

**JACQUES DERRIDA'S RELIGION WITH/OUT RELIGION AND  
THE IM/POSSIBILITY OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

We both have been reading the work of Jacques Derrida for a while. Gert has especially been interested in the ethico-political potential of deconstruction. So, to paraphrase Derrida, analysing all the hidden assumptions implied in a variety of issues, including educational issues. It turns out that deconstruction *is* responsibility, and that deconstruction *is* justice. Along this line deconstruction can deepen our understanding of education as preparing for the incalculable. Siebren has had more difficulties to understand what precisely the philosophical and practical bearings of Derrida's writing could be for him as a pedagogue. The key entrance, the disclosure came with *On the name* followed by other books on religion by Derrida, and such impressing books like Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* and De Vries's' *Philosophy and the Return to Religion*. He became aware of the apocalyptic, versus just apophatic or kataphatic forms of religiosity, and even the messianic (hope and future) tones of religiosity in Derrida. Bringing our experiences together our contention became that deconstruction is a way of doing the truth, keeping things authentic, of living in faith, impassioned by a desire for and the experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible, of the most impossible. In this essay we present the yield of our shared learning process in which we rethink religious education from an engagement of Derrida's forms of reasoning and analysing.

**GERT: DECONSTRUCTION & EDUCATION**

The work of Jacques Derrida and "his" "philosophy" of "deconstruction" has often been a the target of fierce criticisms. Deconstruction has repeatedly been depicted as a form of critical analysis which aims at tearing apart everything it finds on its way. It has been characterised as a form of textualisation with hyper-relativistic and nihilistic implications. Deconstruction, so the argument goes, is therefore ethically void, politically impotent, and utterly dangerous (see, e.g., Habermas 1988; Ferry and Renaut 1990).

I want to argue that these allegations seriously miss the point - or better: points (see

Derrida 1995) - of deconstruction. Deconstruction is not a sceptical or relativistic position (it is not even "a" position), but it has a distinct ethico-political motivation, or, as Richard Bernstein has so aptly put it, it has a distinct ethico-political horizon (see Bernstein 1992). In its shortest and most general formula the ethico-political horizon of deconstruction can be described as a concern for the other or, to be more precise, a concern for the otherness of the other (see below). Rather than being destructive, negative, or "an enclosure in nothingness," deconstruction should be seen as "an openness towards the other" (Derrida 1984,24). For this reason deconstruction can best be characterised as being *affirmative*. The deconstructive affirmation of the other is not straightforwardly positive. It is not merely an affirmation of what already exists and, for that reason, can be known and identified. Deconstruction is an affirmation of what is *wholly* other (*tout autre*). It is an affirmation of what is unforeseeable from the present, of what is beyond the horizon of the same (cf. Caputo 1997,42). It is an affirmation of an other that is always to come, as an event which "as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth" (Derrida 1992a,27). More, therefore, than simply being an openness towards the other, deconstruction is an openness towards the unforeseeable in-coming (*l'invention; invention*) of the other, and for that reason an openness to the otherness of the other. As Caputo has suggested, deconstruction might therefore best be thought of as an "inventionalism" (Caputo 1997, 42).

The road towards the other is not an easy road. As a matter of fact, it is an impossible road. But it is the very "experience of the impossible" (Derrida 1992a,15) which only makes the invention, the in-coming of the other possible. An invention, Derrida argues, "has to declare itself to be the invention of that which did not appear to be possible; otherwise it only makes explicit a program of possibilities within the economy of the same" (Derrida 1989, 60). For this reason we might say that deconstruction is "the relentless pursuit of the impossible, which means, of things whose possibility is sustained by their impossibility, of things which, instead of being wiped out by their impossibility, are actually nourished and fed by it" (Caputo 1997,32). This is one way in which deconstruction immediately becomes relevant for education, in that it expresses a profound critique

of the idea that education is about production, making and control. Such a technical or technological understanding of education forgets that education is only possible, only can exist, because of the fact that there are children, pupils, students, learners who give meaning to and respond to what parents and teachers do and say. What learners learn is not identical with what teachers say. Some argue that ideally teachers should have 100% control over what learners learn. But that would negate and ultimately erase the very existence, the very singularity (see below) of the learner. Hence what makes education possible (the existence of learners, students, children who respond in their own, singular way) is also what makes education impossible (i.e., impossible as a form of total control, of making and production). In this respect education itself has a deconstructive 'nature' (see Biesta 2001).

Deconstruction is therefore not an analytical technique, a way of reading or interpretation; deconstruction has to be understood in its occurrence. What is at stake in the occurrence of deconstruction is an attempt to bring into view the impossibility to totalise, the impossibility to articulate a self-sufficient, self-present centre from which everything can be mastered and controlled. Deconstruction reveals that every inside has a constitutive outside which is not merely external but always in a sense already inhabits the inside, so that the self-sufficiency or self-presence can only be brought about by an act of exclusion. What gives deconstruction its motive and drive, is precisely its concern do justice to what is excluded.

The main problem of deconstruction, which has been the cause of many "misunderstandings" and "misinterpretations," lies in what I propose to call its *reflexivity*, i.e., the fact that its conclusions (which are by no means endings) constantly subvert its assertions. How, for example, not to totalise the non-totalisable? How not to conceptualise the unconceptualisable? How not to speak? But rather than simply evading these *aporias*, deconstruction faces these *aporias* head on and tries to make its strength out of it.

In his chapter in *Deconstruction and the possibility of justice* (Derrida 1992a) Derrida confesses that ethical and political issues have not occupied a prominent place in most of his writings. He acknowledges that "there are no doubt many

reasons why the majority of texts hastily identified as "deconstructionist" ... seem, I do say seem, not to foreground the theme of justice (as theme, precisely), or the theme of ethics and politics" (Derrida 1992a,7). Yet, so he continues, it was normal, foreseeable, and desirable that studies of a deconstructive style should culminate in this problematic, and even that deconstruction has done nothing but address this problematic, if only "obliquely", since "one cannot speak *directly* about justice, thematize or objectivize justice, say 'this is just' and even less 'I am just'" (Derrida 1992a,10). That is to say, one cannot do all this "without immediately betraying justice" (ibid.). Why is this so?

The clue to Derrida's answer lies in the contention that justice is always directed towards the other. Justice is "the relation to the other". Saying, therefore, that something is just, or that one is just, is a betrayal of the very idea of justice to the extent to which it forecloses the possibility for the other to decide whether justice has indeed been rendered. If justice is a concern for the other as other, for the otherness of the other, for an otherness that, by definition, we can neither foresee nor totalise, if justice, in short, always addresses itself to the singularity of the other (Derrida 1992a, 20), we are obliged to keep the unforeseen possibility of the in-coming of the other, the surprise of the "invention" of the other open (see Derrida 1989). This means, however, that the very possibility of justice is sustained by its impossibility. Justice is therefore "an experience of the impossible," where - and this is crucial - the impossible is *not* that which is not possible, but that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility (Derrida 1992a,16).

The implications of this insight are not restricted to the determination of whether a situation or a person is just, but extend to the very definition of justice itself. Here again we can say that it is for the very sake of justice as a concern for the otherness of the other that we can never decide once and (literally) for all what justice is. Justice is therefore not a principle or a criterion (as this would mean that we would know right now what justice is), nor an ideal (as this would mean that we would now be able to describe the future situation of justice), not even a regulative ideal (which would still imply a description of what justice is, although with the implication that the

ideal is not expected to be ever present in some future). It belongs to the very structure of justice itself that it never can be present (and therefore never will be present). It is by necessity, as Derrida would say, a "justice to come," which means that it is *always* to come (Derrida 1992a,27).

The impossibility of justice is not to be understood as "a" deconstruction of justice. To understand why this is so, we need to observe Derrida's distinction between justice and the law (*droit, loi*). By the law Derrida means the positive structures that make up judicial systems in virtue of which actions are said to be legal, legitimate, or properly authorized. The law, Derrida argues, is "essentially deconstructible" because the law is constructed in the first place (see Derrida 1992a, 14-15). But the fact that the law is essentially deconstructible "is not bad news. We may even see in this a stroke of luck for politics, for all historical progress" (Derrida 1992a, 14), because it opens up the possibility to *improve* the law. "Justice is what gives us the impulse, the drive, or the movement to improve the law, that is, to deconstruct the law. Without a call for justice we would not have any interest in deconstructing the law" (Derrida 1997,16). This reveals that deconstruction is not aimed at the destruction of the law but at the improvement of the law in the name of that which cannot be named. As Caputo summarizes, deconstruction "keeps an inventionalist eye open for the other to which the law as law is 'blind'" (Caputo 1997, 131). And it is in this sense that Derrida can argue that deconstruction *is* justice (Derrida 1992a,35).

The fact that justice is not a criterion or a principle means that it is not something that we can have knowledge about and that we only need to apply. Again we can say that the law is applicable. We can see that we act in agreement with norms, with the law. But to speak of justice is not a matter of knowledge, it is not a matter of application and calculation (although, so I want to add, it definitely is a matter of extremely careful judgement).

Justice, if it has to do with the other ... is always incalculable. (...) Once you relate to the other as the other, then something incalculable comes on the scene, something which cannot be reduced to the law or to the history of legal structures. This is what gives

deconstruction its movement.

(Derrida 1997,17-18)

The claim that justice is not a criterion, that it has no ground, so that at the basis of all our decisions lies a radical *undecidability* which cannot be closed off by our decisions but which "continues to inhabit the decision" (Derrida 1996,87), could be taken as the contention that in the end, and despite all that it claims, deconstruction *is* destructive and relativistic. But this of course only holds as long as we assume that ethics and politics can only exist on some firm ground.

Against such a foundationalist point of view Derrida argues that ethics and politics only *begin* when this undecidability, which makes the decision at the very same time "necessary and impossible", is acknowledged. For him, therefore, deconstruction is a "hyper-politicization" (Derrida 1996,85; cf. Biesta 1995). Derrida acknowledges that this is an *aporia* - but "we must not hide it from ourselves" (Derrida 1992b,41).

I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the *aporia*. When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make; irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program. (...) It makes of action the applied consequence, the simple application of a knowledge or know-how. It makes of ethics and politics a technology. No longer of the order of practical reason or decision, it begins to be irresponsible.

(Derrida 1992b,41,45)

Perhaps, Derrida adds, one never escapes the program. But in that case "one must acknowledge this and stop talking with authority about moral or political responsibility" (Derrida 1992b,41). This means, therefore, that "the condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only *possible invention, the impossible invention*" (Derrida 1992b,41).

If I return to the question of education again

it is not in order to apply deconstruction to education. Education is not something that is external to deconstruction, just as deconstruction is not something that comes to education from the outside. Although there are many different ways in which deconstruction can be shown to be "the case" in education (see, e.g., Biesta, 2001; Biesta & Egéa-Kuehne, 2001), what I want to highlight here is that if deconstruction is vocation, i.e., "a response to a call" (Derrida 1984, 118), it is for that reason at the very heart of the experience of education - at least in the form in which this experience has been with us since the Enlightenment. If, to put it differently, the experience of education is the experience of the *singularity* of the other, of the other as a *singular* being, then we can say that education has its proper place in deconstruction, just as deconstruction has its proper place in education. The relationship between deconstruction, justice and education is, in other words, anything but accidental.

Derrida does not tell us, however, how we should respond to the call in order to be just or render justice. Unlike a whole generation of educators and educational theorists, often of a critical bent, Derrida doesn't try to give an answer to the question how we can emancipate or liberate or do justice to the children and students that have been put under the care of parents and teachers. He rather invites educators to return to the question itself, to the question what it could mean to respond to the call, to respond responsibly to the otherness of the other - and to return to this age-old question *today*.

Although we can no longer rely upon the certainties of metaphysics - including the metaphysics of the human being - Derrida is eager to stress that this doesn't land us in anti-foundationalism, relativism or a communitarism where the wisdom of the community is the highest wisdom. Although Derrida is more than perceptive of history, situation, location, difference, et cetera, he continues to reckon with the possibility of the impossible, i.e., with the possibility of that which cannot be foreseen as a possibility but which lies - structurally - *beyond*. The impossible possibility, in short, of justice.

Given this, can education be just? Will education be just? Perhaps one way to appreciate what we might learn from deconstruction is to approach this question from the point of view of

"transcendental violence" which, in a sense, expresses the same idea as what I refer to as the "law of singularity." We could argue that the only way to do justice to the other, the other whom we dare to educate, is by leaving the other completely alone. It is not difficult to see that this neglect (which wouldn't even count as a border-case of education) would make the other unidentifiable and unrecognizable. This would definitely block the invention of the other and would therefore be utterly unjust. For education not to be unjust some form of recognition of the other as other is needed. But as we have already seen, any form of recognition, although necessary, is at the very same a mis-recognition and for that reason violent. Derrida refers to this violence as 'transcendental' in order to express that this violence is the condition of possibility (which, at the very same time is a condition of impossibility) for the other, the student, the pupil, the learner, to 'come into presence' (for the latter notion see Biesta, 1999). To be concerned and responsible for the 'coming into presence' of the student as a unique, singular being, is, so I want to argue, the ultimate task - or perhaps we can say: vocation - of education. Yet, from Derrida we can learn that this task is not something straightforward, not something that can be manufactured or simply be done. At the heart of any education that doesn't want to be unjust, we find an aporia. It is this aporia that education - and educators - have to reckon with. Can this be done? How can this be done?

In a discussion about ethical decisions Derrida stresses that although ethical decisions are impossible, they can, for the very reason of their being ethical decisions, not wait. This "aporia of urgency" (Derrida 1992a, 26) means that the instance of decision is a "madness" (ibid.). One *has* to decide, but a just decision is impossible. And yet, it is this very mad impossibility which only makes justice possible. How can we give a place to this madness? Perhaps it is enough - or at least something - if we are attentive to the *hesitation* that inhabits our decisions. Justice could perhaps come from the "failure of fluency," that is, from "ethical hesitation" (see Edgoose 2001).

Just education - if such a thing exists - has to be on the outlook for the impossible invention of the other. The other, Derrida writes, "is not the possible." The other is "precisely what is not invented" (Derrida 1989, 59-60). This means that

"deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, destabilising foreclosures structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other" (ibid.). But one should not forget that one does not make the other come. One lets it come by *preparing* for its coming.

#### **SIEBREN: THE RELIGIOUS HORIZON OF DECONSTRUCTION**

When my doctoral dissertation was published as a book in 1986, I received a letter from a Dutch professor emeritus - Brus - who suggested me that it might be interesting for me to read Derrida - in case I should not already have done that - because of the content of his work and the direction I had chosen in my book and given the results of my research project.

Lately I re-read that letter. Brus posed the question whether the results of my reconstruction of a recent part of history of the pedagogical sciences vis-à-vis the theory-practice debate and my collapsing efforts to develop a harmonious and fully integrated relationship did not show that this theoretical exercise was itself an anomaly. A debate impossible to conclude with a saving formula and not solvable with/in words, because it is not contained in the possibilities of theory to finalise this tension. Could it be, Brus asked me, that time and again we need to tackle this problem creatively and "solve" it on the level of action and perception? Just now I really understand what he is talking about, and even get the point: this is a plea for deconstruction! Caputo has so aptly formulated what deconstruction means.

The very meaning and mission of deconstruction is to show that things - texts, institutions, traditions, societies, beliefs, and practices of whatever size and sort you need - do not have definable meanings and determinable missions, that they are always more than any mission would impose, that they exceed the boundaries they currently occupy. What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always to come. Every time you try to stabilise the meaning of a thing, to fix it in its missionary position, the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away.

(Caputo 1997, 31)

I don't remember which article by Derrida I read at that time, but I still remember that I could not get grip on the text, and stopped reading Derrida. And although Gert and I already have been working and publishing together since 1987, and theoretically have a lot in common, I really could not understand his growing enthusiasm for Derrida's ideas since the mid nineties. But his enthusiasm intrigued me and kept me occupied, reinforced by the question "How to explain the slight differences we have in our view on education?"

It was not until 2000 when I got back to Derrida's work. This time the explicit and definite entrance was religion. Due to my long-lasting interest in and reading of mystical texts, learning that Derrida's essay "Sauf le nom" (Derrida, 1995, 33-85) is dealing with the German poet-mystic Angelus Silesius and with negative theology, made me curious to read that text. That happened, and now the penny really dropped! We decided to join forces over the issue of "Derrida & Religious Education".

In "Sauf le nom" Derrida is engaged in a dialogue with Angelus Silesius's (Johannes Scheffler, 1624-1677) *Cherubic Wanderer*. His choice to use the form of dialogue is not incidental, because in the very beginning of his text Derrida states:

I would like to speak to you, don't hesitate to interrupt me, of this multiplicity of voices, of this quite initial, but indeterminable as well, end of monologism - and of what follows..

(Derrida 1995, 35)

The end of monologism, is to stop with any dogmatic self-confident plea, and the abolition of any private 'possession' of the truth. The interruptions of the speaker in the text are not destructive and negative, but function instead as critical additions. As if both speakers together represent the endless openness of the truth and the infinite necessity to strive and search for it (see Sneller 1998, 11-12). This necessity of polyphonic speaking about God opens a beautiful pedagogical perspective as well.

Derrida is fascinated by Silesius's radical search for the alterity, the total otherness of God or - as Silesius sometimes denotes it - the Godhead. So, leaving behind all knowledge, thoughts, stories, theologies, words and even the names related to Him.

Even leaving behind and distancing oneself from the search for God. Silesius: "Go there where you cannot; see where you do not see; Hear where nothing rings or sounds, so are you where God speaks" (in Derrida 1995, 44). Related to the name of God Derrida states:

Now the hyperbolic movements in the Platonic, Plotinian, or Neoplatonic style will not only precipitate beyond being or God insofar as he is (the supreme being [étant]), but beyond God even as name, as naming, named, or nameable, insofar as reference is made there to some thing. The name itself seems sometimes to be there no longer save...The name itself seems sometimes to be no longer there, save [sauf, safe]...

(Derrida 1995, 65)

Silesius wants to free himself from a fully positive or kataphatic affirmation in his speaking about God. He also wants to free himself from such a kataphatic affirmation in terms of Christianity. His search can be interpreted as deconstruction, the concern for the openness towards the otherness of God, as the impossible i.e. the 'one' who cannot be foreseen as possibility, the incalculable, the unpredictable and the 'one' who cannot be completely filled-in. The alterity of God drives every human search, without ever finding the concrete locus in a particular religious tradition, a philosophical or theological system or in this man or this group in such a way that we can say "Here is the otherness or the alterity of God". However, this coming of the otherness of God is for Derrida the potential or the source for ethics and morals, and for every religious and philosophical hope. Here Derrida uses the terms messianic or messianicity (but without messianism!).

This [messianicity] would be the opening to the future or the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration. The coming of the other can only merge as a singular event when no anticipation sees it coming, when the other and death - and radical evil - can come as surprise at any moment(...). The messianic exposes itself to absolute surprise and, even if it takes the phenomenal form of peace or of justice, it ought, exposing itself so

abstractly, be prepared (waiting without awaiting itself) for the best as for the worst, the one never coming without opening the possibility of the other. At issue there is a 'general structure of experience'.

(Derrida 1998, 17-18).

What does Derrida mean with the expression 'sauf le nom'? Is it his contention that we also give up the name of God? In a sense the name of God is also always a chance, an openness and a possibility of the impossible. But it is not an *esse*, an essentialist entity. So, the name does not refer to a fixed thing, but is standing for an arrival, a coming and for an event [événement, venir].

To lose the name is quite simple to respect is: as name. That is to say, to pronounce it, which comes down to traversing it toward the other, the other whom it names and who bears it. To pronounce it without pronouncing it. To forget it by calling it, by recalling it (to oneself), which comes down to calling or recalling the other...

(Derrida 1995, 58)

Saving the name can prepare us - and only that - for the unforeseeable in-coming (invention) of the otherness of God. With such an intentionalist view of the in-coming of the alterity of God, essentialist and conventionalist approaches respectively in favour of unchanging essences and ageless traditions (see Caputo 1997, 42) are no longer adequate.

I do not want to deal here with the extensive debate on "Derrida and negative theology", but just shortly argue here that his deconstruction of religion, due to its affirmative character, can not adequately be characterised as 'negative theology' or as apophatic, i.e. exclusively in a negative mode. If deconstruction is the affirmation of what is *wholly other* [*tout autre*], it is precisely the tranquillity of a fully positive or a fully negative theological approach that the deconstruction of religion disturbs. Or to put it differently: it is precisely deconstruction that opens up the possibility of a religiosity that is neither positive/present not negative/absent but appears in the very moment of the occurrence of deconstruction.

To conclude this section I like to refer to Sneller's convincing argument that Genesis 32: 22-31 in several respects offers us a/the key to Derrida's "Sauf le nom". Among medieval mystics this story was favourite, because it points to the unnameable nameable.

And he [Jacob] arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that he did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of Jacob's hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" So He said to him, "What *is* your name?" He said, "Jacob." And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed." The Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray." And He said, "Why *is* it that you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip.

*(The Bible, New King James Version)*

#### **THE GIFT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

An interesting parallel can be drawn between our two texts, because both education and religion can 'use' deconstruction to prevent them in sliding back into a technology which aim is to possess the other (the child, God). Concurrently it is clear that if we want to avoid the possession (the control et cetera) of the other (the child, God), we should not leave the other, the alterity of the o/Other to h/Her or h/His own devices. Within the domains of education, religion and religious education we have in a sense the duty, the responsibility to speak, to name, to give a name. To be silent here is the ultimate form of injustice. The space that opens itself in deconstruction 'is laying between' the will to govern (possession, technology, control) and

complete lack of interest (not to speak, not to name, no recognition, no acknowledgement, no answers, no reaction). This space is not a kind of compromise, nor just a bit of both; it exists precisely as undecidability, as aporia.

How to deal with this aporia in education, religion and religious education? First, there is what Derrida characterises as a double duty, i.e. we have the duty to speak - not to be silent - and simultaneously the duty to show that our speaking is insufficient, i.e. that it presents the non-presentable and that in that sense it is violent (see transcendental violence). This implies, secondly, a responsibility which we can characterise with Derrida as unlimited, as limitless. The double duty implies that when speaking we also take/get the responsibility for the undecidable that perhaps comes 'on the screen', and about which we do not want to be silent. A third consequence of this aporia is that we need to be open for the second voice, the voice of the other, the voice that is not foreseen and not to control, however, that is the ultimate concern of our speaking and not being silent.

This is preparing for the incalculable, i.e. creating possibilities for the impossible, being the unforeseeable invention of the other/Other. This is not something that we can completely organize or arrange in advance, because we do not know what and when the in-coming of the other will happen, whom it will be, and how the o/Other will speak and act. That does not mean that we should not do anything at all. What we can do - and should do - at least is to try to avoid situations that make the invention of the O/Other impossible. If religious education is not the making or production of the child into a religious person, nor the appropriation of well-defined presented or represented religious subject-matter, then the question deconstruction raises for religious educators is how to create an opening in which the o/Other can speak to the child, i.e. how the child can encounter and receive the unforeseeable, unpredictable gift of religion.

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