Flight of the Gods

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

Edited by
ILSE N. BULHOF and LAURENS TEN KATE

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# CONTENTS

Preface vii  
*Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate*

Echoes of an Embarrassment: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology—An Introduction 1  
*Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate*

1. Cloud of Unknowing: An Orientation in Negative Theology from Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckhart, and John of the Cross to Modernity 58  
*Bert Blans*

2. Is the Ontological Argument Ontological? The Argument According to Anselm and Its Metaphysical Interpretation According to Kant 78  
*Jean-Luc Marion*

3. Two Forms of Negative Theology Explained Using Thomas Aquinas 100  
*Jozef Wissink*

4. Zarathustra's Yes and Woe: Nietzsche, Celan, and Eckhart on the Death of God 121  
*Dirk de Schutter*

5. Being Unable to Speak, Seen As a Period: Difference and Distance in Jean-Luc Marion 143  
*Victor Kal*

6. The Theology of the Sign and the Sign of Theology: The Apophatics of Deconstruction 165  
*Hent de Vries*

7. Being Open As a Form of Negative Theology: On Nominalism, Negative Theology, and Derrida's Performative Interpretation of 'Khôra' 194  
*Ilse N. Bulhof*
| 8. Crisis in Our Speaking about God: Derrida and Barth's Epistle to the Romans | 222 |
| Rico Sneller |
| 9. The Gift of Loss: A Study of the Fugitive God in Bataille’s Atheology, with References to Jean-Luc Nancy | 249 |
| Laurens ten Kate |
| 10. Is Adorno’s Philosophy a Negative Theology? | 292 |
| Gerrit Steunebrink |
| 11. “No Spiritual Investment in the World As It Is”: Jacob Taubes’s Negative Political Theology | 319 |
| Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit |
| 12. The Author’s Silence: Transcendence and Representation in Mikhail Bakhtin | 353 |
| Anton Simons |
| 13. On Faith and the Experience of Transcendence: An Existential Reflection on Negative Theology | 374 |
| Paul Moyaert |
| Epilogue | 383 |
| Ilse N. Bulhof |
| General Bibliography | 389 |
| Index of Names and Titles | 425 |
| General Index | 429 |
| About the Authors | 439 |
PREFACE

Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate

The question concerns neither dogmatics nor any articles of faith. The question is simply, whether God has fled from us or not, and whether we are still able to experience this flight truly and creatively.

Martin Heidegger*

VANTAGE POINT OF THIS BOOK

Contemporary continental philosophy approaches metaphysics with great reservation. A point of criticism concerns traditional focuses on philosophical speaking about God. Whereas Nietzsche, with his question “God is dead; who killed Him?,” was, in his time, highly shocking and ‘unzeitgemäß,’ the twentieth century, in contrast, saw Heidegger’s concept of ‘onto-theology’ quickly become a famous term. This concept expresses a critical attitude toward the God of the philosophers who is only to be conceived of according to the logic of Being. In Heidegger’s words, to such a God we can neither pray nor kneel. He did not, however, return to the God of the Christian faith, but tried to initiate a new philosophical way of speaking about God—a way that also reveals the limits of philosophical discourse. Thinkers like Derrida, Marion, Bataille, Adorno, Taubes, and Bakhtin, each in their own way, continue the exploration begun by Nietzsche and Heidegger. It is striking that what once belonged to the traditional domain of philosophical theology now finds new life among these contemporary thinkers in the form of cultural philosophical reflections.

The authors of this book take a fresh look at these developments,

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    Representation in Mikhail Bakhtin
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    Existential Reflection on Negative Theology
    Paul Moyaert

Epilogue
   Ilse N. Bulhof

General Bibliography
   389

Index of Names and Titles
   425

General Index
   429

About the Authors
   439
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* Mein bisheriger Weg (1937/38; Gesamtausgabe 66, 415. (Editor's translation.)
and try to reach their own view. The 'death of God,' as the editors note in the Introduction, announces not only the death of the 'old god'—the god of philosophers, theologians, and believers—but also the death of the modern god who set himself on his own throne: autonomous human reason. With the death of this 'new god,' might a sensitivity reappear for transcendence, for difference, for the sacred, for negation, in short, for religion? Or will religion return to us on its own terms, whether we want it or not? In listening to the reactions to this dethronement of autonomous reason, the editors believe they hear echoes of an experience of embarrassment rooting partly in an old tradition: negative theology. The editors present this book as a platform for investigating this embarrassment.

In the first three texts, the history of negative theology in the Middle Ages and the possible rediscovery of this history in our time are discussed. Thinkers such as Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckhart, and John of the Cross, whom the first chapter treats, and Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas, to whom the second and third chapters are devoted, will be central to this discussion. The following chapters study the question of whether aspects of this tradition can be found in modern authors like Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Marion, Levinas, Derrida, Barth, Eco, Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy, Foucault, Adorno, Taubes, and Bakhtin. A short phenomenological reflection on the specific experience of faith and an Epilogue conclude the book.

The Articles

The first series starts with a contribution by Bert Blans (Chapter 1). Blans reviews several well-known names from the tradition of negative theology (Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckhart, John of the Cross). He shows how their work can have a contemporary meaning by highlighting the debate between thinking on unity and thinking on exteriority; Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida serve as points for comparison.

Jean-Luc Marion (Chapter 2) focuses on the work of Anselm of Canterbury and stresses his famous, but equally enigmatic 'proof of God.' This proof is nearly always seen, especially since Kant's inter-
pretation of it, as Anselm’s attempt to think of God as the funda-
ment of Being: God would then be reduced to the abstract concept
of a Highest Being, to “something such that anything greater than it
cannot be thought.” Marion, however, shows that Anselm’s speaking
about God leans more toward the tradition of negative theology
since it opposes the metaphysical identification of God with a con-
cept of Being. Kant’s criticism of the proof of God rests on a misun-
derstanding, for “God’s existence is demonstrated, but without any
claim to having a concept of His essence...”

Jozef Wissink (Chapter 3) describes how elements of negative the-
ology are at work in Thomas Aquinas’s systematic works, and how
this encourages a redefinition and revaluation of Thomas’s work,
which for centuries has been the basis of the teachings of the Catho-
lic Church. Wissink uses the work of two contemporary theologians to
provide a contrast with and a perspective on Thomas’s position.

The ensuing chapters start with a study on Friedrich Nietzsche by
Dirk de Schutter (Chapter 4). As the editors note in their Introducti-
on, the former’s philosophy opened the “space” in which the twen-
tieth-century search for a new way to speak about God takes place.
Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God is an attempt to dis-
mantle theology and morality as it had developed within traditional
nineteenth-century Christianity. In the place of the Christian idea of
meaningful suffering, Nietzsche posits a suffering without a higher
meaning or cause. His Dionysian philosophy affirms in a new way
ancient concepts such as ‘good news,’ ‘creatio ex nihilo,’ and ‘incar-
nation.’ De Schutter shows how Nietzsche’s criticism takes the shape
of a parody in which, surprisingly, we hear themes resonate from
Eckhart’s negative theology and the lyricism of Paul Celan. The au-
thor also draws a line from Nietzsche’s parodic thinking to Heideg-
ger’s critical analysis of ‘onto-theology.’

Among contemporary thinkers influenced by Nietzsche and Hei-
degger, who in their own way follow in their footsteps, are Derrida,
Jean-Luc Marion, and Georges Bataille.

Marion directly resumes the negative theology developed in the
Christian tradition but lost in modern times. Victor Kal (Chapter 5)
outlines how Marion reaches a theology of distance, a distance that

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1 Kant rejects Anselm’s ‘argument’ because he believes it is ontological.
2 Karl Barth and the Dutch theologian/ethicist Harry Kuitert.
must be eternally "walked through" and in which we must abandon all idols and concepts, even our metaphysical-religious images of God. Kal emphasizes Heidegger's influence on Marion's work and brings him into a discussion with two exponents of contemporary French philosophy: Derrida and Levinas.

Although Derrida admits to feeling a certain affinity for negative theology, he, unlike Marion, dissociates himself from its Greek-metaphysical and Christian content. Derrida's intense attempts to deconstruct and rearticulate the inheritance of negative theology result in his playing a central role in this book; three chapters are devoted to his work. Hent de Vries (Chapter 6) shows that Derrida is done an injustice by those who would label him a neostructuralist, and argues that Derrida cannot be completely understood when studied either only against the background of Jewish tradition or only against that of negative theology. De Vries shows how the paths of deconstruction and negative theology cross and where they diverge. Ilse Bulhof (Chapter 7) contrasts negative theology to nominalism as described in Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*. In her view Derrida can be better understood against the background of negative theology than that of nominalism. But Derrida's resumption of negative theology bears a totally unique stamp: in his work we find more a performance of, rather than a presentation about, a transcendence which, like the 'khora' in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, 'is' nothing, has nothing unique, cannot be put into words, and is open to all names without ever coinciding with any. Rico Sneller (Chapter 8) confronts Derrida's treatment of negative theology with the work of the theologian Karl Barth, specifically with his explanation of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. He 'organizes' this discussion by using Derrida's commentaries on Levinas's thinking.

According to Laurens ten Kate (Chapter 9), the French writer, philosopher, and theoretician Georges Bataille points to the impossibility of escaping the questions posed by negative theology; the problem of negative theology lies at the heart of modernity: How do we react to the emptiness that God's disappearance, His death, has left behind? Is it possible to speak about God, however negatively? Perhaps in raising these questions and in recognizing their unanswerability, this speaking has already begun—without the promise of an answer, but as the (always uncertain) answer to the promise. Ten Kate outlines the way in which Bataille's "atheology" uncovers how
the experience of the death of God—strangely enough—might be the only *sacred* experience left to modern culture: an “inner experience,” as Bataille calls it, that is both our poverty and our “opportunity.” He explains Bataille’s thinking against the background of two contemporary French thinkers who, critically and from a distant nearness, have continued along his path: Michel Foucault and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Even the title, *Negative Dialectics*, of the last great work by the philosopher Theodor Adorno makes us think of negative theology. Gerrit Steunebrink (Chapter 10) compares the ideas of negative theology with Adorno’s thesis on *utopia* as a radical surpassing and denial of what is: the existing unjust world, source of his “*unausdenkbare Verzweiflung* (unthinkable despair).” According to Steunebrink, the expected utopia as Adorno sees it is not the expected Messiah, nor the expected Kingdom of God. Although this utopia is a kingdom without God, a gift without giver, people are nevertheless unable to bring it about by themselves. The author contrasts Adorno’s inner conflict between hope and despair with Kant’s trust in God and his belief that history will finally come to a good end.

In a completely different way Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit (Chapter 11) find echoes of negative theology in the work of a thinker who, like Adorno, is of Jewish origin: Jacob Taubes. Taubes developed a ‘negative political theology.’ The authors confront Taubes’s project with the thought of Carl Schmitt, with whom Taubes maintained an intriguing contact; Schmitt’s writings are an emotional plea for a *positive* political theology in which political power is a representative of religious, ‘theological’ authority. Taubes, in his own political theology, replaces an appropriation of the future (the ‘Eschaton’) by worldly powers with an attitude of detachment and a refusal to “invest” an ultimately spiritual authority in the political world. This attitude is nourished by a messianic expectation that calls for preparedness for the end, the coming of the Messiah.

In twentieth-century Russia—a country that belongs to Orthodox culture, in which apophatic (negative) theology has played an important role over the centuries—amid the terror of communism, there was an echo of negative theology: the work of the philosopher and literary theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin. Anton Simons (Chapter 12) shows how Bakhtin seeks links with negative theology within the
context of a violent situation: Stalinism. Bakhtin feels himself com-
pelled to articulate an ethic of justice and responsibility, but his
problem is that the need to speak about violence and injustice col-
lides with the impossibility of the ‘correct’ word. This impasse leads
Bakhtin to his ideas on dialogue as an eternal, an unending, polyph-
ony that neither can nor may cease and that involves people in the
absence of every “last word.” This absence itself is the “last word”
to be heard in modern culture. Bakhtin thus rejects pure silence—
but, as a consequence, his own silence on the situation in which he
works and lives becomes problematic.

The book closes with an existential-phenomenological reflection
by Paul Moyaert (Chapter 13). He presents the experience of embar-
rassment in negative theology as an experience of faith that may well
belong to our times. Moyaert thinks a form of negative theology may
be the only possible theology left us: a form of reflection in which
faith is maintained despite knowing better, a form based on a funda-
mental attitude of trust for which no reason can be given. We can
no longer, like Dionysius, maintain a negative theology while continu-
ing to hold on to the idea that all of creation witnesses to God. For
modern people, reacting to God’s transcendence means surviving the
silence He has left behind. We observe a modern ‘relationship’ to
God when we think of the image of the lover who trusts the beloved
as long as possible, to the extreme, whatever she or he does. This
relationship consists in the absence of every guarantee. A modern
faith can only be a “groundless,” empty faith.

Genesis

The research that led to this book arose in the framework of the
Research Program in Cultural Philosophy sponsored by the Depart-
ment of Philosophy and Ethics, at the Catholic Theological Univer-
sity of Utrecht. In 1990 a conference was held, in conjunction with
the then ‘Subjectivity, Rationality, and Normativity’ Network, at the
International School for Philosophy in Leusden, The Netherlands.
Papers presented at this conference were later published in Ilse N.
Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate, eds., Ons ontbreken heilige namen
(Holy names are lacking; Kampen: Kok, 1992). During a visit to The
Netherlands in 1993, Professor John D. Caputo, of the Department
of Philosophy, Villanova University, in Pennsylvania, expressed interest in the book's themes. He proposed an English-language edition. The editors then decided to thoroughly rework the Dutch version for this English edition: new articles were added, a few of the original articles were dropped, and all the other articles were rewritten to a greater or lesser degree. Those who have worked on this new book are honored that Fordham University Press is willing to publish it in its series *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy*. They express their thanks to Professor Caputo for his initiative and mediation, and hope that *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* will contribute to a fruitful intercontinental exchange of research and ideas.

The editors wish to thank the Catholic Theological University of Utrecht, in particular the Department of Philosophy and Ethics, which offered the intellectual and organizational room that made this project possible. This is especially true of Professor Dr. Peter Jonkers, chairman of the research group. We also want to thank Professor Theo Zweerman for his long involvement with this book's content. Finally, our thanks go to Catherine Vanhove-Romanik, STL, who undertook the not inconsiderable task of translating nearly all the texts.
Chapter 8
Crisis in Our Speaking about God
DERRIDA AND BARTH’S EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

Rico Sneller

1. Introduction

How are we to speak about God? This apparently innocent question, put in passing, conceals a history. It conceals the exhaustion of a certain way of philosophizing. It is, perhaps, the result of a kind of thinking that in itself tries to find its own anchor. This type of thinking, which accompanies modernity and the Enlightenment, is repeatedly and with ever shorter intervals confronted with its limit.

While apophatic traditions long ago referred to God’s ultimate unspeakableness (‘regarding the divine denials are true, assertions insufficient’), this call seems to have been repeated early in the twentieth century and from an unsuspected quarter. Karl Barth, who repeatedly stated that he did not wish to delve into mystical experiences, and who stepped back from every Deus definiri nequit (God cannot be defined) in the sense of Dionysius the Areopagite, at least since the publication of his Epistle to the Romans (second edition, 1922) believes it impossible to speak about God. He studies anew this ancient theme of being unable to speak. But Barth does not intend to draw the Dionysian line further. In his Church Dogmatics, for example, he writes:

Taken in this way, as in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and all his disciples, the Deus definiri nequit is not understood radically enough. Again, we cannot flee from the hiddenness of God into the possibility
of a negative comprehensibility, as if this were less our own human comprehensibility than a positive, and not just as incapable. . . . The misunderstandings of the Deus definiri nequit which we have mentioned—they are the misunderstandings of different varieties of mystical theology—are all of them attempts to evade this task, which means, to evade the true God in His hiddenness. It is advisable not to take part in these attempts.  

It is this “true God in His hiddenness” that Barth seeks to trace anew. The theological tradition of his time offered him little help, perhaps even less than the negative tradition mentioned above. For this nineteenth-century tradition of ‘liberal theology,’ which had sought contact with culture and science, was based on the optimistic attitude of the Enlightenment. If so desired, we could see Barth’s opposition to this foundation—and its imitation in the last century—as one of the signs of its agony.

The consequences of opposing a thinking (‘negative’ or ‘positive’) that, self-satisfied, locates its own purported foundation, are great. God, for Barth, is by no means an extension of humanity or of any human faculty. That is why our speaking about Him always falls short. Barth, echoing Kierkegaard, says that there is an infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity.

For Barth, the eruption of World War I and the support many prominent theologians gave to the German declaration of war unmasked the tradition of his own time. The war was a divine ‘judgment’ on human culture and behavior, and a ‘crisis’ in theological speaking. In his commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, Barth tried to discard certain pretensions of human speaking about God. He delimited what would later be called ‘dialectical theology’ and spoke about God as the ‘wholly Other,’ who made Himself known ‘vertically from above’ (‘senkrecht von oben’). His message is at right angles with this world. Revelation in His son Jesus Christ, says Barth, is not of the order of this world. It is given ever anew, but always remains beyond our reach.

In our time Barth’s resistance to every form of appropriating thinking—and the distant echo of this resistance in apophatic tradi-


2 Ἰδίος comes from Ἰδίνω, which means, among other things, ‘to judge.’
tions—seems to be enjoying a kind of revival. Certainly, there are serious differences in the background and formulation of this resistance. Yet there is a strong similarity between the motor moving the theologian Barth and certain intuitions within contemporary philosophy. The latter also call attention to absolute 'alterity,' to 'the other,' and so on. Critical of the same tradition that Barth attacks, contemporary philosophy tries to discuss something that cannot be captured in words. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, speaks of the radical alterity that we meet in the face of the other human. Using this theme of the other, Levinas guides an important contemporary philosophical debate. Jacques Derrida, whose work can be clarified by this debate, also puts the 'wholly other' central. His thinking starts with an impressive essay on Levinas's oeuvre. In this essay Derrida recognizes the need for the question Levinas developed. Derrida, too, rejects everything, even in Levinas, that resembles a definition or localization of the 'other.' With Levinas, he argues for accepting the 'otherness' of all that refuses to be swallowed by thought. But Derrida seems to argue more stringently in the name of the 'other' that radically escapes every attempt at absorption.

The horizon against which this limitless protection of an untouchable alterity (noli me tangere—do not touch me) must be understood is a particular negative tradition that confronts Western thought with a certain rhetorical weakness.

Even if Derrida's criticism of Levinas should agree with the latter's deepest motives, as they are presented they bring the issue of speaking about God to the utter limits. Derrida goes to an extreme in radically defying the possibility of an absolute presence. We may ask how this criticism relates to Barth's Epistle to the Romans. Like Levinas, Barth seems to give thinking a certain ('positive') orientation. This orientation must prevent our hope and expectation from being defeated by an absolute openness and indeterminacy. But how far does this lead Barth to draw the orientation point into the sphere of the ambivalent and the unsure? This question is, from the Derridian perspective, particularly pressing.

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A confrontation between the Epistle to the Romans and Derrida's thinking, as put forth in his commentary on Levinas, could prove enlightening. If Derrida's criticism of Levinas is correct, theology's right to exist is put at risk. If all speaking about 'above' comes from 'below,' what could this speaking protect or ensure? What could it remove from the domain of ambiguity or doubt? Does Barth really do justice to the "infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity," to use an expression from his Epistle to the Romans? Or does his design give in to Derrida's criticism of metaphysics? I will try to answer these questions in the present chapter.

We should keep in mind that the voices in the contemporary debate about (God's) otherness refer to but are not necessarily direct representations of Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Angelus Silesius. On the contrary, Barth, Levinas, and Derrida sometimes, each in his own way, step back from apophatic silence and mystical vision. Levinas, for example, who is critical of any provision for mystical union beyond the ability of our linguistic expression, says in Totality and Infinity,

This relation [i.e., with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality] does not become an implantation in the other and a confusion with him, does not effect the very identity of the same, its ipseity, does not silence the apology, does not become apostasy and ecstasy. It would be false to qualify [this metaphysical relation] as theological. It is prior to negative or affirmative proposition; it first institutes language, where neither the no nor the yes is the first word.4

Better known are Derrida's (often cited) words in "Differance":

Thus, the detours, phrases and syntax that I shall often have to resort to will resemble—will sometimes be practically indiscernible from—those of negative theology. Already we had to note that difference is not, does not exist, and is not any sort of being-present [τὸ ὄν]. . . . and yet what is thus denoted as différence is not theological, not even in the most negative order of negative theology. The latter, as we know, is always occupied with letting a supra-essential reality go beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastens to remind us that, if we deny the predicate

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of existence to God, it is in order to recognize him as a superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being.\(^5\)

This refusal to flee into what we call ‘negative theology’ does not alter the fact that a discussion about alterity cannot be sufficiently grounded without express reference to it. Using denials when speaking about the divine has resulted in a paradigm that forms one of the hermeneutical horizons of our culture. The pattern of constantly repeated denials seems to be an effective historical means for contemporary thinkers to step back from every totalizing knowledge and its striving for absoluteness.

2. **Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans*: Revelation, Negative Theology, and Crisis of Representation**

*The “Wholly Other”*

Compared with his later *Church Dogmatics*, Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans*\(^6\) goes much further in positing God’s beings wholly other. On nearly every other page we find apophatic terms such as God’s ‘unknownness,’ our ‘ignorance’ about Him, His ‘unapproachable-ness’ and ‘distance,’ and so on. God’s word “intersects . . . vertically from above,” without leaving behind any trace of God as result.

God’s message, says Barth, is God’s message, not human imaginings, suspicions, or ideas. His message intersects, but we cannot grasp it: we must hear it repeatedly and wait. It does not answer our expectations or feelings. It encompasses its own credibility and is not dependent on our evaluation.

Of what does God’s message consist? It is the historical, human figure Jesus of Nazareth, who is *simultaneously* the Christ (the

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\(^5\) “Differance,” in *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 134; French original, *Margins—de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 6. The translation of ‘différence’ (with an a rather than an e) was modified by this author. Regarding this a/e distinction, see Chapter 6, this volume, by Hent de Vries, esp. section 1.

\(^6\) The English quotations here are taken from *Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the 6th German edition by Edwyn C. Hoskins (London: Oxford University Press, 1968); hereafter cited in the text as E. The German version, *Der Römerbrief* (Munich: Kaiser, 1924), is cited in the text as R. The first edition of this work was published in 1919; Barth completely rewrote the second edition, published in 1922.
Anointed'), that is, the locus of God's revelation. In Him our human world and history is limited and delimited. These are not the totality of what is. There is more than this vale of tears. But that this should occur in Jesus of Nazareth, that in Him "two planes intersect, the one known, the other unknown," is only evident after his resurrection. The resurrection is the unique framework that opens our eyes to the "point [Bruchstelle] where the unknown world cuts the known world" (E, 29; R, 5-6).

It is intriguing that, according to Barth, God, in His revelation, gives us a view of the other world without becoming mixed in our world. His 'world' touches us without touching us, "as a tangent touches a circle. . . . And, precisely because it does not touch it, it touches it as its frontier—as the new world" (E, 30; R, 6). According to Barth, Jesus, as person, is not the bearer of revelation. His humanity is subject to all possible ambiguities and doubts. The point is that God reveals through the man Jesus. In the resurrected Jesus God shows us that there is more than this world and this life. But we can never own this knowledge. It is as if we have glimpsed a blinding light that only makes us dizzy and anesthetizes us for an intangible moment. We still do not know what it is we have grasped. We have nothing in hand, and thus have grasped... nothing. Or have we? God's invasion of our world puts in question this world and all the good, the important, and so on that is in it. As 'signal' (Alarmruf) and 'fire alarm' (Feuerzeichen) of the coming new world, it rejects totally our world as it now operates. To use Barth's terminology, Jesus' resurrection displays God's 'no' to this operation. The Resurrection highlights human mortality and finality. It shows us that this life cannot endure eternity.

But this rejection is not the last. It implies a deeper truth, an ultimate 'yes'. This is what Barth calls 'grace'. If God shows us through the Resurrection that this world is not as He wants it to be and can only be crowned with death, He gives us a prospect and a hope for something else. "Precisely because God is all-embracing, it is also His 'yes'" (Gerade weil Gott's Nein ist, ist auch sein Ja!; E, 38; R, 13). In the event that took place early on Easter morning, a promising, messianic sign canceled our sinful, bounded world, God's 'no'. To this operation, the Resurrection highlights human mortality and finality. It shows us that this life cannot endure eternity.

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and His ultimate ‘yes,’ His acceptance of our world, enclosed and protected in His rejection. His total rejection means that He has something totally different in mind. Since Jesus’ resurrection we can want and desire this ‘something else.’

The boundary of this world, God’s ‘no’ to it enclosed in a hidden ‘yes’—all this is expressed in Jesus of Nazareth. But why there? Do not many people, outside and inside Christianity, feel an urge to resist Jesus’ exclusivity?

Barth notes that it is not now, and never will be, at all self-evident that God should reveal Himself in Jesus. Nothing, no quest into our unconscious, no mystical immersion in prayer, or whatever else can bring this awareness to us. That our faith is in Him is a question of God’s trust. Barth often translates the Pauline πίστις with ‘faithfulness’ (Treue).7 By this he means that the initiative in the act of faith lies with God, namely, when He reveals Himself. It does not start with humans. God cannot—to refer to eighteenth-century deistic notions—be known by natural means. One illustration of this is that faith, in practice, has never accepted a proven or derivative God. By this, however, I do not mean to say that for Barth practice is the measure of all things.

Faith in God, that is, faith that corresponds (Gegentreue) to God’s preceding faithfulness, implies a leap in the dark. The one who dares to make this leap, the one who concurs that Jesus’s resurrection means a sudden change for the world, but who concurs that God, in this Resurrection, condemns the way this world operates—this person is a believer. It is not a question of being convinced, for there are no reasons for ‘choosing’ this (corresponding) faith in God. It is a question of a confrontation that leaves us no alternative, a confrontation with an absurdity (i.e., God’s ‘yes’ hidden in His ‘no’) that makes denying it an absurdity, an impossible possibility. Whoever is really touched by the message from the other side can hardly do anything else but assent. But this assent remains without foundation. As assent it is equivalent to a leap in the dark. Because God hides Himself in His revelation, disguises Himself, the man Jesus becomes for us a ‘vast chasm’ (klaffender Abgrund). “In Jesus, God becomes veritably a secret: He is made known as the Unknown, speaking in eternal silence” (E, 98; R, 73). In other words, we can

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7 In Rom. 1.17: οὐ δεῖ δίκαιον ἐξ πίστεως ζησεῖν.
find in Jesus an experience that is not an experience, because, strictly speaking, nothing happens. A puzzle is unveiled, a puzzling condemnation of what is known and familiar.

Further on, in his commentary on Paul’s comparison of Adam and Christ (Rom. 5.12-21), in which ‘Adam’ stands for the old (restricted) world and ‘Christ’ for the new (announced) world, Barth speaks of a ‘dialectical dualism.’ This contrasts with a ‘metaphysical dualism’ in which the one is simply the complete opposite of the other. Dialectical dualism, on the other hand, involves a contrast in which the one alternative elevates, and has always elevated, the other. In other words, the earthly, our vale of tears, has been defeated from the start. The earthly is not related to that of which God has given us a prospect.

The duality hiddenness-unveiling is an apophatic theme. Barth puts it in a completely different framework. Yet there remains a certain parallel between Barth and apophatic thinking, a parallel highlighted in the ambiguous role that Christ’s humanity plays. This ambiguity is easy to illustrate.

Authors like Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, and Angelus Silesius put a hidden, primeval divine essence (divinity) beside or opposite God’s externalization of self-unveiling. This self-unveiling comes down to a self-denial because God presents himself as a figure with which He does not coincide. This is the figure of the creation that flows from Him. Jesus Christ seems to be the model of this creation. As person, he depicts the divine self-surpassment, but then in a superior, divine way. But the question that then arises is, What is the meaning of Christ’s humanity, and by extension, the meaning of his human presence? not only for Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and Angelus Silesius, but also for Barth. Compare the following:

Dionysius the Areopagite: Jesus Christ “was not a human; it is not so that he was human, it is so that He, [born of] humans, was on the far side of humanity and that He, being above humanity, became truly human” (οὔδε ἄνθρωπος ἦν, οὐχ ὁς μὴ ἄνθρωπος, ἀλλ' ὁς εἰς ἄνθρωπον ἐπέκειτα καὶ ἐπὶ ἄνθρωπον ἐνθάδες ἄνθρωπος γεγονότα. See Epistola IV, in Migne, Patrologia Graeca, vol. 3, 7071; see also the unusual § II, 10 of The Divine Names).

Meister Eckhart: “It would have little meaning for me that the Word became flesh for humanity in Christ differing from me in form [supposito illo a me distinto], when [He] did not (become so) in me personally, so that I would be a son of God.” Die lateinischen Werke, 3.101, J. Quint, ed. (Zurich: Diogenes Verlag, 1979).

Angelus Silesius: “Wird Christus tausendmahl zu Bethlehem gebohrt / Und nicht in dir; du bleibst noch Ewiglich verlohrn” (This verse has been omitted from Maria Shrdý’s translation, The Cherubimic Wanderer [New York: Paulist Press, 1986], Book 1, no. 61) “Were Christ to be born a thousand times in Bethlehem / And not in you, you would remain eternally lost.”

Karl Barth: “Within history, Jesus as the Christ can be understood only as Problem or Myth. As the Christ, he brings the World of the Father. But we who stand in this concrete world know nothing, and are incapable of knowing anything of that
The Problem of Language

What ramifications does this have for theological speech about God? How can we speak of Him, if He is totally different from us, if He withdraws Himself from our ability to conceptualize? Does not every attempt to speak about God stumble under the ‘crisis,’ under the judgment He passed on our being human? Would we not do better to keep silent?

Barth is well aware of this problem and will keep it under consideration throughout his theological thinking. His dialectical theology uses a ‘method,’ that is, its dicta go back and forth. In this sense, we could say, it combines and includes dogmatics (positive theology) and criticism (negative theology). According to Barth, dogmatics runs the risk of becoming too abstract, while criticism risks forgetting or neglecting all the positive that lies behind our denials. All positive utterances about God should be intermixed with negative ones. Our speaking must remain paradoxical, that is, in agreement with the vast paradox of God’s revelation in Jesus, His veiling in His unveiling, His ‘yes’ in His ‘no.’ Our speech can only try to refer to a truth that lies on the other side of our human dimension.

Thus, within dialectical theology, speaking has another function than in the apophatic tradition. The latter has all positive speech stop at denials and, ultimately, at a silent contemplation or submerging. The (strikingly) extensive second and third paragraphs of the third chapter of Pseudo-Dionysius’s Divine Names witness to the incompatibility of God’s unspeakableness and the task of making Him known to people. All assertions about God, says Dionysius, have a pedagogical purpose. But they are, and will always remain, insufficient. The tradition of negative theology rests on the presupposition that God’s word must be spread among humans with the only means that are available, however insufficient. True speech (i.e., silence) is reserved for the theological elite.

Opposite this is dialectical speaking. This does not view itself as a necessary evil, but as a hazardous undertaking. Speaking is impossible...
ble but is still required! Barth holds firmly to the hope that failure, sometimes beyond our willing, is followed by new attempts to succeed.

In his book *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology*, Graham Ward observes that Barthian thinking seems in some places to resemble but not to coincide with the apophatic. The negative, he says, is only one moment in Barth’s thinking, albeit an important one. He notes that “the question arises, then, as to why Barth combines a positivist rhetoric and a transcendental epistemology for an apophatic end. The answer . . . lies in the fact that this negative moment becomes a positive one.” Yet it is not correct, Ward continues, that the negative of the dialectic and the positive of the dogmatic should be kept too far apart as if they represented two separate theological stadia in Barth. Both should be understood together on the basis of what Barth would later call the *analogia fidei* (our speaking about God can only be upwardly reevaluated to truth in and through faith): “Too many critics have drawn a sharp distinction between Barth’s dialectical and dogmatic thinking, emphasizing the negativity of dialectics and the positive theology that issues from the *analogia fidei*. But in *The Göttingen Dogmatics* Barth draws together and demonstrates the complicity of dialogical, dialectical and dogmatic thinking.”

While Barth does not distinguish the ‘methods’ mentioned above (dogmatic, critical, and dialectic) in his *Epistle to the Romans*, he does employ dialectical speaking. In the chapter entitled “The New Man” (on Rom. 5.1–2) he describes the impossible situation in which we stand in our time, and in which Paul stood in his. “He [Paul] stands in a most remarkable situation. For he has to speak the unspeakable [reden zu müssen von dem, vonwon man doch nicht reden kann] and to bear witness to that of which God is the only witness” (E, 152; R, 128). This is the opposite of what Wittgenstein had written a few years earlier in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp at the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”.

Of particular importance here is what Barth says about religion.

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11 Ibid., 96.
All forms of religious expression—including theological speaking—could be compared with the fallout that follows the bomb of revelation. This includes the marginal phenomena, the human reactions, that belong to the human, worldly sphere. These come under the crisis that revelation as such means for people and the world.

Yet Barth thinks that religion is the highest human possibility. Belonging to the earthly, the human, it is a limited possibility. But in referring to something new, something higher that “bears witness to, and is embraced by, the promise of a new and higher order by which it is itself severely limited,” it is encompassed by a special promise. In religion, people are drawn, as it were, as close as possible to the limit. Religious people approach a narrow area where contrasts are sharp. The higher one rises, the deeper one can fall: The religious person, says Barth, is “at once positive, in that he bears noble witness to the relation which exists between God and man; and negative, in that in him human nature is confronted by the reality of God.” But the religious person never goes beyond the limit, never reaches God on his or her own power either in intuition, feeling, or knowledge. Human speech, human references, are the furthest we can go toward approaching the limit. They can never make God present.

Further on Barth comes close to a ‘representationist’ conception of religion and religious speaking. Religion is described in terms of a copy or model. From the human world, it bears witness to the divine. Barth writes, “Placed outside the region of divinity, religion, nevertheless, represents [vertritt] divinity as its delegate or impress or negative” (E, 254; R, 236).

Barth’s Epistle to the Romans is here on the verge of a more classic approach to thinking about representation. The expression “placed outside the region of divinity” is striking. Apparently there is a break between the divine and the human, between the exterior and the inner. The immediate relation is lost. Religion bears witness to this break. It guards the borders of our existence. “There is no human advance beyond the possibility of religion, for religion is the last step in human progress. Standing as it does within humanity but outside divinity, it bears witness [weist hin] to that which is within divinity [das göttliche Innerhalb], but outside humanity [das Außerhalb der Humanität]” (E, 254; R, 237).

In this way our human speaking about God does refer to the other side. But we never know with certitude whether it is about Him, or
whether it is just words without referent. For this very reason, because of this referring, it is desirable that we all be religious people: people who honor, respect, and apply ourselves, people who keep religion alive by continually ‘revolutionizing’ (revolutionieren) it (E, 254; R, 237). Religion puts people in an impossible situation: when we stand on the borderline, all that we hold valuable seems to be crushed. In this extreme situation, we end up standing there empty-handed.

In the chapter in the Epistle to the Romans entitled “The God of Jacob” (on Rom. 9.6–13), Barth extends the question of speaking about God to cover the echoing of God’s word: by people, in the church. But ultimately, this echoing comes down to speaking about God; it is a speaking that in one way or another makes God the point of discussion, draws attention to Him. It is an echoing that wants to be a speaking about. Nevertheless, Barth continually calls upon the dialectic of God’s word and human utterances, underpinning this dialectic with numerous italics that regrettably have disappeared in the translation. His argument is charged and passionate. Compare:

[on Rom. 9.13] The Theme of the Church is the Very Word of God—the Word of Beginning and End, of the Creator and Redeemer, of Judgement and Righteousness: but the Theme is proclaimed by human lips and received by human ears. The Church is the fellowship of men who proclaim the Word of God and hear it. It follows from this situation that, when confronted by the adequacy of the Word of God, human lips and ears must display their inadequacy [versagen gegenüber]; that, though men are bound to receive and proclaim the Truth as it is with God, as soon as they do receive it and do proclaim it it ceases to be the Truth; that, however true the Theme of the Church may be, as the theme of the Church it is untrue. This is at once the miracle [my italics] and the tribulation of the Church, for the Church is condemned by that which establishes it, and is broken in pieces upon its foundations [dass also das Thema der Kirche so wahr ist, das es als Thema der Kirche nie wahr sein kann—es geschehe denn das Wunder!—dass ist ihre eigentliche Not]. (E, 341; R, 325ff)

God’s word and human utterances: the one infallible, the other continually failing. Both remain separate. Paul, Barth says, knows God’s word as something absolute, as something “independent” of the human. Were this not so, he continues, Paul would have known God’s word as one word among many others; then he would have
complained that “the word of God hath come to nought” (cf. Rom. 9.6); then he would have “set to work to consider how he may best repair the breach.” But this is not necessary. God helps His own word, He is its guarantee.

One inconspicuous phrase that I have highlighted from the quotation above deserves special attention (although here the English version is hardly exact). God’s word is never inadequate, while human speech always is, unless a miracle occurs! —a miracle that arouses the human word, that inspires it, that gives it wings. A few lines further on, Barth clarifies the notion ‘miracle.’ He distinguishes between the church of Jacob and that of Esau. The latter is the external, visible church, the organization among other organizations, with all the faults and failures inherent in such an organization. It is the church in which the miracle does not take place. The former is the invisible church, in which the miracle does take place. In the church of Esau nothing else is to be expected but that all human speaking about God comes from liars. In the church of Jacob there is a “miracle, and ... consequently, the Truth appears above the deceit of men.”

Barth returns to the miracle again on the same page as something that we can expect. By ‘miracle’ he means here the divine acceptance of humanity and of human speech. The miracle can reveal to us whether human speech about God can surpass the doom of forever revolving within itself and being a lie. In Barth’s terms, it can reveal to us whether we have a place solely in the church of Esau or also one in the church of Jacob. “What choice do we have except to let this question work on us and ‘await the miracle’—as those say who have no hope—to listen to the gospel and to stutter over what is grounded for eternity in the church of Jacob” (R, 326ff).12

Toward the end of the Epistle to the Romans we meet the ‘miracle’ again in regard to speaking about God. Our speaking about God (in church and lectures), God’s word on human tongues, can only mean that the hidden God has revealed Himself. Our speaking can only

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12 Translation modified by author. Hoskins’s English translation is wrong here. He reverses Barth’s rhetorical question. Cf.: “Was bleibt uns übrig, als diese Frage ihr Werk an uns tun zu lassen und ‘auf das Wunder zu warten’, wie die Fragen, die keine Hoffnung haben, zu lauschen auf das Evangelium und zu stammeln von ihm, das die Kirche Jakobs ewig begründet?,” which Hoskins translates with: “Must we merely leave this problem as a problem and—‘await a miracle’—as they say who have no hope? Must we listen for the gospel, and whisper stammeringly that the Church of Jacob is established in eternity? Assuredly not . . .” (E, 342).
demonstrate that this revelation has given us no ownership or power of discretion over knowledge about God. Theological speaking is representative when it is not representative (a paradox that also marks the apophatic tradition). It can only be representative when it does not want to represent, but rather stresses God’s otherness as made known in the Resurrection. Conversely, people can neither say nor write that the hidden God has revealed Himself. We can only, like Barth, presuppose revelation. Only then do we become aware of God’s hiddenness. When revelation is complete, that is, when people become aware that God ultimately says ‘yes’ to them, intends them good, then God is acting and speaking, and “[this] is the moment of the miracle” (E, 422; R, 408).

The miracle stands for God’s accepting people. Like John the Baptist on Grünewald’s Isenheimer altar, people can only point “to God and to his miracle.” God Himself must put the muscle behind this pointing. ‘Revelation’ cannot be read in any book and cannot be adequately reflected. It is a question of waiting for a presentation without which any (attempt at) representation is no real representation.

In one of the last chapters of the Epistle to the Romans (“The Great Disturbance: The Problem of Ethics”), Barth discusses the character of conversation about God. This can never be an abstract or disinterested conversation. The world around us and everyday events remind us of this. Conversation about God takes place “for the sake of His will.” Just as the thought of God disturbs our whole human situation, “the problem of ethics” must disturb every conversation about God. In daily life a call (Anspruch) goes out to us that will not allow us to continue reasoning about God undisturbed. When Paul rebukes his correspondents (Rom. 12.1), Barth adds,

[on Rom. 12.1-3] Break off—all ye who follow my thoughts, worship with me, and are pilgrims with me—break off your thinking that it may be a thinking of God; break off your dialectic, that it may be indeed dialectic; break off your knowledge of God, that it may be what, in fact, it is [bedeutet], the wholesome disturbance and interruption which God in Christ prepares, in order that He may call men home to the peace of His Kingdom. (E, 426; R, 412)

Since no representation suffices, since God can only present Himself, our human thinking and speaking about God must always be ready
for interruption from (the thought of) God, whose will stands at right angles to our efforts.

3. Confrontation: Derrida and Barth: Silence and Speaking

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, contemporary authors such as Levinas and Derrida try, like Barth, to take into account the 'wholly other.' Levinas wants to use it to refer to a transcendence that unavoidably penetrates our attention and enters our thinking and our language. The other's face, says Levinas, is the place where God has left His trace and in which He speaks to me. "The Other resembles God," writes Levinas in Totality and Infinity and "[we are] in the trace of God."

Levinas's whole project, like Barth's, formally creates numerous reminiscences of negative theology. Derrida was one of the first to indicate this resemblance. In "Violence and Metaphysics" Derrida says that Levinas joins the Platonic tradition of believing in the Good beyond Being. Speaking of the other, "always in the form of negative theology," says Derrida, Levinas frequently uses denials and superlatives. These are intended to prevent daily predicates from being applied to the other without modification. These reminiscences of negative theology do not mean—and Derrida is the last to suggest this—that Levinas's affinity with certain apophatic motives or expressions implies a similar thought pattern. The 'manifestation' of the other of which Levinas speaks coincides with an ethical summons, with a compelling appeal. This summons, says Levinas, comes "from the other side of Being" or "from beyond the order of the same." It is not an extension of our customary and familiar language. The summons from beyond arising from the other interrupts the monologue that dominates Western European tradition.

It is not impossible that the numerous surprising agreements between Levinas and Barth run along the lines of the apophatic reverberation in their works. These agreements smooth the way for our attempt to distinguish Barth's thinking, later, from Derrida's.

Of course, we may not ignore in all this the differences between Levinas's philosophy and Barth's theology. Neither knew much about the other's work. Barth stood in a predominantly Christian-theological tradition, Levinas in a Jewish-philosophical one. It is true
that both Levinas and Barth show us an absolute transcendence of highest importance for life here and now. They use all possible means to preserve this transcendence from any form of unity or alli-
ance with the earthly (Levinas: 'the order of the same'). But, according to Levinas, we cannot meet transcendence except in the (an)other (fellow)human, while Barth puts the one God-man Jesus Christ central, with the understanding that Jesus' humanity, as ambiguous and doubtful as anything, falls away before the content of revelation. This point, "the Other is to be found in the trace of the other person" and "the Other is to be found in the trace of Jesus Christ," is crucial and forms a significant difference.

There is another area in which Barth's and Levinas's paths diverge. Each attributes another meaning to the world or to the 'I' that faces the other. As we have seen, the Epistle to the Romans sketches how God's revelation overwhelms and elevates our world. To be heard, the world and the 'I' raise themselves above themselves. Revelation is accompanied by its own light, it is not dependent on any illumina-
tion from outside. Levinas, by contrast, maintains, in one way or another, the 'I' before the face of the other. For him, it has an indispensable status. Admittedly, the uncompromising compulsion with which the unapproachable and self-satisfied 'I' is confronted, the unnerving insistence it faces, is essential for both Barth and Le-
vinas.13

This is not the place to go extensively into the further differences

13 Certainly, Levinas's 'other' is accompanied, to a certain extent, by its own light: the face is 'expression,' it speaks for itself and needs no content. But for Levinas, at least in Totality and Infinity, the other remains, however paradoxically, linked to the 'I.' The other overwhelms the 'I' and in so doing distinguishes itself from the world (the 'order of the same'). This paradox is apparent from the first sentences of Totality and Infinity: "The true life is absent." But we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi" (33, my italics; Totalité et infini, 3). A few pages later we read, "Alterity is possible only in starting from [à partir de] me" (40; French ed., 10). Much further on Levinas adds, "But the transcendance of the face is not enacted outside of the world. . . . The 'vision' of the face as face [La 'vision' du visage comme visage] is a certain mode of sojourning in a home, or . . . a certain form of economic life. No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached [abordé] with empty hands and closed home. Recollection [recueillement] in a home open to the Other [ouverte à Autrui]—hospitality—. . . . coincides with the Desire for the Other that is absolutely transcendent [le Désir d'Autrui absolument transcendant]" (172; French ed., 147).
and similarities between Barth and Levinas.  

14 Here we are particularly interested in noting that both take seriously the loss of the Other God. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, they accuse the apophatic tradition of having contributed to this loss.

In what follows I would like to emphasize the agreements between Levinas and Barth. On the basis of these agreements we will be able to further the line of criticism that Derrida addresses to types of 'separation thinking' similar to that of Levinas. We can, mutatis mutandis, confront Barth's Epistle to the Romans with Derrida's criticism of Levinas. Does Barth, who also focuses on the paradoxical manifestation of the 'wholly Other' really do justice to this Other's otherness? Or does he still go too far in linking this Other to our world, to what Levinas calls "the order of the same"? Derrida's criticism of Levinas is formulated with a similar concern with allowing the 'other' to be other. Could this provide us with an entry point for considering the Epistle to the Romans from the stance of a contemporary 'philosophy of alterity'?

What is at issue in Derrida's—if we may use the term—'philosophy of alterity'? It is for him, too, a radical otherness, an 'outside' that withdraws from our thinking. This 'other,' which the Western tradition has always provided with a label and a content, does not, in Derrida's opinion, allow itself to be approached in any direct way whatsoever. The 'images' he uses (writing, trace, différence, text, supplement, etc.) always refer to two dimensions: the outer and the inner, the other and the same. They point to the dividing line between our thinking and what permits this thinking while escaping it.

The two dimensions belong together. Our thinking is comprised in one circling body of cross-references that, as such, refers to the

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14 See the thesis by J. F. Goud, Levinas en Barth. Een godsdienstwisselende en ethische vergelijking (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984). See also G. Ward, Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology, chap. 7, "Barth's Theology of the Word and Levinas's Philosophy of Saying." Here Ward notes: "What is being investigated by each is a phenomenon—not the otherness of God, but a revelation, an unveiling of a Logos which remains veiled and hidden within logocentrism. Both analyse how that revelation can be, already has been, significant for human beings; how human beings have been addressed by it." A bit further on Ward daringly posits that a 'theological' moment is not totally unknown to Levinas: "There is in the logic of signification, both suggest, a moment which is ineluctably theological" (170).
completely indeterminable space that first establishes these references. The cross-references are like letters that only become legible against the white background of a piece of paper. The letters contain no message about or description of the nature of this white background. Each description or reference is a betrayal of it. Denying and reticent speech have a purpose in Derrida's texts; it has led many critics to accuse Derrida of trying to reinstate the time-honored negative theology.

The danger of betrayal that every form of reference or localization implies for the 'other' could well be the most important theme of "Violence and Metaphysics" (1964), Derrida's extensive essay on what Levinas had published to that date. Correctly, Derrida notes here, Levinas calls attention to the alterity or transcendence continually repressed in Western thinking. But to what degree does Levinas remain faithful to his own project? To what degree does he avoid contradicting himself?

In his essay Derrida raises numerous points. It would lead us too far astray to treat all of them. One assertion, though, is central: Levinas's work is thought to contain an ambiguity that could be his undoing, an ambiguity that tends to determine the content of the indeterminable. This tendency is seen in expressions such as "the Other resembles God" and "[we are] in the trace of God." What does this mean? Derrida wonders. The conclusion that the world or body of cross-references is permeated by a trace of, a reference to, an alterity that is other than this world, other than the order of the same, seems unavoidable. But the suggestion that this alterity should coincide with a (positive) Infinity ('God'), who is totally independent of every connection, absolute in Itself, contradicts the idea of an alterity. Alterity means 'other than . . . ' and implies involvement with the same.

Thus, according to Derrida, Levinas tries to unite two things that cannot be united: complete alterity and 'positive Infinity,' but an independence that is completely independent, has meaning only in itself, and refers to nothing outside itself (which is more than merely the radical opposite of all finiteness). Derrida writes:

The positive Infinity (God)—if these words are meaningful—cannot be infinitely Other [infiniment Autre]. If one thinks, as Levinas does, that positive Infinity tolerates, or even requires, infinite alterity, then
one must renounce all language, and first of all the words *infinite* and *other*. Infinity cannot be understood as Other except in the form of the in-finite. As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude (one pole of Levinas’s nonnegative transcendence), the Other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable. Perhaps Levinas calls us to this unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond (tradition’s) Being and Logos. But it must not be possible either to think or to state this call.\(^{15}\)

Derrida asks if it is not true that the other’s otherness can be respected only when this otherness remains linked to what we know and find familiar. Derrida suggests that Levinas wants more. According to Derrida, Levinas tries to combine this infinity that cannot be separated from finiteness with a ‘positive’ Infinity, an infinity with content. This attempt is doomed to failure. The other can only be infinitely other as finite and mortal substance, at least when it is subjected to language (as in Levinas).\(^{16}\) Only an alterity that exists outside language—but how could we envision such a thing?—could perhaps be preserved from finiteness, says Derrida. This is not the case for Levinas’s other. In Levinas, thinking does not precede language: both remain involved with one another from the start. This is an element in Levinas’s thinking that Derrida will continually recall.

If the other is present in language, if alterity is made manifest there by interrupting the great ‘monologue’ of Western European tradition, then this implies that there is a certain inevitability in language. The other, who interrupts language, becomes involved in the eternal linguistic game. It becomes entangled in an inextricable jumble of references, making its divine origin uncertain. The infinite Other that breaks through the finite order of the same becomes itself contaminated by the finiteness of what it breaks. So thinks Derrida, who wishes to bring radically under discussion every representation of an absolute Presence or positive Infinity *outside* the body of cross-references.

\(^{15}\) *Writing and Difference*, 114 (French ed., 168).

\(^{16}\) For Levinas, this does not mean that the other’s transcendence can be proven or deduced, let alone described by ontological language. Certainly, Levinas expressly calls attention to a repressed transcendence and does so in philosophical language. What he discusses in this language (originally Greek) is both the disappearance of every form of transcendence in Western, ontological thinking, and the way this transcendence infringes and continually interrupts this. The other’s transcendence is manifested in the ruptures in such an ontological language.
Elsewhere, Derrida uses an (implicit) reference to God's revealing his name to Moses (Ex. 3) to describe the Other's entanglement this way: "as a linguistic statement [en tant que langage] 'I am he who am' is the admission [aveu] of a mortal." Of course, here the Other (God) is the one speaking. But who knows whether or not He was given these words? Is not the translation of the infinite in finite terms the worm of doubt in the root faith?

Elsewhere Derrida links the name of God to the Babylonian confusion of languages in which it is heard. He says, "God's own name is already so divided over language that it confusedly signifies 'confusion.' And the war that he declares [against humanity in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11] first raged in his name: divided, split, ambivalent, polysemic: God deconstructs." Thus, for Derrida, the name of 'God' is taken up in (finite) language and is clothed with the same ambiguity as other words.

When we draw up a tentative balance sheet, it seems that Levinas, when compared to Barth, has added the dimension of language to alterity. Both maintain that direct and responsible speaking about the Other, about God, is impossible. But Levinas illustrates this via and in language: the Other infringes on the language of the same, a language that identifies and classifies, but that makes no room for the Other. Barth seems to dispute God's dependence on a world totally different from Him. His revelation, rather, implies an elevation of this world beyond its boundary and limitation.

The break that Levinas depicts occurs as experience. It resembles what Barth says about the explosion of revelation in humanity. We may perhaps link the other's interruption in Levinas with the Störung (disturbance) of God's revelation in Barth. For this reason I turn now to another of Derrida's works on Levinas, one entitled, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am."19

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Here Derrida goes deeper into the Other’s infringement on our safe, familiar world and into the “tear” (déchirure) the Other makes in it. While Levinas (like Barth) wants to show how the Other stands at right angles to our world, Derrida points to a “hooking back” (échancrure) of its manifestation in this world and with it to its contamination with the world’s virus. This tearing is only possible when something is torn, the infringement when something is fractured, and the interruption when something is interrupted.20 In addition to this, one interruption is insufficient. It would be immediately integrated, just as the one exception confirms the rule. Compare:

The hiatus must insist, whence the necessity of the series, of the series of knots [i.e., in the chain of interruptions]. The absolute paradox (of the absolute) is that this series, incommensurable with any other, series out-of-series, does not tie up threads [fils] but the interruptions between threads, traces of intervals which the knot should only remark, give to be remarked. . . . And in order to distinguish itself, for instance, from the discontinuous as a symptom within the discourse of the State or of the book, it can break its resemblance only by being not just any interruption, and thus also by determining itself within the element of the same.21

In other words, if we want to maintain the idea of an interruption of our world by an absolute transcendence, there must at least be several interruptions. To use a fairy-tale image, the ‘dragon’ named interruption must grow a new head for each one ontology cuts off. And further, the series of interruptions thus created must be distinguishable from other kinds of (finite) interruptions . . . and thus relate and bind itself to our finite world. Not only the Other’s once-only interruption, but the series of interruptions becomes “contaminated” with the immanence of the same (Levinas) or with the world of Adam (Barth).

In his criticism of separation thinking, such as Levinas’s, we come to see Derrida’s own position. ‘Transcendence’ and ‘immanence,’ outer and inner, the other and the same are inextricably linked to one another. A completely transcendent sphere of a wholly Other (God) without any contact with our reality would, Derrida believes, be as meaningless as Epicurus’s pantheon. But a transcendence or

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20 Ibid., 26.
21 Ibid., 28.
an alterity linked to immanence or the same, one that is in a certain sense familiar, is as finite as we are. Put differently, a God who speaks our language and can make Himself understood comes from our world. Such a God is clothed in the ambiguity and relativity of this world, in which many voices resound and many gods are worshiped. He must have made His entrance via language where words, sentences, sounds, and the like can take on various meanings according to their context.

In Derrida's discussion with Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena*, he emphasizes the idea that language is constituted by an indeterminate representation structure. To communicate we use (linguistic) signs. As signs they have a certain recognizability (a 'formal identity'), but one that can be inserted in varied contexts. The identity of the signs, Derrida says, is ideal, abstract: it is thought. As such this identity implies 'representation.' First is the *signification* of the identity in our thinking. Second is the (possible) *re-presentation* or *repetition* of signs in general. Third is the effective *representation* or *application* of every sign in our communication. "Since this representative structure is signification itself, I cannot enter into an 'effective' discourse without being from the start involved in unlimited [indéfinie] representation."

By emphasizing the representative character of linguistic signs, in all meanings of the word, Derrida tries to show that these signs can be understood *qualitate qua* in divergent and inconceivable ways: their 'representativity' is 'undetermined.' How, then, could an exception be made for the story (the combination of written, fixed linguistic signs) about a Jewish man who, during the Roman domination of Palestine, is supposed to have arisen from the dead and who is thought to have had a very special relationship with God? For an answer, let us return to Barth:

> [on Rom. 3.21-26] This creative word [being discussed here] is spoken—through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. What is there, then, in Christ Jesus? There is that which horrifies [Entsetzenerregende]: the dissolution [Aufhebung] of history in history, the destruction of the structure of events within their known structure, the end

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22 "The appearing of the infinite *différance* is itself finite"; *Speech and Phenomena*, 102; French ed., 114.

23 Ibid., 50; French ed., 56.
of time in the order of time. . . . Jesus of Nazareth, Christ after the flesh, is one amongst other possibilities of history; but he is the possibility which possesses all the marks of impossibility. His life is a history within the framework of history, a concrete [dinglich] event in the midst of other concrete events, an occasion in time and limited by the boundaries of time; it belongs to the texture of human life. But it is history pregnant with meaning; it is concreteness [Dinglichkeit] which displays the Beginning and the Ending; it is time awakened to the memory of Eternity; it is humanity filled with the voice of God [redender Gottheit]. In this fragment of the world [Weltlichkeit] there is detached from the world—before the very eyes of men and in their actual hearing!—something which gleams in the darkness and gives to the world a new brilliance. (E, 103ff.; R, 78)

But again, how do we know, how does Barth know, that here we receive a message from the other side, from the wholly other God? How do we know that here we have a text that abrogates all texts, a word that is self-sufficient, that can itself help words that speak about this word?

Is this not a question of experience? Not of just any experience but of the preeminent ‘experience’: the gracious confrontation with the inescapable Other? “He who knows the world to be bounded by a truth that contradicts it; he who knows himself to be bounded by a will that contradicts him; he who, knowing too well that he must be satisfied to live with this contradiction and not attempt to escape from it, finds it hard to kick against the pricks [wider den Stacheln zu löcken] . . . ; he is it that believes” (E, 39; R, 14; my italics).24

But is Barth here not fighting against the category ‘experience’ (“Also nicht Erlebnisse, Erfahrungen und Empfindungen . . . ,” “not an event, nor an experience, nor an emotion . . . ”; R, 4; E, 28)? Experience does have a place in the Epistle to the Romans, and in religion: “Nor must we divorce grace from the experience [Erlebnis] of grace which takes form and shape in religion and in morality, in dogma and in ecclesiasticism” (E, 230; R, 212). Experience, event, and the like always belong on this side, in the ambiguous human

24 The German text puts even more strongly the inescapableness of the choice and the impossible possibility of a human ‘no’: “Wer die Begrenzung der Welt durch eine widersprechende Wahrheit, die Begrenzung seiner selbst durch einen widersprechenden Willen erkennt, wem es schwer wird, wieder den Stacheln zu löcken, weil er zu viel weiß von diesem Widerspruch, als daß er ihm entrinnen könnte, sondern sich damit abfinden muß, damit zu leben. . . .” (R, 14).
sphere. But our being given grace, God’s ultimately accepting us despite our human shortcomings, raises us out of the ambiguity of the human and the worldly. God’s ‘yes’ to us puts us and all we have and are in the divine sphere where everything human is foreign. As accepted and wanted people we have no experiences, and conversely we do not experience that we are accepted and wanted. “But ‘our’ being under grace is not an experience, not one type of human behaviour, not a particular condition [Verfassung] of human activity” (E, 237; R, 219).

Derrida’s criticism of Levinas and of the notion ‘experience,’ found on the last page of “Violence and Metaphysics,” reads as follows:

But the true name of this inclination of thought to the Other, of this resigned acceptance of incoherent incoherence, inspired by a truth more profound than the ‘logic’ of philosophical discourse, the true name of this renunciation of the concept, of the a prioris and transcendental horizons of language, is empiricism. For the latter, at bottom, has ever committed but one fault: the fault of presenting itself as a philosophy. And the profundity of the empiricist intention must be recognized beneath the naivety of certain of its historical expressions. It is the dream of a purely heterological thought at its source. . . . We say dream because it must vanish at daybreak, as soon as language awakens. But perhaps one will object that it is language which is sleeping. Doubtless, but then one must, in a certain way, become classical once more, and again find other grounds for the divorce between speech [la parole] and thought [la pensée].

Can we separate speech from thought? Can we imagine an inspiration that, by definition, cannot be articulated? According to Derrida, Levinas believed it impossible to think of something that does not also—in whatever paradoxical way—occur in language: the idea of the infinite leaves its traces in language, according to Levinas.

If Levinas wants to maintain the idea of an absolute alterity, he would then have to explain where thinking and language divorce (and not where language is ‘only’ interrupted). Then he would have

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25 Barth expressly does not do this. In his Preface he says that he “never presented anything but theology” (E, 4; R, viii).

26 Would Barth do this? In any case he maintains in principle the unsuitability of language for doing justice to God’s revelation.

27 Writing and Difference, 151; French ed., 224.
to show how an infinite idea can occur to me without its being in any way expressible in language, an idea that surpasses language (and what is such an idea except a kind of experience?). And he must do this to keep this ‘notion’ from forging links with a contaminated finite language that would make it ambivalent.

Derrida’s whole work shows that he, too, struggles with this question. He accepts the consequences of the aporia in which he saw Levinas end: the aporia that will ultimately force Levinas to put alterity as he sees it totally, and that means totally, outside language. The insurmountableness before which Derrida stands requires that he bind alterity to language as its reverse, if not as its condition of possibility. For, suppose that there is already a point where thinking and language divorce, it would then be impossible to hide this break from language, which casts doubt on this break a posteriori!28

For Derrida, every speaking is an insurmountable and unceasing betrayal of an ‘idea’ or ‘experience’ that never lets itself be spoken or thought, but that is echoed in language. Our language stands in an aura of infinity, of something we can never say, but only betray; but it is something that makes itself felt in our perfidy and in our betrayal. It is that which permits language and the game of references in which we are subsumed.29 Perhaps Derrida’s work is an attempt to strengthen the resonance of the unspeakable in our language.

From Derrida’s perspective, the Barthian presentation of revelation would be an attempt to go beyond the divorce between speech and thought. Thought is confronted in Barth with an experience that is not an ‘experience’ in the strict sense and that surpasses thinking without implying any mystical unification. The quasi-experience

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28 Note the ambiguity in the following citation from “Violence and Metaphysics”: “... that the positive plenitude of classical infinity [infini classique] is translated into language only by betraying itself in a negative word (in-finite), perhaps situates, in the most profound way, the point where thought breaks with language. A break which afterward will but resonate throughout all language” (Writing and Difference, 114, my italics; French ed., 168ff.).

29 See “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” where we meet the following example: “From the moment I open my mouth, I have already promised; or rather [plutôt], and sooner [plus tôt], the promise has seized the I which promises to speak to the other, to say something, at the extreme limit to affirm or to confirm by speech [par la parole] at least this: that it is necessary to be silent; and to be silent concerning that about which one cannot speak” (in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., Derrida and Negative Theology [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992], 84; “Comment ne pas parler. Dénégations,” in Psyché. Inventions de l’autre, 547).
that overcomes our thought can withdraw from language and thought, from all immanence, because it does not lie in human hands. The *Epistle to the Romans* tells us not only that both the good news and its acceptance are offered to us, but that this message always remains beyond our grasp. It does not depend on our judgment or comparison, it expresses itself immediately and speaks for itself. Revelation creates its own means of reception without seeking contact with any human receptivity, not even in a “desire for the infinite” (Levinas).

Revelation is presented as a flash. This flash is the revelatory moment that withdraws from every present or every presence and that we can interpret in the light of the Resurrection. It is an event that sets in motion numerous (in themselves worthless) human reactions, apophatic and mystical if need be, an event that must renew itself daily if it is to preserve the faith.

Is revelation an ‘interruption’ in Levinas’s sense? Does it become entangled in our world or contaminated by the virus of our finiteness? How can we distinguish the series of God’s explosions from any other series of wondrous (artistic, emotional, etc.) experiences?

After confronting Barth and Derrida I would like to risk saying that revelation leaves us uncertain, but with a recollection of certainty. Essentially, we always remain empty-handed and can never boast of the Other’s gift. We are borne through time by an uncertain memory of a sure promise given us once, outside time, by an always past promise I can never grasp, and by an unsure promise, in time, of a recollection of certainty. Our impotence before a gruesome world faces a certain ‘no’ in our uncertain memory. A certain ‘yes’ answers to our indeterminate desire for another world, but this too is in our uncertain memory. Perhaps we still vaguely know from an unremembered past that this world is limited; maybe we can even deduce this limitedness from the fact that this world seems to point to intactness and fulfillment, for example, in virgin nature or in the unknown human possibilities for justice.

Revelation cannot be dated; our uncertainty, our empty hands, can. Human speech about God, especially when self-assured, can perhaps be (psychoanalytically) examined for uncertainty. But our speaking about God is honest when it tries, despite this uncertainty, to testify to a promise, a ‘yes’ in a ‘no,’ that hides in an uncertain
memory. This testimony only knows paradoxes that express the re-
calcitrance of the promise toward our words and our world.

When Heidegger said to Barth’s friend and proponent Thurneysen that the language of theology consists in seeking a word capable of arousing and preserving faith, he seemed to doubt whether theology were possible. And Barth agreed with him. Theology as speech about God, as speaking the unspeakable, is in itself impossible. It can only progress when at completely unexpected, never ante- or postdatable moments—that may perhaps not be moments at all—it is borne and inspired from above and when it takes into account the absurdity of its subject. Negation in theology was an attempt in this direction, and not the least skillful. But its self-satisfaction (‘denials about the divine are true’) was for Barth a reason for still greater radicalness.

30 See H.-G. Gadamer, “Martin Heidegger und die Marburger Theologie,” in O. Pöggeler, ed., Heidegger. Perspektiven zur Deutung seines Werkes (Konstanz: Atheneum Verlag, 1984), 169. Gadamer, who recalls this dictum, says that it was seen in its time as a doubt whether theology were possible at all.

31 An interesting new work on Barth and Derrida is Isabel Andrews, Deconstructing Barth: A Study of the Complementary Methods in Karl Barth and Jacques Derrida (Frankfurt: Lang, 1996). In his article “Sporen van Derrida bij Noordamerikaanse theologen,” Tijdschrift voor Theologie 30 (1990): 173-83, F. P. M. Jespers discusses several Anglo-Saxon theologians whom Derrida is supposed to have influenced (M. Lafargue, D. Tracy, T. Altizer, C. A. Raschke, C. E. Winquist, R. P. Scharlemann, M. A. Myers, K. Hart, and M. C. Taylor). Despite his several blunders, Jespers concludes his article with an intelligent comment that I would like to cite here: “North American theologians... except for Tracy, are limited to a kind of philosophy of religion in which they uncritically and arbitrarily arrogate ideas from Derrida as if he were the new prophet of the unspeakable and of the wholly Other. This may be stylish, but it is not fertile. Just at the point where they give up, on the metaphysical level, lie the chances for an in-depth dialogue on God’s otherness, on the relationship between God and being and on the reference point of religious and theological thought and speech” (183). I think that it is not so much meaningful to imitate Derrida in thinking and speaking about God as it is to confront theological traditions with his thinking. It is true that it is stylish to cite Derrida, but at present it is equally indispensable to confront a thinking that we have hardly been able to surpass. This chapter is a humble attempt at such a confrontation.