

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) | **UbuWeb**

On Religion

1. Part 1



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This extended interview with Jacques Derrida was conducted by John D. Caputo, Kevin Hart, and Yvonne Sherwood as the plenary session of the 2002 joint annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). The interview gives Derrida the opportunity to speak on a range of subjects from his secret life of prayer, to the Judeo-Christian heritage of deconstruction, to sacrifice, belief, faith, secularization, atheism, finitude, and beyond. But what pervades throughout is a certain feeling of anxiety, reserve, and humility, which to those already familiar with Derrida's work, should be of no surprise. However-given the audience at the annual meeting of the AAR/SBL, many of whom had long heard of Derrida but had never read him or seen him in person, given the reality of how Derrida's reception in the field of religious studies had come full circle from the original reading and employing of Derrida as the post-Enlightenment successor to the hermeneutics of suspicion to the more recent sentiment that positions Derrida as a quasi-Enlightenment pietist driven by an affirmative religious passion, and given the fact that it was only a short time afterward that Derrida would be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, which meant that this would be one of his last major public appearances before his death in 2004-it is interesting to note Derrida's continued hesitation combined, as always, with a sense of urgency. Indeed, it was evident that Derrida knew his time was short. For instance, when discussing a midrash on Abraham and Abraham's relation with his two sons, Isaac and Ismael, and more broadly, the religio-political crisis in the Middle East, he states, "If I had time, I would go in that direction, in the direction of politics" (36). Not only was his time short, but Derrida also returns to a constant theme that runs throughout his work-namely, the limitation of language, the desire, even the need, to say the unsayable, but a persistent falling short, an indetermination, a state of undecidability that renders the line between belief/atheism and faith/skepticism indistinguishable. As Derrida said, "That's why being a believer, even a mystic believer, and being an atheist is not necessarily a different state of affairs" (37-38).

-- Jeffrey W. Robbins

[pages numbers from a transcript to the interview in Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments. Edited by Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart. Routledge, 2005.]

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