Holding One's Beliefs Loosely

A Review of David Newheiser's *Hope in A Secular Age*

Joeri Schrijvers

*School of Philosophy*

*North-West University South Africa*

schrijversjoeri@gmail.com

In his *Hope in a Secular Age*, David Newheiser makes a strong case for hope is that which joins believers and unbelievers. Newheiser does so, mostly, by bringing the work of negative theologian Dionysius into conversation with that of Jacques Derrida whose deconstruction quite often ventured into the terrain of negative theology. Before we proceed to Newheiser's peculiar account of hope, it is to be noted that with the phenomenon of hope, Newheiser believes it “possible to find echoes of the [Judeo-Christian] tradition […] even among those who are no longer religious” (3) and live in a secular age indeed.

Newheiser's book opens with a brief discussion of Charles Taylor, to whom Newheiser's book owes part of its title. Hope, Newheiser argues, is what allows us both “to transcend the immanent frame” and what “illuminates the future of faith in a secular age” (5). For hope, according to Newheiser, will not settle for a closed immanence and a calculable future beyond which nothing can be imagined. Faith, then, has a future in such an era of secularization if and only if it hopes for something beyond its provisional stance, that is, if it learns “to holds its beliefs loosely” (35).

The phenomenon of hope, for Newheiser, is to be positioned over and against both complacency and despair. Complacency follows the false assurances of an all
Holding One's Beliefs Loosely
A Review of David Newheiser’s Hope in A Secular Age

too certain hope; despair is a state of hopelessness that revels in disappointment and uncertainty. For these latter two phenomena, Newheiser takes Jean-Luc Marion and John D. Caputo, to whom Newheiser displays an uneasy relationship to say the least, as paradigmatic examples. Marion is portrayed here as a representative of a “confident traditionalism” (11) and Caputo “recommends an indeterminate spirituality” (ibid.). Yet confidence is, in this book, regarded as leading more or less directly to complacency. Newheiser, for instance, regularly refers to the work of Albert Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus* and David Elliot’s *Hope and Christian Ethics*: for the former “hope posits a confidence that distracts from life” (13) and for the latter “hope displays a confident expectation of ultimate blessedness” (67). Hope need not lead to such false confidence, just as a hopelessness need not lead us into despair. Yet, given the book’s ambiguous relation towards Caputo’s work, the book might be read as if Newheiser suggests that an exaggerated stress on indeterminacy (of a democracy to come for instance) and the concomitant lack of specific hopes and ethical actions might lead to despair. Newheiser is to be commended, though, for capturing something central to many of the classical accounts of hope when emphasizing hope as the middle ground between complacency and despair. In effect, the book covers a wide variety of sources and Newheiser often succeeds in portraying his authors succinctly and in unexpected ways. One can wonder, though, about the absence of Ernst Bloch and Jurgen Moltmann, especially given the fact that the former seems rather close to the position of the book under discussion.

How does hope mitigate between complacency and despair? And can we still speak of a Christian hope when one is to ‘hold one’s beliefs loosely’? For this, the author relies on St. Paul’s account in Rom. 8:24 where hope in things unseen is regarded as uncertain and no easy thing to uphold if the task is to ‘wait for it with perseverance’ (6). From the outset, the author makes it clear that hope, at its best, is to be seen as irrational and that, for there to be hope at all, a leap of faith is required. Such a hope, then, can deal with disappointment and uncertainty. Yet, because of its determinateness and its affirmation, it does not sink into despair. This hope, for Newheiser, is consistent with a “profound pessimism” (9)—a point that is repeated throughout the book: if this hope does not make things any easier, it sure does not make them worse either. The book’s ambition is to show that such a middle position can be found in both Derrida and Dionysius whose accounts of hope and concomitant commitments differ “in content but not in kind” (11) even though Derrida’s stance is one of melancholy and Dionysius’ rigorous negativity displays a rather “sanguine bent” (11, 73 and 85). These similarities between Derrida and Dionysius make for the fact “that religious commitment can be resolutely undogmatic, and that religious tradition can contribute to reflection in a secular context” (11).
Newheiser’s (sometimes bold) intervention in the debate depends on a reading method that he clearly puts in practice. “People think by reading” (ibid.), Newheiser argues, and it is for this reason that Dionysius and Derrida suggest that advances in thought do not come through “pure novelty” but rather through a faithful reading of texts and of traditions with an eye on their “unexpected possibilities” (11). It is in effect such a method that Newheiser puts in action throughout his book reading his authors carefully and thinking, through and with their texts, prudently. In this sense, Newheiser’s book is a performance or enactment of what he himself prescribes: a “practice of reading” (37) Dionysius and Derrida as they themselves have recommended the art of reading, in view of, precisely, activating, “re-instituting” (29), “constructive” (36) possibilities gathered within these traditions and texts.

How to keep up hope in hopeless situations? How to affirm that it is all worth it when evidence, oftentimes, seems to point to the contrary? These questions open onto Newheiser’s first chapter. The question makes clear already that hope is a phenomenon we need to ‘keep up’: it needs perseverance and persistence. After all, hope is something that one can ‘lose’; it does not come by easy. This first chapter answers these questions in three moments. The first one is that of a negativity that is reflexive; the second one stresses the dynamics of affirmation and the third focuses on the ethical and political aspects of such a difficult affirmation. Throughout the chapter Newheiser points intriguingly to the continuity between Derrida’s early and later work; the early work, focusing on an Ausseinandersetzung with the structuralism in vogue of the days, taught us to know that the truth of a system lies outside the system all the while being related to that very system. Just as the center of a discourse is not part of that discourse itself although the discourse, the text and the transcendental system relate to that which only “function[s]” (20) as its center and seems to ground it, as it were, from the outside. Newheiser teaches us then the return of a similar stance in later Derrida when stating that the justice to come is outside the particular laws although it never is foreign to these laws either. The truth of the system is outside the system even if it is not to be perceived anywhere else than in this very system. The justice to come is found no where else than in these imperfect laws addressing and responding to this justice. The outside of the text, if there is such a thing, is experienced only within texts and traditions (to the point of a possible confusion as Levinas would add). Newheiser so reads certain passages in Derrida, for example the one where Derrida states that the order of justice and the order of the law are ‘heterogeneous but indissociable’ (27) with more care than unfortunately has become common in contemporary academia.

Let us focus now on the three moments that set us on the course of the phenomenon of hope. Responding to critics of critique such as Bruno Latour—à quoi bon, indeed, critique in an age of precarity?—Newheiser explains that Derrida
does not just revel in critical negativity. On the contrary, Derrida acknowledges that critique alone can be stifling and therefore proposes a “negativity that is reflexive” (18), i.e. aware of its limits and conscious of its being in default when it is not put into (ethical) practice. There is in this sense, in a bit of an understatement, a “florid affirmation” (ibid.) in Derrida which imposes itself as an act, a decision if not a response. Here we have the first moment on the way to hope. “Derrida holds negativity and affirmation in tension to encourage a persistence that acknowledges its vulnerability” (19). In face of uncertainty, it is easier to lose hope than to keep up hope. Hope needs time and it needs to persist in face of adversity (knowing fully well it cannot always persist in just this way).

    Derrida acknowledges that most people, however, will choose for an affirmation or certainty that is not in any way surrounded by any negativity. This “desire for safety” (21) is at best a pretense and at worst a lie: it is the illusion, in earlier terms, that the center really is a center and not just a function of our discourse. It is the religious belief, to put it bluntly, that a God is really ‘out there’ as the guarantee of the ‘ultimate blessedness’ one comes up with to cope with the adversities and anxieties here down below.

    This brings us to the second moment: whomever thinks hope, needs to think a movement. Hope is ‘up’ and hope is lost. It comes and it goes and has its own dynamic. This too Newheiser finds in Derrida in what perhaps is the most important argument of the book. A reflexive negativity ultimately amounts to a self-critical stance: it is not to make an exception of oneself when it comes to hegemonic discourses. Newheiser, in this regard, repeatedly points out that Derrida taught that his own texts, too, fall prey to the play of différance (Cf. 35) and that there thus is no way that he himself could oversee (as a sovereign indeed) all of its possible interpretations. Yet self-critique, when viewed from the timeless perspective of a system of propositions[,] could seem contradictory, but this neglects the fact that people exist in time. Once self-critique is situated within the context of an unfolding life, its function is not to disbelieve what one believes […] but to hold one’s beliefs loosely, available for future development (35)

    In simpler terms: people can always change their minds. Heidegger’s Being and Time mentions that the retracting of a previous resolution is a sure sign of authenticity. Newheiser finds a simila argument in Dionysius. Here too the unfolding of life makes possible the ‘juxtaposition of affirmation and negation’—one of Newheiser’s favorite formulations in the book in question, it recurs no less than 14 times throughout the book.

    Yet one needs to keep in mind that such a change of mind is not always a conscious and active decision. It can similarly be forced upon us by changed circumstances and contexts. Sometimes there is a game-changer and sometimes the game just changed. It is this that Derrida recognizes, rather abstractly, in ‘the formal
structure of the promise’: “there is always a promise insofar as there is still a future to come” (37). Tomorrow, in effect, things might be different. It is such a formal eschatological structure that breaks open the ‘immanent frame’ and “opens possibilities that are unconstrained by the subject’s present understanding” (38). Both despair and complacency, one might argue, settle for what is: whereas despair can no longer imagine something beyond the present circumstances (and for this reason despairs), complacency is so full of itself and its surroundings that it does no longer want anything other than what it presently takes pleasure in.

This bring us to the third moment: the political and ethical implications of a hope that unsettles the status quo and persists in doing so against all odds. These implications turn hope into an “affirmation without assurance” (37), into a decision about what is undecidable and into a leap of faith even. Yet this does not mean, for Derrida nor for Newheiser, that such an affirmation and a decision is anarchic and uninformed by the present possibilities. On the contrary, “Derrida insists that we must respond as best we can in the situations in which we find ourselves, which requires both calculation according to rules and attention to a particularity that cannot be captured in a rule” (27). It is to Newheiser’s credit that he shows how both these tenets are present in Derrida’s account of decision: both calculation (rule-following programs, law) and what is beyond calculation (singularity, justice). What Derrida has reminded us about is that calculation alone is never enough and that justice alone is never present. Newheiser points to Derrida’s theme of a democracy to come to make this third moment of hope, its ethical and political implications, clear and to show that all judgments (about laws, about justice, about God or about hope in a secular age even) only ever are “provisional” (28). Everything would be easier if the distinction between law and justice for instance was a ‘true distinction’ (Derrida, at 27), pertaining to a timeless system of oppositions if you like, but in the context of life unfolding views over what justice is and is not might change from day to day and it is absurd to think it would ever be fully realized. Even if one could be just in one respect, one might be unjust in other respects. In case of a democracy, definitively instituted and realized completely, Derrida’s negativity shows itself as an “ethical discipline with political implications” (32), for here Derrida

...worries that [in such a case] the aura of democracy [is] appropriated by political systems that remain, in many respects, undemocratic. [Some] societies assert that they embody the realization of democratic ideals, but this obscures the ways in which they fall short of democratic representation (in their treatment of poverty, incarceration, immigration, and so forth). (32-3)

Newheiser to comment: “This is not the only point that needs to be made for a healthy politics, but there is good reason to think it is important [...]”, and a bit later,
“Derrida’s negativity is political insofar as it keeps policy debate in motion, struggling toward greater justice” (33). We have already of these dynamics for Newheiser; later we need to point to some problems when it comes to the struggle for a greater justice.

Chapter two turns to Dionysius and seeks to detect similar moments and movements in his works. The chapter focuses mainly on two themes in Dionysius: his account of apophasis and his theory of hierarchy which seems to run counter to the drive towards democracy present in Derrida. Intriguingly, Newheiser starts with the same argument as he detected in Derrida’s work. Dionysian apophasis is able to juxtapose affirmation and negativity through its unfolding in the time of a life. It is this temporal aspect, in effect, that pushes us outside of 'true distinctions' and 'systems of propositions': “the tension between affirmation and negation could appear to be a contradiction when evaluated from the (synchronic) perspective of logical analysis, it becomes the means of ethical transformation when plotted (diachronically) in time” (40). This explains not only how affirmation and negation can in effect be joined together but also why one can be inclined towards a positive theology the one day yet feel for negative theology the next day. It is such an ‘unfolding in and through time’ that Newheiser seeks to detect in both Derrida and Dionysius. This juxtaposition also nuances, for Newheiser at least, Dionysius stress on ecclesial hierarchy as the one and only mediator between the heavenly and the earthly realm: in line with Derrida’s emphasis on provisional judgments in matters of justice and democracy, Newheiser makes a case that “any institution [that] is directed toward God can only possess provisional authority” (41).

Both theses encounter severe difficulties: is it really the case that Derrida and Dionysius “juxtapose” affirmation and negation and how to describe this paradoxical ‘beyond’ affirmation and negation? Is it really the case that Dionysius is not the traditional hierarchical thinker that some have made of him? One feels that Newheiser struggles with this second question and, at any rate, seems less convinced (and convincing?) than with regard to the first question. We will not focus here on the peculiarities of his argument but outline the main reasons why Newheiser thinks that Dionysius and Derrida can be joined together after all.

How to conceive of the way of apophasis if it is not to be seen as negative unsaying and undoing of any and all affirmation and as, say, a ‘true distinction’? “Dionysius is clear that neither affirmation nor negation is adequate” (43). Pure negation, a negation that disavows all affirmation, is even impossible. We will have to think through the first of many conundrums to take hold of the way of unsaying: “at the very moment at which [Dionysius] says that God is beyond every assertion, he is making an assertion about God” (43). Just as the negation ultimately gives way to an affirmation, just so, it seems, all affirmation will, at one point or other, need to be negated: “Dionysius indicates the inadequacy of theological discourse both by
the negation of every divine name and by the affirmation of every possible name for God” (58).

Yet what is left if negation and affirmation is not simply to be seen as a ‘true distinction’ or contradiction and if it is to be stripped of a logical analysis? Then apophasis appears suddenly as a way, as an Unterwegs, as Heidegger would have it. This reader at least was reminded, for instance, of the ‘Yes and No’ that Heidegger simultaneously uttered over and against technology sending typewritten letters to Caputo all the while arguing that typewriters disturb the work of the hand. “Apophasis […] constitutes a way—a dynamic process, not a static structure. Whereas the juxtaposition between affirmation and negation appears paradoxical when considered in abstraction, with an unfolding life it becomes a means of ethical transformation” (47-8).

Temporal aspects also play a crucial role in Newheiser’s answer to the question of hierarchy and its role in mediating the divine to humanity. Such a way, for which neither affirmation nor negation suffice, entails “dissolv[ing] the notion of divinity itself” (42) considering that each and every name we would come up for the divinity is equally close and equally distant (cf. 61 and 100) from that which it tries to bring to speech: it is not even certain whether we are praising God when we are praising God. Dionysius, according to Newheiser, paves the way for a “desacralization” (55) which we will have to consider later in more detail. For now it is to be noted that just as for Derrida all democracies fall short over and against the very idea of a democracy to come, so too for Dionysius all the divine names fall short over and against the very idea itself it tries to name. Nonetheless, just as this does not mean, for Derrida, that we should not work on our very imperfect democracies so too this does not mean for Dionysius that we do not try to name the divine at all. It does mean, though, for Newheiser, that any act of naming, just as every institution of democracy for Derrida, only ever will be provisional. Such a desacralization, Newheiser will argue, therefore differs from Georgio Agamben’s concept of profanation.

To underscore Dionysius’ take on such provisional attempts to name the divine, Newheiser points again to the way of a “neither/nor” proper to apophasis: “because God [for Dionysius] is neither temporal nor timeless, God’s actions take the form of an unforeseeable event” (60). For this, Newheiser turns to the following citation (of which we are not sure that it will convince the experts) and to which we, no expert at all, will have to return as well:

We now learn these things in the best way we can and as they come to us wrapped in the […] veils […] with which […] hierarchical traditions cover […] things. [But] in time to come, when we have become incorruptible[,] immortal
[and] blessedly happy, we shall be struck by his blazing light. (60, my italics, reference to DN 592B, 52-53)

Newheiser concludes from this passage, and from the difference between what we now can learn but will know in the time to come, that “Dionysius describes ecclesial hierarchy as a provisional attempt to approach the divine in the present” (60) or even that “there are signs that the structure he describes is a human construction” (52).

In the hope to establish that “religious and secular hopes should not be opposed” (73), chapter three focuses on the discipline of hope itself. Here Newheiser shows himself at his most original: probing into the ‘how’ of hope as it were. “To say ‘I hope...’ is already to admit that the outcome is uncertain; however, hope doesn’t take uncertainty as a cause to quit” (64). On the contrary, hope, in Dionysius and Derrida, is what teaches us to “endure” (64), to “persist” (63) and to “press forward” (14), for instance, to “unpredictable possibilities” (16). Hope, in this way, is the acknowledgment that the future to come is uncertain—‘I hope things turns out well’—and that whatever calculations and programs we install and institute, these might not be sufficient to master the unforeseeable possibilities the future can contain. Derrida and Dionysius, furthermore, know all too well that the ‘desire for safety’ causes “people to project themselves onto that which is different, and they both worry that this forecloses the unexpected” (63). Newheiser agrees with Camus when the latter states that hope at times is but a “false comfort,” he disagrees when saying that this hope always would be an “evasion” from the uneasiness of the present. For instance, “Dionysius affirms the promise of the resurrection, but he does not describe what is to come and he does not suppose that it solves anything in the present” (68). Newheiser’s religious hope, inspired by Dionysius, and its Christian practice, is therefore a “provisional attempt that is relativized by the unforeseeable future” (68-9). It is a “hope robust enough to acknowledge its uncertainty” (70).

It even seems the case that the hope Newheiser has in mind starts out from a situation of hopelessness. After all, no one would utter the words ‘I hope that...’ if all were already in place and properly in order. In this regard, it is to be noted that our author again points to a situation which echoes Paul’s propositions in Rom 8:24 when indicating a situation in which Christians had to “revise the hopes they previously held” (71). There are plenty of examples in the scriptures which denote the appearance of Jesus as sudden and Dionysius, too, “places himself in the tradition that portrays God’s action as unpredictable” (70-1) or as an inexplicable event: no matter what one hopes for, its arrival will always come as a surprise that exceeds expectations.
Derrida does not speak often of hope. Yet, for Newheiser, Derrida and Dionysius “relate to the commitments they hold in similar ways” (71) or, as we noted earlier, their attitude differs in content but not in kind: where Dionysius joins affirmation and negation, Derrida gathers critique and (religious) commitment in one bold move (Cf. 73). Derrida, for instance, places his faith in democracy, in Europe or in European institutions but this does not make him any less critical over and against these institutions. Yet the difficulties begin when we start to ponder the objects of these hopes precisely. What is it that Derrida and Dionysius are hoping for exactly? What can someone ‘who holds his beliefs loosely’ hope for precisely?

It is on this point that Caputo’s work intervenes in the debates and Newheiser grants Caputo that “Derrida does express some anxiety about determinate hopes” (75). Derrida is not one who follows the hopes and dreams of a community, a nation or a belief system blindly. Here Newheiser’s position tends to becomes a bit confused. On the one hand, he is distinguishing his own position from Caputo who, “in simplistic oppositions” (105), “opposes indeterminate openness and determinate commitments” (76). On the other hand, Newheiser argues that “Derrida frequently affirms particular hopes” (77), for instance, for Europe and its institutions. Newheiser might be right that Caputo in some works stressed the opposition between particular hopes and indeterminate openness a bit too much, he in turn runs the risk to turn this distinction into a dialectic, especially when he recognizes a “pattern” (75) in Derrida that would be the simple unfolding of the “tension” (76) between indeterminate futurity and determinate attempts to promote democracy in Europe or elsewhere.

For Derrida, however, it is never a matter of the one leading automatically to the other: the danger for Derrida would be to stick with one determinate form as well as to permanently revel in its sheer indeterminacy. Newheiser seems more aware of the second danger (which he associates with Caputo) but less worried about the first one. The reason for this is simple: in a dialectic one would be lead automatically to other forms of determinate hopes and there would always be one or the other openness (to otherness) presupposed as the dialectic is necessarily premised on a multitude.

This brings us to our question again: just how determinate is the object of hope in Newheiser’s account? Recall that for Newheiser this hope is the hope for a future that is unforeseeable and exceeds all expectations. “Derrida and Dionysius suggest that aims which outstrip the subjects’s understanding of what is possible are the paradigm of hope” (80). Now we see that such hope need not be rational (79) and is a matter of the will (e.g. 81): for Newheiser, one ‘hopes’ for something just because it seems impossible. Newheiser does give good (and even funny) arguments for this: “the problem with unhealthy hopes is that they are unhealthy, not they aren’t genuine hopes” (81). For Newheiser one can hope for no matter what, as for
instance “the ability to levitate” (ibid.) but the discernment whether this is a healthy or unhealthy hope, rational or rather foolish, is entirely “extrinsic to hope” (ibid.). Confusion, though, occurs when the question arises whether or not hope must have a determinate object: is a hope in a future to come exceeding the subject’s present judgment (Cf. 80) a genuine hope? Is a hope in God’s unforeseeable event surpassing all (sacramental) anticipations still a determinate Christian hope?

Here Newheiser wavers and tackles two different questions but answers only one: referring to Adrienne Martin’s How We Hope, Newheiser writes “hope must have an object that the hoper judges to be possible”—one does not hope for levitation if one at least doesn’t think it’s possible (80). Yet if hope has an object after all, it seems not that uncertain: one would at least know what to hope for? The question cuts both ways: what is the object of the hope of one who holds his belief loosely, it it is not a determinate object? Newheiser then goes on to answer the other question, that hope is genuine even if it is irrational, but remains silent about whether or not this ’hope in a secular age’ requires a determinate object or not. Yet what is the object of such a genuine but irrational hope? Does the hope for the (indeterminate) democracy to come have a (determinate) object? Does one hope for an indeterminate ‘democracy to come’ or does one hope for such a future to come through hoping for present determinate democracies? Does one have faith in a democracy to come or a belief in our present democracies (according to a distinction that rages through contemporary continental philosophy of religion)?

In the case of Dionysius, the problem is even more glaring. After all, what is Dionysius hoping for? Let us return to the quotes above. One of the problems with hope, as perceived by Camus and Elliot, is that it is an all too confident expectation of an ultimate blessedness that distracts from the problems in the present. Yet Dionysius, in the passage quoted above, seems quite certain what exactly is to come in the ‘time to come’. Despite all of his theoretical efforts aiming at a divinity that is able to surprise our expectations, Dionysius seems quite certain that in the time to come, he (and his fellow believers) will be ‘incorruptible’, ‘immortal’ and, not to forget, ’blessedly happy’. The problem with the determinate object of hope is in effect that it might stick with the one determinate objects it knows and ecclesial hierarchies are not known for surprises: they can seems quite certain what it is we can hope for (and even more who can hope for it and who cannot!). In the end, Newheiser’s account of a hope that could do (almost?) without any object seems destined to fail—for a 'beyond' of present democracies or for a 'union' with God 'beyond' what can be anticipated— and the question of what someone ‘who holds his beliefs loosely’ can hope for remains unanswered. Similarly, Newheiser argues that “Dionysius claims that, because union with God remains yet to come, our present situation is radically uncertain” (77). However, is this uncertainty really radical or “profound” (105)? It is uncertain how exactly this union will look like, but
it is not uncertain that such a union will take place. This is, in any case, not the uncertainty of Heidegger’s Phenomenology of Religious Life where we see St. Paul stating that for the Christian the only genuine question is ‘will I be saved?’; it is rather, the already somewhat complacent, question of a Christian that has a very determinate idea of the ‘time to come’ and asks ‘when exactly will I be saved’? There are thus gradations when it comes to the object of hope and here we need to heed that Dionysius was one on the more enlightened examples in the history of Christianity. But how much more do ordinary believers need a reachable, imaginable object to keep their Christian hopes up!

Newheiser remains silent about these questions and quietly seems to assume that hope best be without an object. Yet this would bring him closer to Caputo’s stress on indeterminacy than he elsewhere is willing to admit! The question deserves to be posed nonetheless: what is hope if it does not hope for something particular? To be sure, Newheiser mentions that just as Derrida ‘fills in’ his indeterminate hope for a democracy to come with ‘particular hopes’, just so Dionysius “fills out his hope for union with God with imagery drawn from a Christian scripture” (77, also 95). Both of them have certain particular and determinate affirmations, yet both of them, too, insist that these affirmations “remain subject to revision” (ibid.). We will have to ponder later about the exact status of such ‘revisions’ (especially in the case of a lingering dialectic) but for now we need to realize that the act of filling in these ‘indeterminate objects of hope’ with a determinate object is not innocent at all: certain Christian believers, just as the ones triumphing about one aspect of their democracy, will fill their hopes in in a particular way and will remain stuck in the one dominant version of Christianity that they desire. In short: it is not sure whether we can hope, at all, for a Christianity that holds its beliefs loosely (although, of course, the fact that believers are looking for manners to hold their beliefs loosely is, in a way, hopeful).

In chapter four, the book takes a turn and the question of hope seems to disappear somewhat. This particular chapter mostly revisits the debate between Derrida and negative theology through the commentaries of Marion and Caputo. Interesting is Newheiser’s consults of the Derrida archive through which he had access to as of yet unpublished texts of Derrida: from these one gathers that the hyperessentialism Derrida supposedly ascribed allegedly to negative theology is but one reading of negative theology (cf. 97) and per usual, for Derida, there is plus d’un. We will not rehearse these (old and a bit outdated) debates between Marion and Derrida here but focus rather on the advances in Newheiser’s argument. Where Marion and Caputo argue, respectively, that religion must choose either for “a secure assertion of traditional dogma” or for “an attenuated religiosite abstracted from any determinate content,” Newheiser hopes to come, through his reading of Dionysius and Derrida,
...to an alternative that is urgently needed. In the context of pluralistic societies, the claim that a particular tradition possesses unquestionable authority rings false, but decontextualized gestures towards higher meaning are vague and unsatisfying. [Yet] it is possible to affirm religious commitments in all their particularity while holding those commitments open to transformation. (86)

These lines are programmatic for the chapters to follow where Newheiser seeks to show what hope can mean for a secular age or what a certain religious stance can contribute to the public realm (Cf. 106). Once again Newheiser concludes the chapter by stating that for Dionysius and Derrida negativity cannot be maintained 'all the way' and at one point has to give way to an “affirmation that is necessarily uncertain” (102)—yet an affirmation of a religious (or otherwise) commitment nonetheless. Derrida fills in his particular images of democracy from within the peculiarities of his context whereas Dionysius uses the Christian images of his time. Both, however, have shook up their discourse from within: the reality of this democracy in Belgium here does not live up to the idea of democracy, whereas the hope for the union with God might not be the union we wish or imagine just as the God one meets will not conform to the ideas of divinity one has beforehand. If hope, then, for Newheiser is never entirely without object—we are hoping for something but it is not sure whether this hope “reaches its object” (96)—it is therefore a sort of 'object without object' that this hope presupposes and once more one is in the proximity of the 'religion without religion' that Newheiser throughout the book rejects.

Chapter five asks whether religious commitments can find their way again to the public and secular realm when the default position of the secular age has been to separate politics and religion. In this chapter, Newheiser examines Derrida’s rather ambivalent relation to secularism. Newheiser argues that Derrida opposes “programmatic” secularism but not “procedural” secularism: the former states that religion is to be excluded from the public realm no matter what where the latter simply prohibits that the state prefers one religious group over others (109). This paves the way for Derrida’s claim that the influence of a religious tradition on the public realm is often “subtle” and “subterranean” (ibid.). Yet just as hope, for Newheiser, establishes an openness towards the future beyond the limitation of the present, so the idea of justice (itself subtly stemming from religious traditions) and “religious traditions open imagination to a justice that transcends the status quo” (109). Here one finds a conundrum present in Derrida’s later writings: although without the religious traditions of the West one would not have imagined such an idea of justice, these religious traditions never embody once and for all this idea of
justice—the very idea of justice transcends the traditions that taught us the very idea of transcendence.

The problem with this chapter is that it, apart from a discussion of Martin Hägglund, remains with Derrida’s ambivalence. Yet whereas this is Derrida’s endpoint—somewhat like a born again soixante-huitard—it should be our starting-point. It is one thing to state that for Derrida religion and the public realm cannot be entirely separated or ‘immunized’ from one another, it is something else entirely for us to see that the religion that is now entering the secular stage can be every bit as violent as the religions that modernity tried to expel in the first place. We will have to come back to this question, for what if the difference in content (between modern and postmodern religion for instance) cannot be all that neatly separated from a difference in kind and, instead, makes for a difference in kind altogether?

We would then be facing a new situation even if it is at times with old means but violent ones all the same—wasn’t this what Derrida puzzled in his Faith and Knowledge when wondering about the fundamentalism that used teletechnological means to distribute its age-old phantasms? The chapter seems to shy away from these, admittedly difficult, questions with regard to Derrida’s legacy. This question is not simply the observation that for Derrida, in fact, religion and secularism intertwined, the question rather is where this will lead us given the fact that one cannot neatly separate religion and politics. All this makes for the fact that this chapter, though it contains some nice insights on Derrida’s relation to religion, is sidetracked just a little when it comes to the question of hope in a secular age. Concluding the chapter with the statement that an “ambivalent relation to a religious heritage characterizes life in a secular age” (130) does not alter this.

In Chapter six Newheiser asks what exactly “theological reflection can contribute to democratic politics” (132) and the question of hope resurfaces. Both religious commitments and political movements can fall prey to the desire for safety and to a certain rigidity. Religion so “becomes impervious to other possibilities [and] political movements that critique the status quo sometimes find it easier to resist power than to exercise it” (132). Newheiser’s negative political theology wants it both ways: both the religious affirmation and the critical negation that remain open to other possibilities. “A commitment to radical transformation,” Newheiser argues, “does not rule out the compromise required to enact concrete policies in the present” (132). Newheiser is to be commended to see a similar structure in Derrida, for all the dreams about democracies to come never entailed that one should nonetheless not at least try, in the best possible way, to maintain democratic impulses in the present. Il faut essayer.

In this last chapter, Newheiser positions Derrida over and against Agamben with whom Derrida had a somewhat tortuous relationship. Derrida wasn’t particularly impressed by Agamben’s work. Agamben agrees with Derrida, though,
that our religious heritage still works in our present governmental system: administrations serve, in one way or other to glorify the power structures at work within our societies. Derrida disagrees with Agamben if the way out of this complex legacy would be to dream up a "nostal[gia] for a pure profanation that [...] preceded the emergence of religion" (145). Here Newheiser’s approach to Dionysius and Derrida pays off, for both these thinkers do not want such a 'pure' profanation, desacralization or secularization:

Much as Dionysius subjects the things he says are sacred to desacralizing critique, Derrida holds particular concepts and practices (such as democracy) as extraordinarily significant, while insisting that they must remain subject to revision. Where Agamben pits profanation against the sacred, Derrida and Dionysius show that it is possible to draw upon symbols that possess special significance, at the same time, maintaining, a critical practice that loosens their authority. (145)

We should consider these symbols more closely, for their status remain somewhat undetermined in Newheiser’s account. These symbols might be an incarnatory reflex, a psychoanalytical fetish or just a point of contact between the empirical and the transcendental. Yet Newheiser’s example of these symbols, and his interpretation of them, is of interest. First, however, we should note that these symbols follow from Newheiser’s account of Dionysian desacralization: although one can 'desacralize' everyone and everything, one cannot desacralize all the time: there is a 'remainder' that, for the time being, will be considered sacred. These things are multiple—and Newheiser already got in trouble enough for the mention of sharing a ‘piece of apple pie’ (151).

Desacralization seeks a difficult balance between the provisional character of all things sacred and the need to revere these sacred things. We should first note that Newheiser finds such a practice of desacralization both in Dionysius and Derrida. “Dionysius articulate a sacramental theology that desacralizes everything including Christian worship” (107) and Derrida seems to come up with a similar thought when he follows Levinas’ distinction between the sacred and the holy (147).

If something sacred remains, Newheiser tends to use it the sense of what is 'separated', 'at a distance' from the ordinary. Similarly, “Dionysius desacralizes the sacred, affirming some things as sacred while submitting them to critique” (134). Derrida, we have seen, in similar fashion, values certain things as 'extraordinarily significant'. Newheiser mentions several examples of such symbols—the flag, the nation, democracy, and so on—all the while claiming that the affirmation of some things as sacred need not mean one cannot “[resist]its appropriation as a tool of legitimation” (143). One needs to understand why Newheiser stresses the
importance of such symbols: they sustain “commitments [that] constitute a faith that exceeds the calculation of cause and effect [and] transcend the pursuit of individual interests” (150 and 149) and particular policy goals. Newheiser is quite clear about how such sustaining takes place. Especially “in moments of national crisis” (149)

Symbols of common identity give a group something to argue over, and they situate disagreement within a shared enterprise. The sacred brings bodies together within rites of communal identity: singing a hymn or the national anthem, eating the Eucharist host […], processing on Palm Sunday or in a Pride parade (151)

All of a sudden, in effect, in the midst of a movement of desacralization no less, a lot of things are sacred! Yet, even if Newheiser might have spent more time on which things exactly can become sacred (and which things not), our question lies elsewhere. For, even though, one can agree that these sacred things have a certain empowerment to them and are “an indispensable resources for a politics in pursuit of justice” (151), questions abound, once more, when it comes to the object and aim of such a “performative power that opens political possibilities” (ibid.). Newheiser, for instance, writes that one needs perseverance and “[insist] upon a justice to come while pursing particular improvements on the level of law” (151).

In an earlier quote, we already pointed to the presence of metaphors of 'revision', 'development' and 'improvements' in Newheiser's book. It is in effect surprising how often such a logic surfaces. A few examples: political action “pursues imperfect improvement” (16); Derrida “opens a space for unpredictable improvement by insisting that every judgment is uncertain” (19); critique seeks “continual improvement” (38) and therefore entails a sort of affirmation; apophasis “opens [the self] to unforeseeable development” (47); “affirmations in tension with a negativity […] opens future development” (82) and so on.

The question now is to where exactly all this development and all these revisions lead? Given the occurrence of what can surmise is a lingering dialectic between determinate hopes and indeterminate future and given the occurrence of all too certain object of hope, one might legitimately wonder whether Newheiser has emancipated himself enough from seeing the ‘democracy to come’ some sort of regulative ideal to which we are heading but will never reach. Similar questions arise when one considers Dionysius peculiar account of Christian practice and its eschatology of a union with the divine ‘to come’. The difference between Derrida (and Heidegger’s account of St. Paul) and Dionysius is that the former’s account of the future remains to come, whereas Dionysius, despite all evidence to the contrary, is certain that the ‘to come’ he is describing, the union with God, will in effect come.
Dionysius knows both what to hope for and what will come (although an element of surprise might be present). All of a sudden, the eschatology of Dionysius appears as an ‘ideal’ just waiting to be realized (which, for ordinary believers, will easily be turned into a goal ‘to be reached’) whereas Derrida’s promise in no way delivers a blueprint or example of what is to come.

There is, however, reason to believe to Newheiser reads Derrida exactly in such a fashion when one perceive a dialectic between ‘determinate’ hope and ‘indeterminate’ ideas continually improving. Even the object cannot be reached (which remains to be seen when it comes to the ‘union with God’) in precisely the preconceived fashion, it will become an ideal nonetheless and something to which all affirmations and all actions are heading and, in this way, an ideal (as a determinate object), as Caputo has it, constrains the open-endedness of the promise of a democracy to come.¹

Yet even if Newheiser has not always stuck to the logic of the conundrum he at times advance and succumbed to all too determinate objects of hope, it is to be noted that “inhabiting the middle space” these conundrums, between determinate objects and indeterminate hopes, prescribe is a difficult balance indeed: why indeed “develop a theological system that is rationally ordered [while] claim[ing] that the divine shatters the structure of reason” (81-2)? Why in effect “articulate a sacramental theology that desacralizes everything” including the logic of the sacraments (107)? Why improve the democracies around us if the democracy to come is never to be realized in the first place?

Perhaps what we can gather from Newheiser’s fine book is that if such a conundrum would be permanently realized in the context of an unfolding life and not constantly ‘inclined towards one side or the other’ (Ignatius of Loyola), this would be nothing short of miraculous—as it happens the topic of Newheiser’s new book. The promise is made, and the hopes are up.