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THE SECULAR TO COME:
INTERROGATING THE DERRIDEAN "SECULAR"

"I do not think that there is anything secular in our time."
--Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida"¹

I. The Return of the Secular

There has been much talk in recent years in both philosophy and politics about what has been called the "return of the religious." It is perhaps not surprising that this return has prompted, in turn, a re-thinking of the secular. From the "headscarf affair" in France and discussions about the compatibility of Islam and modernity, to the plethora of recent studies on toleration and secularism by the likes of Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, William Connolly, Hent de Vries, and Charles Taylor, secularity is once again a central issue within the secular world. It is thus equally justifiable, and perhaps even necessary, to speak with the noted "return of the religious" of a "return of the secular."

What is perhaps more peculiar about the return of the secular is that, where the religious has returned to the secular, the secular has apparently returned to itself. If it was peculiar to ask where the religious had been all these years, what shall we say about a secular that returns to the secular? Was the secular somehow absent to itself? Since the Enlightenment and still within liberal political discourse, the secular has often been defined negatively as the non-religious, a definition which, like all negative definitions, seems to leave little room for ambiguity: presumably something is secular or it is not. If the concept of the secular thus carries within itself a view of itself as total and pure, then how are we to understand the secular to which the religious is said to have returned and upon which we are now forced to turn our critical gaze? Marx said that the critique of religion is the beginning of all critique, which would seem to suggest that the critique that follows the initial critique of religion is a critique of the secular by the secular. However, just as we will later ask, where does the critic of religion stand in order to undertake his or her critique, we may presently ask, where does one stand in order to critique the secular? For has not the return of

¹ Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida," in *Questioning God* ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001), 67.

the religious de-legitimated the interpretation of the secular as wholly non-religious and of the religious as wholly absent to the secular?

One place I would suggest where some of these questions have been broached and wherein we may find a locus to pursue them further is in the work of Jacques Derrida. While the question of the secular was rarely raised explicitly by Derrida, his many later works that address religion in various ways always also address in some way the non-religious, if not the secular itself. In these works, Derrida is most often concerned to reveal how translation and passage is possible between the domains we usually speak of as “religious” and “secular.” Of course, Derrida has a particular understanding of translation, one which refuses that there can ever be a direct, transparent translation, as if the religious is simply secularized, as is sometimes said, or the secular somehow rendered sacred, as is attempted today by certain politicized religious groups (e.g., hardline Zionists, the Christian Right, Muslim extremists, Hindu nationalists). As I shall explain later, for Derrida, such transparent translations ignore, in part because they presuppose, an alterity irreducible to and irrecoverable by the identities being translated. Such an ignorance is the source of the colonizing translations that force you into being like me or me into being like you. Nevertheless the alterity ignored in such colonizations can never be wholly suppressed, leaving a permanent opening within every identity, and thereby giving them a future. The closest Derrida comes to articulating this structure within the terms of the secular-religious distinction is in his well-known concept of “democracy to come,” which he also discusses as a “Messianism without Messiah” or a “religion without religion.”²

In what follows I shall attempt to extract from his work a more precise conception of the secular, a conception I shall call, in a quasi-Derridean formulation, “the secular to come.” One concern I will raise regarding this secular to come, however, is the relationship between its above-mentioned absolute alterity and the cultural neutrality of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment liberal conceptions of the secular, also mentioned above. Derrida, I shall argue, repeats in some ways this Enlightenment and liberal view of the secular as grounded in a cultural neutrality. In place of this view, I will propose—via a brief reading of Kierkegaard—that the secular be conceived as Abrahamic, a view that has gained increased support in recent years, before concluding by outlining some of the implications of this view. Before turning to Derrida, then, let me first provide a description of the secular as cultural neutrality.

² On “democracy to come,” see Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), esp. Ch.8, and *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). On “Messianism without Messiah,” see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* and “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).

II. The Secular as Neutral

The concept of “the secular,” as we use the term today in reference to a domain of social and political life that is decisively non-religious, is relatively new, dating only to the sixteenth century. Prior to the sixteenth century, the term “secular” was still closely related to its meaning within Latin Christendom of “age” (*saeculum*), and secondarily related to the idea of the present, temporal, mundane world in distinction to the divine and spiritual realm of eternity. This distinction is not equivalent, however, to the distinction between the profane and the sacred, or to our own between the secular and the religious. This inequivalence is due to the fact that, in medieval Christendom, even the *saeculum* was considered religious. The doctrine of creation meant that *everything*, including everything in the *saeculum*, is ultimately related to God (*religio*); whence Augustine’s characterization of the *saeculum* as a “mixture” of the earthly city (whose citizens ignore God and love themselves) and the city of God (whose citizens love God first and everything else on that basis). The distinction to make within the Middle Ages, therefore, is not between a purely secular realm and a purely religious realm, but between a mixed secular-religious realm (this world) and a purely religious realm (the other world—heaven), the former subordinated under the latter. It is because of this configuration of the relationship of the *saeculum* and the divine realm that there could arise such ideas as the divine-authorization of monarchs and popes, and philosophy as the handmaiden of theology.

In the early modern period—with the Reformation, the scientific revolution, humanism and the philosophy of the subject, social contract theory and the emergent concept of toleration—this “mixture” of the spiritual and the mundane within the *saeculum* was subjected to a thorough critique. In a sense, as we shall see later, the spiritual and the mundane were unmixed and the spiritual was sifted from certain areas of the *saeculum*, or, rather, was re-conceived as wholly other to the secular. The secular and the religious were beginning to be, as Spinoza explicitly sought to do with philosophy and theology in his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, “separated,” granting sovereignty to each. In one sense, the question in the background of the present essay is, how do we understand the origin of this critique and separation? If, as Marx said, the critique of religion is the beginning of all critique, where, as I asked earlier, does one stand in a *saeculum* that is at the same time religious in order to undertake such a critique?

The most common way to theorize this critique ever since the Enlightenment has been through what Charles Taylor has recently characterized as a “subtraction theory,” wherein the secular is conceived negatively as the residuum left over when the human life-world has been purged of religious illusion.³ Such a subtraction theory was classically formulated by Weber in his idea of modernity as a “disenchantment:” to be modern is to have removed the enchanting lens from one’s vision of the world. Marx and Freud similarly believed that if we strip people of the husk of their religious illusions, their true, a-religious human

³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 18-19.

kernel would remain. Moreover, because with religion comes religious-identification and thus cultural-identification, the shedding of religion is the shedding of false and artificial culturally-constructed identities, casting the secular as a culture- and identity-neutral and so universal humanist space. Culture as a whole was understood to be an artificial construct that was blanketed over the natural, authentic human essence. This conception explains why the early social contract theorists felt the need to isolate, first, our natural human essence, including our natural or human rights, before attempting to imagine social apparatuses that did not privilege one group-identity over another. On this basis, civil society, the public sphere, and the political sphere (the state) were typically configured within modern liberal democracies as culturally neutral.

While the essentialism and humanism present in the Enlightenment and liberal conception of society has been subjected to an important critique in the last few decades (e.g., in the critiques of Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism), the conceptions of the secular and the religious that it presupposes have not. Indeed, part of the reason so many have been surprised by the “return of the religious,” especially on the critical left, is that they, too, were convinced by the subtraction theory. After all, as we have already recalled, Marx says and many repeat that the critique of religion is the beginning of all critique. Yet, it should be clear from my description that the essentialism and humanism of this vision of society stems precisely from its configuration of the relationship between the secular and the religious, more specifically, from its view that there is some human essence that is pre-cultural and so pre-religious and that all we have to do is liberate it from the colonizing chains of culture (“colony” and “culture” from the Latin *colere*, “inhabit, cultivate”).

One of the strongest and most original voices of the past few decades in the critique of this kind of essentialism and humanism has, of course, been Derrida, whose break-out book, *Of Grammatology*, one will likely remember makes much of Rousseau’s nature-culture distinction. In that work Derrida shows how in the thinking of Rousseau—the most classical and exemplary thinker of that distinction in our tradition—the concepts of nature and culture are each employed as supplements to the other, filling-in for and replacing each others’ weaknesses and lacks. What Derrida showed was that if both nature and culture need supplementation from the other, then each of them is lacking, and that if each is lacking and thus needing the supplementation of the other, then both of them, nature included, are supplements, which means nature is not natural, original, or authentic. There is nothing but supplementation, or what Derrida calls in that work writing, text, or the trace. We may refer to these simply as “culture” (with which Derrida would not wholly agree), so long as we be mindful that the concept “culture” is as much a construct (a supplement) as the concept “nature,” as we shall see shortly, and so is itself no more authentic than nature.

Now if, for Derrida, there is no getting outside of culture or supplementarity, then *secularity is no more humanity’s natural, authentic condition than religion, which*

means, obversely, that religion is no more artificial or illusory than the secular. Yet, there are clearly differences between truth and illusion, the religious and the secular, differences which, if we accept Derrida's analysis, can only be differences *within supplementarity and culture.* The different identities and meanings of the concepts "secular" and "religious," therefore, do not derive from some extra-cultural or extra-supplementary thing-in-itself or transcendental form. So how, then, according to Derrida, are we to think identity and difference, particularly the identities and differences of the secular and the religious, *within culture?*

III. The Otherness of Identity

First, let us lay out how Derrida conceives identity and difference generally, before then turning to how he sees these structures within the specific domains of the secular and the religious. As is now well-understood, Derrida's project in general is characterized by an attempt to open up sameness to difference, whether that sameness be the privileging of sameness in a philosophical system, as is often alleged, say, of Hegel, or the sameness that characterizes the structure of some identity—the identity of a text, a person, a culture, a religion, an ideology, indeed, of identity *in general.* According to Derrida, there is no sameness or identity pure and simple, which is not to say that Derrida disparages identity or believes somehow that we do not or should not have them. His point, rather, is to show that identity is only possible on the basis of, or coincident with, a fundamental and constitutive difference or otherness. Identity is always constituted or constructed, he argues, through a process or an act of identification or self-identification. He writes in *Monolingualism of the Other*, "an identity is never given, received, or attained; only the interminable and indefinitely phantasmatic process of identification endures."⁴ Because identity is actually a *process* of self-identification, identification is something that *unfolds*, which means, from the opposite angle, that an identity must consist of *folds*, of demarcations and differences within it. The fold is thus for Derrida a metaphor for the structure of internal difference.

Acts of self-identification, and so identity in general, only occur, as Derrida concurs with Hegel, when a self turns back upon or returns to itself, gathering itself up under the name of its "I" or "we." Where Derrida believes he departs from Hegel (a departure some may wish to contest, although I have no interest in doing so here) is in asserting that a self can only turn back upon itself on the basis of a kind of internal hinge or fold, which is the mechanism that allows the self to turn and face itself. When someone claims "I am X," one is saying that one's self has the characteristics A, B, and C. But, of course, in order to know what are one's characteristics, one must look upon oneself. In looking upon oneself, however, one presupposes or inserts a distance or space within oneself, between one's gazing-self and one's gazed-upon, or reflected, self. That space, or what Derrida more often and more actively calls *spacing* (because it spaces out or

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of the Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), 28.

distances or defers), is a kind of fold within the self but is not reducible to the gazing-self or the gazed-upon-self. In fact, as what allows the self to face itself, to refer to itself, to say “I” or “we,” it cannot be one of the faces, and so is not directly part of the identity, not directly an “I” or a “we.” The fold is other than I, other than we, or simply *the other*.

The otherness of the fold, for Derrida, is radical and absolute—it is wholly other—and is not comparable to the complimentary or mirroring otherness between the gazing-self and the reflected- or gazed-upon-self.⁵ The self cannot look upon the fold within itself the way it looks upon itself; the fold is not available to introspection, since it is what allows a self to turn and look inward in the first place. When a self claims to possess the properties A, B, and C, and so has gazed upon and identified itself, the pivot of the fold which allows it to turn toward itself cannot itself possess the properties A, B, and C. Utterly traitless, Derrida will go so far as to say that, within the order of being, the spacing of this fold is in an intractable retreat and withdrawal, appearing as an unapparent nothingness and weakness, a pure abstraction. Derrida thus purposefully describes the radical alterity of this fold in as non-descript, as bare and barren, as deserted, desert-like, and dry a manner as possible. It is for this reason that he borrows the Platonic concept of *khora*, which in Derrida’s reading of Plato’s *Timaeus* names an irreducible pure spacing that gives place to being and becoming, and so is in itself neither.⁶ This abstracted, near-formalism is necessary, according to Derrida, because all one can assert about the fold are structural claims. For instance: the fold is not *present*, but neither is it simply *absent*, for *absence* is conceivable only on the basis of *presence*; the fold is not *here* where I presently stand, but neither is it simply *there*, since *there* is a *here* imagined elsewhere. Beyond these types of structural claims—structures which Derrida shows, however, can only be discerned through the most sensitive attention to the contents, contexts, and textures of the things we analyze—there is not much one can directly say about the radical alterity of this internal other.

It is this *featureless* alterity within every identity that Derrida uses to establish the conceptual possibility for relations of address, translation, and hospitality between different identities, whether between you and me or between the secular and the religious. As he said in the Villanova Roundtable (1994), “It is because I am not one with myself that I can speak with the other,”⁷ a proposition which is equally applicable to the other, who, we can thus say, can only speak with me because he or she is not one with him or herself. If the other and I were

⁵ The best description of Derrida’s intervention into the philosophy of reflection is Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986).

⁶ Derrida discusses Plato’s *khora* in several places. Here are some of the most significant: “How to Avoid Speaking: Denegations,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: SUNY); “*Khora*,” in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995); *Specters of Marx*; and “Faith and Knowledge” in *Acts of Religion*.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,” in John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham UP, 1997), 14.

each self-identical and self-present within ourselves, without internal difference, two things would follow. First, neither of us could actually speak to the other, since we would be so self-enclosed as to be, in effect, solipsistic and silent. Second, neither of us could receive what the other offers, since we would be so self-enclosed as to be utterly blind to any kind of outside and impassably unable to receive anything new. Instead, according to Derrida, each of us possesses an internal, propertyless alterity. Because this alterity is, as we said, propertyless, it is neither one of our properties and therefore is not part of my or the other's identity. As much as this alterity is neither the other's nor mine, it is inside of both the other and I, and is thus something that we strangely share in common. This sharing, however, is clearly not based on the both of us possessing the same qualities or partaking of some common ground, as in kinship or ethnic nationalism. This internal, propertyless alterity is the possibility for another conception of the relationships of sharing and commonality. It is this featureless alterity, as we shall see next, that Derrida uses to deconstruct the relationship between the religious and the secular, and so to construct them otherwise.

IV. The Other: Neither Religious nor Non-Religious

To interrogate what the concepts of the religious and the secular mean for Derrida, I would like to turn to his discussion of the relationship between Europe and Christianity in two of his works, "The Other Heading: Memories, Responses, and Responsibilities" and *The Gift of Death*, as well as to his essay on secularization, "The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano." I briefly discussed earlier the transition from the medieval mixture of the secular with the religious to the modern separation of the secular from the religious. This transition has a correlative transition at the level of cultural identity. Europeanists like to point out that the concept "Europe" took on its current meaning and usage following the Middle Ages when the concept "Christendom" ceased to be an appropriate way to designate the cultural identity of the majority of peoples living within the territory called Europa. "Europe," then, as we use the term today, is fundamentally a non-religious or secular cultural identity.⁸

In "The Other Heading," Derrida is concerned precisely with the deconstruction of the cultural identity of Europe, a deconstruction that transpires according to the structure of the featureless internal difference I outlined in the previous section.⁹ Describing what he calls there an "axiom" and "a very dry necessity" of culture and cultural identity, he writes that "*what is proper to a culture is to not be identical to itself,*" or, put oppositely, that "[t]here is no culture or cultural identity without this difference *with itself*" (OH 9-10). The alterity that Derrida here binds to cultural identity is not simply an alterity that a culture abuts against, like Christendom defining itself against Islam in the Middle Ages, as one can read in

⁸ See Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), hereafter cited in text as OH; and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), hereafter cited in text as GD.

the *Song of Roland*. As I explained earlier, for Derrida, alterity is within the identity of the culture, so that, by definition, a homogeneous culture is a contradiction in terms: “Monogenealogy,” he writes, “would always be a mystification in the history of culture” (OH 10-11). A culture, therefore, is simultaneously identifiable and other than that identity, has a history and has something beyond that history, and these two sides are in fact indissociably entangled. The entanglement of these two sides bequeaths to the heir of a culture what Derrida sees as a double injunction both to remember and to forget (OH 29), and thus not solely to remember or solely to forget: “We must thus be suspicious of *both* repetitive memory *and* the completely other of the absolutely new,” he warns (OH 18-19). Both clinging to the past or to one’s identity, and fleeing to the future or to some wholly unknown other, shirk the responsibility that comes with having an identity and a heritage.

Applied to the situation of European identity, Derrida states that this double injunction requires adopting a stance that is neither “Eurocentric” nor “anti-Eurocentric” (OH 13), that is, neither solely oriented around Europe nor solely taking a stand against Europe.¹⁰ Standing at the border between these two, he concludes that “it is necessary to make ourselves the guardians of an idea of Europe, of a difference of Europe, *but* of a Europe that consists precisely in not closing itself off in its own identity and in advancing itself in an exemplary way toward what it is not, toward the other heading or the heading of the other, indeed...toward the other *of* the heading...” (OH 29). Because, as I pointed out, every culture is different from itself, the only way to remain true to Europe is not to close it off within itself but to open it up to otherness. And because every culture is *always already* different from itself, this opening up of Europe, he says, is “*taking place now*,” although its *taking place* and its *now* are not to be conceived according to presence. On the contrary, “this event takes place as that which comes, as that which seeks or promises itself *today*, in Europe, the today of a Europe whose borders are not given...” (OH 30-31). As other to itself in its structure, Europe is, right now, to come.

On the basis of this general responsibility to keep Europe true to itself by keeping it open to otherness, Derrida articulates several sub-duties for which the heirs of Europe must be responsible, of which three touch upon our main concern with the relationship between the religious and the secular. The first involves opening Europe “onto that which is not, never was, and never will be Europe” (OH 77); the second prescribes “welcoming foreigners in order not only to integrate them but to recognize and accept their alterity” (ibid.); and the third demands “tolerating and respecting all that is not placed under the authority of reason,” which among other things “may have to do with faith” or “different forms of faith” (OH 78). The openness here to potentially religious alterities is

¹⁰ See also Jacques Derrida, “The Right to Philosophy from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 336-37; and *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2007), 40-41.

based on the featurelessness of the internal otherness described earlier. It is because of a featureless, propertyless, identityless, desert-like alterity within European identity—a non-European and so non-secular alterity—that Europe may welcome religion into itself without itself ceasing to be secular.

Now, one should not worry here about the potential threat that this incoming of religious identities might pose to Europe's great tradition of reason and democracy, for Derrida is not willing simply to let the latter go in the name of the former. As we should expect by now, just as he calls for an othering of European identity, he calls equally for an othering of religious identity. Hence, two years after "The Other Heading," in *The Gift of Death*, whose first chapter is entitled "Secrets of European Responsibility," Derrida undertakes the opposite task, trying now to find in Christianity an element that will, as we saw earlier, open it up to otherness, both to other religious identities and to non-religious "European" identity. He does this through readings of two thinkers on the intellectual and socio-political margins of both Western Europe and Christianity: the late Christian Czech phenomenologist, Jan Patočka, who writes what he calls "heretical essays," and the Danish theologico-philosophical critic of both the Danish Church and Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote, in the name of Christianity, a very public "attack upon Christendom."

Turning first to Derrida's reading of Patočka, Derrida focuses on his (Patočka's) characterization of an internal schism or difference within Christianity, although not one of the famous ones that mark its history. The schism involves a structure of responsibility that, according to Patočka, Christianity has *singularly* bequeathed to Europe. We should not be surprised to discover that in Derrida's presentation of it this Christian conception of responsibility is precisely the one we encountered in "The Other Heading," according to which in order to be responsible to one's heritage and identity, one must also decide, in a radical and unconditional leap of faith, to break from that heritage and so be in a sense heretical (GD 25-26). To be fully Christian would thus require one to break from Christianity, whereas clinging dogmatically to some Christian orthodoxy would be a kind of betrayal. In fact, Patočka does believe Christianity and Europe have betrayed their Christian heritage by clinging instead to an orthodoxy which he regards, like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, as actually deriving from Platonism (GD 23). *True* Christian responsibility, which is to say *heretical* Christian responsibility, has therefore not been, according to him, adequately thought through to its logical end, neither by Christianity nor by Europe (GD 28). What Derrida adds to Patočka's analysis is to point out that such inadequacy is inevitable in this structure, for according to it one is permanently obligated, in the name of one's heritage and identity, to question one's heritage and identity (GD 51). Such a permanent obligation means that one can take one's identity to its logical end only by not being *at* that end, in other words, by not being fully, purely, self-identically one's identity. The end here is structurally deferred, which means there is no end. As Derrida writes, "Something has not yet arrived, neither at Christianity nor by means of Christianity. What has not yet arrived at or happened to Christianity," he then adds, "is Christianity." Christianity," he

summarizes, “has not yet come to Christianity” (GD 28). As we saw earlier with Europe, Christianity, too, is to come.

The reason both secular Europe and religious Christianity are each to come is because there is an irreducible alterity lodged within each of them which disallows either of them to be self-identically or self-presently itself. The religious is thus always in fact religious-*and*-other, the secular always secular-*and*-other, which may prompt us to refer to them, adding some distance, as “religious” and as “secular.” This irreducible alterity, therefore, is irreducible to either and so is, in itself—although it never exists in itself—neither European nor Christian, neither secular nor religious, which is why Derrida associates it with the Platonic *khora* described earlier, referring to it in “Faith and Knowledge,” just as Plato refers to *khora*, as a “third place.”¹¹ It is the alterity of this third place which, for Derrida, is the possibility of what he then calls a “universalizable culture” (AR 56), the kind of culture that secularism seeks to establish. He explains how he understands this possibility in the following manner:

Even if [this third space] is called the social nexus, [or the] link to the other in general, this fiduciary link would precede all determinate community, all positive religion, every onto-anthropo-theological horizon. It would link pure singularities prior to any social or political determination, prior to all intersubjectivity, prior even to the opposition between the sacred (or the holy) and the profane. This can therefore resemble a desertification, the risk of which remains undeniable, but it can—on the contrary—also render possible precisely what it appears to threaten. The abstraction of the desert can thereby open the way to everything from which it withdraws [namely: identity]. (AR 55)¹²

¹¹ Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” *Acts of Religion*, 55; hereafter cited in text as AR.

¹² See also the discussion moderated by Richard Kearney, “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), in which Derrida says the following:

“I think that this reference to what I call *khora*, the absolutely universal place, so to speak, is what is irreducible to what we call revelation, revealability, history, religion, philosophy, Bible, Europe, and so forth. I think the reference to this place of resistance is also the condition for a universal politics, for the possibility of crossing the borders of our common context—European, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and philosophical.... I am not saying this against Europe, against Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.... This place is the place of resistance..., this non-something within something, this non-revelation within revelation, this non-history within history, this non-desire within desire, this impossibility.... Perhaps, and this is my hypothesis, if not a hope, what I am saying here can be retranslated after the fact into Jewish discourse or Christian discourse or Muslim discourse, if they can integrate the terrible things I am suggesting now.” (76-77)

Thus, it is on the basis of this wholly other space which is said here to be pre-cultural, pre-social, pre-political and pre-religious that, according to Derrida, the process he calls “universalization,” of which “secularization” would be only one form, is possible.

Now, if this wholly other is “in” both the religious and the secular, then not only was the religious never wholly religious, as we saw, but the secular that arrives is not wholly secular, which means it does not ever wholly or fully arrive. As Derrida puts it in the epigraph to this essay, “I do not think that there is anything secular in our time.” He draws out this point in a few places, notably in his various discussions of Carl Schmitt, who, in his *Political Theology*, famously claimed that “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,” a process Derrida doubts can ever be fully successful.¹³ The place he makes this point most explicitly, however, is in his essay “The Eyes of Language.”¹⁴ The essay is a reading of a letter written by Gershom Scholem to Franz Rosenzweig regarding the Zionist effort to create the modern Hebrew of the Israeli state out of ancient biblical Hebrew, a transformation which is ostensibly an act of secularization. In the letter, Scholem expresses his worries about using a powerful sacred language in the profane contexts of daily and political life in modern Israel. Not only is he worried this transposition will cheapen the language through its instrumentalization and commonality, but he doubts that this language can ever actually be emptied of its religious sources and powers. In fact, he fears a quasi-apocalyptic or messianic return of these religious powers on a naïve future generation. Derrida here draws attention to the fact that, because Scholem doubts that this language can ever be emptied or levelled, he (Scholem) states that to speak of a secularization as having taken place is false and is thus merely a “figure of speech,” an empty rhetorical device. Derrida points out the strange, but strangely consistent, logic governing Scholem’s thinking on this point. For Scholem begins with the premise that religious language cannot be emptied within the secular, and then infers, on the basis of that premise, that the concept “secular” is empty, an inference which is both consistent and inconsistent with his premise. Consistent because, if Hebrew cannot be emptied of religion, then secularization has *not* taken place; inconsistent because, if the concept “secular” is an empty concept, then it *has* taken place. Secularization both has and has not taken place, meaning the concept both is and is not empty. This internal schism or disproportion within the secular between itself and itself means that all acts of secularization are structurally incomplete or structurally deferred, which, for Derrida, is precisely the possibility of ongoing secularization, of the secular to come. But, as

¹³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36. For Derrida’s comments on Schmitt’s understanding of secularization specifically, see “Faith and Knowledge” in *Acts of Religion*, 63–64, and more generally Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997).

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano,” in *Acts of Religion*, 200.

I pointed out earlier, it is *in its structure* that something is to come, which means the secular is, *here and now*, to come.

It is because in this Derridean conception there is nothing purely and simply religious or purely and simply secular—because, he would say, each domain is undecidable—that any association one has with religion or with the secular must be understood to be a *decision* or an *identification* rather than as a *given*. As Derrida always argues, every decision presupposes undecidability. It is precisely as an identification or decision, rather than as an identity, that Derrida presents his own avowed secularism. In “Taking a Stand for Algeria,” a speech given in 1994 in Paris at a public meeting in support of civil peace in Algeria, Derrida outlines four principles for which he urges supporters to “take a stand” (i.e., to identify with), which to do so, he adds, is “not to be politically neutral.” Regarding the one principle relevant to our current discussion, he proposes that supporters “take a stand for the effective dissociation of the political and the theological [in Algeria],” an idea he repeats when he says that “democracy implies a separation between the state and religious powers.” He then immediately re-describes this separation, using the technical French term, as “a radical *laïcité* and a faultless tolerance,” *laïcité* being translated in the two English translations of this piece as “religious neutrality” and “secularism.”¹⁵ Similarly, in “Faith and Knowledge,” he points out that he and his interlocutors from the workshop for which this essay was written are neither “representative” of, nor “enemies” of, religion. He acknowledges, however, that they “share” an “unreserved taste, if not unconditional preference” for “republican democracy as a universalizable model” and for the “enlightened virtue of public space, emancipating it from all external power (non-lay, non-secular), for example from religious dogmatism, orthodoxy or authority” (AR 47). Before one hastily concludes that Derrida is unequivocally or by default a secularist, one should note that he goes on to add in a parenthesis that such an emancipation or separation of public space from religion “does not mean from all faith.” Derrida somehow stands for what, in addition to the “secular to come,” we can thus also call a “*laïcité* with faith” (GD 49).

To understand what such a “*laïcité* with faith” might mean, we have to return now to *The Gift of Death*, this time to Derrida’s reading of Kierkegaard. Derrida’s reading of Kierkegaard mimics Kierkegaard’s own critique of Christianity, in which Kierkegaard uses the concept and practice of faith to critique what he disparagingly calls Christendom, except that Derrida uses Kierkegaardian faith, in a sense, to de-Christianize Kierkegaard, to find something irreducible to Christianity within his Christianity. To accomplish this task, Derrida focuses on two aspects of Kierkegaard’s analysis of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. First, he discusses how, according to Kierkegaard, faith in the wholly other is not reducible to the universal laws of conventional morality, such as “a father must love his child.” He similarly focuses on how, according to Kierkegaard, faith is

¹⁵ Gil Anidjar’s translation of *laïcité* as “religious neutrality” is found in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 306, and Elizabeth Rottenberg’s translation of *laïcité* as “secularism” is found in Derrida, *Negotiations*, 122.

an act of the singular individual and is thus not directly derivable from or directly communicable within one's generation or even between generations (in history), making it also temporally irreducible. What Derrida extracts from these characteristics of faith is that it is radically unconditional, so unconditional that it is not conditioned by anything in Christian identity (its dogmas, laws, traditions, history, etc.). Faith is thus the radical alterity of the fold within Christian identity that allows Kierkegaard to turn back upon Christianity (Christendom) and then in turn allows Derrida to turn back upon Kierkegaard and break faith free from Christianity. In fact, Derrida goes so far as to say that, on the basis of Kierkegaard's analysis, we cannot prevent the inference that the faith of Abraham happens all the time (GD 67-68), and even that everyone may be an instance of the radical alterity of God (one of the possible readings of Derrida's formulation, *tout autre est tout autre*, "every other is wholly other") (GD 87).

This irreducibility of faith to Christianity means that faith may be present in non-Christian and even non-religious contexts, which is in fact what Derrida attempts to show in other texts. He does so by situating faith in the most universal of domains—language. Every speech act, Derrida argues, whether constative or performative, whether secular or religious, presupposes an act of faith. We cannot speak to each other or interact, even in our apparently non-religious contexts, he argues, without commitments of faith and trust, without an implicit promise to speak the truth and an implicit trust that the other speaks the truth, even if, or especially when, we lie to each other. As he says axiomatically in the Villanova Roundtable, "there is no society without this faith,"¹⁶ or, to put it positively, sociality requires faith. Insofar as secularism is a kind of sociality, then, even the secular presupposes faith.

How is this "*laïcité* with faith" related to the concept of "the secular to come?" To put it quite simply, it is because the secular always involves faith that it is always to come. It is precisely because the secular cannot be wholly purged of religion, as Enlightenment and liberal discourse assumes, and in fact presupposes something in religion that is itself not necessarily religious (whence Derrida's formulation "religion without religion"), the secular is never—not in the past, not in the present, not in the future—wholly or purely secular. As structurally contaminated by non-religious faith, but a faith nonetheless, the secular can only exist within the modality of the *to come*.

V. Whence *To Come*? Kierkegaardian Questions and Suggestions

Having now outlined how Derrida conceives the relationship between the secular and the religious, I would like, via a passage through Kierkegaard, to raise some questions about this Derridean "secular to come" and to suggest some responses.

We have seen that Derrida does not accept the standard Enlightenment and liberal configuration of the relationship between the secular and the religious.

¹⁶ Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable," *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 23.

As was explained, according to the “subtraction theory” employed by Enlightenment thinkers, what is secular for them is the natural space that remains when the illusions of religious identity are dispelled from society, rendering the secular “natural” and religion “artificial” or “cultural.” The ideology of modern liberal democracy, having developed out of this Enlightenment configuration, has conceived civil society, the public sphere, and the state as culturally neutral and therefore, in a sense, as homogeneous. Derrida’s deconstruction of this Enlightenment and liberal approach and his proposition of a secularity conceived otherwise is grounded, as we have seen, in the isolation of a radically unconditional alterity that is propertyless and pre-cultural.

It is with this pre-cultural alterity that questions begin to arise for me. In isolating a *khoral* spacing that is irreducible, unconditioned, propertyless, and pre-cultural within every cultural identity with the intention of opening them up to, and creating a space for, other cultural identities, is Derrida not fundamentally following Enlightenment and liberal thought? To be sure, the model of universality that Derrida conceives is not exactly equivalent to that of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment model of universality, as we have seen, functions by looking “behind” the historically particular conventions of institutions, customs, superstitions, revealed religions, and so on, which cover over the true core of human experience. In doing so, it thereby uncovers the truly universal and transcendental elements of human experience, such as “Nature,” “Reason,” and “the Deity.” On these bases, it then builds new institutions and practices that are sufficiently abstract so as to function irrespective of anyone’s particular historical location. So, for instance, philosophy does not study the values or concepts of a particular tradition, it outlines the a priori structures of reason in itself; government does not protect the interests of a particular cultural group, it protects basic human rights; natural theology is not concerned with the claims of particular religious sects, it is concerned only with what can be rationally inferred about God on the basis of the evidence of experience. Against this view, Derrida insists that *khora*, while pre-cultural, does not wholly transcend history and experience; rather, it is, as Derrida often says, “quasi-transcendental.” The quasi-transcendental is *transcendental* insofar as it is unconditioned by history, but it is only *quasi-transcendental* insofar as it cannot exist outside of history and experience. Thus, Derrida argues that the concept “Nature” is not natural, that “Reason” depends on much that is not rational, and that “the Deity” is subject to the vicissitudes of human discourse. It is for this reason that Derrida believes that institutions cannot be as universal as is often assumed in Enlightenment and liberal discourse and why the secular, for instance, is not fully present but can only be to come. Because of this difference from Enlightenment thought, Derrida claims to be indebted only to a *certain* spirit of the Enlightenment and not to the Enlightenment itself.

Despite this significant difference from Enlightenment thought, is Derrida not perhaps closer to the Enlightenment than he lets on? For one, Derrida’s motivation and strategy remains essentially the same as the Enlightenment’s: to

find in culture something irreducible to all cultures so as to create the possibility for universal culture. Like the Enlightenment, Derrida believes that one can isolate in culture and history something that is non-cultural or non-historical. What's more is that he believes that this movement is possible because of the particular way that he conceives of culture and cultural identity. As has been explained, for Derrida, all identity—indeed, all experience—is constituted through an act of identification that presupposes an alterity which precedes and therefore is irreducible to that which is constituted. The scope of this structure suggests that, *universally*, all cultures possess a dispossessing difference within themselves: “[t]here is no culture or cultural identity,” we quoted earlier, “without this difference *with itself*.” By representing difference as inhering (without inhering) in culture and experience itself, Derrida strangely universalizes the possibility of true universality. The mere *fact* of being a culture makes a culture *structurally* open to being secular. What Derrida does not entertain is that perhaps his conception of culture, and therefore his conception of universality and secularity, is itself culturally conditioned. Ironically, for all of Derrida's deconstruction of the Enlightenment conception of nature, this move on his part risks *naturalizing* his secular to come, rendering its possibility a simple *given* of sociality. The risk of this naturalization is starkly apparent in the interview “Epoché and Faith,” when, after explaining again that he refers to “the experience of faith as simply a speech act, as simply the social experience,” he then adds that “this is true even for animals. Animals have faith, in a certain way. As soon as there is a social bond,” he continues, “there is faith, and there are social bonds in animals: they trust one another.... That [i.e., faith] is the ground of our experience *as living beings*,” which is not as *human* beings, as he goes on to qualify.¹⁷ As simply part of being a social living being, the alterity that makes secularization possible does not require acculturation (it precedes culture), does not need the cultivation and support of a history and a community, for the very possibility of this secularization, as of any culture, history, or community, is premised precisely upon breaking from culture, history and community—just as the liberal discourse on secularism often sets it in opposition to community and belonging.

And yet, when Derrida discusses the most prevalent form of universalization in our world today, what in English and therefore almost globally is called globalization, he is quick to recast it as what he calls “globalatinization” (*mondialatinisation*), to signal that this process is actually a subtle universalization of Latin Christianity, a catholicity, a kind of global missionizing secular conversion (AR 67). Now, while he would hold that in its present form globalatinization is a malevolent, quasi-colonial kind of universalization, it is nevertheless still premised on a certain unconditionality: even colonialism, the imposition of oneself on the other, requires one to break out in some way beyond the borders of oneself, and thus contains within itself the possibility of interaction, hospitality, peace and justice. But if this current form of

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, eds. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), 45; last sentence slightly altered; my emphasis.

universalization is identifiably Christian, even if crypto-Christian, does that not suggest that the unconditionality on which it depends is also identifiably Christian? Derrida would doubtlessly respond that to speak of the unconditional as identifiable is oxymoronic, since, if the unconditional has an identity, then it is conditioned. And yet, what he actually acknowledges observing under the name of globalatinization is that *there is* a culture of universalization. In "Epoché and Faith" he says that, "When I spoke of *mondialatinisation* or, in English, globalatinization, I was thinking of globalization as a Christianization, as a Roman Christianization. I was implying that Christianity is the most plastic, the most open, religion, the most prepared, the best prepared, to face unpredictable transformations,"¹⁸ to face, that is, the wholly other. Nevertheless, in his mind, "the fact that deconstruction's link with Christianity is more apparent, more literal, than with other religions doesn't mean that Christianity has a greater affinity with deconstruction." All religions, all cultures, all histories are open to the wholly other, to universality, and therefore to the secular. But then why is it, as he puts it, that Christianity is most apparently and most literally the most plastic, most open, most prepared of the religions to welcome newness and otherness? Is this simply a coincidence?

Derrida's resistance to seeing in the culture of universalization a culture of unconditionality results, on the one hand, from an admirable ethico-political concern for pluralism, but also from a problematically conceived *opposition* between unconditionality and culture. We should not let Derrida's brilliant facility for uncovering the aporetic interrelations of these terms, or of any other terms, seduce us into thinking that he does not view them as oppositional. The reason the relationship of these terms can appear paradoxical is because Derrida describes them in their natures as opposed to each other. The interrelations of, say, the calculable and the incalculable appear aporetic because, in themselves, they are, as their names indicate, opposed and therefore seemingly not interrelatable.¹⁹ That in Derrida's hands these opposed terms interrelate thus appears paradoxical. But must the concern for pluralism force us to conceive the unconditional as opposed to culture and history?

¹⁸ Derrida, "Epoché and Faith," *Derrida and Religion*, 33.

¹⁹ On this matter, I hazard to disagree with the formidable reading of Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), who argues that in Derrida's thinking the conditional and the unconditional operate according to what he calls, following Derrida, a "logic of presupposition" (163) in which each is the "condition" of the other (330-334). That is true for Derrida only in the sense that one needs a horizon in order for an event to disrupt the horizon, but the horizon for Derrida is in no way the condition of the disruption, as de Vries certainly knows. To claim that the horizon is a condition of the event would require understanding the concept of "condition" in an unconventional sense, while still continuing to read "unconditional" in its conventional sense (which is obviously bound to a conventional sense of "condition"). The horizon is not really a condition, whereas the event really is unconditional. For an elaboration of de Vries' interpretation, see Tyler Roberts, "Sacrifice and Secularization: Derrida, de Vries, and the Future of Mourning," in Sherwood and Hart, *Derrida and Religion*.

Here I would like to return briefly to the locus of one of Derrida's expositions of this logic, namely, Kierkegaard, who proposes a rather different conception of the paradoxical relationship between the unconditional, on the one hand, and history or culture, on the other. We have seen that in *The Gift of Death* Derrida interprets Kierkegaard's assertion in *Fear and Trembling* that faith cannot be passed from generation to generation as suggesting that faith "has no history" (GD 80). History comes into being, for Derrida, because this non-historical act of faith is repeated or re-instituted in each generation—but faith itself is always, nevertheless, irreducible to such historical institutions. Faith's unconditional break with history, for Derrida, is the source of the paradoxicality that Kierkegaard famously attributes to it. But this is actually a misreading of Kierkegaard.²⁰ Throughout *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard repeatedly states the paradox, not taken up by Derrida, that if faith has always existed, then it has never existed.²¹ In other words, if faith is an ever-present possibility, simply given with existence, then it is not faith. Faith must, as he puts it in *Philosophical Fragments*, "come into existence," which means it must have a temporal beginning and a history. The temporality and historicity of faith, however, does not make it any less unconditional, according to Kierkegaard. Rather, the paradox of faith for him, misrepresented by Derrida, is that the unconditional is historical. To demonstrate that point is the purpose of *Philosophical Fragments*, on whose title page Kierkegaard asks, broadcasting the theme of the work, "Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness,"²² that is, for that which is irreducible to time (the unconditional)? Kierkegaard's answer is yes. But, again, that the unconditional is historical does not mean, for Kierkegaard, that it is simply conditioned, as I shall now explain.

Kierkegaard develops his explanation of this last point in *Philosophical Fragments* through a historical contrast between Platonic maieutics and the Christian's relationship to Christ—a historical contrast, therefore, between two different cultures' views of history. Kierkegaard explains that in Platonic maieutics, the role of the teacher is simply to help the pupil recall what he or she already knows from a-temporal eternity (the residence of truth, for Plato), making the teacher what Kierkegaard calls a mere "occasion" for the pupil, lacking any decisive, historical significance. By contrast, in Christianity the wholly other teacher—the eternal-temporal God-Man, Christ—offers the pupil in time the eternity the pupil never had, "bringing into existence" what Kierkegaard describes as a momentous, historically-significant, paradoxical "moment." To the gift of this wholly other moment, the pupil has no choice but to respond. However, because it is the teacher who brings about the possibility of this response, Kierkegaard

²⁰ I am indebted to Brayton Polka for many years of discussion about Kierkegaard and to two articles by Avron Kulak: "Between Biblical Religion and Deconstruction: The Possibility of Repetition," in *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James Olthuis (New York: Routledge, 2002) and "Derrida and Kierkegaard: Thinking the Fall," in *The European Legacy* 6.3: 305-318.

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), 55, 56, 81, 82.

²² Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 1; hereafter cited in text as PF.

describes the teacher as a “condition” of the pupil (PF 14-19). If the pupil responds with his or her understanding (which Kierkegaard takes in the Kantian sense of a faculty of cognition), then he or she will be “offended” by the historical and unconditional paradox, since the understanding cannot comprehend such things (PF 49-54). The only truly appropriate response is to respond with faith, with trust and affirmation, which Kierkegaard aligns with the activity of freedom (which is unconditioned). This act of freedom, this unconditionality, however, is not purely an act of simple will-power. As Kierkegaard writes, “faith is not an act of will, for it is always the case that *all human willing is efficacious only with the condition,*” the condition being, we said, the other (PF 62; my emphasis). Willing that is not a response to the wholly other (the “condition”), therefore, is not actually willing, since it cannot accomplish anything. Only willing that is “conditioned” by and is in response to the wholly other is truly willing (acting unconditionally). This relationship between freedom and otherness gives rise to another paradox—the one I am driving at—for it means that one is unconditional (free, faithful) only on the condition of the other, which means that the conditioning of one by the other does not render one conditioned or conditional, but rather *unconditioned* and *unconditional*. It would be more accurate to say that, for Kierkegaard, the other *unconditions* one.

Derrida is partially correct that, for Kierkegaard, one person cannot make another have faith, as is generally well-understood about Kierkegaard, meaning that faith in one sense is not historical. But that is only half the story for Kierkegaard and only one meaning of being historical. For Kierkegaard also holds that, since the paradox is that Christ came in history, there is a certain sense in which we can say that the only access a Christian has to Christ is through the historical testament of others (the heritage and one’s teachers), although how one understands one’s heritage and one’s human teachers is, for Kierkegaard, of critical importance. Kierkegaard is very firm that the human teacher and the heritage must *not* present themselves as immediately containing the message of Christ’s paradoxical existence as the God-Man, for then the pupil could simply have direct faith (an oxymoron) in the teacher or the heritage (PF 99-110). Rather, in order for the heritage or a teacher (such as Kierkegaard) to convey properly the message of Christ, they must communicate with the pupil *indirectly* (paradoxically)—which, of course, is precisely how Kierkegaard, in *Practice in Christianity*, describes how Christ himself communicates.²³ In this conception of the heritage and one’s relation to it, *history and culture uncondition one*, they make one unconditional. As Kierkegaard writes at the conclusion of *Philosophical Fragments*:

Christianity is the only historical phenomenon that despite the historical—indeed, precisely by means of the historical—has wanted to be the single individual’s point of departure for his eternal consciousness, has wanted to interest him otherwise than merely

²³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 127-136.

historically, has wanted to base his happiness on his relation to something historical. (PF 109)

What this passage through Kierkegaard gives to us is a way to conceive history in a manner not opposed to unconditionality, as Derrida conceives it, but rather as *unconditioning*. *History and culture can open us to alterity*.

VI. The Abrahamic Secular

How does this Kierkegaardian configuration of the relationship between the historico-cultural and the unconditional affect how we conceive the secular, particularly the Derridean secular to come? The first thing that needs to be said is that it does not fundamentally alter the basis of Derrida's conception of the secular, which is, again, the internal, unconditional alterity described earlier. What it does affect is the empirical scope of this internal difference. Derrida, we have seen, locates the possibility of the secular in the internal difference within *every* identity, indeed, in the sociality of *all* social "living beings," and even in "all 'experience' in general." For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, unconditional openness to unconditional otherness is historically conditioned (that is, unconditioned), for him by Christianity. If this Kierkegaardian view were applied without adulteration to the context of secularism, what it would suggest is precisely what we have seen Derrida himself observe and then disavow, namely, that Christianity is the historical condition (or unconditioning) of secularism. This view, which in my judgement is too Christo-centric and needs as Derrida suggests some de-Christianization, I nevertheless think is closer to the truth than Derrida's representation; for de-Christianization does not justify reading the conditions of possibility for the secular universally into all cultures on the basis of a supposed axiom of all culture, as Derrida attempts. I think, rather, that history justifies only the much narrower extension of seeing the conceptual and cultural conditions or sources of modern secularization in the Abrahamic traditions (Yahwism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). This narrower view in no way means or implies, I want to stress, that non-Abrahamic peoples are somehow precluded from the secular—that would be a rather odd way to conceive the secular. As we shall see, a rigorous conception of the Abrahamic secular enables the critique of precisely such a view. All that this genealogical linkage means is that, similar to the recognition today that the atomistic modern subject, liberal democracy, capitalism and progress are Western and European, so I am arguing that the secular itself should be seen as a historical phenomenon that evolves out of a nexus of Abrahamic concepts, values, and practices, as some philosophers have begun to argue.²⁴

²⁴ The classic statement is in Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, New Revised Edition (Toronto: MacMillan Co., 1966), esp. ch. 1. The most notable contemporary statement is Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997). A weaker version of the thesis is put forward in several recent works by Jean-Luc Nancy: "Laïcité monothéiste," in *Le Monde*, 01/01/04; "Deconstruction of Monotheism," trans. Amanda Macdonald, *Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 37-46; *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: SUNY

Understanding the genealogical link between these Abrahamic concepts, values, and practices, on the one hand, and modern secularity, on the other, is therefore critical for understanding the latter and for critiquing the traditional liberal configuration of the relations of religion, culture, and pluralism to secularity, as I will suggest in the conclusion. For the present, I want to provide a *very* bare sketch of a justification for this genealogical link.

The fact that we can refer to the many Abrahamic traditions (plural) as an Abrahamic tradition in the singular itself testifies to the reasons for attributing the secular to the Abrahamic tradition. The interrelations of the Abrahamic religions are characterized by their different testaments to and different interpretations of one God, a God that all of them claim is characterized by a Oneness and, moreover, which is asserted to be the only true God. Despite the seeming *exclusivity* of such a notion, the claim that there is only one God has the nearly inverse effect of creating *inclusivity*, since it renders the world *one world*, understanding all peoples as, in principle, part of *one community*. Such is the justification provided, for instance, by St. Paul for opening Judaism to non-Jews, for Mohammed's attempt to unify beyond ethnicity and kinship the warring Arab tribes of his day, for John Locke's plea for tolerance of different religious sects.

Many recent critics of monotheism have charged it with promoting an anti-pluralistic and thus anti-secular ethos, either because of its exclusivity (rejecting others) or because of its inclusivity (dissolving others within itself). One of the most notable critics in this regard, Jan Assmann, charges both Egyptian and Abrahamic monotheism with denying translation among different cultures. As is well-attested in ancient literature, different polytheist societies were often able to translate the names of their gods into the names of other societies' gods because, as Assmann explains, "[t]he sun god of one religion is easily equated to the sun god of another religion,"²⁵ thus promoting what Assmann calls "intercultural translation." But when monotheism claims that there is only one God and that all other "gods" are therefore not really gods, the possibility of translation, according to Assmann, is blocked: "False gods cannot be translated."²⁶ Assmann thus configures his project as a "deconstruction" (his word) of monotheism.²⁷ And yet, when the deconstructor *par excellence*, Derrida, goes to write two essays on translation, he takes as his starting point two stories from the Bible: the tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9) and the story of the shibboleth (Judges 12: 1-6).²⁸ In "*Des tours de Babel*" Derrida, consistent with his general

Press, 2007). The thesis is put forward strongly, within the context of Spinoza, in Brayton Polka, *Between Religion and Philosophy: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity*, 2 vols. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006, 2007).

²⁵ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸ Derrida reads the tower of Babel story in "*Des tours de Babel*" in *Acts of Religion*, and the shibboleth story in "Shibboleth for Paul Celan," in *Sovereignities in Question: The*

philosophy of translation, reads the untranslatability of God as the very condition of true translation, whereas he characterizes as violence the pre-tower condition of humanity in which all discourse was mutually transparent (consistent with the condition described by Assmann as “intercultural translation”), since it disrespects the alterity and singularity of each. Instead, as Derrida writes, “when God imposes and opposes his name, he ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the colonial violence or the linguistic imperialism” of pre-tower humanity and thereby “destines them [the Semites] to translation” (AR 111). For Derrida—at least in this essay—the radical singularity of monotheism’s God is the very possibility of translation, and also, therefore, of deconstruction. And insofar as translation and deconstruction are the possibility of a Derridean secular to come, the radical singularity of the Abrahamic God is the possibility of the secular to come, as I shall now argue.

What Derrida is in fact identifying in the Babel story is the *unconditionality* of the Abrahamic God, something which Assmann misses when he renders Abrahamic monotheism equivalent to Egyptian monotheism on the basis of oneness. Oneness is not the critical element of Abrahamic monotheism, as is made amply evident when Christianity asserts as consistent with oneness the doctrine of the Trinity.²⁹ It is rather, as Marcel Gauchet has argued, the otherness or the unconditionality of God in relation to the immediacy of the world that is the chief characteristic of Abrahamic monotheism.³⁰ The unconditionality of the Abrahamic God is captured most clearly in the uniquely Abrahamic conception of creation. What makes the Abrahamic notion of creation singular, and not equivalent to theories of generation or emanation (as in Greek mythology and philosophy, for instance), is that the existence of the world is grounded in a *decision* by God: the world exists because God *intends* it to exist, he *wants* it to exist, he *desires* it to exist. If we follow Derrida’s analysis of decision, every true decision—and God is the pre-eminent decider—necessarily presupposes some undecidability, for besides all the cognition and calculation that goes into preparing for a decision, the actual act of decision is a pure act grounded in nothing but the act itself and therefore not in cognition or calculation. Thus, God’s decision that the world shall exist cannot be conditioned by the world, an idea presented most rigorously in the theological doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*,

Poetics of Paul Celan, eds. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham UP, 2005).

²⁹ In fact, the plurality of Abrahamic oneness was evident from the beginning. Scholars who work on the historical emergence of biblical monotheism point out that the biblical figure of Yahweh is in fact an amalgamation of several Near Eastern deities, ascribing to his one person multiple roles and characteristics, which leads one leading scholar, Mark S. Smith, to remark about biblical monotheism that “there was often something quite ‘poly’ about monotheism;” see Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 88.

³⁰ Gauchet, *Disenchantment of the World*, op. cit. While Gauchet does recognize that Abrahamic religion in general separates God from the world, which is the condition of modernity, he accords a special privilege—not wholly justified, in my judgement—to Christianity, which he describes as “the religion for departing from religion” (4).

according to which everything in the world, even materiality itself, is attributed solely to God's agency.³¹

This idea that *everything* in the world, even materiality, comes from God, with its attendant notion that God is therefore irreducible to the world, has the effect, not that significance is taken away from the world and human activity, but rather that significance is attributed to them (they are "very good," the Bible says). For the radical irreducibility and unconditionality of God contained in this idea removes God, in a sense, from the world without simply opposing him to it. The removal of God from the world grants to the human world a certain autonomy and even nobility. This counter-intuition is nicely expressed in the Lurianic Kabbalist interpretation of creation *ex nihilo*, which uses their concept of *zimzum* (contraction) to explain the *nihil*: when God created the world, these Kabbalists held, he contracted his original infinitude to make room (the nothing) for humanity.³² The removal of God from the immediacy of the world enacted in Abrahamic monotheism is thus the possibility of a purely humanly-oriented world or a world-oriented world, a human, all-too-human world, and thus the possibility of the secular and even atheism. Indeed, the humanity or humanness of the human world is so ennobled in this framework that it can, on the one hand, be taken as the very evidence of God, as is expressed, for instance, in the first letter of John, where it is written, "No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1 Jn. 4: 12).³³ On the other hand, it is precisely in a passage such as this one, according to which God cannot be seen and all that can be seen is our all-too-human and all-too-mundane or profane love for one another, that we see how the humanity of the human world can also be grounds for precisely the opposite inference: the death of God. As Jean-Luc Nancy has written, "[m]onotheism, in its first principles, undoes theism,"³⁴ something made evident in Nietzsche. Nietzsche, our most relentless

³¹ Scholars of the Bible and of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* for the most part agree that the Bible does not itself hold the position of creation *ex nihilo*; see most notably, Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994). Moreover, there has been a tendency on the part of philosophers and theologians influenced by Derrida to see deconstruction and creation *ex nihilo* as fundamentally antithetical; see in this regard, John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006) and Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003). In forthcoming studies, I argue that creation *ex nihilo*, while not present in the Bible, is consistent with the biblical conception of God and that the doctrine is consistent with a deconstructive conception of experience; on the former point, see my *The Creation of Deconstruction: Agency and the Question of the "Jewgreek" in Derrida* (in preparation), and, on the latter, see "Deconstruction and Creation: An Augustinian Deconstruction of Derrida" in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (forthcoming).

³² See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Meridean Books, 1978), 129-135. Lurianic Kabbalah is based on the interpretations of Kabbalah introduced by Palestinian Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572).

³³ Human relations as the only evidence of God is also the basis of the philosophies of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas.

³⁴ Nancy, "Deconstruction of Monotheism," 42.

critic of religion and for that reason often construed as simply anti-religious, confounds those who read him in this way when, in the closing pages of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he articulates the genealogical relationship between “unconditional honest atheism” (his position) and the “ascetic ideal” that he associates with the revaluation of values in Judaism and Christianity:

Unconditional honest atheism (and *its* is the only air we breathe, we more spiritual men of this age!) is therefore not the antithesis of that [ascetic] ideal, as it appears to be; it is rather only one of the latest phases of its evolution, one of its terminal forms and inner consequences—it is the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness [promoted by the ascetic ideal] that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*.³⁵

If, following upon Nietzsche, we return to the question we posed earlier to Marx’s claim that the critique of religion is the beginning of all critique—namely, about where the critic of religion stands in order to gain his or her critical standpoint—what shall we answer? (My interest here is less in Marx himself than in what his claim is an index of in the culture of critical thought since the Enlightenment.) If the critic stands in a critical space *outside* religion, where did that space come from, given that Marx’s claim correctly assumes that religion pervades the intellectual landscape before the advent of non-religious critique? If such a non-religious critical space *does* exist, then critique must have begun *before* the critique of religion, which would mean that the critique of religion is *not* the beginning of all critique. On the other hand, if the critique of religion is the beginning of all critique—which, given the fact that Western culture was ostensibly religious before it was ostensibly secular, it must be—then the only place one could stand in order to critique Abrahamic religion is in Abrahamic religion. The possibility of the critique of Abrahamic religion, therefore, must itself be enabled by Abrahamic religion.³⁶ The critique of Abrahamic religion by Abrahamic religion is the beginning of secular critique, which makes Abrahamic monotheism, as Nancy has also said recently, its own “auto-deconstruction.”³⁷ If

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollindale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), third essay, section 27, 160; see also third essay, section 13.

³⁶ The paradigmatic examples of this self-critique within the Abrahamic religions are the Hebrew prophets who critique the Israelites’ following of the law on the basis of the law. Paul and Jesus, following in that tradition, insist that Jesus’ teachings, some of which appear to break Jewish law, are in fact more truly in accord with it. It is this self-critique of Judaism that produces Christianity, just as Mohammed’s critique of Jews and Christians is that they are not adequately true to their own (and his) God, and just as it will be the self-critique of Catholicism that produces Protestantism (Luther, after all, was not a Protestant, but a Catholic). It will be the conflicts among all of these within the Europe of the late medieval and early modern eras, and the critical discourse forged out of religion to deal with them (especially that of tolerance), that are the beginnings of the process of secularization.

³⁷ Nancy, “Deconstruction of Monotheism,” 41.

the Abrahamic tradition is its own auto-deconstruction, then in its beginning it is a secular to come.

VII. Implications

If the secular is produced by the Abrahamic tradition, as I have suggested, then Derrida is correct (although not quite for the right reasons) in his assertion that the secular can never be pure, never be wholly non-religious. There are three implications of this recognition that I would like, in conclusion, to sketch briefly. This recognition would require, *first*, modifying the standard liberal conception, which is actually the preferred liberal *metaphor*, of the secular as culturally-neutral. Neutrality, from the Latin *ne* and *uter*, most fundamentally means “neither/nor,” and is similar to that other Enlightenment metaphor, the *tabula rasa*. With these metaphors, liberalism retains the legacy of subtractive thinking discussed earlier, which, in the name of a coolly calculating, public or procedural Reason, suppresses any sense of the *affirmative, positive activity* required to produce a secular space. Being secular, more than requiring a neutral rationality, is a matter of *ethics* broadly construed, as Nietzsche, the genealogist of morality, recognized of his atheism, an ethics derived, I have suggested, from the Abrahamic tradition.

The fact that secularism thus has its sources in a religio-cultural tradition makes evident, *second*, that it requires cultivation and that it is not in its nature antithetical to culture and community (as, again, liberalism assumes). This recognition would suggest that it must be possible to conceive, with the proper precautions, a democratic politics that did not exclude the cultural and even the religious from its domain (the French headscarf law being only the most glaring example of such an exclusion), but which, rather, included the cultural within it somehow.³⁸

Finally, in acknowledging the religio-cultural origins of the secular and in admitting cultural plurality into democratic practice, we are better equipped to guard against hegemonic impositions on others. *On the one hand*—and only on one hand—democratic secularization inevitably involves a degree of “Westernization” of non-Westerners, or, as I have tried to re-specify it, an Abrahamization of the non-Abrahamite (to use an admittedly inelegant phrase). Anyone who is democratic and secular or who subscribes to democracy and secularization as the best possible way to collectively govern our lives, even if via a pluralistic, agonistic, or social conception of democracy, is inevitably

³⁸ I am thinking here of something along the lines of communitarian and agonistic critiques of liberalism, as distinct as these are. For a communitarian treatment of the secular, see Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, esp. ch.13; for an agonistic treatment of the secular, see Chantal Mouffe, “Religion, Liberal Democracy, and Citizenship,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, eds. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham UP, 2006) and William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). For a helpful discussion of Taylor’s and Connolly’s differing views of the secular, see Mark Redhead, “Alternative Secularisms,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 5 (2006): 639-666.

subscribing to a nexus of concepts, values and practices cultivated by and intimately related to a particular cultural history. Asking anyone to be democratic and secular is thus asking them to subscribe, in part, to that cultural history. *On the other hand*, these concepts, values and practices are auto-deconstructing, for they prohibit viewing as legitimate any person or group, including the Westerner or the Abrahamite, who asserts herself or themselves as a hegemon (as the Torah demands, “you shall love the alien as yourself” [Lev. 19:33-34]). The latter point needs to be made not in the self-congratulatory way, for instance, that some American politicians have in recent years defended “detainee” treatment as better than prisoner treatment in many other countries (*we* have higher moral standards than *they* do). On the contrary, this point needs to be made to remind those committed to some kind of secularism (let us call them, in another quasi-Derridean formulation, quasi-secularists) that, because the secular is culturally-grounded and cultivated, it is inevitably susceptible to real, violent cultural hegemony. Quasi-secularists must therefore be vigilant that the only stipulations placed on the “stranger” are those that will cultivate collective decision-making, a collective decision-making that all quasi-secularists must also allow to call themselves into question. Such a vigilance would take the form of relentless self-critique or auto-deconstruction, which makes secularization a permanently ongoing project, and for this reason, as Derrida would say, essentially to come.³⁹

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³⁹ I would like to thank the reviewer from JCRT for making some helpful suggestions, as well as Neil Braganza, Anna Isacsson, and Avron Kulak for reading and commenting on this paper.