

DERRIDA'S GOD

Victoria Barker

Of late, there has been a growing interest in the attention being shown by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, towards the subject of God. Indeed, his most recent book, *The Gift of Death*, addresses certain questions of religious faith directly, searching for the conceptual links between notions of religion, faith, mystery and responsibility.¹

Nevertheless, if one were required to place the writings of by reference to the oft-mentioned division of Blaise Pascal between the 'God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob' and that of 'philosophers and scientists', then one's inclination would surely be to suggest that these, of all writings, fall squarely upon the latter side of the division. And hence, one might conclude that these writings held little to compel those whose theoretical interests spring from a religious standpoint.

Insofar as Derrida's writings can be understood only by reflection upon the philosophical traditions to which they respond, there appears to lie some truth in the claim as to Derrida's philosophical orientation. Nevertheless, its difficulty lies in Derrida's firm intent to question those premises upon which this suggestion appears to rest: that these two approaches to God constitute two respective identities, which bifurcate upon the traditional division between faith and reason.

The thrust of Derrida's argument, across the entire corpus of his writings, is that the notion of philosophical reason owes its origin and essence, its very possibility, to a structure of conceptuality which subtends the distinction between reason and faith. This structure of conceptuality - named 'ontotheology' by Kant and more simply 'metaphysics' by Derrida - is, Derrida argues, a structure which is governed by principles or laws. Derrida's work is devoted to analysing these laws; it is an attempt to render them intelligible.

Ontotheology, as defined by Kant, cast God as the highest and most originary of beings, the ground of all that is. From this account, Derrida derives a notion of metaphysics as any discourse that seeks to ground itself in a principle of ultimate presence, whether this presence be sought through a originality, ultimacy, totality or centrality.

Throughout many and varied writings, Derrida attempts to clarify the ways in which Western philosophical, theological and other traditions depend upon metaphysical structures of conceptuality. This process of clarification is

called by Derrida 'deconstruction'. Deconstruction is a form of critique. And, as such, it needs an object: its process is not articulated in the abstract but in respect of the discourses of the Western traditions. Nevertheless, it is possible to delineate certain stratagems of deconstruction, as I will attempt to do here.

One might employ a deconstructive critique, then, to analyse this division of philosophy and theology in respect of the alternate notions of God. A deconstructive critique could note the tendency of both philosophers and theologians to clarify this division by reference to correlated divisions between faith and reason, between the private and the public and so on. The metaphysics underlying this project could be seen to lie in part in the attempt to create a singular identity for the concept of God, whether it be the God of the Church forefathers or that of the philosophers. Each is then defined in opposition to, and in a hierarchical relationship over and above, its opposed other.

A deconstructive critique of the notion of faith - in its relation to reason - could proceed as follows: a private faith is of a form that it must always already be inhabited by that which exceeds it, that is, by a public realm wherein reason presides. If not by reference to a reasoned and public account of what faith ideally consists in, this entity would be simply unintelligible; it would not be recognisable for what it is - viz., a private faith. The problem facing the division of reason and faith is not that we are unable to determine whether to place religious belief upon the side of either faith or reason. It is rather that the blurring of the very distinction between faith and reason is the condition of the possibility of the identifiability of faith as such.

A related critique, by the way, might be offered of the notion of reason - in its relation to faith - in the writings of the Western philosophers. This critique might, for example, evidence the manner in which reason depends upon a prior investment in faith, as the grounds upon which reason is endowed with the priority that it is.

The critique is not dissimilar to the critique of the notion of the private language offered by Wittgenstein, but Derrida wishes to push it further. He wishes to suggest that *all* Western thought and the writings that emerge from it - its theological, religious and even its mystical writings included - maintain structural investments that he identifies with onto-theology or metaphysics. And thus, to employ Derrida's metaphor, Athens lies in a closer proximity to Jerusalem than Pascal's formula admits; the edifices of each rest upon related principles of structural support.²

This being so, I wish to consider what deconstructive critique can offer us by way of an analysis of that term so foundational to this division of faith and reason: the very term 'God'.

Without claiming to capture what Pascal may himself have intended by drawing this distinction, let us note that, across the traditions of Western philosophy and theology, God marks that place of a very singular polyvalence. There could be few terms so overdetermined as this term 'God', so richly invested with signification and yet so subject to semantic slippage.

Within Christian theologies, upon which I will concentrate, two alternate conceptualisations of God stand out, reducing the polyvalence to an uneasy ambivalence. The ambivalence lies between two overarching definitions of God. On the one hand, we have God as ultimate and supreme being. This God of positive theology embraces the totality of being and so is a presence that is full to excess; everything bespeaks His presence. This is God as the One and only true Being. On the other hand, we have God as a transcendent Being, a Being that unfolds beyond history, beyond time. This God of negative theology transgresses being and so He is ultimately unknowable, unsayable; nothing bespeaks His presence. This is God as the wholly Other, the Being beyond beings.

Given Derrida's interest in metaphysical structures, it is surely not unexpected that he should come to focus on this play of presence and absence that defines God in Western thought. The interactions and prevarications between these two principles of ultimate intelligibility - of intelligibility of the ultimate - provide a theme that is present in his writings from the first.³

And in this context, deconstructive critique is indeed clarifying. It points, once again, to a level of conceptuality that subtends the distinction between the presence and absence of God. This structure is what makes it possible to speak of God as at once both the ultimate One and the wholly Other. By focussing upon the schema - Derrida calls it a logic or an economy - that produces these alternate characterisations, a deconstructive critique is enabled to show how these alternate characterisations reflect each other, as inverse products of the same metaphysics.

There is a further aspect of the deconstructive critique which emerged in our consideration of faith and reason; this will be useful to our analysis of this ambivalent term 'God'. Derrida's writings continuously reinforce the inability of language to demarcate a definition or identity, of either a concept or a word. Because of the demand for repetition across many and varied contexts, it is in the very nature of language that it cannot prescribe a unity - of sense, of

meaning or of mark - by reference to a determinate and articulated set of terms. In the process of iteration, the sign loses its grasp upon signification; semantic slippage is thus endemic to language and not an accidental feature of it.

This aspect of the critique applies to the terms that are basic to the philosophical quest - truth, reason, goodness and so on. These terms are repeated across the philosophical corpus only at the price of a relentless deferral of that unity - of sense, of meaning or of mark - that they purport to capture. But it applies equally, and by the same logic, to those terms that are basic to a theological quest - of which the very term 'God' must surely be primary.

Now how does all this relate to the issue of religious belief? The deconstructive critique might, I suspect, be greeted with some suspicion by those coming to it with a concern for their religion, particularly if we consider the implications of the critique of the word for our term 'God'.

The difficulty for religion concerns the relation of God to those signs by which we may be taken to know Him, those signs which He Himself may be taken to constitute the ultimate author.⁴ Signs have commonly been understood, across Christian theologies, as the means by which Spirit achieves self-realisation. This is the account that underscores notion of the veracity of the Word of God, the truth of His revelation. If what Derrida says of language is true, then it appears that God is unable to secure the sense and meaning of those terms by which we refer to Him. This is so whether the signs of God are supplied by natural theology or by revealed theology.

For the religious, there must surely be a certain poignancy in the fact that even the authorial presence of a being such as this cannot secure the perspicacity of His own name. In this respect, it is possible to understand the notion of God as lying within our philosophical and theological perspectives as a site of utmost paradoxicality - if not outright irony.

Kevin Hart attempts to find a way out of this apparent difficulty by noting, quite correctly, that deconstruction is a critique of the use to which the word 'God' is put. Derrida does not call into question the notion of God as such, but only those notions which presume His full presence in our representations of Him. And this, he argues, cannot count against the belief in God *as such*. Our words may fail to capture Him, but this need not undermine our faith in Him.⁵

For Derrida, however, the situation is not resolved by focussing upon the distinction between God *as such* and those names that we use to refer - albeit imperfectly - to Him; the distinction between God and 'God' is simply untenable. For the presence of God is only thinkable by us by reference to His

names. There is simply no possibility of reaching behind our representations of God to locate a God in which to place one's faith. There is no God but 'God'; our access to God is thinkable only within the limits of conceptuality itself. I do not think is misleading to state that for Derrida, there is no God as such.

Christian theology thus appears to be challenged by a fundamental dilemma. We cannot speak of God except by reference to His names and yet we are unable to name that God to which we refer in our religious claims. If the very term 'God' cannot name what God is, then God is ultimately unnameable. And, worse still perhaps, insofar as our representations of God manifest the possibilities of our conceptualisation of God, we have a God who is not merely unnameable, but unthinkable also. Indeed, and paradoxically, the very term 'God' might be taken to capture the ultimate principle of this unsayability of God.

One response to this apparent dilemma has been to focus upon the possibilities that a negative theology supplies, affirming that no speech properly pertains to God, since He is wholly Other.⁶ According to this approach, the best we can do is speak of what is not Him. One might reasonably be concerned, however, that too exclusive a focus upon the negative theological approach leaves our talk of God so circumscribed as to reduce God to a place in the void.

The issue of negative theology cannot be dismissed lightly - its relations to deconstruction have inspired a wealth of literature.⁷ I shall merely note my own concern with this response, by questioning whether the negative deconstructive turn in theology renders our theologies in a certain sense vacuous. Even if condoned by the mystics, a purely negative theological approach appears to undermine our entitlement to speak of God in those ways which capture what the religious commonly want to say about Him. Is a God about which we can truly say nothing a living and compassionate God?

The difficulty of too exclusive a focus upon the negative deconstructive critique is that it fails to underline the positive features of the metaphysical framework that governs our talk of God. Rudolphe Gasche warns - directing his concerns to Mark C. Taylor in particular - that the negative deconstructive approach ignores the fact that deconstruction speaks not only of the disabling conditions of language and signification, but also enabling.⁸ In the theological context, the identification of the metaphysical structures is intended to locate the conditions of possibility of speaking of God, as well as the conditions of impossibility.

There is, in other words, a difference between suggesting, on the one hand, that any representation of God fails to fully present Him and, on the

other, that God's presence is simply unrepresentable. Contrary to some recent American interpretations of his work, such as that of Richard Rorty, Derrida affirms that even the most radical singularity - which God surely is - must nevertheless have an identity which allows us to address Him in His very singularity.⁹

Language allow us to inscribe this singularity within a communal history, a tradition of speech and writing and a shared set of questions and concerns that motivate it. This tradition inscribes this singularity in the very word 'God'. The effect of representation, of the continuing iteration of this word, is an overdetermined - but nevertheless recognisable - entity which we call God. This word 'God' marks a site of ultimate significance within our tradition. This site is, as Derrida notes, governed by a logic that ensures the intelligibility of what we want to say about Him.

Theology is the discipline which is charged with the responsibility to reveal this logic. What any theology must aim for is some specification of the minimal conditions which will ensure that our talk of God is in fact intelligible. Such a theology is necessitated by the need to make any sense of alternate theories of God, or indeed of the messages of the Scriptures. So also, the intelligibility of our theological claims bespeaks a shared tradition - a logic - that governs the concepts and words that we use when we speak of God.

So where have we come to? We have established that, upon a deconstructive approach, both positive and negative theological approaches obey a structural logic bequeathed to us by the laws of metaphysics. Nevertheless, this may not seem to have got us very far, we still have the issue of the overdetermination of God's name to contend with. And an even more pressing problem: does this metaphysical play of presence and absence, reflected as it is in the play of the other oppositions I have mentioned, not in a certain sense limit the possibilities of our understanding of God? Do we not wish to move beyond these alternate conceptions of God? Must we remain within the confines of those theologies delivered down to us over the centuries? Can deconstruction make any substantive contribution here or is it limited to clarifying our present usage of this term?

Bearing in mind the overdetermination of God's name, two points deserve mention, concerning the relations of deconstruction and theology. I make these points to support the suggestion that Derrida's philosophical critique, rather than clashing with the theological developments of the late 20th century, is surprisingly consonant with certain of its most exemplary tendencies.

The first point is this: one of the benefits of deconstruction, as it bears upon our understanding of God, is that it can help us to see that the notion of God provides a locus in which the paradoxicality of signification is most clearly highlighted. This gives God an exemplary role within deconstruction itself - and within philosophy more generally. God most clearly typifies of the vicissitudes of the language that deconstruction itself is bound to employ.

In the light of Derrida's readings, it is open to us to understand the notion of God as functioning according to an economy of language that Derrida calls the economy of paleonymics. The economy of paleonymics rests upon the concept of iterability introduced earlier. We have noted that, as a sign is repeated, its signification is modified to accommodate its altered context. The one aspect of this process is the dislodgment of signification; we have noted its negative effects for our understanding of the word of God.

But this process has positive effects also, and these are indicated by the economy of paleonymics.¹⁰ Deconstruction recognises that our metaphysical determinations are always attended by an excess of signification, that the definition of our terms occurs in the context of a plurality, a heterogeneity of signification. Paleonymy refers to the process whereby new significations are attached to those already circumscribing the terms of our discourse, creating a layered or textured fabric of significance. This is the economy whereby conceptual change takes place.

The point is not simply that God's name is overdetermined. The very name of God can be seen as a site of paleonymy, of ever increasing significance and an evolving interpretive wealth. For the very reason that the notion of God has served to found the metaphysical significance of Western discourses, so also, it serves to radicalise them - to open such discourses beyond the closure of previously determined limits. God Himself is incapable of arresting the wealth of interpretive possibilities that irrupt around His name.

This leads me to my second point. The exemplary deconstructive role of God is reflected by an exemplary theological role. The name of God, across Western traditions, has functioned to found religious identities and differences, alliances and oppositions. One of the features of the deconstructive critique is its respect for the differences within and across the traditions with which it engages and the transformations to which they are subject. This implies that the God of whom one may speak in a deconstructive mode is not a God of closure, a God who dictates articles of faith and eternal prescriptions. He is a God that must be responsive to the tradition for which He is responsible.

Once again, the point is not simply that God's name is overdetermined. It is rather that this overdetermination is implicit to the very essentiality of God.

God's essence lies in a lack of essential determination. God's essence, according to this line of thinking, lies neither in a full self-presence, nor in a pure absence. God is never wholly One or Other; He contains within Himself traces of as yet unknown Gods. God acts as the ultimate site of referral to othernesses still to come.

It is enlightening to consider to what extent this approach to God may resonate with certain developments of Christian theology, particularly of the German scholars influenced by Karl Barth.¹¹ The Trinitarian tendencies of 20th century theology tend to stress the displacement between the persons of God, finding in God not an undifferentiated unity but a mutuality of irreducibly different roles. So to cite one example, Eberhart Jüngel can speak of the unity of self-differentiated God, and declare that because God is love, He is essentially related, both in Himself, and in the sense of being related to what is different from Him.¹²

I will not push the analogies too far, but merely note Derrida's deconstruction does not demand, as many postmodern philosophies appear to do, that we jettison this age-old notion of God. Our notion of God can continue serve our theologies as a site of quintessential significance, a significance whose singularity pivots upon an irreducible plurality.

REFERENCES

1. J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, (D. Wills, trans. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1995). For Derrida on theology, see also: 'Violence and Metaphysics' in *Writing and Difference* (A. Bass, trans. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978); 'On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy' and 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', both in H. Coward and T. Foshay, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (SUNY Press, New York, 1992).
2. Cf. J. Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', p 153
3. Cf. J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (G. Spivak, trans. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1976), p. 10ff for a discussion of the relation of word to God.
4. Cf. K. Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989), for an excellent account of the signs of God.
5. *Ibid*, p 37.
6. Again, cf. Hart, for an account of the range of texts on deconstruction and negative theology.
7. Cf. in particular, Coward and Foshay.
8. R. Gasche, *Inventions of Difference On Jacques Derrida*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. and London, 1994), p. 14ff.
9. *Ibid*, p 2.
10. Cf. J. Derrida, *Positions* (A. Bass, trans. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971), p. 71.
11. The speculative theologies of Karl Rahner, Eberhard Jungel and Wolfhart Pannenberg might be profitably considered in this light.
12. E. Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (D.L. Guder, trans. T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1983).