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A Hope that is Concrete but Uncertain

A Response by David Newheiser

David Newheiser
Institut for Religion and Critical Inquiry
Australian Catholic University
dnewheiser@gmail.com

Because there is a lot of myself in this book, I am grateful to receive such thoughtful responses from Victor Emma-Adamah, Joeri Schrijvers, and Calvin Ullrich. Their reflections help me to see what's in the book in a new way, and the questions they pose allow me to find a new angle on issues I have been thinking about for some time. I am conscious that this brief response will not do justice to their rich reflections, but I am glad for the chance to think further about questions that we share in common.

One of the main aims of my book is to show that religious and irreligious communities share more in common than it might seem. Where some commentators claim that religion and the secular are mutually exclusive, I argue that Jacques Derrida and Dionysius the Areopagite share a hope that is identical in kind (though not in content). Although Derrida is an atheist (of a sort) while Dionysius is a Christian monk, I show that both authors affirm determinate hopes that they see as uncertain. (In this respect, I differ from earlier interpreters of deconstruction and negative theology: in my view, commentators such as John Caputo exaggerate the indeterminacy of Derrida's project and misconstrue Dionysius's negativity.) For this reason, although Derrida and Dionysius hold different commitments, they indicate

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that hope constitutes a point of contact between those who are religious and those who are not.

Each of the respondents takes issue with one of the points outlined in this brief summary, but in each case I think our disagreement hinges in part upon a misunderstanding of what the book is doing. I am grateful for the chance to clarify what I intended to argue in order to identify where the respondents and I are closer than they think – and where genuine disagreement remains.

Victor Emma-Adamah writes that my book develops “the successful first proposal and invitation to think hope in the secular age as a shared horizon of experience,” but he wonders whether I unfairly stigmatize religious hope by associating it with an unjustified certainty. Although I am grateful for the generosity of Emma-Adamah’s interpretation, I think both the compliment and the criticism are misplaced. He writes that “what Newheiser proposes is an episteme of indeterminacy and uncertainty as the shared, neutral ground of the secular, and hope as placed solidly on this foundation.” This is not exactly what I intended to propose. I see my project as more Foucauldian than phenomenological: rather than describing a shared horizon of experience, I aim to show that the regime of the secular is contingent and therefore fungible. On my account, secularity is specific to particular times and places; thus, although it has significant effects in some contexts, this experience is neither neutral nor universally shared. This does not mean that we can simply return to a pre-secular past, as some theologians imply, but I think the secular is open to possibilities (such as messianic hope) that it could seem to exclude.

My account of religious hope is contextually specific in just the same way. Emma-Adamah writes that I set secular hope against Christian hope; in his reading, my appeal to secular uncertainty as a shared horizon entails that religious hope is illegitimate. As he observes, I direct my account of hope against theologians who claim that Christian hope constitutes a form of certainty grounded in divine promise. However, I do not identify this view with Christian hope (let alone religious hope) as such. On the contrary, I argue that a specific theological tradition (i.e. negative theology) offers an alternative theology of hope, one that acknowledges its uncertainty. In this way, I aim to unsettle the widespread assumption that religion exclude critique by demonstrating that some forms of religious hope incorporate a rigorous negativity. Much as I see secularity as open to the sacred, I think Christian thought models a hope that is suited to a secular age.

Rather than pitting a supposedly neutral secularity against a theology that is necessarily dogmatic, my book argues that an atheist like Derrida and a Christian like Dionysius share an uncertain hope. For this reason, I am deeply sympathetic with Emma-Adamah’s concluding reflections on hope and the impossible. Although he presents these comments as a corrective to my account, I agree that the impossible is key to Christian hope. As I argue in the book, the view that the

impossible is paradigmatic of hope is explicit in Derrida's work, and it is implicit in Dionysius. This does not mean that my account of hope is universal, but it suggests (more modestly) that particular traditions are linked by unexpected points of connection.

Where Emma-Adamah argues that I exaggerate the dogmatism of Christian hope, Joeri Schrijvers claims that I underestimate it. He writes, "Certain Christian believers 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." Schrijvers appears to share the widespread worry that religion is necessarily dogmatic. Although I think this anxiety is understandable, one of the central aims of my book is to show that it is unnecessary. I think Schrijvers is right that Christians fill out their hopes with a particular content, but this does not entail that they will remain stuck in a rigid system of beliefs. In my understanding, hope allows for an affirmation that is concrete and contentful while remaining open to revision.

My argument hinges upon the difference between affirming particular hopes and asserting that those hopes are certain to be realized, but Schrijvers blurs this distinction. He points to the fact that Dionysius describes a particular vision of the future as evidence that he claims to possess certain knowledge of the future. In my reading, however, Dionysius articulates particular hopes for the future while acknowledging that they are uncertain. It is because hope holds together determinate affirmations and a self-critical negativity that (unlike other interpreters) I see it as central to the Dionysian corpus. Dionysius famously insists that union with God requires radical dispossession, including the negation of theological speech. This does not reduce theology to simple silence; instead, Dionysius argues that theology should proliferate unpredictably, making use of every name to address an unknowable God. I argue that this apparent paradox functions as an ethical discipline that resists the sort of false assurance that worries Schrijvers. Because Dionysius's vision of future union with God is situated within this rigorous negativity, it exemplifies a hopeful affirmation (without assurance).

Schrijvers claims that Derrida rejects the particularity of Dionysius's vision of the future, but I read both authors differently. Schrijvers writes, "The difference between Derrida 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." Against this reading, I argue in the book that Dionysius and Derrida both affirm hopes that are determinate and uncertain. As I have explained, I think there is a sense in which Dionysius knows what to hope for (insofar as he holds particular hopes), but that does not mean that he knows what will come. On the contrary, Dionysius associates the divine with a futurity that is

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strictly unforeseeable. Rather than claiming that his hope is certain to be realized, Dionysius insists that Christians must abandon every potential source of certainty. By the same token, much as Dionysius fills out his hope for union with God with imagery drawn from Christian scripture, Derrida describes his hope for democracy to come in terms drawn from a tradition of European political thought that runs through Kant and Marx. Both authors underscore that the object of their hope eludes their own writings, but neither claims that we must cease to speak of it. Instead, they both affirm determinate hopes that are kept in motion by a discipline of hope that acknowledges its uncertainty.

My argument hinges on the view that indeterminacy and uncertainty are not identical, but Schrijvers elides this distinction. He writes, “If hope has an object after all, it seems not that uncertain.” This claim entails that any hope that has a determinate object is also certain, but I disagree. In my view, particular hopes are always concrete, but the discipline of hope functions as a reminder that every hope is uncertain. Because uncertainty and indeterminacy can be separated, it is possible to affirm particular objects of hope while acknowledging that they may not be realized. These hopes are determinate (in the sense that they are directed toward a particular object), but they remain uncertain.

Schrijvers concludes by posing a profound question: “Why in effect ‘articulate a sacramental theology that desacralizes everything’ including the logic of the sacraments? Why improve the democracies around us if the democracy to come is never to be realized in the first place?” The difficulty Schrijvers identifies is a central preoccupation of my book. As I argue, Derrida demonstrates that the impossibility of fulfillment does not mean that we must retreat into a vague indeterminacy. Instead, he says that we must pursue justice in the situations in which we find ourselves while remembering that there is always more to be done. Dionysius’s idiom is different, but he says in similar fashion that Christians should pursue the divine while acknowledging that God is never in their grasp. To press on in this way, with no guarantee of success, is certainly difficult. However, both Dionysius and Derrida indicate that people possess the capacity to endure uncertainty through a resolute hope. In this way, they point to a negative political theology that pursues justice as best it can while acknowledging that there is always more to be done.

Calvin Ullrich takes issue with my reading of John Caputo. In my reading, Caputo claims that Dionysian negative theology is opposed to Derrida’s “religion without religion,” and he does so because (like Schrijvers) he assumes that Dionysian hope is dogmatic while Derrida’s is indeterminate. For the reasons I have described, I think this is a mistake, but Ullrich argues that Caputo is more hospitable to determinate traditions than I allow. Ullrich acknowledges that Caputo’s *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* may contain some rhetorical slippages that confirm my

argument, but he thinks Caputo's later work is close to my own negative political theology.

As Ullrich observes, my discussion of Caputo focuses on *Prayers and Tears* (which is Caputo's most influential work) and on his account of deconstruction and negative theology (which is what my book is about). Because Caputo's reading of Derrida's relation to negative theology has been hugely influential, I argue at length that his reading is wrong. I think my argument is well-substantiated by Derrida's published work and by unpublished archival materials; in my view, this evidence shows that Caputo's confusion concerning negative theology relates to a basic misunderstanding of Derrida's project. For this reason, I think my response to Caputo is fair. However, I think Ullrich is right that it is incomplete.

Prayers and Tears is a very big book: around 200,000 words. Because Caputo's writing often sacrifices consistency in service of a charming exuberance, I assume that there are passages in the book that support Ullrich's reading. When I first began to read Derrida at the tender age of twenty, I found Caputo's work – and his personal generosity – to be enormously helpful. However, as my reading of Derrida developed, I came to find other commentators more compelling. I think Amy Hollywood is a more penetrating reader of Christian thought, Chantal Mouffe is a more careful interpreter of Derrida, and Ted Smith is a more creative commentator on political theology. This is the reason I have not read everything Caputo has written since *Prayers and Tears*. However, I didn't intend to characterize the entirety of Caputo's oeuvre. (For that, we have Ullrich's own book to look forward to!) Instead, I was simply trying to correct a common mistake that *Prayers and Tears* made into an unquestioned consensus.

Apart from this minor difference concerning the interpretation of Caputo's early work, Ullrich and I are in broad agreement – both about what my book is trying to do and about the broader issues at stake. I greatly admire the critical care with which he and the other respondents have engaged my work. Precisely because we do not agree about everything, it is a gift to have their help in thinking through things that I care deeply about. There are many ways in which the world of 2020 seems desperately grim, but conversations of this kind help me hold out hope for a future in which philosophical community remains potentially transformative.