

## CHAPTER FOUR

# DERRIDA: DECIPHERING THE DESERT OF ABSTRACTION

*...One of the questions I will not avoid is that of religion.<sup>1</sup>*

*...How to 'talk religion'? Of religion? Singularly of religion, today? How dare we speak of it in the singular without fear and trembling, this very day? ...*

*Perhaps one must take one's chance in resorting to the most concrete and most accessible, but also the most barren and desert-like, of all abstractions. ...<sup>2</sup>*

Jacques Derrida

### Introduction

Taking off from the from the foregoing discussion regarding the contours of the depth grammar that constitute the matrix of hermeneutic

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida (2002b) "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone" in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, New York / London, Routledge, p.101. Italics in the original. This is a quote Derrida takes from J. Genet's *Genet a Chatila* ( Paris, Solin, 1992, p. 103) and uses it as the closing remark in his Capri Lecture.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42. Italics in the original.

understanding and meaning in religious language with reference to Wittgenstein, in this Chapter I intend to engage the next philosopher of the ‘trinitarian ladder’, that is, Jacques Derrida (1931-2004). The French philosopher Jacques Derrida is considered arguably the most controversial and elusive thinker on the horizon of the contemporary intellectual world. With regard to the question of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in religious language with reference to Derrida, I attempt to do a close reading of some of the philosophical motifs available in his celebrated Capri Lecture entitled “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone”. I shall also make occasional references to some of his other works and related writings.

### **Locating Derrida in Philosophical Space**

Before I proceed to analyze Derrida’s philosophical thinking about religion, a pertinent question that may linger on in one’s mind is that of locating Derrida in philosophical space. This question becomes all the more problematic in the matrix of the interface between literature and philosophy. Though the resolution of this problem is not directly connected to the central thesis of the present discussion, a prefatory remark about this question would help one to situate better what Derrida

has to say regarding the problem of understanding and meaning in religious language.

The reception of Derrida's *oeuvre* in the philosophical world has been like the pendulum which swings from one extreme to the other. Anthony Kenny exemplifies the hostile reaction when he bemoans the fact that unlike philosophers who saw their task as drawing pertinent distinctions between concepts to promote better understanding and clarity in thought, Derrida introduced "new terms whose effect was to confuse ideas that are perfectly distinct."<sup>3</sup> Kenny considers Derrida a skillful rhetorician and a literary critic of some worth, but not a serious philosopher. Further for Kenny, the philosophical weapons employed by Derrida "are the pun, the bawdy, the sneer, and the snigger"<sup>4</sup> and his method can be characterized as nosegay. Kenny spells out his blistering criticism in this way:

Derrida devised a method of dealing with authors a technique that can be nicknamed the nosegay method. To assemble a nosegay, one collects a number of texts that contain the same word (or often just the same phoneme). One

---

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Kenny (2007) *A New History of Western Philosophy, Vol. IV, Philosophy in the Modern World*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

then snips them out of context and date, discards utterer or voice, and modifies the natural sense by italicization, omission, or truncation. One gathers them together and presents them as a nosegay with some striking or provocative thesis tied around it. The nosegay technique became popular in some departments of literature, since it demands considerably less effort than more traditional methods of literary criticism.<sup>5</sup>

In contra-distinction to this view of Anthony Kenny, Richard Rorty offers a sympathetic and constructive reading of Derrida's *oeuvre* and concludes that in a significant sense Derrida can be considered a *quasi-transcendental* philosopher.<sup>6</sup> But Rorty is careful to qualify the ascription of the word 'transcendental' to Derrida by saying that it is not to be taken in the sense that Derrida "has rigorously and accurately traced the interconnections which link concepts together in a non-empirical world, and which form conditions of possibility." Rather, as Rorty clarifies, it should be taken in the sense of *quasi-transcendental*, that is, "if [Derrida]

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rorty (1995) "Is Derrida a *Quasi-Transcendental* Philosopher?" *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 173-200.

didn't talk as if there were such a [non-empirical] world, and as if he were tracing such interconnections and discovering such conditions.”<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, trying to identify the trajectories of the philosophical space of Derrida, Rorty writes:

Derrida ... has ... a great deal to tell us about philosophy. ... *He is suggesting how things might look if we did not have Kantian philosophy built into the fabric of our intellectual life, as his predecessors suggested how things might look if we did not have religion built into the fabric of our moral life.*<sup>8</sup>

My intention here is not to adjudicate between these oscillating opinions on Derrida's *oeuvre*, for that would be beyond the scope of the present discussion. However, I would go along with Rorty's assessment of Derrida as a quasi-transcendental philosopher. To my mind, a look at the contemporary literature on religion shows that since the publication of Derrida's celebrated Capri Lecture, any attempt at philosophical thinking

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199-200.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty (2008) “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 104, 108. Italics in the original.

about religion cannot ignore Derrida's theoretical engagement with religion.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Capri Seminar and the Question of Religion**

In the winter of 1994, on 28 February and 1 March, a small group of seven philosophers assembled on the Italian island of Capri for a Seminar to deliberate on the inescapable question of religion and its nature and significance in the contemporary globalized human predicament. The group consisted of Jacques Derrida, Hans George Gadamer, Gianni Vattimo, Maurizio Ferraris, Aldo Gargani, Eugenio

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, see John D. Caputo (2001) "What do I Love When I love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy" in John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.) *Questioning God*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, pp. 291-317; John D. Caputo (2005) "Deconstruction" in Lindsay Jones (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition*, Vol. 4, Detroit / New York, Thomson Gale, pp. 2245-48; Gil Anidjar (2002) "Introduction. "Once More, Once More" : Derrida, the Arab, the Jew" in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, London and New York, Routledge, pp.1-39; Eric Boynton (2009) "Derrida and Religious Reflection in the Continental Tradition" in Kailash C. Baral and R. Radhakrishnan (eds.), *Theory after Derrida: Essays in Critical Praxis*, London / New York / New Delhi, Routledge, pp. 220-35; John D. Caputo (1997), *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press; Richard Kearney (2001) "The God Who May Be" in John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.) *Questioning God*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, pp. 153-185; and Neil Saccamano (2007) "Inheriting Enlightenment, or Keeping Faith with Reason in Derrida" *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 405-424.

Trias, and Vincenzo Vitiello.<sup>10</sup> As Derrida himself writes, all the participants of this Seminar were European males who shared a common culture that is pronouncedly Christian and minimally Judaeo-Christian. Further he significantly notes that one should take into account the non-presence of Muslims, representatives of other Faiths and Cults, as well as women in the Seminar and points out tellingly the challenge of “speaking on behalf of these mute witnesses without speaking for them, in place of them, and drawing from this all sorts of consequences.”<sup>11</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), the only German philosopher who participated in the Capri Seminar echoed similar thoughts. In his own words:

Clearly, the selection of participants was also one-sided since, with the exception of myself, everyone came from the Latin world. I was the only Protestant. More problematic ... was the absence of any representative of Islam. Equally problematic was the fact that no woman was present, especially since women – and mothers in particular – certainly have a privileged

---

<sup>10</sup> For the full text of the papers presented in the Capri Seminar by these seven participants see Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds.) (1998) *Religion*, Cambridge / Oxford, Polity Press.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida (2002b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone” in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, p. 45.

contribution to make to the theme ‘religion’ in our world’.<sup>12</sup>

The Capri Seminar was organized to engage the phenomenon of religion in its contemporaneity and instantiated in the neologism called ‘the return of the religious’ that characterizes the ‘spirit of our times’. Gianni Vattimo, the Italian philosopher and one of the chief architects of the Seminar - the other being Jacques Derrida himself - sums up the rationale for the deliberations on religion in this way:

Times have doubtless changed since Hegel wrote that the basic sentiment of his time was expressed in the proposition ‘God is dead’. But is ‘our’ time ...really so different? And is the phenomenon, known rightly or wrongly as the ‘religious revival’ ... really anything other than ‘the death of God’? That is the question we asked ourselves, as no doubt everyone else is doing today, and it is the question we put to the friends and colleagues we invite to collaborate

---

<sup>12</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer (1998) “Dialogues in Capri” in Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds.) *Religion*, Cambridge / Oxford, Polity Press, p. 200.

with us. ...[T]he spirit of the times is not the Holy Spirit...<sup>13</sup>

Hans-Georg Gadamer, the German hermeneutist-philosopher echoed similar thoughts while delineating the common two-fold objective of the Capri Seminar. He observes:

...[ To] recognize that we need to be free of all dogmatism, above all that dogmatism which refuses to see in religion anything other than the deception of self-deception of human beings ... [and to]... agree that no matter to what extent we recognize the urgency of religion, there can be no return to the doctrines of the Church.<sup>14</sup>

A perusal of the papers presented by the participant-philosophers shows that all of them share a very broad postmodernist *weltanschauung*. And the focus is on what is called ‘the return of the religious’ as against the thesis of modernity which is dismissive of the

---

<sup>13</sup> Gianni Vattimo (1998) “Circumstances” in Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds.) *Religion*, Cambridge / Oxford, Polity Press, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer (1998) “Dialogues in Capri” in Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds.) (1998), *Religion*, p. 207.

religious belief and practice as an exercise in dogmatism and superstition. And in the papers presented in the Seminar, an attempt is made to decipher a method of inquiry that would capture in its abstraction the whole range of issues connected with the phenomenon of religion.

At this juncture a word about the postmodernist *weltanschauung* regarding religion may be in order. It is significant to note that there is no one way of defining postmodernity.<sup>15</sup> Rather, what we find in the literature is a large variety of ways describing the phenomenon of postmodernity. Richard Bernstein qualifies it as the “rage against humanism and the Enlightenment legacy.”<sup>16</sup> Another author Norman Denzin argues that postmodernity signals a loss of trust in the capacity of the rational Self to control its destiny and its concomitant byproducts are

---

<sup>15</sup> Sometimes a distinction is made between ‘postmodernity’ and ‘postmodernism’. According to some authors, “Postmodernity or postmodern society is a term that describes how globalization has transformed society into a pluralistic, multi-centred reality subject to global influences, that raise difficult questions about public norms and public order.” In contra-distinction, “postmodernism is a philosophy or ideology that affirms, among other things, that pluralism and relativism are good ...[for]... they undermine the totalism or totalitarian authoritarianism of both traditional and modernist societies.”- See John L. Esposito, Darrell Fasching and Todd Lewis (2008) *Religion and Globalisation: World Religions in Historical Perspective*, New York / Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Bernstein (ed.) (1985) *Habermas and Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, p. 33.

“anger, alienation, anxiety ... racism and sexism.”<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most widely discussed definition of postmodernity is the one given by the French postmodernist philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard. Lyotard defines postmodernity in the context of its conceptual umbilical cord tied to what is called modernity. In his own words:

I use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a meta-discourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. ... I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives.<sup>18</sup>

My intention here is not to discuss the thematic contours of postmodernism. Rather my purpose is to briefly indicate the varied nuances of the postmodernist *weltanschauung* which became the point of

---

<sup>17</sup> Norman Denzin (1991) *Images of Postmodern Society*, London, Sage Publications, p. vii.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard (1992) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Translation from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester, Manchester University Press, p. xxiii-xxiv.

departure for the speakers at the Capri Seminar to engage the domain of religious discourse. The following six papers were presented by the speakers at the Capri Seminar: *Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone* by Jacques Derrida; *The Trace of the Trace* by Gianni Vattimo; *Thinking Religion: the Symbol and the Sacred* by Eugenio Trias; *Religious Experience as Event and Interpretation* by Aldo Gargani; *Desert, Ethos, Abandonment: Towards a Topology* by Vincenzo Vitiello; and *The Meaning of Being as a Determinate Ontic Trace* by Maurizio Ferraris. The paper of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer entitled *Dialogues in Capri* is actually a post-seminar script on the dialogical imperative and imagination that characterized the deliberations in the Capri Seminar on religion.<sup>19</sup>

My concern in the present discussion is with the Paper read by Derrida at the Capri Seminar. In fact, the concluding quote with which Derrida chooses to end his Capri Lecture pointedly evokes the multifaceted significance as well as the inescapability of the problem of religion in contemporary human predicament. Derrida ends his Capri

---

<sup>19</sup> For the full texts of these papers presented by the participant-philosophers see Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (ed.) (1998) *Religion*.

Lecture by quoting J. Genet approvingly: “One of the questions that I will not avoid is that of religion.”<sup>20</sup>

It is to this inescapable and unavoidable question of religion problematized in the Capri Lecture of Derrida that I shall focus my attention now.

### **The Problematic of Understanding and Meaning**

The Lecture given by Derrida at the Capri Seminar on religion became the fulcrum around which the whole gamut of discussion on the reality and experience of religion revolved. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), the only German philosopher who participated in the Capri Seminar, writes: “Derrida has described our friendly discussion so accurately and so well that I have nothing further to add.”<sup>21</sup>

The Capri Lecture of Derrida is titled “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone”. The original version is in French and the English version by Samuel Weber first appeared in 1998 in the volume on *Religion* edited by Jacques Derrida

---

<sup>20</sup> Derrida (2002b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone” in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer (1998) “Dialogues in Capri” in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (ed.) (1998) *Religion*, p. 200.

and Gianni Vattimo, the principal speakers at the Capri Seminar.<sup>22</sup> The reprint of the English version appeared in 2002 in *Acts of Religion* by Derrida.<sup>23</sup> Unless otherwise noted, it is to this reprinted version that I shall take recourse in the present discussion.

A close look at this Capri Lecture shows that its philosophical and conceptual architecture is unique and ingenious. Derrida seems to engage in a play with the very thought of abstraction in religion. It runs into approximately sixty pages, consisting of fifty two sections written mostly in quasi-aphoristic style, and having forty-five footnotes, including the five footnotes added by the translator of the English version. Some sections stand out as the sentences are italicized. In fact Derrida begins his lecture with the section heading ‘ITALICS’. Is this an ingenious instantiation of philosophical architecting? I wonder. Derrida himself responds to this question in these words:

Faith and knowledge: between believing one knows and knowing one believes, the alternative is not a game. Let us choose, then, I

---

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (ed.) (1998) *Religion*, pp. 1-78. As noted earlier, this volume contains all the papers presented in the Capri Seminar on religion.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida (2002b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone”, pp. 42-101.

told myself, a quasi-aphoristic form as one chooses a machine, the least pernicious machine to treat of *religion* in a certain number of pages: 25 or a few more, we were given; and let us say, arbitrarily, to decipher or anagrammatize the 25, 52 very unequal sequences as many crypts dispersed in a non-identified field, a field that is nonetheless already approaching, like a desert about which one isn't sure if it is sterile or not, or like of field ruins and of mines and of wells, and of caves and of cenotaphs and of scattered seedings (*sic*); but a non-identified field ...<sup>24</sup>

As suggested in the above quote, Derrida engages the question of religion by investigating the so-called two sources of religion, that is, the categories of 'faith' and 'knowledge.' For Derrida this is of utmost importance. And to my mind, this provides us with the 'Derridean key' to the problem of hermeneutic understanding and meaning in the domain of religious discourse. Here one may object to the use of the phrase 'hermeneutic understanding and meaning' in connection with Derrida. For, Derrida is undoubtedly seen as a post-structuralist and post-modern

---

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida (2002b) "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone", p. 76.

philosopher whose writings entertain the very polyvalent, indeterminate notion of understanding and meaning in human discourse.<sup>25</sup> And some thinkers have discussed the significance of interface between hermeneutics and Derrida's philosophical thinking available in his *oeuvre*. One such thinker who has philosophically debated the challenge Derrida poses for hermeneutics is David Couzens Hoy.<sup>26</sup> Analyzing the critique of hermeneutics that emanates from Derrida, Hoy brings into focus contentious issues such as the continuity of history, the commensurability of discourse, communality between author and reader, the possibility of progress and consensus in interpretation, etc. Hoy's intention is not to resolve these issues but to analyze the conceptual architecting that is per-supposed here. And he concludes that there are important points of contact that emerge from the interface between Derrida's philosophy and hermeneutics. In his own words:

---

<sup>25</sup> Here it is interesting to note that philosophers like John D. Caputo, Kevin Hart, and Hent de Vries have interpreted 'deconstruction' as the 'hermeneutics of the desire for God'- See John D. Caputo (2005) "Deconstruction" in Lindsay Jones (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition*, Vol. 4, Detroit / New York, Thomson Gale, pp. 2245-48.

<sup>26</sup> David Couzens Hoy (1986) "Must We Say What We Mean? The Grammatological Critique of Hermeneutics" in Brice R. Wachterhauser (ed.) *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, Albany, State University of New York Press, pp. 397-415.

Derrida's philosophy is not as complete a break with the history of philosophy as many would like to believe. On the contrary, he is best understood as the latest development of a tradition going back to Kant and Hegel, a tradition that includes contemporary hermeneutics as well. Of course, to see Derrida as part of a tradition is itself a hermeneutical move – one that may manifest a desire to control his texts by making what is strange in them appear quite familiar.<sup>27</sup>

Another author who has discussed this issue is Anthony Thiselton. He sees the connection of Derrida's philosophical thinking with that of hermeneutics in this way:

In effect ... [Derrida's philosophy] seems to reduce texts to an ever-shifting flux, which is constantly subject to new forms as new conventions and societal assumptions re-contextualize what on the surface appears to count as meaning and truth.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 413-14.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton (1998) "Hermeneutics, Biblical", in Edward Craig (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London and New York, Routledge, Vol. 4, p. 393.

Significantly, some other authors like Michael N. Forster and John D Caputo believe that the French philosopher Derrida symbolizes both break and continuity, symmetry and asymmetry with ‘hermeneutics’ as a prominent philosophical tradition specially within the mosaic of the Continental philosophy. Michael N. Forster does the formidable task of picturing the trajectories of umbilical link between ‘hermeneutics’ and Derrida’s philosophical thinking in this way:

Derrida encapsulates his theory of meaning and interpretation in such concepts as that of an open-ended ‘iterability’ ( a word which he uses in the double sense of *other* and *again*) and ‘différance’ (a word which he uses in the double sense of *differing* and *deferring*). In its synchronic aspect, this is largely a cryptic way of repeating Saussure’s point meaning only arises through a system of linguistic oppositions. In a diachronic aspect, it is largely that a cryptic way of repeating Gadamer’s conception that meaning is something that only

arises through an open-ended process of (re) interpretation.<sup>29</sup>

According to Forster, Derrida's so-called asymmetry with hermeneutics can be seen to be instantiated in the conception of 'decentering' in interpretation. In fact, Derrida's choice of the epitaph for one of his writings is a quote from Montaigne: 'We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things'<sup>30</sup> and this is evocative of this 'decentering' strategy in interpretation. Derrida uses this term to mean two things. First, in hermeneutic understanding and meaning, one has to recognize the situation that there is no pre-given and discrete meaning of a given text to interpret. Secondly, it also can be taken to mean reading a text with the emphasis on those aspects which the text presents as only marginally important. To my mind, in the conception of hermeneutics as analytic practice which forms the conceptual framework of the present discussion, such a strategy can certainly be an illuminating exercise.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Michael N. Forster (2007) "Hermeneutics" in Brian Leiter and Michael Rosen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida (2007) "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in Jacques Derrida, *Basic Writings*, ed. Barry Stocker, London and New York, Routledge, p. 217.

<sup>31</sup> Michael N. Forster (2007) "Hermeneutics", p. 68.

In engaging the inescapable question of religion, Derrida's focus is on the Abrahamic religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And Derrida is hesitant to employ the term 'religion' to the Indic traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. For Derrida contends that a look at the history of the word 'religion' clearly brings forth its singularly Christian moorings which is fundamentally tied to the separation of the religious domain from that of the non-religious domain. Here I should note in parenthesis that such a separation of the domain is foreign to the Hebraic world view of the Gospels. Taking recourse to Benveniste, Derrida claims that this binary distinction which treats 'religion' as a separate institution is not available in the Indic traditions, for what we have in them is "the omnipresent reality that is religion".<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida (2002b) "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone", pp. 72-73. Also see the footnote no. 22 on page 73. In theorizing religion, this is a contested issue whether one can justifiably apply the Judaeo-Christian term 'religion' to Indic traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. For some, to do so would be a case of reifying the categories of enslaving colonial discourse – See Peter Heehs (2003) "Shades of Orientalism: Paradoxes and Problems in Indian Historiography", *History and Theory*, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 173ff. To my mind the closest conceptual Indic category would be *dharma*. For a sympathetic understanding of this complex issue of pairing religion with *dharma* as homological equivalents see D. P. Chattopadhyaya (2007) "In Search of the Roots of Religion or *Dharma*: Linguistic and Social Routes" in Irfan Habib (ed.), *Religion in Indian History*, New Delhi, Tulika Books, pp. 1ff.

Elsewhere in response to a question put to him by Richard Kearney on this issue, he contends that to call them ‘religions’ in the Abrahamic sense would be a case of *mondialatinisation* of religion.<sup>33</sup> The French neologism *mondialatinisation* coined by Derrida emphatically signifies the notion of the ‘world’ as the locus for interrogating the various sites of religion. And it is contra-distinguished from ‘globality’ which is implied by the notion of ‘globalatinization’ in English usage.<sup>34</sup> Further Derrida explores the question of religion in its contemporaneity by dwelling on the sites such as ‘religion and machine’, ‘religion and cyberspace’, ‘religion and the numeric’, ‘religion and digitality’, ‘religion and virtual space-time’, ‘religion and globalatinization’, ‘religion and terror’, ‘religion and capitalism’, ‘religion and politics’ etc.<sup>35</sup> As Maurice Blanchot observes:

If ... religion is etymologically that which binds, that which holds together, then what of the non-bond which disjoins beyond unity –

---

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida (2004) “Terror, Religion, and the New Politics” in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, New York, Fordham University Press, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida (2002b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone”, p. 50. See also the Translator’s note no. 7 on p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

which escapes the synchrony of “holding together”, yet does so without breaking all relations or without ceasing in this break or in this absence of relation, to open yet another relation? Must one be nonreligious for that?<sup>36</sup>

Derrida himself alludes to it by engaging the ambiguity, plurality and indeterminacy of the etymology of the word ‘religion’ itself. First, he brings into focus the two possible etymological sources of the word religion. According to Cicero, the Latin root is *relegere*, from *legere* meaning ‘to harvest’, ‘to gather’. For Lactantius and Tertullian, the Latin root is *religare*, coming from *ligare* which means ‘to bind’, ‘to tie’ etc. Though these two semantic sources may overlap, they do provide us with the material for theorising religion, contends Derrida.<sup>37</sup> Second, Derrida significantly notes that one has to take into account the historic-semantic genealogies of ‘religion’ that “would determine an immense field, with which the meaning of the word is put to the test of historical transformations and of institutional structures; history and anthropology

---

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*. Quoted in Gil Anidjar (2002), “Introduction. “Once More, Once More”: Derrida, the Arab, the Jew” in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, London and New York, Routledge, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> See Derrida (200b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone”, p. 71

of religions...”<sup>38</sup> Third, and more importantly, Derrida dwells on the pragmatic, the functional, the political and the structural implication of the word ‘religion’ in its contemporaneity and contends that such understanding of discourse “liberates words and meaning from all archaic memory and from all supposed origins.”<sup>39</sup> And Derrida claims that the Capri Seminar ought to engage the pragmatic implications of the use of the word ‘religion’ without excluding the other facets indicated earlier. In his own words:

...[The] Capri [Seminar] should privilege the signs of what in the world, *today*, singularizes the use of the word ‘religion’ as well as the experience of ‘religion’ associated with the word, there where no memory and no history could suffice to announce or gather it, at least not at first sight.<sup>40</sup>

This, to my mind, this would mean that to engage ‘religion’ theoretically, one has to delve deep into the ‘primal purity’ of religion as well as into its multifaceted contemporaneous embodiment.

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72. Italics in the original.

## The Hermeneutic Symbiosis of Faith and Knowledge

It is in this context of interrogating the pragmatic contemporaneity of religion that Derrida discusses the philosophical imperative to put to test the quasi-transcendental privileging of the binary distinction between faith and knowledge entertained by philosophers in theorising religion. To do this, Derrida as a heuristic device takes recourse to philosophical reflections on religion as found in Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel and Henri Bergson.<sup>41</sup> In the context of the present discussion, I shall confine myself to the critique Derrida offers regarding the construction of the category of ‘the reflecting faith’ (*reflektierende*) as opposed to that of the ‘dogmatic faith’ (*dogmatische*) in Kant.

It is very important to note here that Derrida is not offering a systematic study of Kant’s reflection on religion. Rather his enterprise is heuristic in nature. The focus of Derrida, as he himself points out, is on the binary distinction Kant makes between ‘the reflecting faith’ and the ‘dogmatic faith’ in the first of the General Remarks appended to each of the four

---

<sup>41</sup> The philosophical works are Kant’s *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Hegel’s *Faith and Knowledge* and Bergson’s *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Here it may be of interest to note that Derrida’s title of the Capri Lecture is identical with that of Kant’s work, except for the one change Derrida makes by replacing Kant’s ‘Within’ with ‘at’. Instead of Kant’s *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Derrida chooses to engage ‘Religion’ *at the Limits of Reason Alone*.

sections in the second edition of Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Kant himself has this to say about the nature of these appended 'General Remarks':

These are, as it were, *parerga* to religion within the boundaries of pure reason; they do not belong within it yet border on it. ...And if in the inscrutable field of the supernatural there is something more than it can bring to its understanding, which may however be necessary to make up for its moral impotence, ... with a faith which ... we might call *reflective*, since the *dogmatic* faith which announces itself to be a *knowledge* appears to reason dishonest or imprudent. ... for to remove difficulties that obstruct what stands firm on its own (practically), when these difficulties touch upon transcendent questions, is only a secondary occupation (*parergon*).<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Immanuel Kant (1996) *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. & ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 96. Italics in the original.

It is to this conception of *parerga* that Derrida draws our attention. The word *parerga* is of Greek origin coming from *para*, meaning beside or beyond and *ergon*, meaning work. It means any work that is considered to be subsidiary or supplementary to another. And for Derrida, these *parerga* embody the fringe where one can inscribe one's reflections on religion in its contemporaneity.<sup>43</sup>

In interrogating the Kantian *parerga*, Derrida is in fact questioning the Kantian legacy embedded in the philosophical practice of emphasising the foundational, transcendental origins of religion in theorising religion. Transcendental interrogation of religion poses the twofold question: what is religion? And how is religion possible? In the Kantian worldview, the philosopher is required to engage religion by explicating its conceptual preconditions within the parameters of the

---

<sup>43</sup> Kant himself identifies these four *parerga* in this way: "(1) supposed inner experience (effects of grace), *enthusiasm*; (2) alleged outer experiences (miracles), *superstition*; (3) presumed enlightenment of the understanding with respect to the supernatural (*mysteries*), *illumination*, the delusion of the initiates; (4) adventurous attempts at influencing the supernatural (means of grace), *thaumaturgy*, sheer aberrations of a reason that has strayed beyond its limits, indeed for a supposed moral aim (one pleasing to God) –See Kant (1996) *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, p. 96. And Derrida does make a lengthy note of these *parerga* –See Derrida (2002b) "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone", p. 52.

boundaries of reason. In other words, the Kantian project is an attempt to elucidate the underlying structures of religion and simultaneously keeping in mind the inability of the speculative reason to adjudicate matters related to faith. As one author has rightly pointed out:

for Kant, reason ‘can only approach the noumenal, proposing problematic concepts of ideas such as God and freedom.’ The philosopher reflecting on religion is compelled to offer an account of the *practical* necessity of the problematic concepts at issue, in a recognition of the limits of *speculative* analysis.<sup>44</sup>

It is this very Kantian paradigm presupposed in the transcendental questioning and the privileged limit of the speculative analysis that Derrida intends to interrogate in his Capri Lecture. This is evidenced by the title of his Lecture, ‘Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone.’ In fact, probing the very

---

<sup>44</sup> Eric Boynton (2009) “Derrida and Religious Reflection in the Continental Tradition” in Kailash C. Baral & R. Radhakrishnan (eds.), *Theory after Derrida: Essays in Critical Praxis*, London / New York / New Delhi, p. 220. Italics in the original.

nature of this Kantian paradigm, Derrida clearly poses this significant question:

...what of this ‘Kantian gesture’ today? ...how **to think religion** in the daylight of today without breaking with the philosophical tradition?... How then to think – within the limits of reason alone – a religion which, without again becoming “natural religion”, would today be effectively universal? And which, for that matter, would no longer be restricted to a paradigm that was Christian or even Abrahamic?<sup>45</sup>

In response, Derrida himself, in an act of religious contemplation - if one may choose to say so - attempts to identify the trajectories of a possible theorization of religion in its contemporaneity in this way:

Now, if today, “the question of religion” actually appears in a new and different light, if there is an unprecedented resurgence, both global and planetary of this ageless thing, then

---

<sup>45</sup> Derrida (2002b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone”, pp. 48, 77, and 53. Emphasis in the original.

what is at stake is language, certainly – and more precisely the idiom. Literality, writing, that forms the element of all revelation and of all belief, an element that ultimately is irreducible and untranslatable – but an idiom that above all is inseparable from the social nexus, from the political, familial, ethnic, communitarian nexus, from the nation and from the people: from ... blood and soil, and from the ever more problematic relation to citizenship and to the state.<sup>46</sup>

That means for Derrida, the employment of the Kantian paradigm is premised on the binary opposition between the domain of ‘the reflecting faith’ (*reflektierende*) and that of the ‘dogmatic faith’ (*dogmatische*). In other words, the opposition is between faith and knowledge. As the notion of ‘reflecting faith’ does not essentially depend upon historical revelation, it engenders the rationality of purely practical reason, and further nurtures good will beyond knowledge. In this significant sense, Derrida contends that this possibility of ‘reflecting faith’ opens up the space for the Capri discussion. But it is radically different from the ‘dogmatic faith’ in that the latter lays claim to absolute knowledge. And

---

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

in this, the difference between faith and knowledge is blurred. Further, Derrida claims that both ‘the dogmatic faith’ and ‘the reflecting faith’ are open to the temptation to apprehend ‘faith’ as ‘knowledge’. For in the domain of religion “recourse to knowledge is temptation itself” and the recurrent motif in the Christian soteriological narrative is “knowing is temptation”. Derrida observes that while ‘the dogmatic faith’ “claims to know and thereby ignores the difference between faith and knowledge”, the philosopher in the domain of ‘the reflecting faith’ entertains “the temptation of knowledge ... to believe not only that one knows what one knows ... but also that one knows what knowledge is, that is, free, structurally, of belief or of faith”.<sup>47</sup> In other words, succumbing to the temptation of knowledge, the intellectual engagement of religion on the Kantian paradigm substitutes the in-built heterogeneity of ‘faith’ and ‘knowledge’ into homogeneity and in that the originary opposition between ‘faith’ and ‘knowledge’ is lost.

Here one might justifiably pose this question: what does Derrida mean by the heterogeneity of ‘faith’ and ‘knowledge’? Elsewhere, in an interview with Richard Kearney - the celebrated Irish philosopher and cultural analyst - Derrida engages the Christian faith in the context of its built-in internal logic of hope, embodied in resurrection. Here he spells

---

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49 and 68.

out the originary heterogeneous character of 'faith' and 'knowledge' in the hermeneutically oppositional sense that while 'faith' engenders 'uncertainty', knowledge gives rise to 'certainty'. In his own words:

My own understanding of faith is that there is faith whenever one gives up not only any certainty but also any determined hope. If one says that resurrection is the horizon of one's hope, then one knows what one names when one says "resurrection" – faith is not pure faith. It is already knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

This act of keeping together the heterogeneity of faith characterised by its uncertainty and of knowledge with its certainty can be qualified as the hermeneutic symbiosis of faith and knowledge. To my mind, it is the fulcrum around which Derrida anchors his act of theorising religion.

At this juncture, parenthetically, I wish to note that this reading of Derrida regarding the nature of 'faith' and 'knowledge' gives a hermeneutic key to fathom the radical uncertainty implied in the loud cry of Jesus on the Cross: "*Eli, Eli, la'ma sabach-tha'ni*" which means "My

---

<sup>48</sup> Derrida (2004) "Terror, Religion and the New Politics" in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, New York, Fordham University Press, p. 12.

God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Significantly the English translation of the Gospel narrative keeps this sentence in its original Hebrew version.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Desert of Abstraction**

In the context of this challenging task of theorising religion in its contemporaneity by holding together the oppositional character of faith with its uncertainty and knowledge with its certainty, Derrida introduces the metaphor of ‘the desert of abstraction’. In fact, Derrida introduces this evocative metaphor in the very prefatory remarks in his Capri Lecture:

*How ‘to talk religion’? Of Religion? Singularity of religion, today? How dare we speak of it in the singular without fear and trembling, this very day? ...To give oneself the necessary courage, arrogance or serenity, therefore, perhaps one must pretend for an instant to abstract from everything or almost everything in a certain way. Perhaps one must take one’s chance in resorting to the most concrete and most accessible, but also the most barren and*

---

<sup>49</sup> See *The Holy Bible, The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 27: 46.

*desert-like, of all abstractions. ...Should one save oneself by abstraction or save oneself from abstraction?*<sup>50</sup>

This desert of abstraction is radical in nature because it attempts to link the question of religion with the problematic of revelation and revealability. Derrida contra-distinguishes revealability (*offenbarkeit*) from revelation (*offenbarung*) by saying that that the former is originary in the sense that it is independent of all religion. This autonomy of the originary is evident in the way the humans conceptually analyse the structure their experience of ‘revealability’. Further Derrida suggests that this domain of the ‘revealability’ is what gives rise to the field of ‘the reflecting faith’. And the domain of ‘revelation’ in a significant sense can be comprehended as revealing this ‘revealability’.<sup>51</sup> This explains why Derrida considers the various contemporaneous forms of religious instantiation, including terror and violence, as the radical sites embodying the most barren and the most concrete forms of abstraction.

An important question arises here. How does one employ this notion of radical abstraction in theorising religion? Derrida’ response is

---

<sup>50</sup> Derrida (2002b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone”, p. 42. Italics in the original.

<sup>51</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

radically challenging: “To play the card of abstraction, perhaps one must withdraw to a desert...”<sup>52</sup> To my mind, the choice of this metaphor of ‘withdrawing to the desert of abstraction’ by Derrida is very significant because of its primal place in the religious narratives available in the Judaeo-Christian soteriological tradition. In the Bible, Jesus is seen withdrawing to the wilderness of the desert in celebratory contemplative silence to identify the nature and significance of his messianic vocation by warding off his temptation to knowledge.<sup>53</sup> In a similar fashion, Derrida is suggesting that perhaps only by withdrawing to the desert of radical abstraction, one can *think* religion by holding on to the heterogeneity of the ‘uncertainty of faith’ and that of the ‘certainty of knowledge’. Derrida chooses to baptise this ‘desert of abstraction’ with the term from Plato’s *Timaeus*, *khora*.<sup>54</sup> The term *khora* - also written as

---

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> *The Holy Bible, The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 4:1-11. To my mind, the notion of ‘the original sin’ in Christianity is a symbolic articulation of this temptation to the certainty of knowledge. This is evident in the biblical narrative where the serpent tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit of the ‘tree of knowledge’ by saying: “You will not die. For, God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”- See *The Holy Bible, The Book of Genesis*, 3: 4b-5.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida (2002b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone”, p. 57. See also “*khora*” in Niall Lucy (2004) *A Derrida Dictionary*, Malden / Oxford / Carlton, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 68-9.

*chora* - infinitely resists any attempt at homogenisation and there by suppressing the heterogeneity and otherness that constitute the fulcrum of human experience. Literally, the term *khora*, means location or place, but Derrida brings into focus the conceptual and the semantic slipperiness of the term so as to denote what may be called the contours of a sort of ‘textual drift’.<sup>55</sup> In other words, to withdraw into the desert of abstraction means to *think the khora*. This, for Derrida, is *thinking religion*. In that sense, Derrida gives glimpses of an anchoritic spirituality that seeks the quiet emptiness of the desert as the challenge to the global religions of tele-evangelism, political terror and market values. For Derrida, then, genuine faith is the deciphering of “this desert in the desert ... [for] in uprooting the tradition that bears it, in atheologizing it, this abstraction,

---

<sup>55</sup> Gadamer has a different take on Derrida’s employment of the Platonic notion of *khora*. He sees it as Derrida’s participation in Plato’s ingenious play with myths. In his own words: “ ...[A]t the risk of being charged with metaphysics, I too can begin to grasp the idea that the *chora*, as that which provides place and space, does not in the least determine what occupies that space. In this way, the concept of *chora* can be applied un-problematically to the neo-Platonic concept of the One and of the divine. The way in which it is used in the *Timaeus* can also appropriately be understood as an expression of the complete indeterminacy which characterizes the relationship between noetic and sensible being. Although this relationship is wholly indeterminate it must, none the less, be unconditionally presupposed. ... This is an ingenious game [Plato plays with myths], but in truth nothing more.”-Hans-Georg Gadamer (1998) “Dialogues in Capri” in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Religion*, Cambridge / Oxford, Polity Press, p. 210.

without denying faith, liberates a universal rationality and the political democracy that cannot be dissociated from it.”<sup>56</sup> To my mind, this invitation to withdraw to the wilderness of desert of abstraction so as to *think religion* in its natural habitat of contemplative silence echoes this radical prayer of the Psalmist in the Bible: “Be still, and know that I am God.”<sup>57</sup>

As I understand, this contemplative silence obliterates even the traits of conceptual idolatry in the hermeneutic understanding of the desire for God. Perhaps this is best encapsulated in this celebrated prayer of the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart: “I pray God to rid me of God”.<sup>58</sup> Saint Augustine echoes a similar spirit in posing this question in the tenth book of the *Confessions*: “What do I love when I love my God?”

Some philosophers, while deliberating on the significance of this Derridean metaphor the ‘desert of abstraction’, have attempted to picture the multiple shades of meaning emanating from Derrida’s engagement with religion. For example, philosophical attempts to engage the nature and meaning of religious language in its complexity after Derrida have

---

<sup>56</sup> Derrida (2002b) “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone”, p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> *The Holy Bible, Psalm 46*, verse 10a.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in John D. Caputo (1997) *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, p. 1.

engendered specific approaches such as ‘negative or apophatic theology’, ‘death of God theology’, ‘diacritical hermeneutics’ and ‘the hermeneutics of the desire for God’. In the domain of ‘negative or apophatic theology’, the focal problem is that any attempt to comprehend God rationally does hermeneutic violence to the transcendent nature of God. The motif here is to critique idols of thought in religious thinking. As John D. Caputo has pointedly put it, “If you comprehend it, it is not God; if it is God, you cannot comprehend it.”<sup>59</sup> Further, one of the crucial questions posed by the approach called the ‘death of God theology’ is this: “what comes after the God of metaphysics?”<sup>60</sup> And Richard Kearney, the celebrated Irish philosopher and cultural analyst, has developed what has come to be known as ‘diacritical hermeneutics’ in which the emphasis is on the *possibility* of God. Kearney takes the paradigmatic self-understanding of

---

<sup>59</sup> John D. Caputo (2005) “Deconstruction” in Lindsay Jones (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition*, Detroit / New York, Thomson Gale, Vol. 4, p. 2247. Here it is significant to note that the conception of apophatic theology has ancient roots as it can be traced in the writings of Plotinus (205-270 CE). For detailed discussion on the origin and development of apophatic theology in Christianity see A. H. Armstrong (1989), “On not Knowing Too Much About God” in Godfrey Vesey (ed.) *The Philosophy in Christianity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 129.

<sup>60</sup> John D. Caputo *et al* (2001) “Introduction: God Forgive” in John D. Caputo *et al* (eds.) *Questioning God*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, p. 2.

the biblical God found in the *Book of Exodus* ‘I AM WHO I AM’<sup>61</sup> and interprets it to mean ‘I-AM-WHO-MAY-BE’. In this interpretation, Kearney gives an onto-eschatological turn to the understanding of God. God is seen neither as being, nor as non-being, but as the *possibility* of either, that is, as *may-be*.<sup>62</sup> Some other thinkers like John D. Caputo, Kevin Hart and Hent de Vries have attempted in their writings to engage Derrida by developing the trajectories of, what one might call, the hermeneutics of the desire for God.<sup>63</sup> Here it is very important to note that though these approaches do share in some respects close affinities with Derrida’s philosophical engagement with religion, Derrida unambiguously remarks that these thinkers are not thinking through religion exactly the same way as he has done. On my view, the closest affinity with Derrida is found in the onto-eschatological approach developed by Richard Kearney in his path-breaking work on religion

---

<sup>61</sup> *The Holy Bible, The Book of EXODUS*, 3: 14. Some others translate the original Hebrew phrase as ‘I AM WHAT I AM’ or ‘I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE’.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Kearney (2001) “The God Who May Be” in John D. Caputo *et al* (eds.) *Questioning God*, p. 170.

<sup>63</sup> For example see John D. Caputo (1977), *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press; Kevin Hart (1985), *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; and Hent de Vries (1999), *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore.

entitled *The God Who May Be*.<sup>64</sup> Even here, Derrida observes that though Kearney's work has very close similarities with his own work on religion, there are deep differences. For example, Derrida himself observes that the onto-eschatological thesis of Kearney that God is *I-Am-Who-May-Be* is radically different from the conception of *khora* he has postulated in his Capri Lecture.<sup>65</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

In climbing up the third step of the trinitarian ladder, my attempt has been to engage Derrida's thinking on religion. I did this by picking out certain philosophical motifs available in his celebrated Capri Lecture entitled 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone'. I began this attempt by locating the philosophical space of Derrida in the midst of two diametrically opposed views regarding the philosophical significance of Derrida. And I found merit in Richard Rorty's claim that Derrida can be considered a quasi-transcendental philosopher. And I tried to situate Derrida's Capri Lecture in the context

---

<sup>64</sup> Richard Kearney (2001) *The God Who May Be*, Bloomington / Indianapolis, Indiana University Press. For an interesting review of this work see B. Keith Putt (2004) "Imagination, Kenosis, and Repetition: Richard Kearney's Theopoetics of the Possible God" *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, pp. 953-983.

<sup>65</sup> Jacques Derrida (2004) "Terror, Religion, and the New Politics" in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, New York, Fordham University Press, pp. 12-13.

of the significance of the Capri Seminar's theme 'religion', and the reflections offered by philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Gianni Vattimo. The focal point was the inescapable question of religion in its contemporaneity. Further in taking up the problematic of understanding and meaning in religion, I focused on the interface between hermeneutics and Derrida's philosophical practice as discussed in the writings of David Hoy and Michael Forster. Our analysis of certain philosophical motifs in Derrida's Capri Lecture showed that Derrida's focus is on the contemporaneous manifestations of the religious phenomenon. To engage it philosophically, Derrida plays with the etymological ambiguity of the word 'religion'. Derrida, then, goes on to put to test the duality of 'the reflecting faith' and 'the dogmatic faith' found in Kant's work on religion. Here, as we have seen, Derrida calls our attention to the notion of *parerga* in Kant's engagement with religion. In this, Derrida is questioning the primacy accorded to knowledge over faith and terms it as temptation to knowledge. To overcome this lacuna, Derrida suggests the possibility of withdrawing to the desert of radical abstraction. Only this can hold together, Derrida claims, the uncertainty of faith and the certainty of knowledge. To understand this heterogeneity and otherness that constitute human experience, Derrida introduces the Platonic term *khora*. Derrida's emphasis here is on the semantic slipperiness of this

term. And I indicated the influence of Derrida's thinking on some contemporary approaches to religion such as 'negative or apophatic theology', 'death of God theology', 'diacritical hermeneutics' and the 'hermeneutics of the desire for God'.

After the effort to climb up the third step of our trinitarian ladder, it is time to gather together the salient points that emerge from the philosophical journey thus far. Employing a metaphor, one may call it 'philosophical harvesting'. For as Wittgenstein says: "Thinking too has a time for ploughing and a time for gathering the harvest."<sup>66</sup> This is what I shall attempt in the next chapter.

---

<sup>66</sup> Wittgenstein (1980) *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. 28e. To my mind here Wittgenstein comes very close to the philosophical and religious motif signified by the term '*kairos*' (a Greek term which means 'opportune time' but not in the sense of the 'chronological time') in the Bible. See *The Holy Bible, Ecclesiastes or The Preacher* 3: 1, 2b: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ... a time to plant, and a time to ... [harvest] what is planted."