CHAPTER 3

A Radical Theology of Conflict and Contestation

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Thesis. In radical thinking, things are never as settled as they seem. Underneath the appearance of continuity lie ruptures and interruptions, underneath identity, difference. As Derrida once put it, "It is the idea of an identity or a self-interiority of every tradition (*the one* metaphysics, *the one* onto-theology, *the one* phenomenology, *the one* Christian revelation, *the one* history itself, *the one* history of being, *the one* epoch, *the one* tradition, self-identity in general, the one, etc.) that finds itself contested at its root (*contestée en sa racine*)."[1] To contest something at its root is not to demolish it but to show that it is *not identical with itself*, that it is internally divided, limited, multiplied, and distributed—for better or for worse, since we cannot be sure where this will lead. To contest something—here *the one* theological tradition—is what radical thinking demands, not from a perverse love of chaos and confusion, but to keep the future open.

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A Meticulous History. One effective way to deconstruct something is to write a meticulous history of how it was constructed in the first place. Then what was thought to have dropped from the sky is seen to issue from a confluence of shifting circumstances down here on earth; what was thought an essence gradually achieving existence is something accidental that could have turned out differently; and what was thought to be inevitable historical progression was in large part happenstance, fortuitous developments, creative imagination, opportunistic decisions, contingent occurrences, if not just plain violence. In the beginning, no one could see how it would turn out later on or if it would last or even that anything was beginning. Instead of seeing the beginning as the root of which the present is the mature plant, a meticulous history sees the beginning as an experiment that is continually being improvised, where the original players would hardly recognize the current product. It tells a completely different story than what was first called in German Idealism the "philosophy of history." There the "philosophy" held the flux of "history" in the firm grip of its *Begriff*, of a logic governing the unfolding of the Spirit in ever higher forms until it finally reached its *Vollendung*—usually in the philosophy faculty of the University of Berlin, Kierkegaard quipped.

A meticulous history is a *radical* history, contesting at its root the invisible hand by which history is monitored. Its only presupposition is that things do not have an essence, they have a history; they do not have a destiny but a story. Nothing was guaranteed. Whatever has come to be has a relative stability, otherwise it would not be there at all, but that implies a relative instability, and hence a revisability, a deconstructibility, a *contestability*. It is not that what has come about is without value, but that it is without necessity. For whatever has been constructed—and what has not?—can be deconstructed. To deconstruct is not to destroy but to undertake a more granular analysis which shows the deep multiplicity of something trying to pass itself off as one and the same. To deconstruct is to show the difference that inwardly disturbs the identity. To deconstruct is to de-sediment, to expose a deeper heterogeneity underlying a seeming homogeneity—in order to show not its futility but its futurity.

After Jesus, Before Christianity. Contesting "*the one* Christian revelation," as Derrida put it, is the relevant case in point of a recent book, *After Jesus, Before Christianity*, co-authored by a group of American New Testament historians, sponsored by the Westar Institute, which had previously sponsored the "Jesus Seminar."[2] The authors paint a picture of the concrete lives of the followers of Jesus after the crucifixion in the first two centuries of what later on, in the third century, came to be known as "Christianity." They seek to avoid anachronism, reading back into the past from the present, retrojecting the later history of *the one* Church, as if that was what had been originally projected. They suspend the meta-narrative according to which *the one* true faith—which had to wait until the fourth century to become clear to itself—gradually fell into place, like the pieces of a puzzle, as the Spirit wisely weeded out the deviations ("heresies"). The authors report a kaleidoscope of "Jesus peoples," not the educated elite who wrote the surviving letters, treatises and books that form the official pre-history canonized in the fourth century councils, but people who for the most part could not read or write but thrived on oral traditions. They describe a wide variety of loosely connected communities, more a mosaic than a single movement, with differing views of who Jesus was and different titles for him. They had several names for themselves, some of them a bit odd, like "the enslaved of God" or "the Perfect Day," but none of them called themselves "Christians."

They almost all identified with the house of Israel, and they had no intention of starting up a "new religion." They were trying to survive and even thrive under the rule of the Roman imperium in safe, supportive communities. There common meals were of great importance, like "supper clubs" or like church suppers today, especially given their illiteracy. They lived in a hostile world and had their own ways, imaged in terms of the "empire of God," an unlikely empire, and perhaps an ironic jab, maybe even a jest, at Rome. They did not conform to the received "gender" roles that were standard in antiquity and did not live in nuclear families but in freely chosen clusters that were not governed by biological or marital bonds. There was no "New Testament" to guide them along the way, although some versions of parts of it were available to some communities and others available to others. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and with the explosion of archeological and anthropological research into the life and times of the first two centuries, we now know their world was far more complex and awash with many different stories than the standard narrative allows. Not only had they never heard of Augustine's Paul or Luther's Paul, they had only a sketchy knowledge of Paul himself, whom they regarded more as an emissary among the Greeks who had established several churches than as a theologian. Some communities knew of one or two of his letters, some none at all, and for a long time Paul himself was unknown to large numbers of them. That would eventually change, especially when Marcion made his mark, and after the Bar Kokhba War (132–136 CE), when the tensions with "the Jews" heated up.

They were focused on life, not learning, on *praxis*, not *doxa*, on community fellowship and support, not theological doctrine. They did not have a "satisfaction theory" of the "atonement." Under constant threat of death themselves by the empire, many of them thought of the crucifixion of Jesus as a "noble death" in the face of the tyrant (Rome), not unlike the noble death of Socrates. No one was authorized to speak on behalf of them all, to pronounce "the" meaning of "the" crucifixion, or to sort our orthodox and heterodox, and no one could if they tried, given the disparate character of these assemblies and the lack of efficient communications. There were lively debates and differences among them, as befits an oral tradition, but their exchanges were not organized under the rubric of "orthodoxy" and "heresy" because there were no such things. The word heresy (*hairesis*), if used at all, simply meant a chosen school of thought, one among many, and it did not at all carry the implication of a dangerous error that it would later bear, starting with Irenaeus and the long line of heresiarchs to follow. Orthodoxy is internally marked by and constitutively dependent upon its other. They rise and fall together.

Constantinianism and Neoplatonism. If it was the Holy Spirit who eventually brought about a unity in this multiplicity, who monitored the way "from Nazareth to Nicaea," as Geza Vermes put it,[3] it was a Holy Spirit supported by an army. As time and circumstance wore on, the Greek-speaking gentile traditions would gain the upper hand over the Jewish ones, the Fourth Gospel over the synoptics, Paul over all, until the fourth century councils were ordered by Constantine to bring order, to "define" it, to canonize it, according to the imperial rule of *the one*—"One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor." To this was joined in unholy marriage the metaphysics of *the One* (Neoplatonism). That fateful deal, summed up in the Nicene creed, a result that would have likely left the first-century Nazarene named Yeshua bar Miriam speechless and scandalized, became the gold standard of what, ever after, would be called "Christianity," *the one* Christianity, whose imperially commanded councils placed the crown of "orthodoxy" upon their own head.

The metanarrative of (*the one*) tradition goes back to the fourth century, stops, and then treats anything earlier as a *prehistory* leading up to the Councils. Under the shock and awe of the Empire, which supplied the military, and of Neoplatonism, which supplied the metaphysics, Yeshua, the Galilean healer, exorcist and prophet who announced the coming rule of God, still detectable in the synoptic gospels, was eclipsed, all but lost in the cloud of history, and along with him the polymorphic Jesus peoples of the first two centuries. Everything had changed. The background assumption of the early communities—how to live under the heel of Rome—shifted. They became the heel. The Word had become flesh—in the Empire; it became "(*the one*) Church." At that point, it was not the Empire which "converted to Christianity" but "Christianity" was created by converting to the Empire. *Pontifex maximus*, *dioecesis*, the whole imperial architecture devised by Diocletian, including the Latin language in which Jesus was condemned to death, would become the "Church" which—they had him say—he had "founded" as the superseding successor to his people, "the Jews," as if "they" were someone else. In a meticulous history, the original players would not recognize the finished product.

These conclusions, which of course can be contested, contest at its root the hoary idea of an apostolic succession in which *the one* true faith made its way from the apostles to our Apple computers. To the more realistic compromise version of the official story, that the subsequent tradition was gradually making "explicit" what was only "implicit" at the start, a meticulous history points out that it was the winners, at spearpoint, who got to decide *what* was implicit; the ones with the cannons get to set the canon. Most of the writings of the dissenters have been lost or destroyed and are known to us largely by citations from the books that were written to refute them. I wager Augustine would head the list of authors with books entitled *Contra* this or that. To be *radically* realistic—to get back to the things themselves and contest the ideology at its root—we should simply confess that "Christianity," like everything else, does not have an essence but a history, that it is not identical with itself. It emerged from the shifting tides of power, politics, and circumstance, in the language and historical framework of the times and places in which it found itself, which at first meant trying to live under the lethal threat of empire—until the historical tide turned in its favor and the shoe of imperial power was on the other foot.

Thinking Radically. As I have argued elsewhere, in radical thinking, theo*logy*, more rigorously considered, is a theo*poetics*, that is, an exercise of our apophatic imagination in the face of the mystery of our lives.[4] I say "apophatic" because we are dealing here with liminal states, the limit-points of our lives, the *Grenzsituation*, the line that divides being from nonbeing, life from death, good from evil, knowing from nonknowing. I say "imagination" because, at these limits, we can have recourse only to images, imaginative figurations, memorable stories, symbols, striking images and sayings. The apophatic imagination resonates with depths we cannot conceive in the prose of logic, depths we can only address with the poetry of our hearts. For example, the Fourth Gospel has Jesus proudly and publicly declare himself "the way, the truth, and the life," quite unlike Yeshua, the source-figure in the synoptics, who deflected attention away from himself and toward God's coming rule. But the words the Fourth Gospel puts in his mouth can serve as a motto that can be adopted by anyone, with or without Jesus. Faced with the mystery of things, there are as many *ways* and forms of *life*, whose *truth* is their *via*bility and *vita*lity, as there are times and places. *Every* theology is what Tillich called a "theology of culture," otherwise it is a just a free-floating abstraction, and every culture has a theology, otherwise it is a just a place on a map, and every theology is a theopoetics, where the prose of theology is preceded by a poetics of the local gods.

The *radical* in radical theology does not mean establishing the foundational ground on which all things rest, but exactly the opposite, contesting foundational claims at their root. It means confessing what Schelling called the radical *facticity* of things, which results in a radical *uprooted*ness. Schelling contested the Hegelian notion of the absolute *Begriff* in which being and thinking (*Denken*) become one, being rendered entirely intelligible to thinking and thinking with access to the essence of being. Against this Schelling advanced *das Unvordenkliche*, not exactly the unthinkable but the un-*pre*-thinkable, meaning that being is always already (*immer schon*) there before thinking arrives on the scene.[5] Being is the *prius*, first or prior, not thinking. Thinking's "a priori conditions of possibility" yield pride of place to the unconditional priority of being's actuality; thinking is a posteriori, literally an afterthought. The first had become last. Mediated by Kierkegaard, facticity and the unprethinkable made their way into the twentieth century, in theology through the work of Tillich and in philosophy through Jaspers and Heidegger. When the "philosophers of existence" said "existence precedes essence" they were thinking of the unprethinkable. Thinking, always and already too late, does the best it can to construe being, to build constructions that hopefully will hold up in the face of the surprises being has in store for thinking. This is not to say that thinking is to no avail but that thinking produces provisional results, with a sense of humility, of the relative poverty or weakness of its constructions, for whatever thinking has constructed can be deconstructed.

This has serious implications for understanding *authority*, particularly *theological* authority, but without jettisoning the very idea of authority. If I am ill, I want to trust the authority of a skilled physician. But in matters most ultimate, so removed and remote, lying at the limits of our understanding, there may be wisdom but there are no authorities. The very idea is epistemologically an exercise in futility and morally and psychologically an exercise in hybris. We are none of us in a position to speak with definition of what lies at the *finis*, on the border of the thinkable and unprethinkable, of knowing and nonknowing. We can experience being *in* an unencompassable whole—a sense of its majesty and *mysterium*—but we cannot step outside and view it and say just *what* it is or *why*. Here we speak in figures, signs, and symbols, drawing upon our apophatic imagination.

Facticity spells the end of authoritarian*ism*, and authoritarianism cuts both ways. Facticity cuts down both transcendentalism and supernaturalism, both the reductionism, of "pure reason" and absolutism of "special revelations," in which the faithful think they have it from God on high. This does not jettison any idea of reason but redescribes it in terms of having "good reasons" to think this rather than that. This does not jettison any idea of revelation but redescribes it. A revelation is not an inbreaking disclosure from a higher world but a striking insight into this world, into a new form of life, the way a whole world is opened up by a poem or a painting. Understood in these terms, Jesus is a theopoet whose poem is called the "kingdom of God," an inverted world in which the first are last and the outsiders are in and the poor are privileged over the rich, a veritable topsy-turvy of reversals that scandalizes the received order of things—in Greek philosophy and in the *imperium Romanum*. The rule in the kingdom of God is not imperial; it is "unconditional" but "without sovereignty" (Derrida).[6] It comes over us not with the prose of power but with the poetry of a parable, in the form of mustard seeds, not metaphysics, of the birds of the air who neither sow nor reap, not on the wings of a mighty celestial army of warrior angels. We embrace this vision at our own risk. It is not a good deal that will yield eternal rewards. If anything, it is a kind of madness (*moria*). Either way, authority has nothing to do with it.

Différance. The classical assumption that multiplicity is a preceded by unity, that difference is a modification of identity, was enshrined and emblematized in the Neoplatonic doctrine of *exitus* and *reditus*, where the many represent a "fall" from *the One* and the goal inscribed in diversity and difference is, like Plato's myth of the androgynous being, to regain its lost unity or at least to imitate it in its own imperfect way. In the radical account, where this is contested at its root, difference is the generative matrix and unity is an effect of diversity, identity a provisional result achieved by the work (or the play) of differences.

This way of thinking about identity and difference draws upon the model of linguistic difference, which is *differential* difference. This is not binary difference, which promotes the dualist categories that prevail in traditional theology and philosophy (body/soul, time/eternity, matter/spirit, male/female), and not ternary difference, which promotes dialectical and trinitarian thinking, which claims to reconcile these dualities. In linguistic difference, meaning is a differential effect produced by the discernible "space" between signifiers, like king/ring/sing, *roi/moi/loi*. In this account, a word is not a free-standing unit which gives outer material expression to an inner event of the soul; it is a signifier produced by its iterability, its repetition, inside a system in which it is differentially related with other signifiers. Meaning is an effect of the coded use of conventionally agreed-upon and intrinsically arbitrary signifiers. Derrida's earliest work was to show the way that even the ideality of an "ideal meaning" (identity) is a function of repetition (difference); it does not occupy an ideal trans-historical realm from which it enters an "empirical" language. A word is not only repeatable; it is *constituted* by repetition. In linguistic difference, repetition produces what it repeats, produces it by repeating it, in just the way the repetition of an improvisation gives it the status of the original. The copies produce the original; they do not reproduce it. This is interestingly illustrated by the history of the very word, the most famous one, which was coined to describe this process—*différance*.[7] Derrida introduced the intentional misspelling in order to say that this was not a word in the language but a non-word which points to how linguistic effects are produced. But, as Richard Rorty pointed out, this was true only the *first time* he used the word.[8] Once he spoke it or wrote it down, it became repeatable, and indeed it was repeated so often that it become one of the most famous words in twentieth-century European philosophy, enshrined in any dictionary of contemporary theory.

Conflict and Contestation. This shift to a differential framework casts notions like "conflict," "contestation," and "dissent" in a new light where they play a creative role and are no longer under suspicion. In the monist or monological scheme, the many is an inflection of *the one*, "fallen" from the univocity of the one. They are suspect characters, outsiders or outlaws, rogues or undesirables, incommensurate with the measure of all things, unreconciled to *the one* true way. The very grammar of "dissent" casts a veil of distrust over the idea, presupposing a normative sense or *sententia* from which it is departing.

But in radical thinking, to "contest" is the mark not of a perverse desire to deviate from a prior truth but of a search for truth, which proceeds by testing, contesting, and attesting, by experimenting, exploring, and improvising, in search of tentative constructions. On the radical account, unity is a temporary and provisional effect of multiplicity and an "essence" is like a field report sent back from journalists giving us a reading on present conditions. When Aristotle "defined" human beings as "rational animals" (*zoon echon logon*), he thought he was identifying an unchanging essence or species but what he was doing was giving us a progress report on the current state of evolution. Two hundred thousand years earlier no such being existed and, given the current trajectory of AI research, robotology, and information technology, it may well be that humans will not be around much longer, if and when the "post-humanists" succeed in becoming post-biological. The stabilized unity of a linguistic "meaning" or of an ontological "essence" is like a freeze-frame in a video, or a frozen waterfall, or the photographs we see of athletes or dancers snapped at a moment when their bodies are completely airborne, no more able to last than a dancer could "hold it" in mid-air so we can take a picture.

In radical thinking, it is essence which represents the fall—from movement, from life. To valorize the unity, silence, and timeless stillness of essence is to deal in death, to collect mummified forms, to content oneself with the inscriptions on tombstones instead of living beings. "Essence" and "meaning" are words that are best reserved for eulogies, words of praise we can pronounce over the late lamented when we can speak with the assurance that we will not be refuted, that the dead will not prove us wrong in the future by contradicting what we have said about them. We can pronounce *the* meaning of a word only in a dead language, when we make an inventory of every known use of the word, without fear that some rogue of a poet will come along and make this word dance to a new tune, coin a new metaphor, and confound our definitive pronouncement.

This is not an esoteric point, and radical thinking is not a purely academic exercise reserved for graduate seminars in theory. This is the concrete movement of life, the energy and ecstasy of existence, and it affects everything nearest and dearest to us.

What is the essence of democracy? It does not have an essence; it has a hope for the future, for a "democracy-to-come," and in that expression, the "to-come"—the infinitival, infinitizing force—is more important than the "democracy," which threatens to decline or relapse into an essence.[9] The to-come, taken radically, is not the foreseeable future but the coming of what we cannot see coming. The hope, the promise harbored in the word "democracy" is also a risk; it cannot be insulated from the threat that its fragile hold on reality will be broken by the disaster of a demagoguery, which, given the contingencies of history, the accidentality of time and place, in short of facticity, we can never rule out.

What is Christianity? It does not have an essence; it has a history. Well, then, what is the meaning of its history? We do not know yet. It is not over. It is not dead yet. The various declarations of its "essence" are so many still lives, freeze frames. In saying this, we are not putting words in its mouth. We are saying what it itself says, that it is a prayer for the kingdom-*to-come*, a coming kingdom which stands in judgment of every *existing* kingdom. So whenever something tries to pass itself off as *the* kingdom, *the one* kingdom, we must object, defer from this announcement, dissent, disagree, contest this proclamation—in the name of the kingdom *to-come*. This kingdom does not exist; it *insists*. The kingdom does not exist; it *calls for* existence. In this expression, the "kingdom-to-come," the "to-come" is more important than the "kingdom," and this is because when we call for the kingdom, what is being called for, what is calling, is the coming of what we cannot see coming. It may be that what is required in and by the name of Christianity will require that at some point "Christianity" will no longer be required. "Jesus" and the "kingdom" are icons of something coming, where the "second coming" will surprise everyone.

What is democracy? Justice? Christianity? Humanity? God? The list goes on and the answer is always we do not know yet. History is not over. They have not died yet. When they are good and dead, we will write their eulogy and say what contribution they have made without fear of contradiction.

The Catholic Principle. Opposite this rule of eulogy and death is the rule of life and the future, of the spirit, which gives life. Once a belief or practice is immunized against alteration, it gives up its spirit; it hardens over, seizes up, sediments, atrophies, becomes sclerotic, setting itself up over and against the to-come, which means a menace to the spirit. Contestability is a sign of life; it is life. The Catholic tradition wisely chose to invoke tradition as its very principle. The scriptures are not the foundation of the tradition, their measuring rod, but the *effect* of the tradition, a *product* of an oral tradition sustained by people who were not well born (1 Cor 1:26), not an educated elite, from which what was written down is *derived*. The *promise* contained in writing down these stories is to give them a future, to make them available for endless *re*telling, *re*petition, *re*invention, producing what they repeat. The *danger* this posed—Derrida called it the "dangerous supplement," the danger of the technology of writing, the *pharmakon*, the poison/cure—is that it would rigidify, codify, canonize a process. "The Church" avoided biblicism but only by making the opposite mistake, absolutizing itself. As Alfred Loisy said, the early Jesus people were expecting the second coming and what they got instead was the Church! After the Reformation, it became a matter of "picking your poison"—infallibility or inerrancy, a real Pope or a paper pope, notions equally hostile to tradition, spirit, life, in a word, Derrida's word, to the *event*, the coming of what we did not see coming.

In speaking of a "principle" (*principium*, *arche*) in radical theology, I do not mean a proposition, like a premise in logic or an axiom in geometry or a ruling authority, which would be precisely to prevent the event. A *principium* here is not a logical proposition but an ontological force, like the source of a river, a fountainhead, an initiating impulse, a historical impetus, an originary source of momentum. Looked at formally it is a quasi-principle, one which produces only relatively stable and provisional results, no finalized products, no fixed margins. It is a slightly anarchic *arche*, issuing in traditions in the lower case and the plural. Then, instead of *the one* tradition, it issues in the messy life of transmissions, in the plural, of letters lost in the mail, hidden layers, anonymous interventions, creative reinventions, translations, mistranslations, creative misunderstandings, strong readings, messages in a bottle, lost stories, copyist errors, palimpsests, rival editions and redactions, competing agendas, and betrayals. Tradition is the transmitting of multiple missions, omissions, emissions, transmissions, permissions, commissions, which make their way across the surface of history like water finding its own way down a hill.

A principle is an imperative which urges us forward, a call, even a prayer, which calls "come" to the future. A radical theology of tradition is a theology of the event, of the coming of what we cannot see coming, which poses the promise/threat of tradition, an openness to the future that is not without risk. The challenge for the advocates of tradition is to have the courage of their convictions, instead of paying it lip service while seeking to build up a bulwark against its unwieldy ways. In a radical theology of the event, the memories and the promises of Jesus are not modelled on the imperial ideal of *the-one*-holy-catholic-and-apostolic Church but of an *anthology*, which literally means a collection of flowers, letting many flowers bloom, of a *festival* of many poems and poets, artists, songs, and storytellers. Instead of a single star, it prefers a heavenly vault of innumerable stars which we are forced to read in order to find our way. Instead of a monad, a mosaic of multiple, different pieces whose colors play off each other to glorious effect. Instead of deciding (*hairesis*) on the monotony of essence, on the unity of a definition, on the straight rod of a canon, why not prefer a wondrous array of irregular and unpredictable variations, like the magnificent mountain formations etched over the eons? Why in heaven's name would they do such a thing? It had nothing to do with heaven and even less with Yeshua. It had to do with empire, with the very "powers and principalities" against which the "kingdom" was meant to be the protest, with which it did contest, in the name of God.

The authors of the canon, of the definitions that put an end (*finis*) to open-ended becoming, did not trust the tradition; they used it to serve their purposes. They feared the event. They did not trust the promptings of the spirit, which open us to the event. They paid lip service to the principle *ubi spiritus, ibi ecclesia*,[10] but they meant the opposite, as if the spirit has written the Church a blank check, authorizing it to speak in its name. A *formal* authority—as opposed to the *material* authority of something that can *speak for itself*—is auto-forming, self-authorizing; no one has formally authorized the founding authorities. Legend has it that Napoleon took the crown from the Pope and crowned himself the emperor. No one formally authorized the authors of the American "Declaration of Independence" to declare independence. They took a *risk* that they had the spirit on their side and that it would catch on. The later church authorized itself, putting the words "thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church" in the mouth of a pious Jew who intended no such thing. The fourth century councils had Constantine on their side, not the spirit, *ubi imperium, ibi ecclesia*, and the only risk involved was to resist Constantine. Today, "the Church," *s'il y en a*, as if there were *one* homogenous thing that answered to that name, would do well to listen to the promptings of the spirit about same-sex love, the place of women in the church, the suffering of the poor, and the plight of the planet itself.[11] The spirit is not about the hierarchy but the hieranarchy, the *populus Dei*, the multitudes, *ta me onta* (I Cor 1:28), and above all about the event, the to-come. The Spirit comes as the event. The tradition is the spirit of the event, of the to-come, of the openness of the future. Tradition transmits the hope, the prayer, that the future is always better, not because it is, but because that is what we hope and pray, that is what we mean by the spirit.

The unconditional, the undeconstructible, the incontestable. The attempt to construct a first or final authority, a locatable, identifiable, supreme authority, is idolatrous. It confuses the conditional with the unconditional, the contestable with the incontestable, the construction with the undeconstructible. It attempts to prevent the event, to escape the unyielding force of facticity, to contain the unwieldy ways of history, to build a castle of sand which tide and time will not wipe away. This is not to say that there is nothing to which radical thinking swears allegiance, nothing it holds sacred. Radical thinking is not as an exercise in antinomianism, not an anything-goes anarchy. Its protests and contests are always in the name of the *incontestable*; its negotiations with conditions are always in the name of the *unconditional*; its dealings in constructions are always in the name of the *undeconstructible*. Radical theology is a theology of the incontestable, the unconditional, the undeconstructible, which take the place of a first or final *authority*. In thinking in terms of testing, contesting, and attesting, the only thing truly *in*contestable is the unconditional, the undeconstructible *but*—and this is key—this is never a fixed and determinate thing, never anything conditioned and constructed, never an identifiable something or somebody, no matter how gloriously adorned. That does not mean that some constructions are not better than others. Justice cannot be reduced to the law, because justice, which is always calling, always to-come, is undeconstructible, and laws are constructions. But some laws are better than others. Some laws say "come" to the coming of the event, seeking to keep the future open, and some seek to close it off, to prevent the event.

The incontestable/unconditional/undeconstructible cannot be reduced to a Super-Somebody who is coming to get us at the end of time if we do not behave ourselves. It is not a straight rod against which we can measure deviations. Here, orthodoxy is a misunderstanding, as if the unconditional could be shrunk down and fitted inside propositional rectitude. The unconditional is the stuff of a kind of *Ur*-doxy, a primordial faith (*foi*, *fides*) in being-itself which exceeds any particular belief (*croyance*, *credo*) in this being or that, however "supreme" the being may be and with however many omni-attributes it is embellished. The incontestable should never be confused with something conditional and contestable, like a book or an institution, a definition or a rule. It is the beating heart of an open-ended process, an ongoing event which comes without coercion and external authority; it is not an unnamable One but omninamable multitude. It is not an infinite being but an infinitival expectation. The unconditional is a lure, the God ahead, the coming God, a call which exposes dogmatic authority as a mirage, as more a matter of pathology than a theology.

To be sure, while we seek the unconditional all we ever find is conditions. That is because conditions are the only things that exist and provide our sole access to the unconditional. But conditions never get as far as the unconditional and must never be confused with it. The unconditional is not a being whose existence which can be proven but an element or a quality in things which can be testified to or attested. It is always encountered *under* certain conditions, *iconic* conditions—like Yeshua, in whose life and death "we" (who have inherited this name) catch sight of something unconditional, attesting to something incontestable, something of unconditional worth. The unconditional does not exist apart from the conditions under which it is found but there it is the *excess in* any particular set of conditions which prevents them from closing over, from closing down.

The incontestable/unconditional/undeconstructible is not an ideal which we can foresee but not attain. It is a dream, a hope against hope, a radical prayer—for the event, for the coming of what we cannot see coming, for the kingdom-to-come, the justice-to-come, for the event that is harbored in the name (of) "God," the spark of hope set off by this name. The unconditional does not exist, not as such, but it happens. The kingdom of God does not exist, not as such, but it is *attested* to every time the hungry are fed or the stranger made welcome. The incontestable is experienced in the to-come, in the call for the coming of the kingdom, of something I know not what, which keeps the future open. The unconditional comes over us with the weak force of a call, not the strong force of an authority. The unconditional comes without sovereignty as the powerless power of a solicitation which calls upon us from on high in the face of a stranger laid low, which speaks for itself. The unconditional calls of itself, from itself, without the economy of eternal rewards or punishments, without the threat to separate the sheep from the goats, the faithful from the infidels, the orthodox from the heretics. The unconditional resonates below the radar of true beliefs and false as the groundless ground of that in which we live and move and have our being, the *prius*, the unprethinkable, being-itself—"it" does not care what you call it—which is always already there, long before the police of orthodoxy arrive on the scene searching for dissenters.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le nom* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 85; *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 71.
2. Erin Vearncombe, B. Brandon Scott, Hal Taussig, *After Jesus Before Christianity: A Historical Exploration of the First Two Centuries of Jesus Movements* (New York: HarperCollins, 2021).
3. Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
4. John D. Caputo, *Specters of God: An Anatomy of the Apophatic Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).
5. F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Revelation (1841–42) and Related Texts*, ed. and trans. Klaus Ottmann (Putnam, CN: Spring Publications: 2020), 124–45.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. *Peggy Kamuf* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 202–37.
7. See my account of *différance* with the pertinent citations in John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. with a new Introduction (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997, 2020), 96–105.
8. Richard Rorty, "Deconstruction and Circumvention," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 102–103. For a commentary, see John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 95–101.

9. Jacques Derrida, "Politics and Friendship," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews: 1971–2001*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 182.
10. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, III, 24.
11. See John D. Caputo, "Tradition and Event: Radicalizing the Catholic Principle," in *In Search of Radical Theology: Expositions, Explorations, Exhortations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 29–44.