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The Catastrophe of Memory

Derrida, Milbank, and the
(Im)possibility of Forgiveness

Mark Dooley

The movement known as radical orthodoxy, the most notable exponents of which include John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, has, since its inception, crusaded against what it sees as the plagues and nuisances of secularism and postmodernism. Its fundamental aspiration, we are told, is to “reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework,” one which is much more than a “leisure-time activity of private commitment.”¹ The theology of radical orthodoxy, so its mission statement reveals, is predicated upon the firmly held principle that “the self-conscious superficiality of today’s secularism” has led to a regrettable state of nihilistic despair. The objective, thus, is to still the “impersonal chaos” which lies at the heart of the postmodern predicament by reconfiguring “theological truth.” They do so by reaffirming their commitment “to credal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix,” thus “recovering and extending a fully Christianized ontology and practical philosophy consonant with authentic Christian doctrine.”² What this amounts to is an attempt to have everything “participate” in God, for if such participation does not obtain, then eternal stability gives way to “a purely immanent security,” to a void or a nothingness

which makes all questions of ultimate meaning meaningless. If Derrida and his defenders opt for the void (a void which they try to conceal through appeals to the saving power of *différance*), the high priests of radical orthodoxy insist that behind the phenomena lies an “eternal source,” one which gives to “bodies, their art, language, sexual and political union” a more profound and permanent density. The choice then is clear: either participation in the eternal source or nihilism, either permanence and stability or an anonymous vortex devoid of rhyme or reason. Postmodernism can only offer, in good Nietzschean style, an anonymous rumbling, while radical orthodoxy makes sense of our world by affirming its participation in a divine order, one which is given expression through language, culture, sexuality, religious practice, and politics.

It may seem somewhat strange, therefore, that the principal harbinger of the good news of radical orthodoxy, John Milbank, contributed an essay to a book edited by his fellow traveler, Graham Ward, entitled *The Postmodern God*.³ However, Milbank, Ward, Pickstock, and Philip Blond consider themselves to be “postmodern” in the sense that they see the dawn of modernity as having heralded the demise of true and genuine theological discourse. With the collapse of modernity this “modern predicament of theology” has been overcome, for now “it no longer has to measure up to accepted secular standards of scientific truth or normative rationality.”⁴ As such, it can reclaim its premodern roots as an alternative means of making sense of reality, one which assiduously avoids the confusion and lack of cohesion which postmodernism of the Parisian variety generates. So when Milbank uses the term “postmodern theology,” he is not referring to the work of Mark C. Taylor, John D. Caputo, Edith Wyschogrod, Kevin Hart, or Charles Winquist—each of whom has been influenced by Derrida in one way or another, but rather he is adverting both to himself and to the radical orthodoxy set writ large. The former, on Milbank’s reading, ought to be categorized as postmodern nihilists who “embrace contingency and arbitrariness as the real natural good.”⁵ Having given up on the eternal source, having called into question the divine origin, and having disregarded all talk of ontological foundations, such thinkers appear to have surrendered themselves to a formless flux in which nothingness prevails. As such, they should not be considered theologians *stricto sensu*, but preachers of the abyss, prophets of the dark night into which we are all aimlessly and hopelessly wandering.

Milbank’s response to the efforts of postmodernists such as Caputo and Taylor and others is thus to advance a “postmodern” theology of his own, one which is founded on the most sacred tenets of radical orthodoxy. Such a theology, he argues, “can only proceed by explicating Christian practice.” For Milbank, Christianity ought not to be thought of as simply one discourse competing with others. Rather, we should think of it as more “internally” postmodern than competing religions because of its celebration of difference. “Christianity,” he continues, “pursued from the outset a universalism which

tried to subsume rather than merely abolish difference: Christians could remain in their many cities, languages, and cultures, yet still belong to one eternal city ruled by Christ, in whom all ‘humanity’ was fulfilled.⁶ Christianity is nevertheless “peculiar” in that while it admits of difference, it is simultaneously committed to a harmonization of those differences “in the body of Christ.” So while Christianity manifests for Milbank the perfect form of community, one in which, by virtue of the resurrection, everyone is admitted, so-called “nihilistic postmodernism” represents the breakdown of dialectics, resolving in indifference, fragmentation, and the sundering of community and self-identity. He argues:

Christian theology, by contrast to nihilistic postmodernism, yet with equal validity, imagines temporal process as, in its very temporality, reflecting eternity; as the possibility of a historical progress into God, and as something recuperable within memory whose ultimate point is the allowing of forgiveness and reconciliation.⁷

It is this sentiment, and all that underpins it, which goes to the heart of the debate held at the second Religion and Postmodernism conference held at Villanova in September 1999. While much of the debate between radical orthodoxy and deconstruction at the conference appeared, ostensibly at least, to focus primarily on the notion of “forgiveness”—both Jacques Derrida and John Milbank gave difficult and intricate papers on that subject—much more was indeed at stake. First, this was the occasion of the first live encounter between two movements which are currently battling it out for the minds and souls of many theological faculties throughout the United States and beyond; second, it allowed postmodernism—in the form of Derrida—to respond to the criticisms which radical orthodoxy has been inexorably launching at it for much of the past decade, the essence of which I have outlined above; third, it put under the spotlight the contention, advanced by Milbank, that because time reflects eternity, forgiveness and reconciliation are indeed possible. What I will endeavor to do in the remainder of this chapter is show how this “debate” between Derrida and Milbank unfolded. In so doing, I will argue that the critique advanced by Milbank of Derrida as both a nihilist and as someone for whom absolute self-sacrifice is essential is indicative of a thorough lack of understanding of what has driven deconstruction since its inception. In so doing, I shall pay close attention to the question of forgiveness as dealt with in both conference papers and in the course of the roundtable which followed.

Overcoming the Void in the Instant of the God-Man

As stated, radical orthodoxy tries to reclaim from secularism “aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, [and] space,” by resituating them “in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church, and the Eucharist.”⁸ This emphasis on a highly Christianized approach to theological and philosophical

matters becomes starkly evident once more in John Milbank's scholarly conference paper, "Forgiveness and Incarnation." The crux of this article centers on what the author designates as the "five major aporias" of a "purely interhuman forgiveness."⁹ For Milbank, as his title suggests, real and genuine forgiveness can only be attained in and through the Christian Incarnation, for this announces a "time when divine forgiveness can be mediated by human beings: a time for which justice is infinitized as forgiveness."¹⁰ But for those of a secular frame of mind, and perhaps also for those of another denominational persuasion, forgiveness appears impossible. Before attempting to delineate the differences between Milbank and Derrida on this rather complex issue, let me detail the nature of the five aporias which Milbank argues are an insuperable obstacle for those seeking forgiveness without the intercession of the Incarnation.

The first aporia to be faced by those who strive after such purely interhuman forgiveness revolves around the question Who is to forgive? Milbank contends that because only the victims of injustice can forgive, and because any harmful or injurious action will never be limited to one victim alone—in that an evil action tends to have innumerable unforeseen consequences and ramifications for many other innocent victims—the culprit can never be fully exonerated. For "it is impossible to know how far the consequences of even the simplest and most minor misdemeanors extend." "The infinite jury of victims," declares Milbank, "can never be summoned to the consistorial court of penitence."¹¹ Moreover, the "true victims" of injustice—those whose bodies lie "pulverised in their fury and despair," cannot, and indeed should not, be spoken for in their absence. For if a living victim forgives in the name of those who are either dead or forgotten, "all the other, often untraceable victims are thereby betrayed."¹²

This applies also to the sovereign power who has the right to pardon those whose crimes have left a trail of shattered bodies. Milbank argues that if such sovereigns, in forgiving the perpetrator—a rapist in this example—were to offer "the chance for making reparation and achieving rehabilitation to a dangerous rapist, while his [the rapist's] actual, damaged victims persisted in hatred and bitterness toward him, then we should not feel that he had been forgiven." The sovereign, in other words, cannot forgive the living in the name of the dead; neither he nor she can "represent all those injured who may lie unknown beyond any traceable boundary of space and time." No one, that is, can speak for those whom Paul Ricoeur calls the "anonymous forces of history." Hence, Milbank concludes, "neither the victim nor the sovereign power may forgive, and there is no human forgiveness."¹³

The second aporia, "forgiveness and time," focuses on the following problem: How can a wrongdoing be elided from memory through an act of forgiveness, such that the wrongdoing appears never to have happened, without thereby risking irresponsible amnesia and thus a repetition and a revisitation of that same wrongdoing on a future generation? In analyzing this conundrum,

Milbank appeals to the insights of Vladimir Jankélévitch, an author about whom Derrida also has a lot to say. Milbank points out that for Jankélévitch, “the order of time runs counter to forgiveness,” and this because any attempt to erase a past event ignores “the ineluctable discreteness of past moments, through which alone time occurs and finite being arises.”¹⁴ While forgiveness demands that the wrongdoing be elided from memory, the future demands that it be retained as a warning from history. The horror of the Holocaust, for example, bears witness to a “radical evil” which ought never to be forgotten or expunged.

Milbank does, however, identify a possible way of obviating this aporia in the form of Augustine’s argument to the effect that time and memory are inseparable. This argument which is central to Ricoeur’s treatment of narrative selfhood in his monumental *Time and Narrative*¹⁵ is founded on the assumption that the past, as Milbank puts it, “only *is* through memory, and while this does not abolish the ontological inviolability and irreversibility of pastness, it does mean that the event in its very originality is open to alteration and mutation.”¹⁶ Consequently, pace Jankélévitch, forgiveness on this Augustinian reading does not seek to undo the past but rather strives to “re-narrate the past.” In so doing, “one comes to understand why oneself or others made errors, in terms of the delusions that arose through mistaking lesser goods for the greater.”

Moreover, because the finite is of itself a “nothingness,” and because evil “is only of the finite, not of the infinite,” it follows that evil, once again contra Jankélévitch, may be abrogated. Hence the victim who “positively remembers” the past, or who re-narrates the past, will come to understand that the object of his hatred—the evil or horror perpetrated by his aggressor—was in fact *nothing*. To think otherwise allows evil to acquire a firm foothold, for “what is unredeemed remains in force.” So when Jankélévitch declares that the Holocaust is unforgivable, Milbank rejoins that “the greatest atrocity requires all the more an access of hope, the greatest evil calls out all the more for an impossible forgiveness and reconciliation.”¹⁷ Before turning to his third aporia of forgiveness, Milbank makes clear that this “Augustinian vision” is “necessarily a theological vision,” one which insists that unless time “participates in the divine, infinite eternal memory . . . it would be destined to pass away . . . into pure oblivion, thereby rendering the good and actual ontologically as nugatory as the privative and deficient.”¹⁸ Where no such vision abides, forgiveness truly did, as Jankélévitch believed, perish in the death camps.

The third aporia is dealt with under the title “Forgiveness and Forgetting.” Following on from the conclusion drawn in the discussion of the previous aporia regarding the necessity of a theological approach to questions of time and forgiveness, Milbank argues that for those who do not hold to the theological vision advanced—those of a “purely immanentist perspective”—the past cannot be transformed or re-narrated in accordance with the Augustinian schema of time and memory. The problem for one with an immanentist frame

of mind is that because hatred, and the fault which provoked it, cannot be transformed in the manner described above, no forgiveness seems possible. The only way the fault can be forgiven is if it has been, as Milbank suggests, entirely forgotten. The problem here consists in the fact that if the fault has been forgotten it no longer requires forgiveness. So “as soon as forgiveness becomes possible, it is already redundant.”¹⁹ This is the paradox of “negative,” or purely human, forgiveness.

The penultimate aporia considered by Milbank, “The Trade in Forgiveness,” is especially significant, because it is here that he tries to counter many of the arguments put forward by Derrida in *Donner le mort* (*The Gift of Death*) and elsewhere,²⁰ to the effect that Christian charity is regulated by a sophisticated form of celestial economics. Although Milbank does not mention Derrida by name in this context, it is obvious from the analysis that it is the latter he has in mind. For Milbank, forgiveness should not be thought of as an act of what Levinas calls “total altruism.”²¹ Rather, we ought to consider it in terms of a “Christianized eudaimonism,” in which forgiveness marks the site of a self-reorientation by way of a dialectical engagement with another. Milbank describes this process in the following terms:

For this Christianized eudaimonism, my interest in my own happiness cannot compromise the disinterest of my will to forgive, since my happiness is from the outset less a possession than a relational ecstasis: my fulfilling myself by orientating myself beyond myself to the other, my realizing myself by expressing myself and letting myself go and receiving back from the other a new interpretation of myself. Here to forgive is to restore that order of free unlimited exchange of charity which was interrupted by sin.²²

Such is the paradoxical “aneconomic economy of pardon”—an economy which is founded on the belief that unless one is already receiving “infinite divine charity” one cannot offer charity or forgiveness to another. For divine charity is “the ontological bond between God and creatures,” the means by which the latter can forgive and be forgiven. Due to the fact that one is always already divinely forgiven, one has no need to engage in the secret trade of counterfeit forgiveness. One can forgive freely without compromising one’s purity of motive. Indeed, it is because we are already the recipients of divine charity, of a divine gift, that we can establish what Milbank refers to as “a correct harmonious relation between creatures.”²³ This is so because in receiving the gift we can freely, without thought of how we might profit from such an exercise in generosity, pass it on to fellow creatures. In so doing, our motives remain pure as a consequence of the fact that we give not to receive, for we have already received. But those who do not recognize divine charity, those who believe that the gift of forgiveness comes from them alone, run the risk of binding those whom one forgives “in an infinite indebtedness.” Furthermore, such a person will not seek to embrace the pain and suffering which positive or divine forgiveness demands; not only does such counterfeit forgiveness release

the forgiver from the “injuries done to him and the terrible difficulties involved in seeking reconciliation (within infinite justice) with others,” but it also leaves open the possibility that the one to be forgiven will not be rehabilitated. Purely human forgiveness is, according to Milbank, too easy—it is cheap forgiveness, forgiveness at a below-cost price.

Finally, the fifth aporia—“Forgiveness and Finality”—deals with the vexed issue, touched on above, of how to forgive while at the same time retaining a sense of the injury caused so as to prevent such a thing ever recurring again. For Milbank, the negative or purely human forgiver, in simply forgetting the past wrong, naively thinks that mere forgiveness alone will immunize him against some future threat posed by the one he has forgiven. Reconciliation between the wronged and the wrongdoer, that is, is not a natural consequence of mere forgiveness qua forgetting. Such is the insecurity in human relationships caused by forgiveness which is not grounded in a divine source. If, however, divine forgiveness is sought, we can be sure that the wrongdoer has actively “offered penance” and that his repentance has resolved in “an improvement of character beyond the latent tendency which led to the commission of a fault.” It is only through participation in what Milbank calls “real, divine, eschatological finality”²⁴ that forgiveness can engender the security in human affairs which any act of genuine reconciliation promises.

For Milbank, thus, positive forgiveness requires the intercession of the Incarnation. For, as he goes on to argue in the remainder of his chapter, the God-Man, as “unique sovereign victim” for the reason that he suffered “the maximum possible victimage,” can forgive *in the name of* those countless victims whose forgiveness we desire but can never receive. Through him humanity can forgive humanity. As such, it is not God himself who forgives us, but rather he gives us the capacity to forgive one another. Unlike negative forgiveness, no hate or bitterness precedes the forgiveness afforded in and through the incarnate Christ. Consequently, “with the God-Man alone there arises a pure forgiveness, since this really surpasses forgiveness and is rather the unbroken continued giving of the divine gift as also the offering of a suffering actively undergone.”²⁵ Through the Holy Spirit, thus, we may access the gift of divine charity which the Trinity embodies and purveys.

The most obvious concern which Milbank’s analysis arouses, as I intimated earlier, has to do with whether or not those who do not believe in the Incarnation can be saved. It never seems to occur to Milbank, either here or throughout his other writings, that it is not simply a stark choice between credal Christianity, on the one hand, and secularism, nihilism, and postmodernism (all of which are synonymous for him) on the other. The logical upshot of this extreme Christocentric position is that forgiveness and reconciliation appear to be impossible not only for those of a secular or nihilistic frame of mind but also for those of a non-Christian religious disposition. This may not be what Milbank intends to suggest, but I can locate nothing in his argument which leads me to any other conclusion. Indeed, his analysis of forgiveness sits

comfortably with that advanced by Hegel in his early essay of 1799, "The Spirit of Christianity,"²⁶ in which the negative forgiveness of the Jews is compared unfavorably to that of the positive forgiveness of the mediator and redeemer, Jesus Christ.

In fact, it could plausibly be argued that Milbank's version of radical orthodoxy shares many of the same fundamental gestures and axioms which characterize Hegel's philosophy of religion, even though the latter is not normally considered one of the theological precursors of radical orthodoxy. For is it not the case that when Milbank says such things as "Christian theology . . . imagines temporal process as, in its very temporality, reflecting eternity; as the possibility of a historical progress into God, and as something recuperable within memory"²⁷ he is echoing Hegel's belief that it is only by virtue of the Incarnation, only by virtue of the fact that time does indeed reflect eternity, that we can dialectically surmount the division, alienation, and sin which block the passage to full reconciliation and atonement in the form of a full-fledged Christian community? But for those who do not believe that God has entered history in the form of the God-Man, for those who continue to look to the future for the coming of the kingdom, positive forgiveness appears unavailable. Just like Abraham in Hegel's depiction of the Jewish condition, those who reject the Trinity are condemned to wander the barren deserts without hope of returning to the place whence they came.

Giving Economy a Chance

If observed from this perspective, it becomes somewhat easier to analyze Milbank's stance in relation to Derrida. To recall, Milbank contends that postmodernism generally, and Derrida in particular, opts for a nihilistic brand of secularism which espouses the view that out of nothing we came and into nothing we shall go. Hence, the pure positive forgiveness of which Milbank speaks is rejected in favor of a purely human form of forgiveness which resolves in negativity, insecurity, despair, and alienation. But to accuse Derrida of propounding such a view is quite simply a mistake. For Derrida has never spoken in these negative terms; he has never, that is, declared himself on the side of those who champion either neo-Nietzschean nihilism or postmodern relativism. Tirelessly, he insists that deconstruction is neither nihilism nor negativity, but affirmation and hope. It is true, of course, that Derrida would consider problematic (for all the reasons I shall give below) the type of Trinitarian position to which Milbank holds, but it in no way follows that because of this he is a knight of infinite despair. For Derrida is one of those individuals who serves to complicate and confound Milbank's stark and rigid dichotomy between Christianity and secularism/nihilism. He is one of those for whom the lines of demarcation are not so clearly drawn.

In his previous writings, Milbank has described Derrida's work as "unregenerate Hegelianism."²⁸ I consider this to be a rather accurate description of

what Derrida is up to, even if I don't agree with the spirit in which it is employed in that context. For, as I have argued elsewhere,²⁹ Derrida's entire enterprise has been an attempt to make trouble for the logic of self-presence and closure which characterizes Hegel's dialectics, the same type of self-presence and closure which I am arguing is a significant feature of Milbank's oeuvre. But for all his criticism of teleology and the dialectics of closure, Derrida is still a Hegelian insofar as he considers Hegel to have been correct in assuming that identity is predicated upon difference and also by virtue of the fact that he too considers history, unlike those who quest for transcendental or metaphysical purity, to be central to our self-understanding. More important, however, it is Hegel's emphasis on the pivotal role of "recollection" or "memory" and the way in which it is employed by Derrida which most interests me here. For it is in and through their respective theories on the function, role, and power of *memory* that the differences between radical orthodoxy and deconstruction become clearly identifiable.

On my reading, as argued above, Milbank considers memory to be that faculty which permits us access to eternity as it is reflected in temporality. This suggests that it is by virtue of our recollection of the God-Man that we can breach the rupture between finitude and the infinite. In other words, through the forgiveness of sins the God-Man provides the occasion for a reconciliation of the temporal and eternal components of the self. Even though, as we have seen, Milbank considers it impossible for us to offer forgiveness in the name of the dead, for the reason that countless victims have been lost to memory, he nevertheless believes that we can, through a Trinitarian ontology, tap into a divine source, recover or re-member it, as it were, from the vagaries of time and chance. While we might forget the victim, we cannot forget the occasion of the God-Man—the *sovereign victim*. Either we accept that we can indeed surmount the alienation which temporality necessitates through the forgiveness of sins or we surrender ourselves, like Abraham on Moriah, to an impersonal void.

We can move toward a greater understanding of the issues here by attending to a chapter in Milbank's recent book, *The Word Made Strange*,³⁰ in which he severely criticizes Derrida's distinction between speech and writing as well as his distinction between writing and "the Book." For Milbank,

Derrida's written difference, defined by its possibility of surviving the death of every speaker, is necessarily a deferred difference, a difference that never arrives, that is therefore nothing, no-difference. For a regime of the primacy of writing is perform a disembodied, ahistorical regime, in which sign does not finally decay along with its speaker; in which, therefore, sign is falsely hypostasized in abstraction from figured event, and construed as a "pure value" which never can be, and is in consequence "nothing."³¹

In analyzing Derrida's use of the distinction between speech and writing in such literal terms, Milbank misses the more general point which is being made

here: In employing this distinction, Derrida is endeavoring to drive home the point that throughout its history, philosophy, qua metaphysics–onto-theology, has tended to privilege the notion of self-presence and purity above a notion of selfhood which admits of loss and contamination. The metaphor of speech is used to convey the idea that in hearing itself speak, the self is fully present to itself, while the metaphor of writing is used to convey the idea that any attempt to circumscribe speech within a frame or between borders (in a “Book”) so as to keep it safe is bound to fail. For once I open my mouth, I draw on a language which is not my own, but which is an admixture of many different languages and tongues. My language, Derrida insists, is not *my* language, but the language of the other, of the other who inhabits me. Quite simply, languages and traditions have a history, a long and convoluted history which is by no means transparent. All traditions and languages are multi-layered and multi-textured; they contain within themselves voices which have long since been repressed by the weight of the dominant tongue or the dominant tradition. Hence, there is no *one* tradition or language, no *one* lineage or history, but traditions within traditions, languages within languages.

The consequence of all this, for Derrida, is that even while speaking, the self is always already disjointed, always already somewhat lost (*destin-errant*). For it is never the case that we can twist free of our sociolinguistic-cum-historical moorings; we can never, that is, fully, trace our origins through a systematic unraveling of contexts which have been occulted either by the dominant tradition or simply through the wear and tear of time. No grand narrative, myth, or supreme plot can account for the fact that, whether we like it or not, our past is composed of multifarious contexts, all of which have bled into one another to such an extent that even the most skilled historian, archaeologist, anthropologist, or geologist cannot hope to comprehensively disentangle them. All we have to work with are signs and traces, archives and museums, bones and ashes, testimonies and narratives. As such, memory—personal or communal—delivers a past which is always already, to appropriate one of Derrida’s most misunderstood slogans, “under erasure,” or a past which has always already begun to decay. Traces, signs, and testimonies do not afford us full access to a world lost from view, to the mind or intentions of others whose only remnant is ash, or to those whose marks or traces never made it into the archive.

The importance of this for Derrida lies in the fact that any community which declares itself pure all the way down has lost sight of the fact that its identity is ineluctably contaminated from within, that it contains within itself traces of strangers and foreigners. So any community which attempts to reinforce its identity by insisting that it can trace its origins, or that it can, by way of its sacred books, take aim at the heart of the real or the true, is impervious to the fact that books have a history and a context, that they too had authors who were situated in a particular sociolinguistic framework. Hence, books demand interpretation; they demand to be read and re-read not as documents which

contain within themselves the full and pure intention of their authors but as traces of a context bound up with innumerable other contexts. Consequently, because communities are generally founded on myths, stories, and books, they too cry out for interpretation, they too summon us to look beyond or beneath their borders and frames for the marks and traces of the other both within (the suppressed other) and without (the excluded other). As such, the identity of a community is always already incised and permeated by difference. It is a community or an identity which is plagued by gaps in its memory and haunted by the ghosts of those who were either colonized, expelled, or killed in its name. So while communities might give the impression of being completely organic, they are in fact as disjointed and as fractured as any other entity which attempts to erect borders in an effort to block the exile. All communities are inhabited by other communities and identities.

What drives Derrida's deconstruction, thus, is a passion to keep us sensitive to the unavoidability of context, to the fact that all contexts are inhabited by others and that because of such contamination the notion of the absolute origin is undermined. His aim is to encourage us to move beyond the dominant readings of our past, to look between the lines of our sacred books in an effort to identify the traces of those whose voices were censored, those who were denied entry. Deconstruction, in other words, wants to sensitize us to the faceless and nameless who have been buried beneath the weight of officially sanctioned history. It asks us to keep watch for signs of a past which has never been present to us in the form of a grand narrative.

It is incorrect of Milbank to suggest, therefore, that Derrida's "written difference" is a "nothing," for such a view entirely misconstrues the fact that, for Derrida, "writing" equates to the marks and inscriptions of those who have been victimized in the quest for purity and full self-presence, even when such marks have been, either intentionally or unintentionally, turned to ash or cinders. If, as I have claimed, the driving passion of deconstruction is to alert us to the muffled calls and cries of the faceless, which, in turn, alert us to the poverty of memory, then I think it is fair to say that Derrida's "written difference" amounts to an affirmation of the otherness which has been written out of, or elided from, consciousness, or of the muted and censored difference which lies deep within the depths of the self.

Every country, state, and context, argues Derrida, has its own "economy of memory"—its own way of being economical with memory. Such an economy is predicated upon "several layers of forgetting," which issues in a "capitalization of silence." Deconstruction is an attempt to initiate "a movement towards the liberation of memory," toward the liberation of "specters" or "ghosts." It is an attempt to give them a future, to let them come again (*revenir*). For deconstruction is all about giving hope to those whose time is out of mind. The book (historical, religious, political, philosophical), thus, has no end, for there is always the possibility of dissecting it further, of uncovering hidden intentions, of reinterpreting it in the light of new findings and newly disclosed

marks. So, for Derrida, “the axiom of deconstruction—the basis on which it has always set itself in motion,” is justice—justice for those who have fallen between the lines of the page or for those who have been exiled beyond the borders of the book. Such is what links deconstruction “to the priceless dignity of otherness.”³² This “work of mourning,” the work of trying desperately to keep the promise of hope alive, is what a deconstructive meditation on writing sets out to do:

To meditate on writing, which is to say also on effacement—and the production of writing is also the production of a system of effacement, the trace is at once what inscribes and what effaces—is to meditate constantly on what renders unreadable or what is rendered unreadable. . . . But there is also the unreadability that stems from the violence of foreclosure, exclusion, all of history being a conflictual field of forces in which it is a matter of making unreadable, excluding, of positing by excluding, of imposing a dominant force by excluding, that is to say, not only by marginalizing, by setting aside the victims, but also by doing so in such a way that no trace remains of the victims, so that no one can testify to the fact that they are victims or so that they cannot even testify to it themselves. The meditation on writing is a meditation on this *absolute weakness*, the weakness of what you are calling the victim.³³

To meditate upon writing, therefore, is not to surrender oneself to a “nothing” or to an impersonal void. It is to open oneself to one’s heritage, to come to terms with the fact that “memory is not just the opposite of forgetting,” but it is “tied to the future and not only to the past.”³⁴ It is to contemplate the possibility that, as Derrida likes to say, we have forgotten that we have forgotten, that there has been a “destruction of memory,” that the name of the victim has been effaced.³⁵

Now I think the implications of all this for Milbank’s brand of radical orthodoxy, and for his related belief in the possibility of pure forgiveness, are quite significant, so significant, in fact, that I believe this is the reason why he continues to read Derrida’s “speech-writing” distinction so literally. For if Derrida’s analysis of memory holds, the belief that we can somehow, in a manner analogous to Hegel, return to the divine source through the mediation of the God-Man is complicated somewhat. This is so not because at bottom there is nothing but simply because scripture, like any other text, has a context and a history. In saying this, Derrida is not out to destroy Christianity, or any other religion for that matter, but to make it a little more honest about its origins, to make it face up to the possibility that it might just have forgotten that it has forgotten. For example, if placed in context, it is probable that much of what we read in scripture cannot be taken literally. For the historical Jesus scholars, as well as many contemporary theologians, have taught us to be highly circumspect with regard to the *facts* of the “Book”; in reading between the lines on the page, they have exposed us to the many whose accounts were pilloried and excluded because they challenged the official version of events.

They have taught us that most of the events of the New Testament do not correspond to actuality, that they were manufactured after the fact in an effort to “protect the faith.” They have, moreover, highlighted the fact that the so-called “religions of the Book” have presided over a catastrophe of memory by “imposing a dominant force . . . so that no one can testify to the fact that they are victims.”³⁶ What these Jesus scholars tend to emphasize above all else is the Jewishness of Jesus, the fact that he never set out to cause trouble for Judaism but only to revivify it. His social teachings were geared to bring about a new kingdom for the Jewish people and to soften the hearts of his fellow rabbis. It must not be forgotten that Jesus liked to be called “Rabbi.” This Jesus—Jesus the Jewish rabbi—is the one which the deconstructive techniques of the scholars have exposed, few traces of whom can be found in the “Book.”

This, of course, is not to say that deconstruction, as John D. Caputo repeatedly reminds us, is a cold atheism. Due to the fact that it calls our attention to the difficulties involved in recollecting and memorizing the origin, it can hardly then definitively declare that there is no God. Like the rest of us, all Derrida can do is take what Enda McDonagh has so powerfully called the “risk of God.”³⁷ Like Abraham, he hears a voice summoning him from the darkness, from the pit of his psyche, a voice which cannot be traced. To respond to such a voice, to risk responding to its demands, requires courage and faith. For one will never know who or what is calling, or where one might be led if one chooses to respond to the call. The trials of responsibility go hand in hand with fear and trembling.

Unlike Milbank, who thinks that *pure* forgiveness is possible through the redeeming power of the God-Man, through the occasion of the resurrection when fissure and rupture in the form of sin are healed, and when the self becomes one with itself through the intercession of the Holy Spirit, Derrida, for all the reasons proffered above, can only hope against hope that, like Abraham, he too will one day make it home. For he dreams of a day when the work of mourning will come to an end. Such is Derrida’s impossible dream: the hope that one day justice for all the ghosts who summon us to mourn them will be realized. It is an *impossible* dream because the work of mourning is interminable and the meditation on writing is a passion which cannot be assuaged—that is, of course, unless you have forgotten that you have indeed forgotten. To try to recover oneself from the ruins of memory—even the memory of the God-Man, given what deconstructive analysis has taught us about Jesus the Jew—or to return to one’s roots and origins, is to pray and beg for the impossible. It is an attempt, as Derrida said to me in the course of a recent interview, to “make possible what I am sure is impossible.”³⁸

But let me reiterate: What inspires deconstruction is the hope against hope—the passionate *faith*—that one day the impossible might become possible, that the Messiah may show up, that one day the promise of my heritage may be fulfilled. This is why Derrida begins the first chapter of *Given Time*—a text which has everything to do with resurrection, reconciliation, and forgive-

ness—with the words: “Let us begin by the impossible.”³⁹ For, pace Milbank and radical orthodoxy, Derrida’s work does not resolve in hopelessness and despair, but, as I said at the outset, in affirmation and longing. He does not say “Let us be content with mere possibility, with the here and now,” but “Let the desire for *the* impossible impassion us.” The responsibility of deconstruction is to try to go one better than mere possibility. Its aim is to teleologically suspend all laws of equivalence in the name of what exceeds the order of the same.

But this does not mean, as Milbank and others suggest, that deconstruction does not have preferences, that it is a pure affirmation of otherness which strives to annul all sameness, presence, or self-possession. As I have tried to make clear, deconstruction always works from within a heritage; it insists that one cannot entirely escape from one’s tradition, home, culture, or language. One belongs from the very outset to an *oikonomia*—to a home or an economy which is subject to laws and regulations. So the first “principle”—a word Derrida would be loathe to use, but one which I shall employ for the sake of convenience—of deconstruction is that we cannot evade the law of the home—that we have a self, an identity, a history, a family—but that this inheritance cannot be traced back to its origins. We are, to a certain extent, to invoke Julia Kristeva’s charming expression, “strangers to ourselves.”

The work of mourning is an impossible attempt to recover this loss as best we can. It is an impossible attempt to welcome the strangers back home—impossible because they are, alas, dead, but also because some are not even inscribed in memory. But this should not deter or inhibit us from probing further, or from desiring beyond desire that, at some point, a trace or mark may come into view and, as a consequence, the strange will become less alien. While I cannot, in other words, escape the law of the home, I can endeavor nevertheless to make it a little less uninviting and a lot more welcoming to those who challenge my rigid sense of identity, self, and context in the name of an opening of the borders, in the name of hospitality.

This is why in his conference paper at Villanova, “To Forgive: the Un-forgivable and the Imprescriptible,” Derrida argues, pace Jankélévitch, that “there is only forgiveness, if there is such a thing, of the un-forgivable. Thus, forgiveness, if there is such a thing, is not possible, it does not exist as possible, it only exists by exempting itself from the law of the possible, by impossibilizing itself, so to speak, and in the infinite endurance of the im-possible as impossible; and this is what it would have in common with the gift.”⁴⁰ The big difference between Milbank and Derrida here is that for the former the aporias of forgiveness outlined above can be surmounted through the Incarnation. Even those whose marks and traces have been erased are brought to life again, are resurrected through the sovereign victim. For Milbank, the work of mourning is indeed interminable unless divine forgiveness can be availed of, unless the law of the home, the *oikonomia*, is fully functioning. There is no uncertainty or undecidability in Milbank, no fear and trembling, no faith. The manifold layers of history do not present an obstacle to full self-recovery, for

the wounds and scars of temporality are salved, healed, and purified by the blood of Golgotha.

What worries Derrida about all of this is the fact that it is predicated upon the belief that the impossible can become possible, that the catastrophe of memory can be overcome. For if the impossible becomes possible, the passage to the other—the other deep within myself whose time has yet to come—is blocked off. In saying that we can avail of pure or divine forgiveness, Milbank is overlooking the fact that what we call “the divine” is no less contextual, no less historical, and therefore no less deconstructable than anything else. While Derrida dreams and hopes that there might be a savior, he cannot say for sure that there is one. To do so would be to destroy faith, to confuse it with knowledge. It would be to give a concrete messianism the edge over its rivals, thus insulating itself against any unforeseen ghosts, any unnoticed traces, and any smoldering cinders. It would be to block up the home, to secure the self against foreign invasion. In such circumstances the fully conditional law of the home would prevail:

That the without-ground of this impossible can nevertheless take place is . . . the ruin or the absolute ashes, the threat that must be thought, and, why not, exorcised yet again. To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other arrivants to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome—without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for justice. Present existence or essence has never been the condition, object, or the *thing (chose)* of justice.⁴¹

Derrida tries always to situate himself between what is possible and the impossible, between the conditional and the unconditional. He endeavors, that is, to ensure that the law of the *oikonomia* does not become too conditional and rigid by exposing it to the unconditional demand. To begin by the impossible, thus, is a way of sensitizing to the fact that our current traditions and institutions can never acquire absolute status, that they can always be reformed in the light of unforeseen appeals for justice. To have a passion for the impossible or the unconditional means that you desire what you know to be impossible—due to the claim which language and tradition make upon you—so as to prevent the conditional from becoming *too* conditional. So when Derrida says that *pure* forgiveness is impossible and that this is what it has in common with the gift, he is simply saying that because forgiveness by its very nature must be afforded unconditionally, and because I cannot actually grant forgiveness without *wanting* or *desiring* to do so, thus reconciling myself to and domesticating the other (by drawing her into an economy), forgiveness is always already annulled. Like the gift in Derrida’s analysis, once “I” *want* to forgive or once “I” *desire* forgiveness, I draw the other into a circle of exchange in which there is a remission of *debt* through the *giving* of pardon (*don*, gift),

hence nullifying the gift. In saying that something is unforgivable, therefore, Jankélévitch is insisting that only under the most extreme conditions will forgiveness be afforded. But for Derrida, what Jankélévitch is here referring to as forgiveness in no way resembles forgiveness. For the more conditions, the less forgiveness.

To say that I have been reconciled with an other is to say that our differences have been surmounted, that we have balanced our payments and put the economy in order. But when I am engaged in the work of mourning, I can never say that I have been reconciled with those who summon me from the embers of history, for the trace bespeaks loss and disjointedness. Milbank agrees, and that is why he insists that we must have divine forgiveness. But Derrida insists, on the other hand, that because we cannot rise above context, divine forgiveness is an impossible dream. For it would be the height of injustice to say that mourning the dead reconciles me to them *in full*. But the dream that someday I may be reconciled to them is what keeps us mourning all the harder. It is what prompts us to keep digging further and further beneath the surface, even if we are simply sifting through ashes and dust. Indeed, to say that because there is a “supreme victim” pure forgiveness and absolute reconciliation is possible would be to say that now that we have been forgiven, and now that we have the capacity to forgive, we need no longer mourn. Mourning, however, is a process in which *singular* traces and marks enjoin us testify on behalf of *proper names*. It is a process whereby we try as best we can, given the constraints of temporality and history, to bear witness to individuals and to the memory of broken lives. Even though we know it to be impossible, we try indefatigably to bring them home. If Milbank’s resolution to the five aporias amounts to a forgetting of proper names and of singularities, Derrida’s notion of impossible forgiveness keeps hope for singular victims alive.

So for Derrida, it is always a case of beginning by the impossible, of desiring what you cannot have so as to keep the self desiring beyond desire, or to keep the self from closing in upon itself. It is never a case of surrendering oneself to the other, of becoming one with the other, as Levinas instructs, to the point of substitution—for that is the impossible—but of coming to terms with the fact while I cannot escape my heritage (*oikonomia*), I can, however, try to keep the borders sufficiently porous and permeable. It is a case of trying for what Milbank thinks is possible while knowing all the while that self-recovery on such a grand scale is beyond the capacity of a poor existing individual who has no means of tapping into an eternal source. It is a matter of understanding that mourning is not forgiveness, for the reason that it is undertaken by a subject or a self who wants and *desires* pardon for the victimhood which a meditation on writing reveals. For once forgiveness is sought, as Derrida asks, “Is there not the beginning of a reappropriation, a mourning process, a process of redemption, of a transfiguring calculation which, through language, the sharing of language . . . rushes toward the economy of a reconciliation that causes the wrong itself to be simply forgotten or annihilated?”⁴²

It is a matter, therefore, of moving between the dream of absolutely unconditional forgiveness, “which ultimately should even be able to do without repentance and the request for forgiveness,” and conditional forgiveness, “which is inscribed within a set of conditions of all kinds.” For, as Derrida reminds us again and again, “the unconditional and the conditional are, certainly, absolutely heterogeneous, and this forever, on either side of a limit, but they are also indissociable.”⁴³ In other words, the desire for pure forgiveness serves to prevent conditional forgiveness from becoming simply a judicial pardon, a situation in which forgiveness is given only on the condition that the accused appeals for clemency, or *gives* of his time, or shows signs that he has repented. Such a sphere is governed by what Paul Ricoeur calls “the logic of equivalence”—the logic of give and take, or the logic of retribution—as distinct from the “logic of superabundance”—the absurd logic of forgiveness in which clemency is offered without condition.

Self-Sacrifice versus Hospitable Narcissisms

We are now in a better position to understand why, I think, Milbank’s questions to Derrida in the course of the Villanova roundtable were somewhat off the mark. When Milbank asks if Derrida is in danger of becoming too moralistic because he insists on “pure absolute self-sacrifice” or because he demands that we strive after “a very pure gift or very pure forgiveness,” he shows that he has profoundly misunderstood Derrida’s work on the gift and on forgiveness, a misunderstanding which has serious implications for the way in which radical orthodoxy interprets Derrida across the board. For, as I have argued, the whole point of Derrida’s discourse is to suggest that “pure absolute self-sacrifice” is impossible, that no matter how hard I try I can never abandon my heritage, my language, or my tradition. I can, to repeat, never escape the law or the economy of the home. But I can, by keeping the impossible dream alive, prevent this law from becoming an obstacle to those who do not come under its jurisdiction. Pure gifts and pure forgiveness are, for Derrida, impossible. This is why he urges that “without a movement of narcissistic reappropriation, the relation to the other would be absolutely destroyed, it would be destroyed in advance.” “The relation to the other,” he continues, “even if it remains asymmetrical, open, without possible reappropriation—must trace a movement of reappropriation in the image of oneself for love to be possible.”⁴⁴ Without a sense of self how could I love the other? In other words, how could I be a host if I did not have a home?

On my reading, thus, it is because Derrida insists on the fact that *absolute* self-sacrifice is impossible that he cannot be accused, as he is by Milbank, of wanting to give to the other to the point where he neglects his own. As such, it is wrong of Milbank to accuse Derrida of “masochism,” a masochism which is the inevitable result of secularity. If, for Milbank, the religious disposition is one in which I will give away what I have to the other if there is not enough to

go around but one in which I also hope that “I will be able to eat alongside the other, too,” then Derrida is, pace Milbank, “religious beyond the ethical.” He embraces the sort of “hyper-ethical” position that Milbank accuses him of neglecting in favor of moralistic indifference. Derrida’s reply to these charges in the roundtable sums up nicely what I have been trying claim on his behalf in the course of this paper:

You might call this indifference, but if you think that the only moral duty you owe is the duty to the people—or the animals—with whom you have affinity, kinship, friendship, neighborhood, brotherhood, then, you can imagine the consequences of that. I, of course, have preferences. . . . But I do not have a good conscience about that. I know that if I transform this into a general rule it would be the ruin of ethics. . . . So when I give a preference to my cat, which I do, that will not prevent me from having some remorse for the cat dying or starving next door, or . . . for all the people on earth who are starving and dying today. So you cannot prevent me from having a bad conscience, and that is the main motivation of my ethics and politics.⁴⁵

If John D. Caputo were to ask me, therefore, to tell him “in a nutshell” what Derrida is endeavoring to say throughout his paper on forgiveness in this volume, I think I might paraphrase what Derrida himself says so incisively of the gift elsewhere:⁴⁶ *Know* still what forgiving wants to say, know how to forgive, know what you want and want to say when you forgive, know why you intend to forgive, know how forgiveness annuls itself when it is drawn into an economy, commit yourself even if commitment is the destruction of (pure) forgiveness by (conditional) forgiveness, give economy its chance. For, finally, the overrunning of the circle (*oikonomia*) by forgiveness, if there is any, does not lead to a simple, ineffable exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation. It is this unconditional forgiveness, this exteriority, that sets the circle going, that puts the economy in motion. It is this unconditional forgiveness that engages in the circle and makes it turn. We ought not to think of the distinction between unconditional and conditional forgiveness in terms of a simple opposition. They are indissociable. Like unconditional hospitality, justice beyond the law, and the democracy to come, pure forgiveness is the stuff that dreams are made of. Without such dreams all economy would simply freeze over, and the promise to those for whom no tears are spilled would be broken beyond repair.

NOTES

1. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 1.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

3. See John Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short Summa in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions,” in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 265–278.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
8. *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 1.
9. John Milbank, "Forgiveness and Incarnation," this volume, pp. 97–98.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
16. Milbank, "Forgiveness and Incarnation," this volume, p. 101.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–103.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–104.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
20. See primarily Chapter 4 of *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), entitled "Toute autre est tout autre," pp. 82–115. For a remarkable reflection on this text, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 188–211.
21. Emmanuel Levinas, "Existence and Ethics," in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Ree and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 34.
22. Milbank, "Forgiveness and Incarnation," pp. 104–105.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
26. G. W. F. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," in *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings by Friedrich Hegel* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1970), pp. 192–301.
27. Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism," p. 266.
28. John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Blackwell: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 61.
29. See Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Soren Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); "Kierkegaard on the Margins of Philosophy," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, no. 2 (March 1995): 95–107; "Murder on Moriah: A Paradoxical Representation," *Philosophy Today* 39 (Spring 1995): 67–83; "Playing on the Pyramid: Resituating the 'Self' in Kierkegaard and Derrida," *Imprimatur* 1, nos. 2/3 (Spring 1996): 151–162; "Risking Responsibility: A Politics of the Emigré," in *Kierkegaard: The Self and Society*, ed. George Pattison and Steven Shakespeare (New York: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 65–89; "The Politics of Exodus: 'Hospitality' in Derrida, Kierkegaard, and Levinas," in *The International Kierkegaard Commentary: Works of Love*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), pp. 125–142.
30. Milbank, "Pleonasm, Speech and Writing," in *The Word Made Strange*, pp. 55–83.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
32. "The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Radical Philosophy* 68 (Autumn 1994): 36. As with so many of his interviews, this one with

Brigitte Sohm, Cristina de Peretti, Stephane Douailler, Patrice Vermeren, and Emile Malet is a lucid and insightful guide to the many complex issues which characterize Derrida's prodigious output over forty years.

33. "Passages—from Traumatism to Promise," in *Points . . . Interviews 1974–1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 389.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 383.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 389.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Enda McDonagh, "Friendship, Marriage, and the Risk of God," *INTAMS Review* 5/1 (1999).

38. "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *From Aquinas to Derrida: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (forthcoming).

39. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

40. Jacques Derrida, "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible," this volume, p. 48. See also John D. Caputo, "The Time of Giving, the Time of Forgiving" (forthcoming); his excellent discussion of forgiveness in both Hannah Arendt and Derrida in both *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 106–112; and "Reason, History, and a Little Madness: Towards an Ethics of the Kingdom," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 84–104. See also Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: SAGE, 1996), pp. 3–14; and "Memory and Forgetting" in *Questioning Ethics*, pp. 5–11, as well as our interview with Ricoeur, "Imagination, Testimony, and Trust: A Dialogue with Paul Ricoeur," also published in *Questioning Ethics*, pp. 12–17. While there are differences between Ricoeur and Derrida on the notion of "forgiveness," these differences ought not to obscure the striking convergences which are also very apparent, especially as Ricoeur also situates forgiveness within "the logic of the gift."

41. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 175.

42. Derrida, "To Forgive," pp. 45–46.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

44. Derrida, "There is No One Narcissism," in *Points . . .*, p. 199.

45. "On Forgiveness: A Roundtable with Jacques Derrida," this volume.

46. Derrida, *Given Time*, pp. 30–31. The figure of the circle has long been a feature of Derrida's work. From the very beginning, he has been preoccupied with the way in which the relationship with the other is predicated on a circle of exchange in which the self gives of itself to the other only so as to reappropriate in full the gain from the investment. This, of course, is the dialectical logic of giving and receiving which lies at the heart of Hegel's systematics, a logic which I am suggesting Milbank shares. In Hegel, the loss of oneself, the gift of oneself to the other, is always negated through a recuperation of the loss. The self, thus, is resurrected or reconciled to itself *via* the other. Consequently, Hegel's theory of self-becoming runs on a *circle* of exchange, in which what I give is returned to me in equal measure. As Hegel repeatedly argues, the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end. Such a notion of full self-recovery is

what set the wheels of deconstruction turning. This is why I have always felt that it is in the reader's best interest to approach Derrida as someone who is trying to thwart the logic of circularity inherent in Hegel before turning to the way in which deconstruction goes to work on the logic of presence in both Husserl and Heidegger. For the motifs of anamnesis, of resurrection (*relever, aufheben*), and of reclaiming the origin through a circular recovery of expenditure are typically Hegelian gestures. In contradistinction to this rather "restricted economy," (*oikonomia*—homecoming), Derrida proposes a general economy which does not seek a full return on its investments. He grants to Hegel that it is only by virtue of the economy between self and other that self-awareness and possession is possible. But he then tries to ensure that the economy does not close in upon itself by insisting that full self-reappropriation is impossible because the self is, from the outset, cut from the origin. Derrida inhabits the circle, thus, in an effort to show how its beginning and its end are incommensurable. Due to the fact that we have always already forgotten that we have forgotten, and due also to the fact that we cannot cleanse ourselves of our acculturation, the self is irreparably wounded. This explains further why the motif of "circumcision" is so central to the Derridean text: for Derrida, the circle of exchange, the circle of absolute recovery, is always already severed and cut.

For a more detailed explication of these rather complex matters, and for a fuller account of the way in which Derrida deals with the Hegelian notion of absolute returns through a negation of death, see my "Murder on Moriah" and "Playing on the Pyramid."