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FAITH AND GOD ACCORDING TO JACQUES DERRIDA

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Abstract: This article asserts that Derrida's concept of faith, which is devoid of the object, is faith in the nothingness that still requires the concept of God. In the first part, I explain the position of faith in religion. Derrida, who can be called an atheist, states that religion is an unavoidable question. In the second part, I explain how the concept of faith in nothingness tends to negate faith. Faith which is marked by hope and restlessness is faith without the object. In the third part, I explain that the concept of faith without an object requires the concept of God. The deconstruction of the concept of a God who reveals Himself is expressed in the idea of the death of God as the core of Christianity. In the fourth section, I elucidate the significance of Derrida's concept of faith without an object for believers, concluding this article.

Key words: faith, God, the wholly other, deconstruction, the possible impossibility.

1. Introduction

There has been a significant movement in the last four decades on the philosophical approach toward faith. In this “post-modern” movement towards God, Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological approach is brought back to describe “meditative thinking”, another way of thinking that gives birth to metaphysics and the sciences. According to Joseph J. Kockelmans, there is Heidegger’s critique of “the god according to philosophy” or the God in metaphysics - which for him, must be abandoned (Kockelmans 1965). By leaving it, humans will actually be closer to the “divine God” (*göttlichen Gott*). Through this perspective, we may gain insight into Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) discussion of God.

It is clear that the movement to “look back at religion” is not a return to the old theism. Hent de Vries, in *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, summarizes this tendency in a French word that has two meanings: the words *à Dieu* (to God) or *adieu* (goodbye), “a movement toward God, toward a word or the name of God”, which is also a dramatic farewell to the dogmatic interpretation of the same meaning of ‘God’ (de Vries 2019, 24).

Apparently, there is not only meaning in the name “God”. Even since the development of post-structuralist approaches to language (Mura 1990, 381), we are increasingly aware of how unstable a word’s meaning can be. The word “God” is just a “signans” whose meaning we just got but in the sense of something different from, for example, “creature”. This difference will always occur. Therefore, the meaning of “God” will not stop.

Derrida is famous for his provocative ideas. He juxtaposed atheism and faith when talking about God. John D. Caputo asks about Derrida’s confession to Geoffrey Bennington as an atheist: “If you rightly pass for an atheist, to whom are you praying?” (Hart & Sherwood. Eds. 2005, 28). This expression needs to be juxtaposed with his statements of faith, “I pray all the time” (Hart & Sherwood. Eds. 2005, 47), even if there is no God who accepts his prayer (Hart & Sherwood. Eds. 2005, 31).

This paper introduces Derrida’s contradictory statements born of reflection on the deeper foundations of atheism and faith. In the first part, the author explains the position of faith in religion. In the second part, the author explains how the concept of faith in nothingness tends to negate faith. In the third part, the author explains that the concept of faith without an object requires the concept of God. In the fourth part, the author explains the contribution of Derrida’s idea of faith without the object for the believers and closes this article.

2. The position of faith in religion

Deconstruction, according to Derrida's description, is a way of reading text that shifts the "central" reference and opens the valve for opportunities to enable the participation of thoughts that are on the "periphery". In fact, Derrida deconstructs the binary assumption of Western thought that has prioritized spoken language over writing. He expressed the ideas that emerged from the texts he read. The meaning of the text, which originally had a normative and directive role, becomes relative, even contradictory when other ideas arise (Derrida 1997, ix-xx).

Derrida has the opposite opinion from Saussure regarding the understanding of meaning. Derrida states that the signified can have a role and is known for its meaning because of the difference (*différance*) from other signs around it. Meanwhile, Saussure argues that the signified (*signifiant*) and the signified meaning (*signifié*) are naturally bound to each other. Thus, Derrida states that meaning can be understood from its difference from the meanings of other things around it. In other words, there is no permanent meaning in our lives. Meaning is always explored or created by humans for the sake of their survival.

Deconstruction is a philosophical, political, and intellectual strategy to dismantle the modes of reading and interpretation that dominate and strengthen the basis of the hierarchy. So, deconstruction is a strategy to 'peel off' the layers of meaning contained in the text, which has been suppressed so far.

When Derrida speaks of "deconstruction", it is the view of the "other" that is implied. The word "deconstruction" is then interpreted as a text interpretation method. However, actually, "deconstruction" is closely related to something ethical and political. Derrida wrote: "Deconstruction is justice". Because it is really unfair to reject those who were scattered and silenced when unity was formed.

Derrida's engagement with Judaism, which he embraced from childhood, and his transcendence of the traditional bounds of that religion, culminating in a "religion without religion," epitomizes a fervent devotion to the Divine, *the Impossible*. "Religion without religion" is a religious experience and Derrida's way of approaching the Divine as Impossible. This "religion" is unique in its emphasis on the total passion for the Divine as the wholly other, which is impossible to describe. This passion blinds our faith. We can only say – in Derrida's words – "je ne sais pas, il faut croire" (I do not know, you have to believe).

"Religion without religion" transcends religious traditions or institutions and liberates our religious experience from the limitations of religious traditions or institutions themselves. This experience requires religious people to live the diversity of religion with a high appreciation of the infinity of God and the limitations of human language. Living religion

is not just religion by adhering to dogma or carrying out rituals required by religious institutions. To live means to question, challenge, and make faith a constant experimentation to test our experience with the Divine. No “faith” is finished!

This struggle is only possible when a religious person opens himself to an absolute future, that is, a future that cannot be anticipated in the present. Faith will always be tested with new experiences that may be far more radical. The infinite challenges of the future cannot be summed up in the present or the possibilities shaped by the present or our present presence. In other words, the absolute future is a delay in attendance.

Derrida’s “religion” is an apocalyptic religion, that is, a faith that is open to *the Other*, which invites *the Other* to come and makes our religiosity impossible, and makes our faith an endless journey to the impossible. The apocalyptic call lies in the word “viens”, (come). Derrida emphasizes this word to convey an apocalyptic tone that is deconstructive to the presence and open to an absolute future. This problem can be seen in the fragment of the quote from *The Book of Elie* below:

“Viens!

Something coming

Viens.

Something unforeseeable and incomprehensible

Viens.

Tout autre

Viens.

Let every one say,

Viens.

To every gift,

Viens, oui, oui.

Amen” (Caputo 1999, 69).

Derrida emphasizes the word *viens* (come) to show an apocalyptic tone that is deconstructive towards presence and open towards the absolute future. The word *viens* cannot be interpreted into an adequate explanation because it is an address without a subject: we do not know who is speaking or to whom it is directed. There is no dialogue, two-subject dialectic, or *Aufhebung* in that word (Derrida 1987, 536).

The *Viens* put off all our suppositions about the existence of a *telos* (goal). *Viens* cannot be conditioned temporally because the stress on this word transcends a time horizon that moves linearly from the present to the future. The imperative stress on *viens* cannot be conditioned on the horizon of understanding unless it completely faces the absolute future and accepts absolute openness to *the Other*.

The word *viens* is related to two derived words, namely *venir* (come) and *à venir* (in-coming). *Venir* and points out that “arrival: the Other can never be anticipated; it transcends moments of presence by creating

suspense that suddenly makes the regularities we build fall apart and are impossible to rebuild.

The apocalyptic tone of this word lies in the letter (in-...) à *venir* (in-coming), which implies a surprise, a sudden arrival that enters the order of time we anticipate and makes everything crack. The three words – *viens*, *venir*, à *venir* – form a time structure that is open to the absolute future. Time points more to the impossible experience with *the Other*, which is always changing and “events” (*é-venir*), because of its absolute openness (Derrida 1996, 68).

In addition to providing an apocalyptic effect, the three words also refer to the active experience of responding to the absolute future by welcoming the arrival of *the Other*. The arrival of *the Other* is unpredictable. Therefore, it is always inventive: the Other requires us to summon it actively. The word invention is related to the word in-venir (in-coming), which is a call to *the Other* who was never present, but one day he will surely come.

According to Derrida, deconstruction is the call itself that says *viens* to the Other, and makes our faith something truly impossible: “To prepare oneself for this coming (venue) of the other is what can be called deconstruction” (Caputo 1997, 73). So, deconstruction has a double face: it is active and passive, hoping and waiting, calling and silent, immersed in a dark, dangerous, apocalyptic experience that holds a million mysteries.

3. Faith without object

Faith without object will be explained by two main terms, namely the term “messianic without messianism” and “the possible impossibility”.

First, faith marked by hope and restlessness has no object. The statement used by Derrida to show faith without an object is “messianic without messianism”. Faith without an object is openness to the future or the coming of others as the coming of justice, but without the prophetic prefiguration, the coming that is always on the way without ever arriving. This hope does not have a picture of the figure and atmosphere of the future. Messianic expectations do not recognize anticipation and therefore are open to surprises (Derrida 1994, 56).

Meanwhile, messianism always defines and narrows expectations. Messianism is not pure hope but a form of knowledge, for it has been named the content of hope. True faith means hope without a definitive and objective content of hope. Resistance to accepting messianism or the object of faith is based on the view that the object is always something that is defined. The object must be present, presented, or present itself.

The subject-object relation is a relation that is only possible in the metaphysics of presence. Objects are present to the subject both as ideas

and phenomena in this metaphysical framework. However, in Derrida's critique of phenomenology, he shows that objects are always strung together in an endless woven relation with others. Presenting objects to be understood is an impossibility. Even the subject can never fully state and define himself (Hart & Sherwood 2005, 47). Therefore, faith cannot be thought of as a relation in terms of subject-object. Faith does not make God the object of human activity.

Second, Derrida's whole "philosophy" is almost entirely born from his appreciation of *the possible impossibility*. Derrida feels an "other" desire, a religious desire and passion that transcends dogma – an indescribable spiritual longing for a "God" that is impossible to be known.

Faith without an object is nothing but faith in nothingness or ideas which tend to negate faith. Faith is based on trust, which is an openness to accept something without a fully explainable reason. The reason put forward? Given that God is not an object of faith that can be used as a reference, then humans have a relationship with God that can only be clarified based on belief. The relationship with God is a relationship without a relationship (Derrida 1996, 92). This means that asymmetrical relationships, such as people, have relationships with humans. God is not something that can be demonstrated (Horner 1999, 12). Feedback, as in human relationships, is not obtained from a relationship with God.

Faith is still based on an attitude of trust in God. The attitude of faith precedes the content of faith. That is, the attitude of faith is a longing for the future, a hope for the impossible. Because people believe in God, that person is willing to accept teachings about Him. Faith goes beyond the teachings of faith; morality is an attitude of trust or surrender to God (cfr. Anidjar 2002, 49).

Derrida wants to show that man's attitude toward God has the same structure as attitudes toward all others. Derrida does not dispute the value of what is temporary. He questioned each tendency to find a total representation of the future (Horner 2010, 8).

The rationality of uncertainty or in Derrida's language, 'the rationality of *the possible impossibility*' is the structure of faith without an object. *The possible* and *the impossible* are two things that do not contradict each other in total. For Derrida, *the impossible* must be seen as the basis of *the possible* from what is called an event (Derrida 1995, 55-59).

There are two explanations for the above. First, something actual refers to its potentiality. Something can be actual because there is a possibility to be that way. However, experience exposes us to things that are very impressive and previously unimaginable, which do not count as potentialities. Such experiences are referred to as events.

The event interrupts what we consider normal and reasonably expect, already known as potentiality. We face something that was previously seen as impossible in an event. Therefore, the actual event is the revelation of the possibility of the impossible.

Second, the experience of an event is stated in general terms. We often face experiences that go beyond what we predict, actually pointing to the basis that there is an impossibility that is possible. Events point to the impossibility of the possible as actuality also reveals potentiality. Although the impossibility is absolute, it is longed for as possible. The impossible reminds us that something beyond our ability and strength, which is impossible from the ability to know and predict, can indeed happen. Therefore, the impossible is something that is not conditioned, cannot be anticipated, and is only an expression of generosity that can only be missed (Derrida 1995, 42-43).

Derrida does not explicitly make *possible-impossible* structures a framework for talking about God. However, this structure can be used if one wants to explore the concept of faith in Derrida's philosophy. God is not included in something that can be predicted. God has a place in closed estimates of possibilities based on worldly considerations. Derrida states: "All the aporias of the possible-impossible or of the more-than-impossible would thus be 'lodged' but also dislodging 'within' (au-dedans) what one might calmly call the desire, love or movement towards the Good, etc." (Derrida 1998, 505).

Richard Kearney responded to the abbreviation "etc." at the end of the sentence above as resistance to making the statement into the end. By placing "etc." at the end of the sentence, Derrida wants to open up space and add the notion of a "possible God". This addition is very reasonable because Derrida quotes the expression of Angelius Silesius, who refers to God as "das mögliche berunmöglichste", which means "the most impossible or the more than impossible" (Derrida 1995, 44).

However, Derrida speaks explicitly about the relationship between the structure of *the possible impossibility* and faith. He wrote: "But it [the impossible] is not simply negative or dialectical; it introduces to the possible ... it makes it to come, it makes it revolve according to an anachronistic temporality or incredible filiality – a filiality which is also the origin of faith" (Derrida 1998, 519)

Since *the possible impossibility* cannot be calculated by human calculations, it can only be accepted as faith. The goal of faith is God, and God is something that cannot be present, present itself, and be fully presented. The presence of God in the world and history is an impossibility. But what is impossible is not the same as what is not. 'God cannot be present in history and in the world' is not the same as 'God does not exist'. God's existence is a possibility, which means faith is a permanent attitude towards a possibility.

Therefore, faith is directed to the impossible or in the belief in the possibility of the impossible. In the face of these impossibility, what can we do? According to Derrida, we can no longer do anything, because there

really is nothing left. Even though there is something left behind, a trail that is still pending, it is faith and hope for the impossible. However, faith is also an impossibility, so faith cannot be projected except into the absolute future which is also an impossibility.

Faith without objects is the same as faith in nothingness. Faith has no basis other than trust as an openness to accept something for no reason that can be fully explained. A relationship with God is a relationship without a relationship.

4. The deconstruction of the concept of God

Deconstruction has a “theological” dimension. However, the word “theological” can be understood in terms of the metaphysics of presence, which refers to the existence of a logos or certain transcendent truth. The “theological” dimension in deconstruction refers more to the impossibility itself, namely the impossibility of talking about “God”.

The apocalyptic experience with *the Other* (*the wholly other*) transcends the limitations of human language because of the impossibility of the Other being named with an adequate designation. Therefore, experiences with *the Other*, apart from being apocalyptic, are also apocalyptic. Apophatic means avoiding any attempt to attribute a name to *the Other*. The name itself may be born of our desire to approach *the Other* in a language that we believe is adequate to describe it.

Even though the language we use contains limitations caused by *différance*, differences continue to be delayed. Thus, language becomes impossible, and any desire to name *the Other* will always be delayed and will never succeed in attributing a name to *the Other*. The impossibility of approaching *the Other* by this name is driven by the desire to respect the “abnormality” of *the Other* from the influence of knowledge, vision, and desire to dominate and possess itself on us. *Sans savoir, sans voir, sans avoir* (Without knowing, without seeing, without having). Respect for *the Other* asks us to “keep his name” and say “no” to any attempt to name him or to call him only by one name.

Apophatism is a form of negative theology that constantly overshadows our logocentric understanding of the Divine (Derrida 1995, 15-16). Negative theology begins with a refusal to speak because of our impossibility of reaching the “distinct” of *the Other* and the necessity to preserve its uniqueness. The arrival of *the Other* at an apocalyptic moment seems surprising and makes all our efforts to talk about it disappear instantly. Talks become meaningless because we are completely immersed in the longing for an absolute future, which is impossible to predict or calculate with our concepts.

Talk requires certainty and that certainty never exists in the absolute future. Uncertainty makes talking about *the Other*-to-coming impossible. The conversation is also an urge to conquer the future so that we avoid uncertainty. Meanwhile, the absolute future is a future that is completely open, beyond the horizon that we can know, and has a completely unlimited structure (Derrida 1996, 68). This all makes talking about “God” impossible. The absolute future consists of moments of *différance* that delay our ability to speak.

The various impossibility mentioned above are emphasized by Derrida when we affirm the arrival of *the Other* at the apocalyptic moments of *Viens*. Affirmation of ‘*Viens, oui, oui*’ (Caputo 1997, 69) confirms two things at once: first, the recognition of the limitations of language to talk about *the Other*, and second, the full acceptance of the arrival of *the Other*. This dual structure can be found in one of the expressions used to refer to God in the Jewish tradition: *Yahweh*.

Derrida uses the famous mystical song composed by a mystic, Angelus Silesius, *Der unerkandte Gott* (“The Unknowable God”) to accompany his journey to the impossible by repeating the words: “Yahweh spricht nur immer ‘Ja’”, “Yahweh always says only ‘yes’ (Caputo 1997, 26). The structure of the affirmation lies in the three letters ‘Jah-’ in Yah-weh, which means ‘yes’. This affirmation is important because a name for a god that has existed in the history of religions has been structured as an openness to an apocalyptic future.

The word *Yahweh* also means an acknowledgment, an affirmation of the limitations of language to perceive *the Other*-who-is-to-come. The affix of *Yah-* on *Yahweh* plays with the two double faces of the affirmation; that is, it has an apocalyptic and apocalyptic tone, as written in the Old Testament Scriptures. God said to Moses, ‘I am Yes.’ He then said, “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I am Yes has sent me to you. The impossible, the one who is to come.’” (Exodus 3:14)

Yah-weh is perhaps just a name for something that is worshipped, a name mentioned in a tradition that has a certain historical and cultural scope, namely Judaism. However, this “name” awakens us to something infinite, *the Other* that transcends history and tradition and provides endless inspiration for the apocalyptic arrival of *the Other* in an unexpected moment.

It must be admitted that Yah-weh is a signifier that may not be sufficient to describe *the Other*-to-coming. However, this word provides a very strong suggestion that stimulates us to face fully into the absolute future. The affirmation of yes, as Yahweh says, is the affirmation of this future and the impossibility of anticipating the coming of *the Other*, “The Impossible, The Coming”.

The journey to the absolute future, according to Derrida, was traveled with a desire to fulfill this promise that will never be fulfilled. This messianic promise never existed in eschatological times. It can only

be felt as we enter the messianic time, which is uncertain and full of impossibility. This promise cannot be expressed in language because it is a “footprint” that only “messianic language” can grasp: “*Viens, oui, oui*”, [Coming, yes, yes] (Caputo 1997, 69): “I will thus not speak of this or that promise, but of that which, as necessary as it is impossible, inscribes us by its trace in language before language. From the moment I open my mouth, I have already promised; or rather, or sooner, the promise has seized the I which promises to speak to the other, to say something, at the extreme limit to affirm or to confirm by speech at least this: that it is necessary to keep silent. This promise is older than I am” (Caputo 1997, 29-30).

The messianic promise lies beyond language, but leaves its mark in a language older than our experience with the world and shapes the possibilities of facing an absolute future. This promise, if we use Martin Heidegger’s expression, is “the language that speaks to us” (*die Sprache spricht*), which precedes speech and the language we use – language which is the *archi-trace* of our experience of language and even our ability to express something with language, “Language has started without us, in us, and before us” (Caputo 1997, 31).

The messianic promise cannot be judged by its fulfillment of what is promised because what is promised is the impossibility itself, namely the future of *the Other*, which we really cannot anticipate with the usual measures of time.

Derrida thinks of God as singular, as opposed to the other. God as another and the other are alternatives that separate each other when deciding on responsible choices. The dilemma of responsibility also shows the asymmetrical relationship between God and man. Does this concept of faith keep people away from God?

The answer to the above question can be given in two steps: 1/ God is the wholly other and 2/ Attitudes that have a structure of faith, *the possible impossibility*. First, Derrida speaks of God as *the wholly other* (Derrida 1996, 87), a name for the other, and adds that all others are little others or all others participate in *the wholly other*. In fact, Derrida refers to others as God (Derrida 1996, 87). That is, the determination of attitudes towards certain things contains a responsibility that is without basis, as is the determination of attitudes towards God.

A radical attitude toward God becomes evident in attitudes toward others. The other is that it is not something that looms far away, that this immaterial nature exists among matter. Ignorance of others as a consequence of determining one’s attitude towards God is also found in taking sides with something else.

Second, attitudes that are in accordance with faith are generosity, responsibility, mercy/friendship, democracy, and forgiveness because these attitudes manifest the structure of *the possible impossibility*.

a. Derrida talks about justice and love as attitudes that are completely directed to the impossible, which is also called “powerlessness” (Kearney 2004, 13). On certain occasions, he speaks of God as the name for the structure. Therefore, every effort to implement justice, forgiveness, giving, friendship, and democracy is in contact with *the possible impossible*, namely God.

Deconstruction is justice, according to Derrida. It is unfair to reject those who were scattered and silenced when unity was formed. This will be even more unfair if unity is considered eternal. The unity that does not budge is violence. So the question of justice is ultimately a question of liberation.

b. Derrida shows the *aporia* contained in the phenomenon of giving. He always adds that a true gift only occurs without any conditions, without any expectation of return. There are three elements in every gift, namely: the giver, what is given, and the intended address.

A giver has the hope that his gift will please the recipient of the gift. He felt like a person who had done a good deed. This condition is always there, even if people give anonymously. The giver expects joy from the recipient of the gift. Thus, the giver gets satisfaction as a person who can please others. However, by expecting something, giving is tied to conditions. Giving ceases to be a gift when it is given, but a gift cannot be called a gift if it is not given (Derrida 1992, 15). If so, the gift cannot exist as a gift, meaning that it is known and recognized as a gift.

However, true unconditional giving is an impossibility. The true impossible gift is something that is possible, which is unconditional, unplanned, and truly an expression of generosity. True giving remains possible as something completely beyond economic reckoning and exchange (Caputo & Scanlon. Eds. 1999, 59).

To exclude the possibility of true giving means to position human relations only at the level of the exchange economy. For Derrida, this equates to the impossibility of life. The impossibility of life cannot be called death because death is also a form of giving (Derrida 1996, 49).

c. Derrida reminded us what happens when “sorry” is treated as a political project, when “sorry” is accompanied by conditions. For Derrida, such “sorry” does not function as an apology but as a way to build and maintain a nation. In other words, “sorry” has become an “exchange economy” (Caputo et al. Eds. 2001, 10)

Conditional forgiveness also presents a hierarchy. Those who forgive and set conditions put themselves above those who are given the conditions and will be forgiven. Sorry, can be canceled if the conditions are not met. The power factor arises. “What makes ‘I forgive you’ at times sickening and upsetting, even obscene, is the assertion of a sovereign in words (Caputo et al. Eds. 2001, 23-24).

Finally, such an attitude of forgiveness reverses the initial brutality: the victim is hailed in such a way that the perpetrator is humiliated.

Furthermore, the victim is not present as a victim, the criminal is not felt as a criminal, and sorry itself loses its meaning. However, could there be an unconditional apology?

5. Closing

Derrida has a radical faith, but he does not become a fundamentalist. He struggles critically and creatively in the appreciation of faith so that he lives faith as an open attitude to the Other who will come in the midst of all the limitations of the world and history. The most interesting and unique thing about Derrida is that faith is understood in the temporal conditions of space and time by always considering the dimension of uncertainty.

Although religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) believe in revelation, Derrida warns that faith is based on the belief in God. One has faith because he believes in God, not because faith is supported by revelation as its foundation. An attitude of faith is a longing for the future, a hope for the impossible. People who believe in God are people who yearn for Him. So the person accepts the teachings about God. Faith does not begin with doctrine and does not end with dogma.

Faith without objects or faith in nothingness still requires the concept of God. That faith is openness to the future in a journey that never arrives (the terms “messianic without messianism” and “the possible impossibility”). According to Derrida, the concept of God that is compatible with faith without an object is God as *the wholly other* and as *the possible impossibility*.

Faith has no other basis than trust as an openness to accept something without any explicable reason. Because God is not an object of faith that can be determined and used as a reference, the relationship with God can only be explained based on belief. According to Derrida, the relationship with God, as mentioned above, is a relationship without a relationship (Derrida 1996, 92), which means an asymmetrical relationship, unlike people’s relationships with other people (symmetrical relationships). God is something that cannot be demonstrated (Horner 1999, 11). People do not get feedback on their relationship with God. On the other hand, we get feedback in human relations. Hence Derrida once again asserts that a relationship with God can only be built based on trust.

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