), who is most certainly the most radical of all orthodox theologians, especially in need of clarification.

4. As for the source of this needed clarification, the credit lies first with Caputo, who not only was the orchestrator and chief moderator of the conference, but also, in both the introduction to the text and in a later essay of his own, did the most to bring these two thinkers together. This bringing together should not be taken too literally, as if Caputo somehow resolves what amounts to significant differences between the one and the other. On the contrary, Caputo does his scholarly best to specify and highlight differences. This is accomplished first by Caputo’s continued effort, which began most prominently in his recent work, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*,<sup>4</sup> to counteract the prevailing myth of Derrida—which is, specifically, that as the progenitor of deconstruction, Derrida must therefore be *against* religion. Caputo makes the case, in contrast, that Derrida is in fact impassioned by religion, and that it is precisely this religious passion that is the neglected secret, which has caused Derrida to be read less and less well throughout the years. To the extent that Caputo is correct in his reading of Derrida, this forces a reevaluation of the differences between Derrida and Marion. Put simply, it is not that the one is the enemy and the other the defender of religion. On the contrary, it might instead be the case that the severest critique is, and always has been, in service to faith, and that a faith that begins too sure of itself is left open to a critique it cannot withstand. Thus, because the matter is not a choice between religion or not, the question is left open concerning who Derrida, Marion, or someone entirely different might best be suited to speak of and for religion in the spirit of postmodernism.
5. Second, Caputo circles in on what he considers to be the most significant point of disagreement between the two thinkers, which traces back to the basic distinction from Husserl “between ‘intention’ (meaning, signification) and ‘fulfillment’ (givenness)” (“Introduction,” 6). Both Derrida and Marion agree that there is an inevitable disjunction between the one and the other, and that this disjunction is the key to understanding Husserl’s inability to deliver on his dream of achieving phenomenology as a rigorous science.<sup>5</sup> With Derrida, what this disjunction

<sup>3</sup>This is a term first offered into the dialogue by Marion, specifically in reference to the pragmatic function of language, most especially the liturgical languages of prayer and praise. It is then picked up by Derrida as “one of the points on which I feel very close to him [Marion]” (45).

<sup>4</sup>John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup>For instance, in an appendix to Husserl’s last major work, which was published posthumously, he writes, “Philosophy as science, as serious, rigorous, indeed apodictically rigorous science—the dream is over.” In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, David Carr, trans. (Evanston:

means, or at least that to which he gives the most emphasis, is that in the play of language, there is intention *without* fulfillment. Thus, according to Derrida's interpretation, thought is freed to think the impossible. With Marion, on the other hand, there is an overflow of givenness, which means that intention cannot contain fulfillment, or that there is fulfillment *without* intention. Thus, it is not that one thinks the impossible, but rather that the impossible gives rise to thought. In other words, between Derrida and Marion the order of exchange is reversed. Derrida moves from an epistemological statement of fact (e.g., the epistemological structure of *unknowing*, the structure of *différance* itself) to an ontological expectancy. Marion moves from the ontological priority of the gift to an epistemological indeterminacy. Indeed, Caputo makes a compelling case that both are rightly considered "apostles of the impossible," but it makes a difference how the impossible is imagined, whether as a striving or as the ground of impossibility. Caputo writes:

Is the impossible lodged in a givenness that can never be intended or in an intention that can never be given? Depending on the answer, the transgression of the old Enlightenment, the movement beyond the constraints imposed by modernity's conditions of possibility, the apology for the impossible, will take either of two very different forms which bear the proper names Marion and Derrida ("Introduction," 7-8).

6. Thus we move from Caputo's description of Marion and Derrida, to Marion and Derrida themselves, both of whom take advantage of the forum given to them to rehash and clarify their differences. Marion takes the lead, not only by the fact that his essay is the first of the volume, but more tellingly, by virtue of his theme, which is best seen as a full frontal attack on what he considers to be Derrida's mistaken presentation of "negative theology" in his 1980 essay, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials."<sup>6</sup> This "attack" comes in several different guises. Speaking as both logician and historical exegete, Marion reminds the reader that the terms "negative theology" and "metaphysics of presence" should be read more as problems to be overcome than as descriptive concepts to be trusted. He explains:

For neither the Alexandrian nor Cappadocian Fathers, nor Irenaeus nor Augustine, nor Bernard, Bonaventure, nor Thomas Aquinas—all of whom resort to negations when naming God and build a theory of this apophysis—none of them use the formula "negative theology." As a result, it can reasonably be supposed that this formula is nothing but modern. 'Consequently, we will from now on no longer consider the phrases "metaphysics of presence" and "negative theology," if by chance we have had to use them, as anything but conceptual imprecision to be overcome or as questions awaiting answers—never as secure bases (21).

7. Next, Marion takes on the role of the psychoanalyst, asking why, if nowhere present in the primary texts themselves, would Derrida take up "negative theology" as a theme to be distinguished from deconstruction. Marion's answer is that it is because "negative theology" presents deconstruction with its first and foremost rival. Thus, "for deconstruction, what is at issue in 'negative theology' is not first of all 'negative theology,' but deconstruction itself, its originality and its final pre-eminence" (22). This, according to Marion, explains the need of deconstruction to deconstruct the claims of "negative theology," even to the point of

Northwestern University Press, 1970), 389.

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," Ken Frieden, trans., in *Derrida and Negative Theology*.

employing a misnomer that purportedly distinguishes the ancient rival from that which is new to the scene. This deconstruction of “negative theology,” in other words, is in fact a form of self-defense, which in archetypal fashion, replays the Oedipal complex with its own tragic consequences.

8. It is in the explication of these consequences that Marion takes on his third and most urgent role, that of the Christian theologian. The issue at hand is whether what Derrida improperly refers to as “negative theology” remains a viable option. Having already questioned both the accuracy and justification of Derrida’s account, Marion next approaches his theme from a less defensive position, which gives him the needed space to develop a more proper understanding of Christian theology on its own terms, rather than those prescribed by the critic. “In short,” Marion asks, “can Christian theology as a theology evoked by Revelation remove itself in principle, if not in actual accomplishment, from the ‘metaphysics of presence’ or is it, in the final analysis, reducible to this metaphysics? Which amounts to asking: Is Christian theology subject to deconstruction, or not?” (23) Key to Marion’s answer to this all important question is that apophysis is a part of a larger strategy “that includes not two but three elements... . The game is therefore not played out between two terms, affirmation and negation, but between three, different from and irreducible to each other” (24). It is for this reason that the term “negative theology” is a problem to be overcome, for “negative theology” is not strictly negative, but neither is it fundamentally affirmative. Such predicative terms simply do not apply. It is not a matter of saying or un-saying, or naming or un-naming. In Marion’s words, “It is solely a matter of de-nominating” (28). Such de-nomination does not fix the divine essence, because it “does not name him properly or essentially, but ... marks his absence, anonymity, and withdrawal.” In this sense, praise in mystical theology would in the case of divine proper names only reproduce an aporia that is already unavoidable in the proper names of the finite world” (29). Finally, as a “purely pragmatic” discourse, “it is no longer a matter of naming or attributing something to something, but of aiming in the direction of ‘ , of relating to ‘ , of comporting oneself towards ‘ , of reckoning with ‘ ‘in short, of dealing with’ ” (30).<sup>7</sup>
9. Notice here that Marion’s description of Christian theology is working on two fronts simultaneously. Not only is he offering a corrective to what he considers to be Derrida’s misreading, but he is also offering a subtle challenge to those who would wish for theology a self-confidence of which it is not capable. What I have in mind here is John Milbank’s critique of Marion, in which he accuses Marion, finally, of a radical indeterminacy which leaves Christian theology with no essential presence to be felt, or, as Marion himself voices this critique: “goodness remains undetermined and, in any case, without essential impact” (32).<sup>8</sup> For Marion, however, this is how it should be when one considers Christian theology as purely pragmatic discourse. That is because “it is no longer a matter of saying something about something, but of a pragmatics

<sup>7</sup>This description of Christian theology is reminiscent of Karl Barth’s fondness for Matthias Grünewald’s painting of the crucifixion, in which John the Baptist stands at the foot of the cross, pointing with an elongated finger at the crucified Christ. Which also brings to mind David Tracy’s insightful introduction to Marion’s *God Without Being*. Tracy situates Marion as one who stands in the tradition of Christian theological thought that begins from the standpoint of revelation, a tradition that was pronounced and made prominent in the Twentieth century by Barth. As Tracy writes, “Marion has clearly forged a new and brilliant postmodern version of the other great alternative for theology: a revelation-centered, noncorrelational, postmetaphysical theology. Like his great predecessor in Catholic theology, Hans Urs Balthasar, and like his natural ally in Protestant theology, Karl Barth, Marion has developed a rigorous and coherent theological strategy focused on the reality of God’s revelation as pure gift, indeed as excess.” In *God Without Being*, xii.

<sup>8</sup>See John Milbank, “Only Theology Overcomes Metaphysics,” in *Theology, Language, Culture: The Word Made Strange* (London: Blackwell, 1997), 36-54.

of speech, more subtle, risky, and complex. ' It is no doubt no longer a matter of saying but of hearing, since according to the conventional etymology that Dionysius takes from Plato, bountiful beauty bids" (32, 33).

10. Therefore, what Marion offers is a wariness of both a heightened skepticism and a theological arrogance. Neither gives proper articulation to what Marion considers as a whole tradition of a *theology of absence*.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Derrida's critique of "negative theology" 'namely, that it is an effort to *save the name* of God' is misplaced, because if Marion is correct, "the theologian's job is to silence the Name and in this way let it give us one" (39). The name of God is not at issue, except to the extent that the idolatrous naming of God by those who confuse theology with metaphysics bars one from the encounter with the God who is *without* being, and without even a proper name we could call his own. So too is Milbank's critique off the mark, because God is not in need of human intervention. In fact, Marion suggests the relationship is precisely reversed, which is to say that humans stand as the recipients of that which cannot be named, but instead, only de-nominated. Such de-nomination, furthermore, leads to the purely pragmatic speech of prayer and praise, which is the third way beyond either affirmation or negation.
11. Recall that it was earlier stated that the differences between Derrida and Marion should not be posed as matters of agreement or disagreement. This is crucial in appreciating Derrida's response to Marion's critique, which is essentially one of agreement on virtually all points of contention. For instance, Derrida agrees that "negative theology" is more a problem to be treated than a reference to a unified field of discourse. Derrida agrees with the importance of the third way, which evidences the purely pragmatic function of language. Derrida also agrees with Marion's point about de-nomination, by which Derrida means "the question of the name and of the name of God, as the proper name which is never proper" (45). Furthermore, Derrida repeatedly points back to his own texts in which he has shown sympathy, and dare I say, even understanding, of these various dimensions to both religious discourse and the theological tradition.
12. With such apparent good will, agreement, and regard from Derrida, the reader might be fooled into thinking Derrida had nothing either to add or to take away from Marion's account of apophasis. Such is not the case, however. While there might be general agreement on the meanings of terms and the problems to be considered, even structural agreement on the nature and *telos* of the strategy of apophasis, on the *purely pragmatic* level which, recall, both Marion and Derrida have agreed is the true gist of the matter they are more like ships passing in the night. Pragmatics, for Marion, means a concrete, embodied, and incarnate discourse that emerges from a specific paradigm of ritualized activity, liturgical language, and/or ecclesiastical structure of authority. In *God Without Being*, for instance, the very heart of the work is a chapter on the "eucharistic site of theology," in which the conclusion is drawn that "*only the bishop merits, in the full sense, the title of theologian*" (Marion's italics).<sup>10</sup> In the critical essay presently being considered, Derrida detects repeated references made by Marion to baptism as the (proper?) paradigm for understanding the structure of what Marion means by de-nomination. According to Derrida's tastes again, recall the importance of tastes for a purely pragmatic discourse this structure lacks the universality or formality that he would

<sup>9</sup>Marion explains, "By theology of absence ... we mean not the non-presence of God, but the fact that the name God is given, the name which gives God, which is given as God ... serves to *shield God from presence* ... and offers him precisely as an exception to presence" (37).

<sup>10</sup>*God Without Being*, 139-160, 153.

desire. Perhaps one way of understanding Derrida's distaste would be that he considers Marion's pragmatics, at its best, only conditional. This *conditional pragmatics*, then, would stand in marked contrast to the *purely pragmatic* discourse that both Marion and Derrida "agree" is the desideratum.

13. Marion's response confirms this point of difference. He expresses gratitude for Derrida's "general agreement," and admits that they are working within a shared problematic. Nevertheless, according to Marion's tastes, which are born out through his reading of Christian theological texts, the matters of agreement are too formal and they lack the specificity required of a truly pragmatic discourse. By definition, in other words, pragmatics must be incarnated, which, from a Christian perspective, would mean not only fully conditional, but also paradoxically, fully universal. A scandal no less than the stumbling block which first divided the Jewish hope from the Christian conviction.
14. Finally, then, what remains from this conversation on de-nominating the name of God, are at least two denominations of postmodern religion and theology. The one follows the structure of religion as faith, driven by a hope and expectation by that which is not yet come. By its universality, it attests to a common need and desire for a justice still lacking. If rightly called a denomination at all, it is a wandering and diasporic one, which has felt the brunt of violence and rests unsettled in any given homeland of its own. The other follows the structure of religion as fulfillment, culmination, and conviction. By its universality, it attests to a surplus of meaning, which cannot be contained by any single denomination, nor properly named by any single term. It is an overflowing denomination, full of great paradoxes and internal flexibility, in the world, but not of it, concrete, and thereby, also universal.
15. In this way, the theme "Religion and Postmodernism" turns back into the more ancient and more urgent question of "religion" and the religions of the world. That this question is of purely pragmatic significance, is at least one point on which both Derrida and Marion—in spite, or perhaps even because of, their differences—agree is not a matter that should be taken lightly.

## Notes

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