Research Article

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Thinking with Faith, Thinking as Faith: What Comes After Onto-theology?

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Abstract: Despite Heidegger’s constant claims to the contrary, thinking is not opposed to faith. Indeed, against his own intentions, Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology, which breaks the grip of modernity, issues in a faith more radically conceived. This faith is the thinking, this thinking is the faith that becomes possible in the post-secular space which Heidegger’s critique of modernity opens. Although the great medieval theologians like Augustine and Aquinas are not onto-theologians in a strict sense, they, along with the whole history of metaphysics, fall under its wider sense of any centered and foundational discourse. But any discourse that eludes onto-theology in the wider sense finds itself embracing a faith, not reducible to belief, where thinking is a form of faith and faith is a form of thinking. Derrida’s “Circumfession,” a paradigmatic post-ontotheological discourse, is a work of prayer and a confession of faith in the open-endedness of the event, an un-programmable future (à venir). This text communicates with Heidegger thinking the “open,” the “promise” of language, of the Zukunft embedded in the Herkunft, constituting the “piety of thinking.”

Keywords: onto-theology, Heidegger, Derrida, Aquinas, Augustine, thinking, faith, Marion, prayer

Despite Heidegger’s constant claims to the contrary, thinking is not opposed to faith. Indeed, against his own intentions, Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology, which breaks the grip of modernity, issues in a faith more radically conceived. This faith is the thinking, this thinking is the faith that becomes possible in the post-secular space which Heidegger’s critique of modernity opens.

1 The strict meaning of “onto-theology”

The word “onto-theology” is Kant’s, who used it to describe proofs for the existence of God that were a priori in character, or based on mere concepts, as in the various ontological proofs in Anselm or Descartes.¹ Kant opposes it to “cosmo-theology,” which makes use of proofs based on experience, like Aquinas’s proof from the motion that is visible in the world. Approached cosmo-theologically, God is determined as the First Cause and Governor of the universe. Approached onto-theologically, God is determined as the most perfect being than which nothing is more perfect. When Heidegger took over the word from Kant he made it identical with “metaphysics” itself, which for him means thinking Being itself in terms

¹ Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A632–B660.

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of some entity, like God or the human subject, or some regional characteristic of entities, like matter or the will.² Heidegger settled on Kant’s word because he thought the structure of the word, highlighted by the hyphenation, brought out a problem in Aristotle’s Metaphysics. Is metaphysics first philosophy because it is the science of the First and Highest Being (Metaphysics, Book VI,1, 1026b15–20), which Aristotle called theology, or because it is the science of Being as such (Book IV,1, 1003a20–25), which modernity calls ontology?

For Heidegger, onto-theo-logic is the circle or circulatory system which runs between Being and entities. Being is the common ground of everything that is, what they all have in common, their common base or support. God is the causal ground of other entities, setting in motion the distribution of Being among entities, so that entities may have Being at all. The two belong together in a unity. Metaphysics is ontology because it is theology, and theology because it is ontology. Without Being, there is nothing for the First Being to distribute; without the First Being, nothing will get distributed. Common being (ens in communi) requires the First Being (ens supremum) to get going; the First Being requires common being to have something to go with.

If that is what onto-theo-logy means, Thomas Aquinas would have nothing to do with it. For him, if metaphysics is the science of being in general, then it must be the science of God, in which all being is exemplarily contained.³ To know anything about God is to know being as such, paradigmatically, in its finest hour (in eternity), as it were, all that any being, insofar as it is a being, can aspire to be. To speak of being in general as a common ground which precedes or grounds God is strictly an artifact of our thinking, a “being of reason” (ens rationis), an abstraction we construct for our own mental convenience. We may say that “Being” is what God “has,” as if there were some Being before God for God to have, but that is strictly a feature of our modus significandi, the way we speak, not of the modus essendi, the way things are. In reality, God does not have Being. Aquinas does not enclose God within Being, in the manner of onto-logic; he is saying that whatever being means is found supereminenly in God. Indeed, in one very important sense, God is not even “a being” at all, not an individual being, since God’s being is not the individuation of a common shared nature. The sense in which God is an “individual,” Aquinas said, is that God is incommunicably identical with Godself. God’s preeminent being is un-divided, not shared in common with others – there are no other Gods – although, of course, the analogical likenesses of the divine being are received in a proportionate measure by what we call “creatures.” In that sense, Aquinas, and I wager nearly every medieval theologian before Scotus, was decidedly not an onto-theologian. They did not locate God inside a circulatory system between Being and entities. Rather, entities belong inside a circulatory system of God, meaning that creatures take their origin from and return to God, exitus and reditus. Creatures proceed causally from the infinite and subsistent being of God, in whose being they participate finitely, and are teleologically appointed to return to God from whence they originated. God is not so much in us as we are in God.

But in modernity a decisive shift takes place, as Heidegger shows in an exemplary analysis in Der Satz vom Grund (The Principle of Reason).⁴ The defining feature of modernity, Heidegger says, is the unprecedented importance of “principles,” which after a long period of incubation finally emerge in Descartes and Leibniz. In modernity, Heidegger holds, thinking means subsuming beings under principles. In Aquinas, God cannot be subsumed under the principle of causality and is not self-caused. For Aquinas, the very idea of a causa sui is contradictory; to be self-caused a being has to give itself what it does not have, lack something, and then make up that lack by giving itself what it lacks. For Aquinas, God is the first cause uncaused, not self-caused. Why then would thinkers as sharp witted as Descartes and Leibniz call God a self-cause? Because, as Jean-Luc Marion points out, drawing upon Heidegger, they held to the conceptual

² Heidegger, “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics, 72.
³ See Aquinas’s “Introduction” in his Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics. I have worked out in detail the relationship between the metaphysics of esse in Thomas Aquinas and the meaning of Being in Heidegger in Caputo, Heidegger and Aquinas, see in particular 122–84 for relevant texts and a detailed elaboration of this material.
⁴ Heidegger, The Principle of Reason.
priority of rational “principles” to which everything, God included, would be subject.⁵ Whatever is in any way, finite or infinite, ought and must conform to principles like the Principle of Sufficient Reason or the Principle of Causality. God is no exception. To be sure, God passes the tests that the principles put to him with flying colors. God comes out first in the class, summa, nay maxima cum laude. God not only has a cause, God is his very own cause, in no need of anything other than himself to cause his being. That is why Descartes redefined the principle of causality. He did not say it was the principle by which act is communicated to a being in potency; he said there is at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect, which is true but not the point of the causal principle. That sidestep allowed him to save the face of the principles by saying God is the cause of himself, who thus passes muster before the Principle of Causality.

But the very fact that such a test was put to God, that God stood before the court of reason, which Kant defined as the faculty of principles, would be rejected by Aquinas and most medieval philosophers. Aquinas would say not that God passes the tests of the principles, but that the principles pass the test of God, meaning that the principles are made in the likeness of God, that they mirror features of God’s Being. Principles are pale propositional (Satz, principium) reflections constructed by human reason (ratio) of God’s pure subsistent being, finite models constructed in imitation of God’s infinite being. We deploy a “principle of causality” in our thinking only because God is pure self-sufficient being a se. It is with a borrowed (created) subsistence that everything that is not God imitates imperfectly the self-subsistence of God. Everything has and needs a sufficient explanation of its being because God is self-sufficient being and intelligibility itself!

Aquinas thus is not an onto-theo-logian in Kant’s sense, because like Kant he too rejects the attempt to prove the existence of God by mere concepts. But more importantly, he is not a onto-theo-logian in Heidegger’s sense either, if that means the circulatory system described in the “On-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics.” Aquinas is not an onto-theologian because God is in no way a case of or in any way falls under “common being” (Scotus, metaphysica generalis) and he is not an onto-theologian because God does not fall under the ontological “principles” of Descartes, Kant, and Leibniz. It is rather beings and principles which fall under and fall short of God.⁶

The “logic” highlighted by Heidegger’s hyphenation means “calculative” thinking (Rechnen), discursive-causal reasoning from effects to causes. On one level, Aquinas and other medieval theologians would plead guilty as charged on this point: they have every intention of offering a rational argument for the existence and attributes of God. They are “scholastics” or “schoolmen,” or as we would say “academics.” They author books, make arguments, and test their results by submitting them to public critique and cross examination (quaestio disputata). They are the beginning of the history of our western academic tradition.

But there is such a profound difference between these theologians and the Cartesians and post-Cartesians who came after them that the “logic” in “onto-theo-logic” does not fit the schoolmen. They were theologians before they were philosophers, and men of prayer before they were theologians. They were friars, monks, and even saints, who punctuated their day with prayer, whose theology was part of a larger life of liturgy and praise of God. They spoke of God in terms that were theologians before they were philosophers, and men of prayer before they were theologians. They were the deepest sense of awe and mystery. There were assertions that could guardedly be made about God (cataphatic theology), which should always be understood within the context of guarding the mystery of God (apophatic or negative theology). While Aquinas describes God as “being itself subsisting through itself” (ipsum esse per se subsistens) he does not pretend thereby to capture the essence of God but to offer the least confining thing that can be said about God, the best way to talk about God while protecting the incomprehensibility of God. God is only “approached” by these assertions – the word way (via) in the five ways (quinque viae) is a term of respect for the distance of God – and not exhausted or fully conceived. That indeed is why Jean-Luc Marion had later on to retrench after saying in God without Being that Aquinas’s notion of ipsum esse subsistens was a conceptual idol. He would later confess that, just like the clever interpretation Marion had

⁵ Marion, On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism, §8; and Marion, “Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy,” 302–4.
⁶ See Caputo, “Heidegger’s Dif-ference and the esse/ens Distinction in Aquinas,” 161–81; reprinted in Putt, The Essential Caputo, 93–108.
2 Decentering and the broader meaning of onto-theology

But even if we agree that, carefully considered, the metaphysical theologies of the middle ages have little to do with onto-theology in a strict sense, there is a broader and more sweeping sense which they do not evade, found when Heidegger uses the term interchangeably with “metaphysics.” Then the critique of onto-theology is not simply an exercise in medieval piety, not merely inscribing a zone of respect around the incomprehensible being of God, not a pious confession of our mortal limits, like Augustine circumferens suam mortalitatem, carrying around his mortality, coram deo, before God’s excess.¹⁰ We did not need to wait for Heidegger or Derrida to hear that. If that is what it is, then postmodernism would just be pre-modernism under another name, and the critique of onto-theology old wine in new skins.

In its broader sense, where onto-theology means metaphysics itself, be it modern or premodern, the critique of onto-theology means a delimitation of what I propose to call here the “Center” (capitalized); it is a critique of any possible “-centrism,” not only the onto-centrism of ontology, and the logo-centrism of science, but also of the theo-centrism of theology, medieval or modern. It is only when all three ingredients in the expression are displaced – the excessive rationalistic metaphysics of its “onto-logic” and the privilege of the “theo-” – that we can come to grips with this critique in its distinctive contemporary sense. This wider criticism – better described as “overcoming metaphysics” than “overcoming onto-theology” – includes a long line and wide array of philosophical or theological positions from Parmenides to the present. It is a criticism of any effort to arrest the play of competing “master names,” like spirit or matter, capital or history, man or life, or nowadays information. These are all so many replacement candidates for the place formerly held by God, rather than displacements of this very place. It was in this same spirit that Nietzsche said we will not be rid of our faith in God until we are rid of our faith in grammar. Nietzsche, who was a brilliant

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7 Marion, “Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theology,” 288–311.
8 On ratio as a debilitas intellectus, see Rousselot, Intelligence; and Caputo, Specters of God, 53–6.
9 Heidegger, “The Onto-theological Constitution of Metaphysics,” 72.
10 Augustine, Confessiones, Book I, chapter 1.
classical philologist, was not against grammar but against faith in grammar, that is, the fiction that grammar reflects an underlying metaphysical order. Thus expanded, this is not merely a delimitation of our knowledge of what the Center is, but rather an unsettling of our very ability to hold or declare a Center at all, of whether there is a Center; it would be like Augustine confessing he does not know whether there is anyone to whom he can confess and that he may just be talking to himself. In this wider sense, this is a critique of any attempt to make anything, physics or metaphysics, being (onto-), God (theo-) or “logic” (science) the center. It is, as Derrida said of the “book” in Of Grammatology, a critique of “the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its aphoristic energy, and, as I shall specify later, against difference in general.” What is being criticized is confidence in the Center itself, deus sive natura, and the protection it affords, the confidence that there is a Center and that it holds firm and orders all things unto good. Derrida is describing a situation in which we are radically decentered, not in the edifying sense that we are fallen and finite while the Center itself is infinite, holy, and incomprehensible to our finite minds. We are decentered in a more unsettling sense. The Center itself is in question while what we have to fall back upon is the “aphoristic energy of writing,” that is to say, the non-encyclopedic inventiveness of thinking in idiomatic circumstances deprived of rules or method, lacking the program or any anticipatory foresight to guide the way.

This critique extends to all the various “centrism” by which we have been visited in metaphysics – both geocentrism and heliocentrism, theocentrism and anthropocentrism, logocentrism and phonocentrism, phallogocentrism and ethnocentrism, and so on – just in virtue of their metaphysical centeredness. Whenever Derrida speaks of the very gesture of theology, the theological operation itself, in Of Grammatology, he treats it as a general matter of positing a master name, a reassuring key that unlocks the secret, a program that governs writing. Marx himself, one of the great masters of suspicion of religion, repeats the theological gesture for Derrida, because Marx thinks that he can treat matter and dialectics and pure use-value as ontological realities by means of which he can drive out the “hauntological” specters upon which, as Derrida shows, the spirit of a certain Marxism depends. Levy-Strauss’s distinction between a pure nature and a fallen culture is “theological,” relying on the theological distinction between the natural purity of what God has made and impurity of what fallen cultural man has corrupted. To the extent that Heidegger himself lets the Greek Anfang or the “gathering” (legein) power of the originary Greek Logos play the role of the Center, the role formerly played by God, Heidegger himself falls victim to his own critique of onto-theology. So when it comes to onto-theology, Derrida says, “we must not think of a ‘theological prejudice’ functioning sporadically,” here or there, in this or that concept of God, or in this or that concept of humanity, truth, ethics, or the nation, but of the theological gesture itself, which is the very gesture of holding on to the Center.

Even if in pre-modernity there is a more modest and humble sense of the Center, it is the Center that is at the center of the trouble with onto-theology in the distinct sense that concerns Heidegger and Derrida. In classical theology, de-centering the self is part of a larger economy of being re-centered upon the True Center that is God, not the simulacrum of the center that is the self. The very complementarity between our humility, finitude, and guilt, on the one hand, and the Center’s glory, infinity, and holiness, on the other hand, is not a counter to onto-theology; it is the very structure or architecture of onto-theology and of Augustine’s Confessions. De-centering is part of the piety of re-centering. Given the transcendence of God, the self-centered autonomous self is re-centered as what Tillich calls the “theonomous.”

The upshot of the wider sense of this critique, then, is to cut us adrift, “destinerrant,” as Derrida would say, grasping at an unstable chain of substitutions. To stop the chain of substitution anywhere, with science

11 Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, 48.
12 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 18.
13 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 174.
14 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 139.
15 Ibid., 71.
16 Tillich, “Religion and Secular Culture,” 120–6.
or ethics, art or theology, the God of the bible or the Stoics’ *natura*, is to find a fulcrum, a point of leverage, an Archimedean point, and that is onto-theo-logy at its core.

3 What comes next? Thinking with faith, thinking as faith

What then? If we have been cut off from any stable center, where would we go from here? What comes next? What would it be like to live without a Center? Would it be possible to have a “faith” beyond any possible centrism, a God beyond onto-theo-centrism? Is there a theology that does not make the theological gesture, a faith that can collaborate with thinking, a thinking that would not be shut down by faith?

To answer these questions consider that in its broadest terms the critique of onto-theo-logy is a Janus-faced argument. On the one side, it is directed against the theological gesture, metaphysical theology, be it classical or modern, be it onto-theo-logical in the narrow or in the broad sense. On the other side, it is no less impatient with the anti-theological gesture, the *odium theologiae*, no less a critic of materialism and secularism, if they are installed as the Center. The critique of the Center displaces both theism and atheism if these are taken as fixed and stable discourses. The chain of substitutions cannot be stopped – at God or man, spirit or matter, theology or physics, reason or faith, all of which are rival candidates for the “master name” of the Center. The critique cuts down theological hubris, but not by means of an opposing atheistic counter-hubris – which is why Derrida very acutely says of himself that he “rightly passes” (*à juste titre*) for an atheist, for he has no idea whether he really is one – and also not by descending into cynicism, skepticism, or nihilism, as Derrida’s most ill-informed critics complain.

The critique of onto-theo-logy is not an ontological argument against God. It is sheer dogmatism to “reduce” God without remainder to a desire for our Mommy, or to an opium of the people, or to an expression of our resentment. We can be grateful to the masters of suspicion for their excellent advice to religion to beware falling down before such idols. But neither do the masters of suspicion know the master name, and there is nothing in their suspicions to justify reducing God to “nothing more than” this or that. On the contrary, just as this critique rids us of the dogmatic theological gesture, it likewise rids us of the dogmatic reductionistic gesture, of the hubris built into the “nothing more than.” This is a critical delimitation which insists that the name of “God” belongs to a chain of substitutions which can never be stabilized at some fixed point like God or anything else.

But the interesting point is that, while the chain cannot be stopped at God, the name of God does indeed belong to the chain. That is, the inquiry, the desire, the work of thought does not simply and arbitrarily throw up one name after the other, as if any name will do, as if, as Derrida’s more thoughtless critics allege, “anything goes.” If these names fail, their failure is felicitous, a felix culpa from which we have something to learn. The name of God is not a philosophical theory, a scientific hypothesis, a term of art devised in an academic seminar, but neither is it an arbitrary contrivance. It is forged in the blood, sweat, and tears of human experience which touches a nerve in the human heart and points at something “undeconstructible.” That means the beat of an Augustinian heart is detectible in the critique of onto-theo-logy, a confessing, circum-fessing Augustinian *cor inquietum*, whose counter-part in Derrida is the “desire” or “affirmation” of “the impossible.” Among the great premodern theologians, it is more in Augustine than Aquinas, and more in the heartfelt existentialism of the *Confessions* than in the polemical and doctrinal explorations of the *City of God*, that the critique of onto-theo-logy in continental philosophy can find an antecedent.

In deconstruction, the name of God is not excluded or denied. It is inhabited from within and indeed hyper-affirmed, affirmed beyond itself, affirmed in its excess, pushed to an excess it itself cannot contain. To deconstruct something is not to destroy or discard it but to reopen it. This can best be seen in the text of Derrida’s “Circumfession,” which is an exemplary exhibition of what would come after onto-theo-logy. This

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17 Derrida, “Circumfession,” 155. For a commentary on this complicated text, see Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 281–308.
text does not launch one more tired destructive demolition of Augustine’s religion, another attack on his Neoplatonic dualism. Instead it situates itself within Augustine’s Confessions where it undertakes to stage a new performance, a reenactment, a reinvention of the event taking place in the Confessions. Derrida does not position himself against Augustine but with him, side by side with Augustine (“my compatriot”), on his prié-Dieu, confessing with Augustine and, I will go so far as to say, at the risk of offending secularizing deconstructors everywhere, praying with him. In Derrida’s text, the best way to confess is to circum-fess that we are cut adrift, destierrant, circum-cut, severed from the Center, and to do this by asking with Augustine, “What do I love when I love my God?” In this text, then, there is a sea-change. Here the name of God is not the name of the theological gesture. It is the name of one who confesses that he is precisely deprived of all such theological protection, cut or circum-cut off from all divine support, adrift, with “no lighthouse and no book” to show the way.¹⁸

In the choreography or staging of the text of “Circumfession,” Geoffrey Bennington is stationed overhead in the theological position writing the program called “Jacques Derrida,” the encyclopedic, omniscient “Book of Derrida,” in the future perfect, in which everything that “Derrida” has ever said, or ever will have said, will be contained as a case in point, as an instance, or an application of the program. Jacques/Jackie is down below, complaining that Bennington is trying to rob him of the event, of his future, of his secret name, of his “salvation,” his “resurrection.” Bennington is trying to draw his blood and put it in a vial labeled “Jacques Derrida.”¹⁹

So there is a striking difference between the part played by the name of God in Of Grammatology, where it is the name of the theological gesture – that part is being played here by Bennington – and the part played by the name of God in “Circumfession,” where it is found down below, among the bleeding bodies of Jacques and his mother, where Jacques/Jackie calls upon “my God,” the one about whom he has been asking himself all his life what he loves when he loves his God. The name of God is not located in the theological position, in the onto-theo-logical program running on high, but in the questions written in blood, with sick children and dying mothers, questions like, What do I love? What do I desire? What is the name of what I love and desire? In this choreography, “Circumfession” does not so much come “after” onto-theo-logy as “below” or “under” it, beneath the radar of onto-theo-logical categories. Here the name “my God” is not associated with the encyclopedic protection of an omniscient providence, but with the “aphoristic energy” of writing, of writing with one’s blood – with blood, sweat, and tears, with the singularity of the “event,” with the unforeseeable future, with a hope and a promise for something-I-know-not-what, for the coming of what I cannot see coming.

In virtue of its extraordinary re-staging of the Confessions and a totally unexpected recontextualizing of the name of God, “Circumfession” disrupts Heidegger’s claim that the name of God is the antagonist of thought, that faith shuts down every question raised by thought. Derrida hyper-affirms the name of God, affirms it for all it is worth, for more than it is worth. He does not practice a “methodological atheism” (Heidegger), try to bracket it (Husserl), or methodologically doubt it (Descartes), which are characteristically modernist gestures uncharacteristically embraced by Heidegger, who is otherwise profoundly critical of modernity, its “method,” and its “principles.” Heidegger failed to heed his own counsel, that a Destruktion is not a demolition or an opposition but a Wiederholung, a repetition, a retrieval, a reenactment, a reinvention, a reappropriation, a recontextualization. In his own Destruktion of Augustine’s Confessions, Heidegger was able to sort out its hermeneutics of factual Christian life from the overlay of Neoplatonism,²⁰ but, unlike Derrida, he was not led to another way of thinking about faith, to another faith in thinking, and another thinking with faith.

Derrida’s results are not exactly religious or irreligious but, if I may say so, Ur-religious, or as he might say, religious without religion. “Circumfession” is a kind of archi-confession, of a certain religious sort, maybe even more confessional, circum-fessional, and archi-religious than Augustine’s Confessions (whose prayer enjoyed the protection of a Book and the support of a community). Contrary to Heidegger’s

¹⁸ Derrida, “Circumfession,” 344–5.
¹⁹ Ibid., 4, 15, 75.
²⁰ Heidegger, Phenomenology of Religious Life.
expectation, the result is not to divest oneself of faith in order to remain purely in the element of thinking, but to invest in a thinking that is a still more searching prayer, a deeper faith, a more “wounded word,” which is Chrétien’s beautiful definition of prayer, and hence an even more circum-cut version of Augustine’s prayers and tears, where God is an eternally stable center.²¹

The name of God is one of the names in the chain – his mother must have known, Derrida says, that the constancy of what is called God for him goes under other names as well. Endlessly substitutable, translatable, undecidable, the name of God is but one of many ways to speak of the possibility of the impossible, for which we lack a fixed and proper name. In Derrida, the critique of onto-the-ology issues in a confession of a lack of a determinate name for what we love or desire, in a profession of the open-endedness of our desire, of our faith, hope, and love of something coming, of something-I-know-not-what.

4 The open

But now let us station ourselves with Heidegger, within thinking, not against him, or at most, reading Heidegger against Heidegger. Let us say that all this is something Heidegger also knows, in those texts in which, not stamped by words like faith and God, he discusses the Open. The Open does not permit a perimeter or certify a center; it spills over any border or barrier, is not confined to a determinate region.²²

The Open is, at the risk of redundancy, open-ended. It eludes the grip of any comprehensive concept, transcends any transcendental horizon or projective framework, precedes any program, declines any paradigm, does not answer to any proper name, resists any regulative ideal, overthrows anything which would give us the bearings to establish a center. It outlasts any claim to a conclusion, defers ultimacy, interrupts the last word, blocks anything that would close down the Open.

Inasmuch as it overcomes any possible onto-theo-logical closure or centrism, Heidegger’s Open communicates with the structure of the “to-come” in Derrida, for in both cases – each on its own terms²³ – we are turned to an un-determinable, un-programmable, open-ended future (à venir, Zu-kommen). In Derrida’s Specters of Marx, the open-ended desire/hope/promise of the to-come shows up under the name or the nickname of the pure “messianic.” Speaking of the promise, democratic or communist, Derrida writes:

The effectivity or actuality of any promise will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart (en son coeur), this eschatological relation to the to-come of an event and of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated... just opening which renounces any right to property... messianic opening to what is coming.²⁶

This open-endedness is described here as the “heart” of the determinate forms in which our faith and hope, our desire and expectation, take shape. Within the democratic promise, an open-ended aspiration stirs. The pure messianic, then, is not a regulative ideal, a fixed, overarching form (eidos) which we can gradually approximate in empirical reality, nor is it a pure transcendental structure, derived by a formalization, by bracketing the concrete messianisms as empirical instances. It is instead an “infinite promise,” an open-hearted aspiration and hope, a pure opening of faith (foi) and expectation, beset by namelessness, of which any determinate or particular belief (croyance) or hope is a contraction or a determination or a partial closing. The actuality of the factual (être) is a contraction of the possibilizing of the eventual (peut-être, au-delà de l’être). Messianic faith takes place in the gap between countable, calculable, factual possibilities and the infinite, incalculable promise of the impossible.

²¹ Chrétien, “The Wounded Word,” 147–75.
²² Heidegger, Discourse on Thinking, 58–90.
²³ Unlike Derrida, Heidegger was certainly not dreaming of a democracy to come, a coming communism, of a Jewish messianic coming.
²⁴ Derrida, Specters of Marx, 65.
The critique of onto-theology is not finally a critique; it is an affirmation of the possibility of the impossible, of what onto-theology declares impossible. It is not finally a closing down but an opening up of the promise, of the to-come; it is not finally a critical cut but a cut that opens, like the circumcised ear or circumcised heart, which opens itself to something I-know-not-what. While Heidegger boxed himself into a (surprisingly modernist) corner, where thinking could never coexist with God and faith, Derrida found in a radical faith, a foi beyond croyance, an opening to the future, which we affirm every time we open our mouths, and he experienced the name of God not as the answer foreclosing every question but as a name of the tout autre which keeps every question open. For Derrida, to be turned to the future is to be turned à-Dieu, to and by God, that is, by the event that is taking place in the name of God. Derrida detects the beat of an aspiration for the undeconstructible lying at the heart of any historical construction, the trace of a faith in any determinate historical belief (croyance).

With this distinction in mind, Heidegger was right to say that faith as croyance, as propositional assent (Glaube), encloses the Open and blocks the path of thinking, but he failed to think the link between thinking, which transcend regional and propositional discourse, and a deeper foi taken as a more underlying hope and trust in the Open (Vertrauen). This faith can be fruitfully linked with Heidegger’s own notion of the “promise” (Versprechen) of language (Sprache), where die Sprache verspricht, where the promise of a new beginning springs from the memory of the archi-original first beginning, where Herkunft and Zukunft are interlinked, which Derrida points out. And if faith, then also prayer, which prays devoutly (andächtigt), with the piety of thought (die Frömmigkeit des Denkens), de profundis, from the humility of our condition, “mortals” carrying around about their mortality (circumferens suam mortalitatem), which is the classical Augustinian posture of prayer. But this quasi-Augustinian prayer exposes our mortality to a more radically unforeseeable future, deprived of the protection of classical prayer.

Have we then come around full circle to installing a new Center now traveling under the incognito of “faith” in the “pure messianic” or “undeconstructible”? That is an interesting question. It is a far more interesting and well-informed point to put to deconstruction than the uninformed and uncomprehending taunts about “relativism” and “nihilism” by which it is usually visited, and it is one which would require more time than we have here. The short answer is, I do not think this is so, not in any telling sense. Messianic faith is radically open-ended to something unforeseeable, not seeking to make asymptotic progress on a regulative and identifiable ideal, some foreseeable eidos off in the future which we gradually approach. Messianic faith is faith in the to-come, l’à venir, that is undeconstructible just because it never has or can be constructed. To the extent what we desire bears a fixed, proper, and identifiable name, including a name at the sound of which every knee shall bend, it has closed off the Open and arrested the play of faith, hope, and desire.

Centering fixes the proper term of desire, names the secret, identifies its hope, so even while, in its premodern form, it respects the distance, centering affords the restless heart (inquietum est cor nostrum) a promise of rest (donec requiescat in te). That promise of rest is the “theological gesture,” “the protection of theology,” the “Book,” the “lighthouse,” which Derrida describes and of this, ever and always restless (destinerrant, inquietum), messianic faith is deprived. The restless heart of classical faith has rest in sight.

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25 In that sense overcoming onto-theology does not mean casting it aside and leaving it behind but penetrating it all the more deeply in terms of the event that it harbors. That is why Heidegger distinguishes between simply overcoming (Überwindung) metaphysics or onto-theology and a wrestling with it (Verwindung), and Kant himself underlined the “interest” reason has in metaphysics. For approaches to onto-theology along those lines, see Schrijvers, Between Faith and Belief and Ontotheological Turnings?; and Sands, “After Onto-Theology,” 16–24.

26 Here is a point which Heidegger’s much vaunted German language, the language we need if we wish to think, fails to think. There is no good equivalent in German to the distinction between belief (croyance) and faith (foi), or the Latin fides quae and fides qua.

27 See the fascinating hypothetical conversation Derrida imagines between Heidegger and a special breed of Christian theologians in Derrida, Of Spirit, 109–13.

28 I have developed the idea of such a prayer in Caputo, “Do Radical Theologians Pray?”

29 I have developed this notion more fully in Caputo, “Temporal Transcendence,” 188–203.
now through a glass darkly, then face to face, whereas the heart of messianic faith is structurally restless, and it views rest as death, requiescat in pace, the arrested heart. In messianic faith, we sustain ourselves rigorously in the element of the pure promise, of the undeconstructible, of the open-endedness of an unforeseeable future, come-what-may, hoping against hope in the coming of what we cannot see coming, which may well be a disaster. In classical faith, God will provide, God will see to it (pro + videre), whereas messianic faith is faith in the coming of what no one can see coming.

So the most we dare say is that if messianic faith lacks a center, it does not lack hope and it does not lack a heart. This “absolutely undetermined messianic hope” has a heart, a circumcised heart, a quasi-Augustinian heart, a cor inquietum, an open and restless heart, which lies at the heart of any determinate hope or promise, but one sustained without the providence and protection afforded by a Center. Rather than a centered discourse, which has a proper name for the way, the truth, and the life, the life of messianic faith is a way without a way. It is earnest but errant, desirous but destinerrant, the faith of a desert traveler, making an inescapably kharal, decentered journey, seeking truth because it is “severed from the truth (sevrée de la verité),” life always being too short.³⁰ The result is a kind of poly-centered heart, leading an elliptical life, moving from center to center, ever recentering upon provisional, strategic, local centers, never able to get ultimate bearings in the Open, unable to arrest the play of substitutions for the master name, a multifarious desire that has come to grips with an unstable cosmos, a mortal God, affirming an unforeseeable future with a desire beyond any particular desire, with a faith that exceeds any belief, with a hope against hope, a love that exceeds understanding.

Centering does not lack for a name for its beliefs. Centering prays for the coming of a Holy Spirit, veni Sancte Spiritus, while the prayer of pure messianic faith, viens, oui, oui, is haunted by the spirit of a more spectral prospect, by the promise/threat of invisible specters conjured up by names of elemental and open-ended promise.³¹ Messianic faith never ceases to ask through a glass darkly, with no expectation of ever meeting its specters face to face, what do I love when I love justice or hospitality, forgiveness or the gift? What do I love when I love my God?

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³⁰ Derrida, “Circumfession,” 314–5.

³¹ That is the central argument of my *Specters of God.*
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