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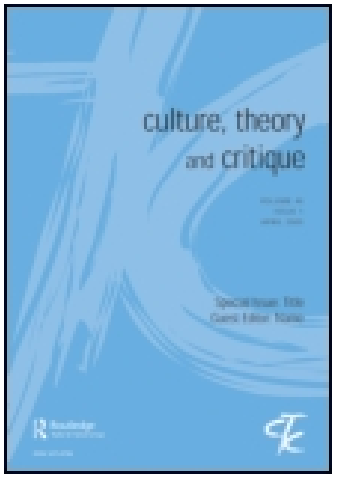

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Seeking Forgiveness (Jacques Derrida)

Peter Banki

Abstract *This paper offers a reading of Jacques Derrida's concept of forgiveness, in relation to what he and Jean-Luc Nancy call 'the deconstruction of Christianity'. Against a certain powerful tradition of the Enlightenment, which extends from Voltaire to Heidegger (including Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche), Derrida and Nancy argue that it is not possible today to speak from a position that is purely and simply disenchanted from what is called religion, and in particular, from an experience of faith. This audacious claim does not, despite appearances, mean the abandonment of all critical and deconstructive vigilance with regard to the metaphysical heritage of Christianity (and/or monotheism in general) but rather, I would argue, a deeper, more responsible way of addressing it.*

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> I have never found a concept that was grasped in a word. Should that be surprising? Has there ever been a concept that was really nameable? I mean nameable with a single name or a single word? The concept always demands sentences, discourses, work, and process: in a word, text … I sometimes feel I have never done anything, ever, other than to try to be coherent in this regard. (Derrida 2005: 83)

Many recent studies have focused on the contemporary proliferation around the world of requests and offers of apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Eliza Barkan, notably, has spoken of an 'age of apology', referring to the impressive number of heads of state, leaders of the ecclesiastical hierarchies and even multi-national companies, who over the last 25 years have been asked to – and in some cases have made – public confessions, offers of apology and requests for forgiveness (see Barkan 2000; Barkan and Karn 2006). It is to the detriment of many of these studies that they have not been informed by a careful reading of the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida, who, during the last ten years of his life, elaborated a novel concept of forgiveness which took as its departure point a reading of this phenomenon quite different from that of anyone else (see Celemajor 2009; Gibney 2008; Schaap 2005).

Derrida spoke of a contemporary 'worldwidization of forgiveness' (*mondialisation du pardon*), whose historical novelty he traced back to the institution of the juridical concept of 'crimes against humanity'. His analysis focussed on the global proliferation of *scenes* of apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness

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(transmitted via television and the internet). Unlike Barkan and others, Derrida did not presume that apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness is something that is actually happening in the world simply because there is this proliferation of scenes. Indeed, he argued almost the opposite: 'the very dimensions of forgiveness tend to be effaced in the course of this worldwidization, and with it all measure and conceptual limitation' (Derrida 1999a).

The worldwidisation of forgiveness as a symptom of the deconstruction of Christianity

Derrida's formulation 'worldwidization of forgiveness' can and, I would suggest, must be read at least in three different ways. In the first instance, it draws attention to the fact that a certain language and scenography of apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness, which has its roots in an *Abrahamic*[1] religious heritage, have today become a universal idiom, imposing itself on radically different cultures, including those which do not have European or 'biblical' origins. The stakes implied in such an internationalisation are at once legal, political, economic, and diplomatic:

> I am thinking of those scenes where a Japanese Prime Minister 'asked forgiveness' of the Koreans and the Chinese for past violence. He presented 'heartfelt apologies' in his own name. ... Recently there have been real negotiations, this time official and serious between the Japanese and the South Korean governments on this subject. There will be reparations and a political reorientation. These negotiations, as is almost always the case, aimed at producing a reconciliation (national or international) favourable to a normalisation. (Derrida 2001a: 31)[2]

When Derrida speaks of 'a reconciliation favourable to a normalization', this suggests that the formulation 'worldwidization of forgiveness' should also be heard in a second, ironic sense, giving voice to the suspicion, or rather, the observation that the language and scenography of apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness function today as an ethico-political currency that can be bought and sold in a globalised market place. For such an economy to function effectively, it is useful, perhaps even necessary, that a single idiom be universally accepted, one that may be applied and translated into different contexts, in relation to crimes committed under absolutely

[1] Derrida prefers to use term 'Abrahamic' to designate an idiom of apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness, which is the shared inheritance of the three great monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, it is clear what he is most concerned with is the Jewish and in particular, Christian appropriations of this idiom (Derrida 1995a).

[2] A striking contemporary example of the 'worldwidization of forgiveness' is recent apologies from the Zen community in Japan for complicity with the Japanese military during World War Two – complicity which included giving justification to policies of invasion and colonisation; and in particular, 'spiritual education' to Kamakazi pilots prior to their missions. Significantly, these public apologies, which acknowledge a submerged and largely unknown history, were issued shortly after 11 September 2001 (see Victoria 2006, 2003).

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heterogeneous conditions and for absolutely heterogeneous motives. And yet, with the universal adoption of a single idiom, one can foresee the possibility – even the inevitability – of further injustices.[3]

There is a third way of reading the expression 'worldwidization of forgiveness', which is probably the most important of all, but also the most enigmatic and difficult to approach. Implied in the adoption of an Abrahamic language and scenography as a universal idiom is a worldwide process of Christianisation and/or Latinisation. What Derrida calls the 'worldwidization of forgiveness' is co-extensive with a globalisation of Christianity itself, or more precisely, an understanding of globalisation (*mondialisation*) as worldwide Christianisation.[4] However, unlike the missionary efforts of the past, this universal or tendentially universal 'convulsion-conversion-confession' does not conform to the implementation of a program or dogma. It resembles rather a *dissemination*, which, in order to be operative, no longer needs the Christian church or even, at the limit, the belief in God (Derrida 1986: 311–21). The globalisation/worldwidisation of Christianity corresponds, for Derrida (as it also does for Jean-Luc Nancy), to the deconstruction and self-deconstruction of Christianity.

> The 'worldwidization' of forgiveness resembles an immense scene of confession in progress, thus a virtually Christian convulsion-conversion-confession, a process of Christianisation which has no more need of the Christian church …. I propose to nick name 'globalatinisation' to take into account the effect of Roman Christianity which today over-determines all language of law, politics and even the interpretation of what is called the 'the return of the religious'. No alleged disenchantment, no secularisation comes to interrupt it. On the contrary. (Derrida 1999a: 21)

Leaving aside the question of the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of the juridical concept of Crimes against Humanity, which Derrida contends is the main charge as well as the horizon of this worldwide proliferation of self-accusation, repenting and asking for forgiveness, I will restrict myself to elaborating two fundamental – and radical – consequences of the thesis of globalisation as worldwide Christianisation.

Firstly with regard to worldwide Christianisation, whether or not one shares a religious viewpoint or confession is of no importance. Christianisation

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[3] Consider, for example, critical readings of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (see Grunebaum 2002; Mamdani 2001).

[4] Derrida resists translating '*mondialisation*' as globalisation, because of the particular resonances of 'world' (*mundus*) rather than globe, cosmos or universe, even though '*mondialisation*' is *also* the French translation of globalisation. The significance of the reference to world or *mundus* in the term *mondialisation* is that it keeps the memory of a Christianisation of the Greek: 'Le monde, ce n'est ni l'univers, ni le cosmos. Même quand saint Paul a parlé de *cosmos* pour designer le monde Chrétien, il affectait le mot de *cosmos* d'une nouvelle signification qui signifiant l'ordre de créatures, de la fraternité des hommes comme prochain, etc. . .quand on dit mondialisation il faut se rappeler cette mémoire qui est à la fois théologique et philosophique et le mot de globalisation perd la référence à cette mémoire-là' (Derrida 2001b: 67–8; Nancy 2002: 21; 'Philosophie et mondialisation' 2007: 21).

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takes place and is operative without it. In fact, for both Derrida and Nancy, it is precisely where Christianity appears today to be irrelevant and no longer recognisable that Christianisation is most effective and powerful, for example, in the secular institution of international law. In the epoch of globalisation there is no simple outside of Christianity.[5]

Secondly, what Christianity is or will be remains, however, open – yet to be decided. If worldwide Christianisation corresponds to the (self)-deconstruction of Christianity, then this implies that what Christianity will become is unpredictable. It cannot, in a secular fashion, be reduced to a personal confession or a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) (see Heidegger 1977). Jean-Luc Nancy goes so far as to argue that atheism is realised Christianity:

> Christian assurance can only take place at the cost of a category completely opposed to that of religious belief: the category of 'faith', which is fidelity to an absence and the certainty of this fidelity in the absence of any assurance. In this sense, the atheist who firmly refuses any redemptive or consoling assurance is strangely and paradoxically closer to faith than the believer. This means that atheism which in future will determine the Western structure, which is inherent in its mode of knowing and existing, is realized Christianity. (Nancy 2005: 56, 207f; translation mine)[6]

Derrida suggests that Christianity is the most plastic, the most open religion, the one best prepared for unpredictable transformations, for the event, for what is coming:

> If the deconstruction of Christianity develops we won't be able to recognize the roots of Christianity any more, and yet nonetheless, we will still be able to say that this is Christianity …. (S)omething is happening to Christianity, an unpredictable earthquake, and that's not necessarily negative. (Nancy 2005: 53; translation mine)[7]

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[5] 'What matters is not the Christian marks bourn by the West that are so visible and numerous, and of which the Cross is like an abbreviation. On the contrary, what matters is that Christianity is present – and perhaps above all – where it is not possible to recognize it … for example a certain concept of "human rights" as well as a determination of the relationship between politics and religion come directly from Christianity'. (Nancy 2005: 53; translation mine)

[6] The thesis of atheism as realised Christianity is related to the formulation of Marcel Gauchet adopted by Nancy that 'Christianity is the religion of religion's exit'. On the non-contradiction between atheism and faith (see Caputo et al. 2005: 36–8).

[7] In the same interview, Derrida makes the point that the word 'deconstruction' is more closely related to Christianity than to Judaism or Islam, inasmuch as it refers to Heidegger's *Destruktion* and to Luther's *destruuntur* : 'But the fact that it is literally linked to Christianity does not mean that Christianity is more deconstructive than other religions'. Nancy continues: 'la déconstruction…est elle-même chrétienne. Elle est chrétienne parce que le christianisme est, d'origine, déconstructeur, parce qu'il se rapporte d'emblée à sa propre origine comme à un jeu, à un intervalle, un battement, une ouverture dans l'origine' (2005: 217).

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If Christianity is in deconstruction, then it is not identical to itself. It is not stabilised and grounded an identifiable origin or essence. As a symptom of the deconstruction of Christianity, the 'worldwidization of forgiveness' undermines any distinction between the theological and the political, as well as the opposition between reason and 'religion' (or thought or science and 'religion'). It also is against a certain powerful tradition of the Enlightenment, which extends from Voltaire to Heidegger (including Marx, Freud and Nietzsche), Derrida and Nancy argue that it is not possible today to speak from a position that is purely and simply disenchanted from what is called religion, and in particular, from an experience of faith. This audacious claim does not, despite appearances, mean the abandonment of all critical and deconstructive vigilance with regard to the metaphysical heritage of Christianity (and/or monotheism in general) but rather, I would argue, a deeper, more responsible way of addressing it.[8] Interpreting religion simply as ideology (Marx), illusion (Freud), error (Nietzsche) or, more radically, as having no place in thought as such (Heidegger: '*Das Glauben hat im Denken keinen Platz*'[9]) does not permit to account for the ways in which religion (in particular, Christianity) transforms itself in tandem with the development of secularisation, reason and techno-science, and forms ever new alliances with it. Consider what de Vries calls 'the irreducibility of the theologico-political' in examples of liberation theology, existential theology, Christian Science, even Christian Zionism (2002: 353). Moreover – and this is perhaps the most important point – anti-religious vigilance in the filiation of a certain tradition of the Enlightenment, by virtue of its position of presumed disenchantment and outsider status, is at best limited in its chances of affecting how the great traditions of religious thought today are read and, consequently, the acts and decisions these traditions are presumed to authorise. Parting with the relative security of this outsider position (however, powerful and necessary the insights that have come from it) may today be a political imperative.

> Now if the type of deconstruction that I try to do remains let's say Abrahamic—Jewish, Christian, Islamic—that would imply that it is part of this tradition, and also that it affects this tradition in an unpredictable way. (Caputo et al. 2005: 33)
>
> This year the seminar consists in analysing in what way the Christian schemas are prevailing in the world. Beyond the Christian cultures,

[8] The designation 'metaphysical' is understood here with reference to Heidegger's determination of the history of Western thought as the forgetting of the difference between being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seinende*). This forgetting speaks out, for example, in the understanding of God as an existing or absolute being which is present as an essence or substance (*ousia*). Indeed it speaks out in any interpretation of being which is grounded and guaranteed by a presence (Idea, *ens summum*, Subject, Will). The term 'metaphysical' should also be related to Derrida's re-reading of Heidegger's ontological difference in terms of the phonocentrism, logocentrism, phallocentrism and finally, carnophallogocentrism of the history of Western thought (Cadava et al. 1991; Derrida 1967). For the ontological difference, see Heidegger 1978; Nancy 2005: 16.

[9] 'Belief or faith has no place in thought' (Derrida 1998). See also the exclusion of theology from philosophy as fundamental ontology (Heidegger 1978).

> even in Japan and India, and so on. In the culture in which Christianity is present, and sometimes dominant, I try to understand what's going on. My language is marked by a number of Christian seals. It is sealed. Christian means also Jewish. There is a certain relation to Judaism and Islam, what I call Abrahamic traditions. My discourse is sealed by this complex Abrahamic tradition. My friend, Jean-Luc Nancy, is preparing a book entitled *The Deconstruction of Christianity*, and I know for having read some pages of the short text he has published on this subject that he also thinks that in fact we cannot escape what we call Christianity. It is in the name of Christianity that we get rid of Christianity. The death of God, for example—the death of God is a Christian theme. Nothing is more Christian than that. So perhaps what's going on today in the world under the name of what I call 'mondia-latinization,' world-wide latinization, world-wide Christianization if you will, is a sort of self-deconstruction of Christianity. (Fathy 1999)

The above citations further help to read what Derrida and Nancy understand as the thesis of the inescapability of Christianity, and how this is related to deconstruction and self-deconstruction. Just as Derrida had argued in the late sixties that the end of metaphysics is a metaphysical category, in the late nineties he insists that nothing is more Christian than the death of God. Like the metaphysics of presence, or rather, *as* the metaphysics of presence, Christianity is 'inescapable' in the sense that simply refuting it, or claiming to overcome it, does not prevent it from returning in new ways. Therefore, getting rid of what is called Christianity, if this remains the goal, must be approached otherwise. It is impossible to leap out, as it were, with both feet. And yet, on the other hand, if nothing is more Christian than the death of God, then this also means that the 'Word' (what in the Bible is called the 'Word' or *Logos*) can function and remain legible in God's absence. In other words, without necessarily referring to a deciding or decidable instance, an origin or final addressee, that would guarantee and fix (its) meaning, (its) truth, indeed (its) very existence. Christianity is inescapable, not because it is 'the only true religion', but inasmuch as it deconstructs itself into universally or almost universally employed schemas, which mark and seal the language(s) we speak. Consider emblematically the word 'religion' itself, whose provenance is the Latin *religio*, which may remain untranslatable.[10]

[10] Following Benveniste, Derrida recalls that, within the Latin sphere, the origin of *religio* has been the subject of two competing but nonetheless commensurate readings: *relegere* (supported by Cicero): 'bringing together in order to return and begin again'; and *religare* (Lactantius and Tertullian): 'linking religion to the *link*, precisely, to obligation, ligament, and hence to obligation, to debt, etc'. Whatever side one takes in this debate, it is to the ellipse of these double Latin foci that the entire modern (geo-theologico-political) problematic of the 'return of the religious' refers. Whoever would not acknowledge either the legitimacy of this double foci or the Christian prevalence that has imposed itself globally within the said Latinity would have to refuse the very premises of such a debate. And with them, any attempt to *think* a situation in which, as in times past, there will perhaps no longer exist, just as once it did not yet exist, any common Indo-European term for 'religion' (Derrida 2002a: 36–8).

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One can say that the motif of the deconstruction of Christianity (and/or the Abrahamic monotheistic tradition) is both the same and also something quite different from that of the deconstruction of the 'Greek' phonocentric philosophical tradition, from Plato to Husserl, Rousseau, to Austin, and beyond. One could analyse the relation between the two as a relation of insistence (see Hélène 2006). Like the opposition between speech and writing, the oppositions between theism and atheism (and between the sacred and the secular) are so deeply entrenched in Western ('worldwide') thought and practice that they cannot be displaced in one go. Nor should such displacement be regarded simply as an accomplishable task.

Resisting Christianity from within: Giving measure and conceptual limitation to forgiveness

> Ontotheology encrypts faith and destines it to the condition of a sort of Spanish Marrano who would have lost—in truth dispersed, multiplied—everything up to and including the memory of his unique secret. Emblem of a still life: an opened pomegranate, one Passover/Easter evening (*un soir de Pâques*), on a tray. (Derrida 1998: 66)[11]

> In my family and among the Algerian Jews, one scarcely ever said 'circumcision,' but 'baptism,' not Bar Mitzvah, but 'communion'. (Derrida 1999b: 72)

If it were necessary to distinguish between Nancy and Derrida's readings of the deconstruction of Christianity, one would have to make reference to Derrida's avowed identification with the figure of the Marrano, which at one point he also suggests is a clandestine structure of identity in general (Fathy 1999). The terms *Marrano*, and the slightly less pejorative *converso*, were applied in Spain and Portugal from the end of the fourteenth century to the descendants of baptised Jews, who in many cases continued to observe Jewish laws and customs in secret, in order to avoid further persecution. In Spanish *Marrano* means 'pig', it was employed by Christians as an expression of contempt and loathing, which later Jewry trans-valuated to wear as a badge of honour – in this regard analogous perhaps to the labels 'dyke' or 'queer' today.

The interest of the Marrano tradition, which one would hesitate to locate simply within Judaism, is that it marks a clandestine resistance to Christianity from within Christianity. As noted above in the citation from 'Circumfession', within Derrida's family and among the Algerian Jews, the language of the Christian sacraments was employed as a code, a *shibboleth*. The same language used to name the sacred rites of the dominant Christian (colonialist) culture was also used to designate other rites, testifying presumably to another

[11]The word *Pâques* in French can mean both Passover and Ester (Weber 2005: 113–4).

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faith.[12] Interpreting this (double) gesture would call for a long analysis, which I will not undertake here. I will simply suggest, as an introduction to what follows, that the word as well as the concept Derrida calls 'forgiveness' may be usefully read with reference to this Marrano tradition. Unlike in other places where he invents new names to draw attention to the newness of his concepts (*differance*, *destinerrance*, *circumfession*, *grammatology, iterability*, etc), his employment of the term 'forgiveness' marks a more clandestine practise, comparable perhaps to the use Baruch (Benedictus) Spinoza made of the term 'God' in his system (Yovel 1989). Even though Derrida situates his concept within a Judeo-Christian or 'Abrahamic' tradition of thought about forgiveness, what he calls forgiveness considers something quite other than what has been previously understood by this term. For Derrida, forgiveness is not 'closure', 'reconciliation', 'absolution', or even a therapy of mourning. Even though it is an event, nowhere does he designate forgiveness as the grandeur of a 'new beginning', as does Hanna Arendt (1999: 217).[13] Forgiveness is neither an end nor a new beginning. Concretely, it may be closer to complicit, demented laughter (*le rire dément*).[14] Or otherwise, it is an elementary condition of all forms of communication. Forgiveness is implied in listening, reading, speaking, and writing:

> We are asking forgiveness by reading. Somewhere I wrote that as soon as I write, I am asking for forgiveness, without of course knowing what will happen. But forgiveness is implied in the very first speech act. I cannot perform what I would like to perform. That is why things happen. (Derrida 2001c: 56)

To lend support to my reading, one can refer to at least one other place in Derrida's oeuvre where he refers to Marranism as a deconstructive practice. Towards the end of 'Marx and Sons', Derrida offers to share the experience of the universal Marrano with Tony Negri, a Marxist autonomist who calls for 'a post-deconstructive ontology'. Rather than attack Negri for this apparently regressive metaphysical manoeuvre, Derrida suggests to him the possibility of using the word 'ontology' to mean something other than what it means normally in the tradition of Western philosophy:

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[12] As Yirmiyahu Yovel has noted in his study of Marranism, Judaism was guarded only in a 'fragmentary and distorted manner'. Information about it was often gleaned from 'polemical works against it, the Latin Vulgate and other Christian sources'. The residual Judaism of Marranism was, according to Yovel, a hybrid mixture of religions, 'fraught with Christian symbols and categories', making it appear both Christian and Jewish, and neither (Yovel 1989: 15–39; see also Yovel 2008).

[13] For Arendt, forgiveness is a mode of action, which corresponds to a new beginning: "*Handeln als Neuanfangen entspricht der Geburt des Jemand, es realisiert in jedem Einzelnen die Tatsache des Geborenseins*' (Arendt 1999: 217).

[14] See Derrida's interpretations of a Jewish Joke recounted by Theodor Reik (Derrida 1997a: 131–65; Derrida 2002: 397–8). In his memoirs, the Nazi hunter and Holocaust survivor, Simon Wiesenthal, makes the observation that 'people who have once laughed together do not want to kill one another anymore' (1988: 424).

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> In philosophical company we could act as if we were still speaking the language of metaphysics or ontology, knowing full well, between us that this was not at all so. (Derrida 1999c: 262)

Such a practise pretends to speak the language of theology and metaphysics, but in so doing speaks another language entirely. It hides an alterity as well as protects it, but also at the risk of losing it or rendering it unrecognisable.

Unlike Heidegger, who clearly also recognised the *mondialatinisation*, Derrida does not attempt to resist its domination by searching for another idiom that would be more proper. Through worldwidisation, the Abrahamic heritage has become ineluctable. Derrida re-thinks the value of forgiveness – and the name 'forgiveness' – through a novel re-reading of the Abrahamic heritage itself. Not simply by returning to a Hebrew thought of forgiveness, of which he is also aware, but, as we shall see, by re-reading the Latin idiom of the gift in its alliance with forgiveness (the verbal link of 'don' and 'pardon').

Returning to the discussion above concerning the 'globalisation of forgiveness', one can note that if an Abrahamic language and theatricalisation of apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness have today become a universal idiom, it would *seem* that one concept or understanding of forgiveness has effectively triumphed, to become the universal concept that may be functionally applied and translated into different contexts, in relation to crimes that have been committed under absolutely heterogeneous conditions and for absolutely heterogeneous motives.

One can say that Derrida's position on this question is subtle. If there is today a universal concept of forgiveness employed internationally (in conjunction with a language and scenography of apology, reconciliation, and so on), it is a concept whose contours have yet to be rigorously defined, and moreover, whose foundations are obscure. The apparent transparency and translatability of a particular idiom *does not*, despite appearances, signify the existence of a rigorous and coherent concept – or understanding – of what is taking place when one speaks of forgiveness, apology, or reconciliation. One could even suggest the opposite, thinking, for example, of what Heidegger says about the use of the word 'being' (*seiend*) at the very beginning of *Being and Time*, which is to say that an apparent clarity and self-evidence conceals a deeper disquiet (*Unruhe*).[15]

It is Derrida's interest to take such disquiet as seriously as possible – disquiet not only about the concept of forgiveness, but also the immense tasks (or abysses) to which the scenography or idioms of 'forgiveness', 'apology', and 'reconciliation' today bear witness. The point of such an inquiry is not to remove ambiguity in order to delineate, for example, a clearer concept that will work better. *The apparent good functioning today of the idioms of 'apology', 'reconciliation', and 'forgiveness' is, for Derrida, symptomatic* – as indeed is the

[15] Heidegger's epigram for *Being and Time* from Plato's Sophist: 'For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression "*being*" (*wenn ihr den Ausdruck, seiend' gebraucht*). We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed (*in Verlegenheit gekommen*)' (1978: 19f).

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fact that these three 'concepts' often appear together.[16] If anything, the inquiry should have the consequence of *slowing down* the globalisation or worldwidisation of forgiveness by making the quasi-universal employment of certain idioms and conventions more difficult because less self-assured. Against the tendency in this worldwidisation towards the effacement of all measure and conceptual limitation, Derrida indeed will attempt to formulate a rigorous concept of unconditional forgiveness. However, it will be a concept that is internally split; one that, if anything, will accentuate, rather than diminish, contradictions, abysses and impasses.

To what end? While this question should be left open (because one does not know what the effects of such a concept will be), I will argue nonetheless that there is an answer that one cannot avoid choosing. The purpose of such a concept is to make a place for the dream of an unheard of kind of forgiveness, a forgiveness of the unforgivable, a forgiveness for crimes or wrongdoing whose seriousness and gravity is such that they cannot be expiated (through apology and remorse). As forgiveness of the unforgivable, such forgiveness would be as *unjustifiable*, indefensible even, as the crimes or wrongdoing to which it responds. As such, it would necessarily be grounded in a secret, not in the sense that it conceals some hidden or ineffable truth, but rather that it cannot be reduced to the principle of sufficient reason, or the possibility of an adequate explanation in the public, political, juridical, or even ethical domains.[17] It would also be a leap of faith, which would not amount to forgetting, (forgiveness, Derrida insists, is not equivalent to forgetting), but rather to a living, active memory of both the wrong and the guilty person (Derrida 2005: 160–1):

> The impossibility of forgiveness offers itself to thought, in truth, as its sole possibility. Why is forgiveness impossible? Not merely for a thousand psychological reasons, but absolutely impossible? Simply because what there is to forgive must be, and must remain, unforgivable. If forgiveness is possible, if there is forgiveness, it must forgive the unforgivable-such is the logical aporia. But, in spite of appearances, this is not only a cold and formal contradiction or logical dead end. It is a tragedy of compassion and of inter-subjectivity as destiny of the hostage, hôte, and madness of substitution of which we speak of with Levinas and Massignon. If one had to forgive only what is forgivable, even excusable, *venial*, as one says, or insignificant, then one would not forgive. One would excuse, forgive, erase, one would not be granting forgiveness . . .. The forgiveness of the forgivable does not forgive anything: it is not forgiveness. In order to forgive, one must forgive the unforgivable, but the

[16] The term 'symptom' is loosely employed here as referring to a formation, which testifies to an unconscious conflict.

[17] 'The only possible pardon is really the impossible pardon . . . I don't believe the pardon defined in that way rightly belongs in the public, political, juridical, or even ethical field. Which is why its secret is so serious and important an issue' (Derrida 2005: 161, 2008: 121–9).

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> unforgivable that remains (*demeure*) unforgivable, the worst of the worst: the unforgivable that resists any alteration, any historical reconciliation that would change the conditions or the circumstances of the judgement. Whether remorse or repentance, the ulterior purification of the guilty has nothing to do with this. Besides, there is no question of forgiving a guilty one, a subject subject to transformation beyond the fault. Rather, it is a matter of forgiving the fault itself . . . if it remains thus impossible, forgiveness must therefore *do the impossible*; it must undergo the test (*épreuve*) and ordeal of its own impossibility in forgiving the unforgivable. It must therefore undergo the test and ordeal, merge (*se confondre*) with the very test and ordeal of this aporia or paradox: the possibility, if it is possible and if there is such, the possibility *of* the impossible. And the impossible of the possible. (Derrida 2002a: 385–6)

How to read the intransigence of this thought or 'logic' that enjoins one to do what one cannot do, and will not accept anything less? How to '*faire l'impossible*': not only 'to do the impossible', but also 'to make the impossible', as if the impossible itself were each time an invention? Furthermore, how to respond or live – read, write, think – in relation to the authority of this heteronymic injunction, whose power or irony seems to increase by virtue of its contradictory character? Derrida deploys the same paradoxical 'logic' in relation to other unconditional concepts such as invention, testimony, hospitality, the gift, democracy-to-come, and even reading. According to Derrida 'the only possible invention would be the invention of the impossible . . . otherwise, it only makes explicit a program of possibilities with the economy of the same' (1989: 60); 'the testimonial act is poetic or it is not a testimonial act: it must invent its language and form itself in an incommensurable performative' (Blanchot and Derrida 2000: 83); 'I cannot read what I can read. Only that which is illegible can be read'.[18] While these unconditional concepts should not be seen as equivalent to forgiveness, they must by virtue of the paradoxical 'logic' they share be in some way related to each other (Derrida 2005: 89).

If deconstruction is both a thinking of the impossible *and* the unconditional injunction to *do* and/or *make* the impossible, then it necessarily implies both a thought and an experience of forgiveness. Why? Because when faced with the impossible, *one cannot not ask for forgiveness*. The request for forgiveness is an inescapable corollary of the injunction to do and/or make the impossible:

> If I have been multiplying the detours and the contortions since a moment ago, including the place where I humbly ask for forgiveness and commiseration, it is because I am, I am placed; I have placed myself, in an untenable position, faced with an impossible task. Forgiveness and pity: mercy. (Derrida 2005: 82)

[18] J. Derrida Lecture given at Columbia University, October 2002.

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One can notice that in the citation above the rhythm of articulation slows down and falters. This faltering step ('it is because I am, I am placed, I have placed myself, in an untenable position …') testifies that the 'I' is at a limit of its capacities. Even if the demand to do the impossible enjoins a request for forgiveness, forgiveness itself remains out of reach …

Following the argument that Derrida elaborates elsewhere on the gift (see Derrida 1992a), forgiveness – from the moment it appears as forgiveness – necessarily submits to an economy of exchange, and thus to the possibility of inmixing and contamination. Even the most generous, heartfelt, authentic, sublime act of contrition or forgiveness never appears without being haunted by the possibility of a return – in the form, for example, of a reward or profit (intentional or otherwise) within, for example, an horizon of reconciliation, expiation or redemption.

This transcendental style of argument about the nature of forgiveness or its 'condition of (im)possibility' might be read as an attempt to broach the question of whatever link there may be between the Judeo-Christian concept of forgiveness (and its metonymies of confession, contrition, reconciliation, etc) and the possibility of genocide and crimes against humanity. If 'pure' forgiveness is impossible, then the Judeo-Christian notion of sincere, genuine, heartfelt forgiveness is *necessarily insufficient*; it cannot be equated with forgiveness; it is in a sense the destruction of any chance of forgiveness, because it pretends to make present what cannot be made present. The employment of this notion, at least in its habitual understanding, is henceforth – if not simply forbidden – displaced, reinterpreted in such a way that it can no longer be employed with a good conscience and without irony:

> If forgiveness happens, then this experience should not be the object of a sentence of the kind 'S is p'… if I say that I know that I forgive, if I say, lightly, 'I forgive you' this sentence in the present, with a verb in the present tense, is absolutely the destruction of forgiveness. That is because it implies that I am able to forgive, that I have the power to forgive, the sovereign power to forgive, which introduces me into the scene of the economy of exchange. (Derrida 2005: 25)

It seems to me necessary to point out that Derrida's argument has two separate moments, which seem to go in two apparently contradictory directions. On the one hand, it affirms that pure forgiveness – forgiveness as such – is impossible; on the other hand, if such a thing were ever to be imagined, it must be other than what has always been thought of or understood as forgiveness. And it is in the name of – or for the sake of – this other thing or something else that we are henceforth called to think and to speak. In this context, he refers to the 'im-possible' (which holds the possible and impossible in suspension) and elsewhere, after Angelus Silesius, to 'the more than impossible' (*das Überunmöglichste*) (Derrida 1992b: 290f).

What would be at stake here is, as I suggested above, the elaboration of a concept of forgiveness that is radically foreign to any kind of instrumentalisation or exchange. Such a concept is, at one level, only a more rigorous development of the thought of unconditionality and generosity that was already implied in the Judeo-Christian notion of genuine, sincere, heartfelt

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forgiveness. The cost or advantage of this 'more rigorous' concept is a certain 'im-possibility', a forgiveness that cannot be made present as such – or appropriated by a subject in the present.

What would *also* be at stake here is the elaboration of a concept of forgiveness that preserves as rigorously as possible a place for the otherness of the other, an other who could not be reduced to an horizon of identification, knowledge, understanding, and so on. It is in this sense that Derrida's theorisation of forgiveness should be related to the Levinasian tradition of ethics and responsibility as *prima philosophia*. It is also in this sense that I would suggest that one read Derrida's insistence that one must also think forgiveness without the request for forgiveness:

> There is in forgiveness, in the very meaning of forgiveness a force, a desire, an impetus, a movement, an appeal (call it what you will) that demands that forgiveness be granted, if it can be, even to someone who does not ask for it, who does not repent or confess or improve or redeem himself, beyond, consequently, an entire identificatory, spiritual, whether sublime or not, economy, beyond all expiation even.

And again:

> This link between forgiveness granted and forgiveness asked for does not seem to me to be a given, even if here again it seems required by an entire religious and spiritual tradition of forgiveness. I wonder if a rupture of this reciprocity or this symmetry, if the very dissociation between forgiveness asked for and forgiveness granted, were not *de rigueur* for all forgiveness worthy of the name. (Derrida 2001c: 25)

No doubt the traditional insistence on the request for forgiveness is justified on the basis that without it one is given over to the worst risk, the risk that a crime may be repeated over and over again, without any commitment on the part of the perpetrator(s) not to repeat it or to compensate for it – at the limit without even the recognition that a crime has been committed. The expression of apology and remorse would seem particularly indispensable in the fields of contemporary international politics where newly created criminal tribunals rarely, if ever, have the means of prosecuting all those responsible. A sincere public statement of responsibility and contrition on the part of (at least some of) the perpetrators offers victims a kind of loose (in many cases *very* loose) compromise, where – in the absence or hopeless insufficiency of a criminal tribunal – the injustices that have been done to them are at least recognised as injustices, and there is, at least implicitly, the commitment to another, better future, by virtue of a transformed relation to the past (Jankélévitch 1996: 49).

And yet, if there truly is such a thing as alterity of the other, an alterity that cannot be reduced to the possibility of identification, knowledge and so on, then it cannot be taken for granted that there would be in each case an elementary agreement as to whether there has been a crime and as to who is the victim and who is perpetrator of it. It is unreasonable to presume, on the basis of such

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a hypothesis, that the conditions necessary for an admission of responsibility could be in each case satisfied or satisfiable. For a sincere admission of responsibility, an offender must at the very least be *conscious* of their fault and have the ability to confess to it. In the case where an offender can neither be presumed to be conscious nor able to confess, expiation of the fault is impossible. Forgiveness is out of the question, because it could not even be asked for.

It is perhaps to the possibility of this kind of ethical impasse – an impasse where at the limit there is no agreement that there even is an impasse – that Derrida's unconditional notion of forgiveness responds. The necessity and urgency of such a thought of forgiveness appears, for example, when someone may be wrongly accused – and yet unable to *prove* their innocence. In such circumstances, an 'offender' could not ask for forgiveness without perjury (either by confessing to something that they did not do, or do not believe that they did; or by pretending to agree that a given act was an offence when they at bottom do not consider it to be one). In such situations, the 'offender' submits to a situation where forgiveness is the playing out of a ritual, an actor wearing a mask. And yet, one can ask if it is ever possible to ask for forgiveness, without wearing a mask, without hypocrisy?

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An ethics or politics of the dream

I will not attempt here to criticise Derrida's thought of unconditional forgiveness, but rather attempt to account for the chance and/or necessity to which it responds in terms of what he elsewhere calls 'an ethics or politics of the dream':

> Could there be an ethics or politics of the dream which yields neither to the imaginary nor to the utopian, and is therefore not an irresponsible or evasive resignation? . . .The possibility of the impossible can only be dreamed. Thought, a totally other thought of the relation between the possible and the impossible . . . has perhaps more affinity with this dream than it does with philosophy itself. It would be necessary, while waking up, to keep the vigil of this dream. I try in my own way to draw out some of the ethical, juridical and political consequences of this possibility of the impossible—whether it concerns time, the gift, hospitality, forgiveness, decision or the democracy to come. (Derrida 2005: 168; translation modified)

> 'Politics of the dream' is not a politics of dreamers or for dreamers. The dream I am talking about is a dream of thought, not the present collective phantasm of security, patriotism or revenge. A war such as the one that is currently being prepared cannot alone be the answer. The dream would be to say: let us invent something else. (Derrida 2001d; translation mine)

The dream of unconditional forgiveness is related to a thinking of disarmament and peace: one which acknowledges what Heidegger identified as the epochal removal (*Beseitigung*) of the distinction between war and peace (Derrida 1997b: 248–9), and which is not the equivalent of death as Kant

feared.[19] Derrida distinguishes the dream (of unconditional forgiveness, of innumerable genders (Derrida 1982: 76–7), even of God (Derrida 2006: 157)) from the phantasm (of absolute knowledge (Derrida 1990: 217),[20] of indivisible sovereignty (Derrida 2002b: 204–5), of the intact kernel (Derrida and McDonald 1985: 115)), although at other times he also seems to run the two terms together (Derrida 2006: 157). The two terms are very close, since they are both at grips with desire for the impossible. What is perhaps most important, however, is that for Derrida the dream is not separate from the 'real', from what happens. For this reason, it should not be understood as utopian in the sense of a fictional place or ideal:

> The deconstruction of logocentrism and linguisticism and economism…as well as the affirmation of the impossible, have always come forward *in the name of the real*, of the irreducible reality of the real—not the real as the attribute of the *thing (res)* … but the real as a coming or event of the other …. [T]he real is this non negative im-possible, this im-possible coming or invention of the event, the thinking of which is not an onto-phenomenology …. In this sense, nothing is more 'realist' than deconstruction. It is what or who happens (*ce qui arrive*). (Derrida 2005: 96)

In the course of elaborating her own theory of forgiveness, Julia Kristeva criticises Derrida's dream for being 'a little utopian' and, moreover, for presupposing 'the existence of extremely flexible and evolved individuals, which is unfortunately not the case' (2002: 283, 290). Kristeva makes the exemplary mistake of presuming that, for Derrida, forgiving the unforgivable would be the heroic act of a sovereign subject who *is able* to do the impossible. But this is not what Derrida means. If the individual is called to do the impossible, the important point is that he, she, or it is not able to do it – will never be able to do it – in the same way that the unforgivable (which is to be forgiven) *remains* unforgivable. It is not something that can be achieved by an extremely flexible and evolved individual. If, however, the impossible happens (and for Derrida it is *only* the impossible that happens in strong sense, which is to say as

[19] In his famous sketch, Kant designated perpetual peace as a 'sweet dream', which is to say that which does not exist in the present. In her reading of Kant's sketch, Avital Ronell writes: 'The problem that Kant faces in the entire essay involves the deflection of perpetual peace from its semantic hole in the graveyard: could there be a movement of peace that is unhitched from the death drive? Must the duty we have toward peace have as its background music that radical tranquility which resonates with "rest in peace"? If Kant can only draw a philosophical sketch of peace, this is because his leanings push him toward the edge of undecidability where absolute peace, like war, means you're dead' (Ronell 1998: 286).

[20] 'Philosophical discourse is not only governed by the phantasmatic (either originary or derived), but, more seriously, can no longer be assured of possessing a philosophical concept of the phantasm, a knowledge that would control what is at issue in this word …. What happens if the absolute phantasm is co-extensive with absolute knowledge? It should be possible to demonstrate … that the philosophic is the phantasmatic' (Derrida 1995b: 23).

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an event which is absolutely singular, new, surprising, unforeseeable, incalculable, etc.), then it is not the individual who makes this happen, but the other:

> The only thing I can forgive is the unforgivable. If I can do that, if I have the sovereignty to do that, then I don't do this. If I do what I can, then I don't do anything. I must do what I cannot do, more or something else than what I can do. *Therefore it is not me who does this, but the other in me.* It is the other who forgives in this unconditional sense. (Derrida 2004; italics mine)

For this reason, as mentioned in a passage cited previously, doing and making the impossible is not separate from undergoing the test and ordeal of this paradox, which is also, and perhaps firstly, a paradox of reading. Thus, one can say that without doing the impossible one is *perhaps* also doing it; or rather, that one does the impossible by not doing it as such, in other words by creating a place or the conditions for it. Like unconditional hospitality, the dream of unconditional forgiveness makes the impossible. It calls the impossible into being as an absolute pole, from which the task then becomes to find the best 'juridical' conditions to bring it about. 'For that, you have to change laws, habits, fantasies—a whole "culture"' (Derrida 2005: 131).

Derrida's thought enjoins 'us' to ask what these conditions would be. They would undoubtedly look different from the scenography and idioms of apology, reconciliation and forgiveness that currently dominate the world stage. In this essay, I have argued that to bring about unconditional forgiveness one must first differentiate it from any form of political or personal reconciliation. Rather than as a mechanism of repair and normalisation, offers and requests for forgiveness should be thought of and practiced as pure gifts. They should not be grounded in the hope or expectation of a return on investment, in a speculation on the future – even in the first instance in the desire to seek recognition from the other. At the limit they should not even be spoken as such, because once expressed in language, as a word of apology or reconciliation, then they already enter into the circuit of exchange. Offers and requests of forgiveness should be approached as inventive, poetic tasks, always in relation to singular individuals and not directed by an end or finality. I can imagine that in certain situations just listening to the other or reading is already a profound event of forgiveness. Perhaps the very word 'forgiveness' should not be used – it should be kept secret for fear that it would ruin any chance for forgiveness in a Derridean sense.

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