

MAR ROSÀS TOSAS\*

## TWO FORMS OF OVERCOMING NIHILISM: THE THEOLOGY OF THE DEATH OF GOD AND CONTEMPORARY MESSIANISM

This paper examines some parallelisms between two theoretical debates that began in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that have as a starting point the belief that the world, in its present form, lacks sense – the philosophical and theological reflections following the death of God, on the one hand, and the contemporary discussion on the messianic notion of history, on the other. Both consider God as absent from this world, both maintain that this world is therefore meaningless, and both look for ways to overcome the lack of sense of the present world. The former explore the paths opened up by the death of God, and rises within Christianity – although the Holocaust unleashed a similar discussion within Judaism. The second revolves around how history and the mythic stage will be lead to a conclusion by a messiah that will bring with him redemption, and acquires a significant dimension among some libertarian authors within contemporary Jewish philosophy. Among the various reactions to the death of God there are several proposals that do not consist in *overcoming* such nihilism, but rather regard it as a fertile ground and therefore propose *embracing* it and accommodating it – the proposals of the authors belonging to the so-called radical theology, which can be traced back to Bonhoeffer and Jünger but is also nurtured by Postmodern continental philosophy. The aim of this paper is to point out that within contemporary messianism there is also at least a proposal that reads the absence of God in such a fertile way – Derrida's *messianicity without messianism* –, and to analyze its logic and compare it to the one underlying the celebrative reactions of radical theology.

*Keywords:* Jacques Derrida, Messianism, Postmodern Turn to Theology, Radical Theology, Theology of the Death of God

### *Introduction*

This paper examines some parallelisms between two theoretical debates that began in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that have as a starting point the belief that the world, in its present form, lacks sense. Both consider that God is absent from this world, both maintain that this world is therefore meaningless, and both look for ways to overcome the lack of sense of the current world.

I am referring to the two following set of reflections: some philosophical and theological reflections following the death of God, on the one hand, and the contemporary discussion on the messianic notion of history, on the other. The former explore the paths opened up by the death of God, and rises within Christianity – although the Holocaust

---

\* Blanquerna School of Health Sciences. Ramon Llull University, Barcelona. Email: mrosas@rectorat.url.edu  
Received: 18/04/2017; Approved: 12/07/2017.

unleashed a similar discussion within Judaism. The second one revolves around how history and the mythic stage will be lead to conclusion by a messiah that will bring with him redemption, and acquires a significant dimension among some libertarian authors within contemporary Jewish philosophy. Both movements – the reflections following the death of God and contemporary messianism – reflect on the fact that God is missing, but while the former misses – and, as we will see, sometimes celebrates – that *God is gone*, the later reflects on the fact that the messiah is *yet to come*.

Within each of the two movements, there is also a great diversity. Although the different versions of this messianic narrative hold that the world, in its current form, lacks sense, they differ in the ways they think this lack of sense should be faced and overcome or left behind. The same applies to the different reactions to the death of God proclaimed: they share a nihilistic view of the world, yet their way of facing nihilism differs significantly.

Among the various reactions to the death of God, this paper focuses on those proposals that do not consist in *overcoming* such nihilism, but rather regard it as a fertile ground and therefore propose *embracing* it and accommodating it. I am referring to the proposals of the authors belonging to the so-called radical theology, which can be traced back to Bonhoeffer<sup>1</sup> and Jüngel<sup>2</sup>, but also includes the theologians of the death of God of the 1960s and is currently nurtured by Postmodern continental philosophy, as in the case of Caputo. *The main aim of this paper is to suggest that within contemporary messianism there is also at least a proposal that reads the absence of God in such a fertile way – Derrida's<sup>3</sup> messianicity without messianism. I analyze its logic and compare it to the one underlying the celebrative reactions of radical theology.*

In short, the goal of this paper is threefold: first, to present the two aforementioned debates; second, to show that the most fertile positions in each of them are informed by stunningly similar ideas; and, finally, to explore these two positions in order to shed light on each other and better understand their far-reaching implications for theology, philosophy and ethics.

Before proceeding, I would like to make two preliminary remarks. First, it is important to underlie that it is not the aim of this paper to delve deep and examine thoroughly any of the aforementioned authors. There are several excellent studies that have done this<sup>4</sup> and I myself have done it in the case of some of the messianic authors<sup>5</sup>. The goal

<sup>1</sup> D. BONHOEFFER, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (1951), Scm Press, London 2001.

<sup>2</sup> E. JÜNGEL, *God as the Mystery of the World* (1977), Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene 2009.

<sup>3</sup> J. DERRIDA, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*, Galilée, Paris 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Such is the case of the book on Bonhoeffer by J.W. DE GRUCHY (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1999; the work of V. CAMPS, *Los teólogos de la muerte de Dios*, Nova Terra, Barcelona 1968 on the theologians of the death of God; the work of M.C. TAYLOR, *After God*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2007, K.J. VANHOOZER (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, Id., *Remythologizing Theology Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010) and R. KEARNEY - J. ZIMMERMANN (eds.), *Reimagining the Sacred*, Columbia University Press, New York 2015 on the Postmodern turn to religion; or the work of P. BOJANIC, *Violence and Messianism. Jewish Philosophy and the Great Conflicts of the Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London 2017 and M. ROSÁS TOSAS, *Mesianismo en la filosofía contemporánea*, Herder, Barcelona 2016 on contemporary messianism.

<sup>5</sup> In M. ROSÁS TOSAS, *Derrida's Way out of the Dead End of Contemporary Messianism*, «Journal for Cultural Research», 18 (2014), 1, pp. 350-369 as well as in *Mesianismo en la filosofía contemporánea*.

of this paper is precisely to go beyond the specificity and originality of each of them – which, as just mentioned, is doubtless relevant and has been and is being explored as it deserves – in order to group them and inscribe them into one of the two distinct aforementioned trends to provide with a panoramic view of the logic of the two trends and be able to compare them. By grouping them together, something will unavoidably be lost. But when this will be the case, bibliography for further inquiry will be provided.

Second, despite the effort I will be making to group several authors into either the movement of the theology of the death of God or contemporary messianism, the fact that they all participate of the so-called logic of radical theology should not be overridden. As Robbins and Crockett maintain<sup>6</sup>, radical theology is a phenomenon that rose in the United States with Paul Tillich in the middle of the twentieth century, which later on also included the theologians of the death of God of the 1960s to which the paper will refer. So far, one could claim that radical theology is the ground of only one of the two movements this paper will be exploring – the theology of the death of God. Yet, according to what Robbins and Crockett hold, this would not be precise: radical theology extended through – or, at least, is «accomplice of»<sup>7</sup> – the so-called turn to religion unleashed in the 1970s and 1980s by the postmodern a/theology proposed by Mark C. Taylor, among others, particularly in his *Erring. A postmodern a/theology*<sup>8</sup> and more recently developed in *After God*<sup>9</sup>, openly indebted to French deconstruction and poststructuralism – in which some of the so-called messianic authors that inform the second trend this paper examines must be included. And, to finish with Robbins and Crockett, radical theology's most recent fruits are the several works of Continental Philosophy that, since the 1990s, have been proliferating around the work of John D. Caputo, to which – we need to add –, several of the messianic authors are also linked. In short: having radical theology as a common ground implies that several filiations can be traced between the two movements this paper studies.

The paper is divided into five sections. Section 1 briefly presents the major landmark in contemporary Western thought concerning nihilism – Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God. And focuses on and examines the original arguments through which Bonhoeffer and Jüngel read this phenomenon against the grain – they do not consider it the end of theology, but regard it as the most fertile ground in which a Christian can live. Section 2 delves deep into the developments that followed such unexpected reading of the death of God – the theology of the death of God in the 1960s and the most recent so-called turn to religion. The other reaction to nihilism that this paper is focused on – i.e., contemporary messianism – is examined in section 3.

Section 4 critically compares and contrasts the two presented forms of facing nihilism. It explains in detail that, in spite of their similarities, they differ in a fundamental point: contemporary messianism reads negatively the logic at work within the *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, a stage – described by Gershom Scholem to Walter Benjamin in a letter dated 20 September 1934 – in which forces keep their validity but are no longer strong enough to translate into concrete norms – whether epistemological, eth-

<sup>6</sup> J.W. ROBBINS - C. CROCKETT, *A Radical Theology for the Future: Five Theses*, «Palgrave Communications 1», (2015), pp. 1-10, in part. pp. 1-5).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibi*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> M.C. TAYLOR, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1984.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*, *After God*.

ical or political –, while for Bonhoeffer and the theologians that followed him this is seen as a free, fertile and creative ground. That is, contemporary messianism, in spite of the diverging logics it groups together, as it presents itself and as it has been argued, seems to lack the *embracing reaction* of nihilism and only look for its *overcoming*. Section 4 finishes, then, by asking how is it possible that the most sophisticated messianic narratives read negatively precisely what for Bonhoeffer and for the theology of the death of God constitutes the most fertile ground. What I am contending in section 5 – and what constitutes the core of this paper – is that this embracing of nihilism can also be found within contemporary messianism – namely, within Derrida's *sui generis* use of messianism. This conclusion reveals more similarities between the two set of reflections examined in this paper and allows to shed further light on each other.

### 1. *From the death of God to its claim for Christianity by Bonhoeffer*

Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God<sup>10</sup>. Some authors considered that what was at stake was simply a transitory «eclipse of God»<sup>11</sup>, but this was not Nietzsche's point. By proclaiming the death of God, the German thinker radically affirmed this world and this time, denying the existence of any transcendence that provided sense to the here and now. The German philosopher did not maintain that the world lacked sense, but that sense had to be sought – or, rather, created – here, without turning to any transcendent authority.

Throughout the decades that followed his death, a common and well-known reaction to the Nietzschean proclamation of the death of God revolved around the following argument: if God is dead, then everything is allowed<sup>12</sup>. The death of God represented the end of all ethical, moral, political and aesthetical stable foundations. God could no longer provide life and the world with an undisputable meaning. There was no longer any objective, indisputable, universal criterion that allowed to evaluate, hierarchize and organize the world. This absolute absence of a solid authority went hand by hand with the so-called 'everything goes'. Man had no other criterion than himself<sup>13</sup>.

This comprehensive permissiveness is highly conflictive. Bereft of an external, objective and universal criterion that guides our evaluations and our decisions, in some fields proliferated an astonishing hyperlegislation. Human rights, for instance, have been regarded as a way of organizing a world abandoned by gods – they may have to do with the need to ensure that the arbitrariness of the order in force will not be

<sup>10</sup> First in *The Gay Science* (1882) and later in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1891).

<sup>11</sup> See M. BUBER, *Eclipse of God. Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (1952), Princeton University Press, Princeton - Oxford 2016. Buber holds that the phenomenon of the death of God is transitory. For him, God has neither died nor undergone any modification. Just as within an eclipse, in which what changes is our way of seeing the planet at issue and not the planet itself, he maintains that the change at work within the phenomenon of the death of God is our way of relating to God: we have turned blind. According to him, the only way to have a close relationship to God is through a direct relationship, from I to You, without idolatric mediations.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Sartre's prolongation and reformulation of Dostoevsky's and Nietzsche's comments on the death of God: «[M]y future is virgin; everything is allowed to me» (J.-P. SARTRE, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Washington Square Press, New York 2012, p. 65).

<sup>13</sup> In *On the Genealogy of the Morality* (1887), Nietzsche goes so far as to claim that one has the right to do everything one is able to do.

made manifest, that is, in order to prevent chaos from irrupting<sup>14</sup>. Lacan's reading of the absence of God echoes this idea: «God has died; then, nothing is allowed»<sup>15</sup>.

Did the death of God only unleash these two reactions? Wasn't there any fertile reading of this phenomenon? Was it impossible to read the approach to nothingness as positive? This fertile reading has been sought within theology, although of course not in all the theology of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – liberal theology, for example, attempted to rehabilitate *homo religiosus* – but within a certain theology to which I will now refer.

For the authors that, in front of the death of God, had one of the two aforementioned reactions – either the 'everything goes' or hyperlegislation –, the death of God had liquidated the theological sphere. By way of contrast, there was a third reaction which *inscribes the death of God within theology*<sup>16</sup>. According to its representatives, the death of God is a phenomenon proper to theology, particularly of Christianity. It is, in fact, one of the cores of Christianity. As I will examine in a moment, the authors of this third reaction do not think that the death of God has left a sterile land. On the contrary, they regard this sacrifice as a highly fertile phenomenon.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a celebrated protestant theologian born at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was crucial in this reaction. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*<sup>17</sup>, he explains the failure of ethics based on a rigid system of rules – what he labels «ethical fanaticism». Echoing Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer writes that the «path of duty», consisting of strictly adhering to a closed set of rules, only leads to irresponsibility. In his own words:

It looks as though the way out from the confusing multiplicity of possible decisions is the path of duty. What is commanded is seized upon as being surest. Responsibility for the command rests upon the man who gives it and not upon the man who executes it. But in this confinement within the limits of duty there can never come the bold stroke of the deed which is done on one's one free responsibility, the only kind of deed which can strike at the heart of evil and overcome it. The man of duty will end by having to fulfil his obligation even to the devil<sup>18</sup>.

Bonhoeffer, by contrast, encourages man to dare to be free. According to him, man has to undertake what he labels «civic courage»: his deeds need to be free and responsible. And, for him, this is only possible when there are no previous rules at work. As it is affirmed in a study on Bonhoeffer's thought titled *The ethics of responsible action*, for him «[t]here is no depositing the responsibility for what happens elsewhere, including with God»<sup>19</sup>.

One of the lectures he gave in Barcelona in 1928 sheds light on this idea<sup>20</sup>. In it, Bonhoeffer explained that acting according to some principles is not creative and obeying

<sup>14</sup> See chapter 5 and 6 of TAYLOR, *After God* for an exploration of different reactions to the phenomenon of the death of God.

<sup>15</sup> J. LACAN, *Le triomphe de la religion, précédé de Discours aux catholiques* (1975), Seuil, Paris 2005, p. 36 (Author's translation).

<sup>16</sup> Although Nishitani's reaction to the phenomenon of the death of God is not the object of this paper, at this point it is also worth mentioning it. The course paper Nishitani handed in to Heidegger in his seminar in Freiburg in the academic year 1938-1939 bore the provocative title *Meister Eckhart and Nietzsche Zarathustra's*. In it, he explored the Christian roots of Western nihilism, thereby pointing out that Western nihilism was not actually finishing theology and religion, but revealing some of its aspects.

<sup>17</sup> BONHOEFFER, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

<sup>18</sup> ID., *Ethics* (1955), Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, New York and London 1995, pp. 68-69.

<sup>19</sup> DE GRUCHY, *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 211.

<sup>20</sup> ID., *Works*, Vol. 10, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2008.

the law is simply acting as a copyist. He proposed instead an ethics which does not suppress the importance of the moment of decision using a series of pre-established norms. And in suggesting so he goes so far as to compare this man to Nietzsche's superman.

Although Bonhoeffer does not use the notion «death of God», without a doubt his reflection on ethics is framed within a deep digression of the origin and implications of this phenomenon. For him, God has gradually stopped being necessary in several fields of knowledge and life. Bonhoeffer considers that this movement began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century: little by little, man discovered the laws that govern the workings of world. Man realized that scientific, social, political, artistic and ethical fields could be explained without the need to turn to God. In short, man came of age, assumed his autonomy and stopped feeling safe thanks to a «system of guarantees». Bonhoeffer is criticizing the so-called God-of-the-gaps or, as he puts it, «God as a working hypothesis». Science, for him, had revealed that the world does not need God in order to work.

He then points out that the usual reaction of theologians is mistaken and dangerous. Christian apologetics, he explains, keeps claiming that God is necessary: that although he is no longer necessary to explain the phenomena of nature, for example, it still is the only possible explanation for the so called «last questions», such as death and creation. A clear example of this reaction is the attitude of theology towards Darwinism: theology finally accepted Darwinism, but only by granting room to God as a *deus ex machina* who puts the process of evolution under way.

Bonhoeffer believes the attempt to claim the necessity of God is absurd. Theology should not attempt to give back to man the feeling of being in puberty, that is, to convince him of the need of an authority that comforts him and explains the *raison d'être* of thing, but should accept that God is not necessary.

What room does Bonhoeffer leave for God, then? According to the protestant theologian, the current world, precisely because it is more without God, is closer to God than the underage world. The true Christian is the one who experiments the death of (a certain) God. In his letter to Eberhard Bethge on the 16th of July of 1944, he explicitly links his view on ethics with the phenomenon of the death of God:

God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us<sup>21</sup>.

Stated differently, it is only when God becomes superfluous, when we no longer need him to put patches or cover holes, that we can live according to him. In short, experiencing the abandonment of God is the only path to live in a Christian way – and this leaves us without stable criteria for ethics, something the man on the «path of duty» is not able to bear<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> ID., *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> At this point it is necessary to mention that some scholars have pointed out that the logic at stake in this freedom and mastery that knows no limits might be disturbingly similar to some of the logics underpinning fascism and other forms of totalitarianism. But that Bonhoeffer's ethics avoid those risks by underlining «our finitude and creatureliness and» advocating «the way of faith». See DE GRUCHY, *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 213.

Eberhard Jüngel, a German Lutheran theologian, took again this thread in *God as the Mystery of the World*<sup>23</sup>. Jüngel says he is writing in a period in which science no longer needs God or, echoing Bonhoeffer, when God as a working hypothesis is no longer required. According to Jüngel, theology should not live this situation sadly. Aligning with Bonhoeffer, he defends the thesis of the «wordly inness of God». Jüngel pertinently poses the following questions: how could God be absolute and at the same time have been crucified? Can absolutism and weakness be given at the same time? Does the death of God have any theological sense? His answer is affirmative. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that although metaphysics arrived at the idea of the death of God through an internal need, this idea could not exist without Christian faith. What is more: he goes so far as to say that the death of God originally belongs to theology.

In Jüngel's eyes, Hegel is the theoretician who provides the best explanation for this phenomenon. According to Hegel, the feeling of the death of God appears intensively within Protestantism, particularly in the rejection to conciliate God with finite existence. For Hegel, this impossibility is a moment of the absolute through which the eternal needs to pass in order to suppress the stage in which each of the dimensions of totality believes to be absolute, a process that, in the end, gives way to a conciliated totality. Crucifixion is crucial to account for this switch from one stage to another – God cannot be only for himself. For this reason, he sacrifices himself, giving himself to the world, to finitude. It is worth noting that, for Hegel, the death of God – the speculative Holy Friday – does not affect exclusively God's human nature, but also his divine nature. Negation and death are proper to God. In his *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*<sup>24</sup>, a little before Jüngel, Jürgen Moltmann had already affirmed that the death of Jesus is the center of all Christian theology. God does not stonily contemplate the world from the Olympus, but, as François Varillon<sup>25</sup> would maintain three years after Moltmann, suffers.

Varillon holds that God, far from being impassible and insensitive to world's pain, suffers. If God is love, then he necessarily needs to be moved by the suffering of the beings he created and loves<sup>26</sup>. An invulnerable father would be a father without tenderness<sup>27</sup>. Varillon trawls through the Bible seeking traces of divine suffering. One of his most original points is the uncertainty of God in front of Creation. Following André Neher, Varillon maintains that Creation is not the application of a pre-established perfect program, but is characterized by a «radical unpreparedness»<sup>28</sup>. Some creatures revolt and God, as a result, feels «dramatically insecure about the success of his work»<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> JÜNGEL, *God as the Mystery of the World*.

<sup>24</sup> According to J. MOLTSMANN, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (1972), SCM Press, London 2015, ancient Christology regarded divine nature as impassible, that is, God was invariable, unable to suffer and immortal. Moltmann, by contrast, holds that God is not impassible, but suffers in front of the Son on the cross. And, what is more, he suggests that the death of Jesus does not only affect the human nature, but also the divine. In fact, for him, the death of God is the center of all Christian theology.

<sup>25</sup> F. VARILLON, *La souffrance de Dieu*, Le Centurion, Paris 1975.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibi*, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibi*, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibi*, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibi*, p. 28. Author's translation.

Going back to Jüngel: in my view, it is through the phenomenon of the death of God that Jüngel provides the philosophical ground for understanding Moltmann's and Varillon's characterization of God. A positive reading of weakness and caducity underlies Jüngel's reading of the death of God. If, traditionally, caducity was understood as negative because of his propensity to nothingness, Jüngel reads caducity as positive. Weakness and caducity are proper to God because God can only truly affirm himself if he does so in front of nothingness and emptiness, but not as if they were something external, but as something which takes place inside him. In few words: God is only God if caducity and death are his ontological possibilities.

In short, the theological reaction to the death of God, of which Bonhoeffer, Jüngel, Moltmann and Varillon are representatives, can be synthetized with the following ideas:

- a. weakness, caducity and death are inherent aspects to God. The death of God is not an event that has recently happened to God, but one of his constitutive phenomena.
- b. The society which believes itself to be the furthest from God is the one which, in fact, is more prepared to live according to him.
- c. When Western society starts talking about the death of God, it is not killing God, nor verifying that God has been killed, but it is allowing that which is most proper to God to emerge.

## 2. *The theology of the death of God or celebrating that God is gone*

The reading of the death of God put forward by Bonhoeffer became influential in the English-speaking world particularly after the publication of John A.T. Robinson's *Honest to God* in 1963 and contributed to the emergency of the so-called *theology of the death of God*<sup>30</sup>, which on the 8th of April of 1966 would occupy the cover of «Time» magazine: *Is Goad dead? – read its title.*

The notion «theology of the death of God» – which has been defined as a «theological trend» and an «Americanization of the death of God»<sup>31</sup> – grouped together theories that differ substantially between them. To mention only some with the aim of showing their diversity without attempting to be thorough – Gabriel Vahanian<sup>32</sup>, strongly influ-

<sup>30</sup> In fact, the legacy of Bonhoeffer's understanding of the death of God is vast and reaches far beyond the authors writing in the 1960s. See the DE GRUCHY, *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, for how Bonhoeffer underlies the thought of several contemporary theorizations on ethics, politics and theology, and to which extent it is indebted to his cultural and political context.

<sup>31</sup> CAMPS, *Los teólogos de la muerte de Dios*, pp. 113-116.

<sup>32</sup> Gabriel Vahanian was, in a «pretty unconscious way» (CAMPS, *Los teólogos de la muerte de Dios*, p. 23), the beginner of the eclectic movement of the theology of the death of God. As he suggests in *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (1957), Wipf & Stock, Eugene 2009, God dies as soon as he becomes a cultural accessory because our culture, as finite, cannot encompass God, that is, the infinite. His diagnosis is the following: the current manifestations of Christianity drive us far away from authentic Christianity. It is important to underline that Vahanian neglects Christendom, but not Christianity. For him, Christianity has to get rid of Christendom. After doing so, a new form of Christianity, that Vahanian labels Post-Christian, will be able to emerge. In short, Vahanian propounds leaving behind the current period, characterized by a radical immanence, and urges the Christian to face God as infinite and radically other. As Victoria Camps (*Los teólogos de la muerte de Dios*) points out, the limitation of Vahanian's approach is that

enced by Kierkegaard, proposed to deny Christendom for Christianity to realize itself; Paul Van Buren<sup>33</sup> warned about the need to update religious language; Thomas J.J. Altizer<sup>34</sup> read the death of God from the Hegelian dialectic as a necessary and unavoidable phenomenon proper to Christianity; William Hamilton<sup>35</sup> aligned himself with a certain existentialism and suggested that the absence of God had to bring about a consolidation of the bonds of the human community; and Rubenstein, from Judaism, maintained that after Auschwitz God had died, but religion kept being necessary.

The representatives of this eclectic movement shared, however, an essential point: they did not oppose the death of God, but claimed it for theology and religion – although with diverging goals and interests. As Altizer and Hamilton suggest in their *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, this movement tried to use certain ideas typical of atheism for theology and not against it<sup>36</sup>. In *Living the Death of God. A Theological Memoir*, Altizer summarizes the essential contributions of his thought this way: creation is not an act of power, but a *kenotic* act. Altizer presents, then, a God Creator who is vulnerable and weak like the crucified God. For him, it does not make sense to believe that God the Creator and the crucified God are essentially different. Vulnerability is not only proper to the crucified God, but also to the Creator – something that, as pointed out above, Varillon had already suggested. Altizer's argument rests upon the following idea: the sacrifice of God does not only lie at the heart of the Christian redemption, but also at the heart of the Creation<sup>37</sup>.

Again, as was the case of Bonhoeffer, Jüngel, Moltmann and Varillon, what all the representatives of this new theology had in common was the idea that weakness, caducity, in short, the death of God, open extraordinarily fertile paths for thought.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the theology of the death of God in combination with Postmodernism gave way to the so-called postmodern turn to religion<sup>38</sup>,

---

he does not dare to indicate with precision the direction that Post-Christianity ought to take.

<sup>33</sup> In *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (Macmillan, New York 1963), Van Buren holds that the language and the mentality in which the Gospel was written has almost nothing to do with our language and mentality. He proposes to reinterpret the holy texts on the light of current society. For him, the crucial element of the Gospel is not its theological insights, but the ethical guidelines that might be inferred from Jesus' life. In this sense, it is telling that he reads the Gospel without mentioning God.

<sup>34</sup> T.J.J. ALTIZER - W. HAMILTON, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis 1966; T.J.J. ALTIZER, *Living the Death of God. A Theological Memoir*, State University of New York Press, New York 2006.

<sup>35</sup> ALTIZER - HAMILTON, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*.

<sup>36</sup> In their preface to their book, they define their theological proposal in the following way: «Radical theology is a contemporary development within Protestantism – with some Jewish, Roman Catholic and non-religious response and participation already forming – which is carrying the careful openness of the older theologies toward atheism a step further. It is, in effect, an attempt to set an atheist point of view within the spectrum of Christian possibilities» (*ibi*, p. 9). However, it must be said that the theologians of the death of God are not atheistic. As Victoria Camps explains, «if they reject the God of Christianity it is because they expect to find a more authentic God, that is, more Christian» (CAMPS, *Los teólogos de la muerte de Dios*, p. 16, Author's translation).

<sup>37</sup> ALTIZER, *Living the Death of God*, p. 125.

<sup>38</sup> Between the 25th and the 27th of September 1997, the Villanova University held a conference titled *Religion and Postmodernism* which is considered a landmark within the turn to religion. Its discussions were published in J.D. CAPUTO - M. SCALON, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1999. Although the main axis of the text is de debate between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc

which, to some extent, can be considered a prolongation of the third reaction against the Western nihilism we have been examining. Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo, two of its most relevant representatives, propose a weak ontology in *After the Death of God*<sup>39</sup>. Vattimo holds that what lies at the place traditionally assigned to a foundation is weak, and therefore it cannot be used to organize and evaluate the world once and for all. Vattimo regards this phenomenon as positive, since this elimination of walls grants considerable doses of freedom. For him, this model of world is closely tied to the Christianity that has experienced the death of God: the core of this Christianity is informed by a message of love that allows us to get rid of the dogmatic burden in all fields of experience. Vattimo goes so far as to say that it is high time that Christianity realizes the non-religious destiny that belongs to it. Vattimo's weak ontology presents itself, ultimately, as a recovery of Kenotic Christianity.

Caputo also considers that the fragility of God constitutes the core of Christianity. For him, things can *happen* to God, who is, then, vulnerable and powerless. The example *par excellence* of this is Crucifixion. From Caputo's perspective, Crucifixion reveals that God is exposed to the events of the world<sup>40</sup>. A God like this does not contribute to close and determine the system with which we interpret the world and we act in it, but keeps it permanently open. In *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Caputo contends that God is unconditional and, simultaneously, vulnerable, unstable and powerless. His argumentation rests on his distinction between names and events: names contain events and provide them with a provisional shelter, but events exceed it. Names, therefore, offer a sort of horizon of expectations to events, but not in order for events to achieve said horizon, but to surpass it. Within this scenario, God constitutes the event *par excellence* and, therefore, the task of theology as conceived by Caputo is fundamentally a hermeneutics of the event that aims at freeing it from the limitations that the name imposes him. This is what, according to Caputo, Meister Eckhart has in mind when asking God to free him from God<sup>41</sup>.

This «freeing» the event of God from his name has to do with Caputo's claim to untie the notion of God from causality. Caputo understands «the name of God as the

---

Marion, it also includes important reflections by Richard Kearney, Mark C. Taylor, and John D. Caputo on the relation between Postmodernism and religion. For a thorough study on the relation between Postmodernism and contemporary Western theology, see VANHOOZER, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, in which Vanhoozer explores the possibility of a theology divested of metanarratives. See also KEARNEY - ZIMMERMANN, *Reimagining the Sacred*, a collection of essays on how the sacred is nested within secular society, in which the term anatheism is coined, defined, and proposes – it is neither a matter of theism nor atheism, but a mode of believing proper to Postmodernism, and which should not be understood as a Hegelian synthesis «for it operates from a space and time *before* the dichotomy of atheism and theism, as well as *after*» (*ibi*, p. 7).

<sup>39</sup> Again, as in the case of the theologians of the death of God, Vattimo and Caputo acknowledge their debt to Bonhoeffer. See J.D. CAPUTO - G. VATTIMO, *After the Death of God*, Columbia University Press, New York 2007.

<sup>40</sup> In a similar vein, Carmen González Marín, in a text on justice within Derrida's thought, writes that «Christ is the deconstruction of God» (C. GONZÁLEZ-MARÍN, *Marx, Derrida, Justicia*, in M. BELTRÁN - J.M. MARDONES - R. MATE [ed.] *Judaísmo y límites de la modernidad*, Riopiedras, Barcelona 1998, pp. 215-222, here p. 220, Author's translation) – of an omnipotent and insensitive God, we would add.

<sup>41</sup> J.D. CAPUTO, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2006, pp. 2-4.

name of a call rather than of a causality»<sup>42</sup>. The event of God is a call to live otherwise and not the cornerstone of a flawless theoretical gear. Caputo aims at disconnecting the name of God from ontology: God should not be understood as the foundation that underpins ontology, but, on the contrary, as an unconditional power without sovereignty that operates a short-circuit within ontology, which disrupts the order of the world, and which underlines the exceptional and the singular versus the oppressive mechanical workings of the norms. In his own words:

My idea is to stop thinking about God as a massive ontological power line that provides power to the world, instead of thinking of something that short-circuits such power and provides a provocation to the world that is otherwise than power<sup>43</sup>.

The implications that such a God has for the way of living proper to the kingdom of God are the following:

This kingdom is organized around the power of the powerless, by forces that are weak, not strong, by a sustained sensitivity for the exceptional and singular, for the different and the left out, the foreigner and the immigrant<sup>44</sup>.

Despite the fact that many Christian churches can identify in these words the message of Jesus Christ, not all the reflections by Caputo are easily assimilable by traditional Christianity. Proofs of this difficulty are Caputo's interpretations of two Biblical passages in which he reads the fragility of God and on which he bases his theses. On the one hand, for him, the reason why Jesus Christ did not get off the Cross is not that he did not *want*, but that he was not *able to*. On the other hand, Caputo holds that the weakness of God can already be seen in *Genesis*, where God dislikes his own work and feels uneasy about it. Against traditional Christian theology, Caputo affirms that God is not responsible for the programming of the world and that things can happen to him. A God like this, then, does not close the system with which we interpret the world and we act in it, but keeps it permanently open.

Without a doubt, the thought of all these authors, from Bonhoeffer to Caputo, differ significantly. Their contexts and interests are clearly different, and the implications that their proposals have for believers also differ greatly. Bonhoeffer and Jüngel, in spite of their opposition to certain ideas of Christianity, are closer and more understandable for Christian churches than Vattimo and Caputo, for instance. Nevertheless, beyond these differences, the positions of all these authors share two crucial points, as examined above. First, for all of them, the death of God is not a radical novelty that finished theology, but a possibility harboured since forever in God himself. Weakness, caducity, vulnerability and even death are inherent to God<sup>45</sup>. Second, they all coincide in the idea that it is not a matter of a total death of God, but only of some aspects traditionally associ-

<sup>42</sup> *Ibi*, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibi*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibi*, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> Marion, in his lecture *L'impossibilité de l'impossible: Dieu* (March 2011, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona), explained that the fact that, for God, everything is possible, does not amount to saying that he is omnipotent. God is not omnipotent, since there are many things that are forbidden to him – i.e., he cannot lie, nor provoke damage, nor contradict himself.

ated to God. This has allowed to question the secularist assumption according to which modernity and secularization go hand in hand<sup>46</sup> – and the only place allowed to religion is that of private belief<sup>47</sup>. The religious, they show, has not been dismissed or annihilated. On the contrary, in Hent de Vries' words: «It returns as the repressed, even though the suppression was never of anything in particular. Religion, in this light, resembles the experience of trauma: its modality is the impossible mourning of an immemorial loss»<sup>48</sup>. Their theology must, then, be labeled *postsecular*<sup>49</sup>.

Going back to our point: for all these authors, what the death of God *does* imply is that God – the God that remains after the death of God – cannot be translated into a number of ontological, epistemological, aesthetical, ethical, or political laws, that is, God is not accessible through any concept or, in Caputo's terms, name<sup>50</sup>. Trying to derive these laws from God would mean turning God into an idol<sup>51</sup>. In this sense, Bonhoeffer, the thinkers that followed his thought, the theologians of the death of God, and even the thinkers of the so-called turn to religion, must be labeled *postliberal*. As Robbins and Crockett affirm: claiming a world without the working hypothesis God

represents a distinctly postliberal sensibility [...] that totally repudiate[s] the cultural form of religion that was great achievement of the likes of Kant, Hegel and Shleiermacher [...]. Bonhoeffer's

<sup>46</sup> The conventional narrative on secularization is not only being questioned by and through current thinkers, but also through Bonhoeffer and the other aforementioned theologians. As Zimmermann acknowledges, the postmodern turn to religion is partly inspired by Bonhoeffer's «being with God yet living without God» (KEARNEY - ZIMMERMANN, *Reimagining the Sacred*, p. 17).

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, T. ASAD, *Genealogies of Religion. Discipline and Reasons of Power and Christianity and Islam*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD 1993, pp. 45-47. See also Casanova's thesis according to which the turn to religion might be described as a «deprivatization of religion» (J. CASANOVA, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994).

<sup>48</sup> H. DE VRIES, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1999, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> ROBBINS - CROCKETT, *A Radical Theology for the Future*, p. 3. For in depth studies on the phenomenon of the turn to religion, see H. DE VRIES, *Religion and Violence. Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 2002 and TAYLOR, *After God*.

<sup>50</sup> For Jean-Luc Marion, the fact that God is not accessible through any concept is the reason why we cannot talk about the (total) death of God. In the lecture mentioned in the previous footnote, Marion shows the impossibility of affirming that God has died. First, he distinguishes between the impossibility of demonstrating the existence of God (which constitutes a metaphysical problem) and the impossibility of talking about the essence of God (which cannot be considered a metaphysical problem) and, then, analyzes this second impossibility. According to Marion, things, as pointed out by Husserlian phenomenology, can only appear in one of the two following ways: either we receive an *intuition* of them and fix it through an imposed concept, or we figure out a *concept* that ends up finding an empirical validation. God, Marion points out, cannot become accessible through any of these two ways: we cannot receive any intuition of God – because an intuition, by definition, has to be affected by the forms of space and time. And God is not a concept. God is, therefore, inaccessible. One of the consequences that, according to Marion, this inaccessibility brings about is the disqualification of the death of God: since the death of God has to necessarily assume a given concept of the death of God, and having seen that there is no concept suitable to grasp God, the only thing that can die are the concepts that, mistakenly, attempt to make God accessible but that, ultimately, do not manage to do so, because they are mere idols (J.-L. MARION, *The Idol and Distance* [1977], Fordham University Press, New York 2011, p. 23; Marion's argumentation rests on the thesis that he had already developed in this text).

<sup>51</sup> As Vries maintains, it is no coincidence that the turn to religion of contemporary Continental philosophy is inextricably linked to a new preoccupation for ethical freedom and responsibility. See DE VRIES, *Religion and Violence*, p. 221.

call for a religion-less Christianity set the template for a radical theology's self-distancing from religion. From this perspective, it is easy to see the continuity between Bonhoeffer and Caputo, whose reading of Derrida's «religion without religion» represents just a variation on a theme<sup>52</sup>.

### 3. Contemporary messianism or regretting that God is yet to come

The Jewish messianic tradition also inspired and unleashed a discussion on the void to which the absence of God seems to condemn humankind. But while the theologians of the death of God and the other aforementioned thinkers *celebrate* the weakness of God and the inexistence of a foundation that underpins a solid set of rules for ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology, most of the so-called messianic thinkers tend to *miss* God's reassuring presence in all of these domains. And therefore expect that the messiah will finally show up and resolve all tensions and conflicts.

Judaism had been discussing the issue for centuries – for millennia. And at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish messianism came into contact with certain political trends, particularly within Marxism and other libertarian ideologies, and this brought about a significant turning point: the messianic discussion surpassed the domains of Judaism, and started to inform the thought of philosophers as diverse as Benjamin, Schmitt, Lévinas, Rosenzweig, Taubes, Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek<sup>53</sup>.

In all the messianic narratives, at least the two following stages are at play: a mythic stage and a messianic stage. In the first, also called historical time, relationships are shaped by and mediated through law. The second, a superior stage, redemption, opened up by the arrival of the messiah – be it a historical figure or a concept –, is characterized by freedom, justice and spontaneous relationships between individuals who without needing to turn to the law are immediately good to each other. It is worth noting that historical time and messianic time exclude each other. The arrival of the messiah will not imply the *culmination* of historical time, but its *interruption*.

Beyond sharing this logic, each messianic narrative presents its own particularities. Agata Bielik-Robson<sup>54</sup> wisely summarizes in the following way the aspects in which they can differ. First, according to some of these narratives, this world is *fallen*, and therefore must be *destroyed* entirely, while for others it is just *separated*, and thus must only be *repaired*. For the first authors, the world can only be saved *from outside*. For the second, it can be saved *from within*, since there is something in the world that keeps the spark of the divine. This is the case of Franz Rosenzweig<sup>55</sup> and Emmanuel Lévinas<sup>56</sup>. The second difference has to do with the channel of redemption. For these two messianic authors, what keeps the spark of the divine and therefore can be used to host the redemptive love of God is the divine law, the Halacha, which will allow knocking down the mythic, natural law. Others, such as Benjamin, Taubes, and Badiou, are clearly anti-

<sup>52</sup> ROBBINS - CROCKETT, *A Radical Theology for the Future*, p.4.

<sup>53</sup> For a thorough study of their use of the messianic tradition, see ROSÀS TOSAS, *Mesianismo en la filosofía contemporánea* and BOJANIC, *Violence and Messianism*.

<sup>54</sup> A. BIELIK-ROBSON, *Tarrying with the Apocalypse: the Wary Messianism of Rosenzweig and Levinas*, «Journal for Cultural Research», 13 (2009), pp. 249-266.

<sup>55</sup> F. ROSENZWEIG, *The Star of Redemption* (1921), The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2005.

<sup>56</sup> E. LÉVINAS, *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, Minuit, Paris 1968; Id., *Otherwise than being or beyond essence* (1974), Kluwer Academic, Dordrecht 1991.

nomic. For them, as long as the law belongs to this world, it is corrupted and must be knocked down. The law is an obstacle for justice and for redemption.

But can the law so easily be abrogated? Is there a real need to surpass it? Redemption can only come from outside? Can the messianic logic be that simple? Or, as Lévinas and Rosenzweig propound, can the divine law remain unaltered in messianic time? As has been extensively studied by Rosàs<sup>57</sup>, both approaches oversimplify the role that the law plays within the redemptive process. This is why she is particularly interested in the messianic narratives that cannot be easily classified as either antinomic or for the law – in particular, Benjamin's, Agamben's, Žižek's, and Derrida's.

What interests me the most and constitutes the core of this paper is that *the logic of Agamben's and, above all, Derrida's messianisms are stunningly similar to that of the fertile readings of the death of God examined above and thus provide lucid insights to delve into them.*

Whereas for most of the messianic narratives there are only two possible stages – either within the natural law or without it, either corrupted or redeemed –, for Benjamin<sup>58</sup>, Agamben<sup>59</sup>, Žižek<sup>60</sup>, and Derrida there is a third stage in play, which is of particular relevance for our enterprise: *a stage in which the law is simultaneously applied and suspended or, to be more precise, is applied in its suspension.* This is the so-called state of exception Benjamin already had in mind, which works as a transition from the mythic stage to the redeemed one<sup>61</sup>.

To my mind, a powerful key to understand its inner workings is to be found in a letter from Gershom Scholem to Benjamin dated 20 September 1934. In it, he wrote about a version of this state of exception: the *Geltung ohne Bedeutung* [force without significance or validity] that refers to the status of law in Kafka's *The Trial*. Within it, the law is in force, but it is not applied, that is, it does not translate into any concrete shape. Scholem labels such state «the zero point of revelation»<sup>62</sup>: everything is

<sup>57</sup> ROSÁS TOSAS, *Mesianismo en la filosofía contemporánea*.

<sup>58</sup> W. BENJAMIN, *Critique of Violence* (1921), in ID., *Selected Writings. Vol. 1: 1913-1926*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, London 1999, pp. 277-300.

<sup>59</sup> G. AGAMBEN, *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (1995), Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998; ID., *The Messiah and the sovereign. The problem of law in Walter Benjamin*, in D. HELLER-ROAZEN (ed.), *Potentialities: Collected essays in philosophy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, pp. 160-174; ID., *The time that remains: A comment on the letter to the Romans* (2000), Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005; ID., *State of exception* (2003), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005.

<sup>60</sup> S. ŽIŽEK, *The Puppet and the Dwarf. The Perverse Core of Christianity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA - London 2003.

<sup>61</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that while for Carl Schmitt (*Political theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty* [1922], The MIT Press, Cambridge 1985) the state of exception is a means to prevent chaos from advening and pursues the return to a normal state, to a *juridical* frame (and, therefore, he considers that within the state of exception *the law is suspended for its preservation*), for Benjamin (*Critique of Violence*) there can be two different types of state of exception: the negative one, which bears an undeniable resemblance to Schmitt's, and the positive one, which he defends, and which leads to a new stage where there is no room for laws.

<sup>62</sup> Agamben quotes Scholem: «A state in which revelation appears to be without meaning, in which it still asserts itself, in which it has validity but no significance [*in dem sie gilt, aber nicht bedeutet*]. A state in which the wealth of meaning is lost and what is in the process of appearing (for revelation is such a process) still does not disappear, even though it is reduced to the zero point of its own content, so to speak» (G. SCHOLEM, *The correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1989, p. 142).

in potency, nothing is in act. In other words: the form of the law is dissociated from its applicability; the first one remains, while the second one is suppressed.

It is my view that this state allows for adding a third stage to the binomic schema mythic-messianic. Then, contemporary messianic narratives can include up to three different stages. First, the classical mythic stage, in which the law in force is translated into a number of laws – whether ethical, aesthetical, or epistemological – and which logic Agamben describes as a force-of-law<sup>63</sup>. Second, the stage labeled by Scholem «the zero point of revelation», in which the law is in force but is no longer applied, to which Agamben refers as force-of-law. Within it, it is a matter of a state of exception, in which the law is simultaneously applied and suspended. For the Italian philosopher, this state of exception is negative: the difficulty in identifying the law and yet feeling its overarching force turns out to be suffocating and thus the force needs to be switched off. Auschwitz and Guantánamo Bay Detention Camp are its paradigm. The war on terror, and any other state of exception, is also informed by this logic: the laws protecting individuals can be suspended for the preservation of the law as a whole. Finally, a stage in which said force has been interrupted, which following Agamben's nomenclature, could be expressed as force-of-law. This stage, which Agamben and, to some extent, Benjamin, believe to be the most redemptive moment we can aspire to, is characterized by a lack of hierarchizing and differentiating rules. They consider it a positive state of exception because the exceptionality at work no longer classifies and oppresses individuals, but grants them the possibility of enjoying pure life without mediation<sup>64</sup>.

#### 4. *Overlap and distinction between the two forms of facing nihilism*

*What I would like to propose is that these three stages with their corresponding logics bear a stunning similarity to the three distinct logics at work within the narratives of the death of God. First, the stage in which God was alive and strong – which could be synthesized as Christendom –, was a stage in which the force, impulse or drive proper to God was translated or actualized through a set of norms. It could be said that this is the stage that Bonhoeffer criticized in his reflections on ethics. Wasn't the stage he was criticizing a matter of a force-of-law, that is, the logic at play in the first stage of any messianic narrative? Second, the everything-goes reaction to the death of God could be considered to be informed by the logic proper to the Agambenian and Benjaminian redemption – that is, a force-of-law in which, as such, there are no longer laws at work because their spring has dried.*

*And the third and last analogy is the one that concerns us most: Isn't the logic at stake within the *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, the force without significance or without validity, the force-of-law, analogous to the one at work within the sort of force granted to (what remains of) God by the theologians of the death of God, his precursors, and the postmodern representatives of the turn to religion? Isn't there in both cases a force or potency that remains in suspension and is never actualized – the powerless God that does not translate into concrete norms, on the one hand, and the law that keeps*

<sup>63</sup> See the second chapter of *State of Exception*.

<sup>64</sup> See C. MILLS, *Agamben's Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment, and Happy Life*, «Contre-temps», 5 (2004), pp. 42-62. for an extended examination of Agamben's messianic politics.

*its force but not its validity, in the case of messianism? Aren't the oppressive negative state of exception thematized by Agamben and the theological reaction to the death of God of Bonhoeffer and other mirror images of each other?*

I would like to draw the attention to the fact that while the logics underlying these perspectives resemble one another, *their conclusions could not be farther apart*. Agamben holds that such state is extremely dangerous and, what is worse, that it is leading the West towards a global civil war<sup>65</sup>. For him, said state needs to be overcome, said force needs to be interrupted. By way of contrast, as we have seen, Bonhoeffer, Caputo and, to some extent, the other thinkers of the death of God mentioned above, consider it the most desirable state. In other words, interestingly, Agamben regards this stage of redemption as particularly dangerous and undesirable, while for Bonhoeffer, Jüngel and other theologians constitutes precisely the stage in which the Christian is called to live and the only way to overcome nihilism.

*In short, how is it possible that the most sophisticated messianic narratives read negatively precisely what for Bonhoeffer and for the theology of the death of God constitutes the most fertile proposal?* In my view, a really fertile reaction to nihilism seems to be missing from the messianic ground.

What I would like to put forward with this paper is that the messianic tradition can also be used to provide a fertile way out of the dead end to which messianism seemed to have lead. As I explored elsewhere<sup>66</sup>, a messianism that embraces the present stage is to be found in Derrida's work. I would now like to do a step more and propose that *Derrida's messianism sheds light on and complements the theological reaction to the death of God we are dealing with*.

### 5. *The messianic way out of nihilism or Jacques Derrida*

In what follows I will argue that for the messianic narrative built by Derrida the state of exception is not a transitional stage in which a suffocating force is at work and needs to be turned off, as Agamben would hold, but the most redeemed stage we can aspire to. And that, therefore, Derrida's use of messianism has a manifest link to the approach Bonhoeffer and Jüngel have towards the phenomenon of the death of God.

Derrida coined the notion of *messianicity without messianism*<sup>67</sup> to oppose the vision on history by Fukuyama<sup>68</sup>, who adhered to a Hegelian – or, rather, Kojevian – concept of history and propounded that after the fall of communism the engine of history – the fight of classes – had extinguished and history had concluded. From Derrida's perspective, this is neither *possible* nor *desirable*. According to him, this ideal state will always remain spectral: its effects can be felt, as by anticipation<sup>69</sup>, but the gap that separates the current stage from it can never be bridged, just as the signifier will never fully reach the signified<sup>70</sup>. By claiming the spectral spirit inherent to a cer-

<sup>65</sup> AGAMBEN, *The time that remains*, p. 87.

<sup>66</sup> In ROSÁS TOSAS, *Derrida's Way out of the Dead End of Contemporary Messianism*.

<sup>67</sup> DERRIDA, *Spectres de Marx*.

<sup>68</sup> F. FUKUYAMA, *The end of history and the last man*, Free Press, New York 1992.

<sup>69</sup> DERRIDA, *Spectres de Marx*, p. 35.

<sup>70</sup> ID., *De la grammatologie*, Minuit, Paris 1967.

tain Marxism<sup>71</sup>, Derrida replaces the Hegelian ontology by a spectrology. He counters Fukuyamian apocaliptism with the notion of a messianism without *parusia* that he labels *messianicity without messianism*<sup>72</sup>.

Although Derrida never established a dialogue with the other messianic reflections of the moment<sup>73</sup>, his approach to messianism can be said to be highly in dialogue with it. As I explored elsewhere<sup>74</sup>, what distinguishes him from the rest of messianic authors is his idea that the realm of law cannot actually be completely left behind and so justice cannot be reached. It is worth noting that, in Derrida, said reflection is not initially connected to messianism. In *Force of Law*<sup>75</sup>, for example, he deploys his idea that the mere application of a set of laws does not lead to justice and that justice requires the suspension of law. Yet he maintains that justice can never be reached because grasping it would entail giving it a shape, that is, turning it into a law. He understands justice as that which opens up the possibility of laws, as the condition of possibility of laws. As a mere possibility, justice can never become actual. In other words, law tends to justice, but justice is forever deferred. Each time one attempts to make a just decision one has to try to overcome the law by suspending it, but a thorough overcoming of the law is not possible. The most just decision we can aspire to is then the one that is located precisely in this irresoluble tension between law and justice. This desire or impulse that knows no release prevents the system from closing itself into a monolithic structure of meaning.

In *Force of Law*, then, Derrida might seem to be a classically antinomic messianic author – there can be no justice as long as the law is at work. Justice is to remain always other, it is forever deferred. And yet he encourages us to attempt to surpass the law, even if said attempt is always condemned to fail. Hence the fact that Derrida can be neither grouped with the antinomic messianic authors nor with those for the law. It is in *Specters of Marx*, from 1993, where Derrida clearly links his reflections on the interplay between law and justice of the 1980s to messianism and further develops them – the impossibility of the messiah’s arrival is a guarantee against the oppression of a closed system in which everything is established beforehand<sup>76</sup>.

In short: the originality of Derrida’s approach is the irresoluble, aporetic tension between law and justice. Justice can never be translated into a set of laws. Yet the force of justice can always be felt and should always inspire our deeds. I have argued

<sup>71</sup> Id., *Spectres de Marx*, pp. 151; 162-163.

<sup>72</sup> For further studying the role that religious categories play within the thought of Derrida, and understanding the ways in which the Derridean messiah could, at times, be barely distinguishable from ‘monsters’, see Y. SHERWOOD - K. HART, *Derrida and Religion*, Routledge, New York and London 2005.

<sup>73</sup> See MILLS, *Agamben’s Messianic Politics*, A. THURSCHELL, *Cutting the Branches for Akiba: Agamben’s Critique of Derrida*, in A. NORRIS (ed.), *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death. Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2005, pp. 173-197 and ROSÁS TOSAS, *Derrida’s Way out of the Dead End of Contemporary Messianism*, for different attempts to carry out this dialogue.

<sup>74</sup> In ROSÁS TOSAS, *Derrida’s Way out of the Dead End of Contemporary Messianism*, as well as in *Mesianismo en la filosofía contemporánea*.

<sup>75</sup> J. DERRIDA, *Force de loi. Le “fondement mystique de l’autorité”*, «Cardozo Law Review», 11 (1989-1990), pp. 921-973.

<sup>76</sup> At this point it must be highlighted that the same logic informs the religion without religion that, inspired by Derrida, Caputo develops (J.D. CAPUTO, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1997).

elsewhere<sup>77</sup> that this space works analogously to the state of exception Agamben deals with: Derrida's justice is a force that can never be actualized. The *messianicity without messianism* would then be but a name of *Geltung ohne Bedeutung* or force-of-law. Yet while Agamben wants to overcome this stage, Derrida considers that this is not only impossible but also undesirable<sup>78</sup>.

Agamben's messianic time has been fiercely criticized<sup>79</sup>. According to his detractors, were the force of law shut down, differences would vanish, and this would render us a vulnerable amorphous mass and not liberated individuals, as he propounds. Derrida's proposal is to raise awareness of the fact that, unlike what Agamben thinks, we permanently inhabit this state of exception, we should celebrate it, and we should learn to live in it, with the uncertainty it implies. Any attempt to overcome it is doomed to fail. This force, impulse or drive that does not translate into any concrete law keeps alive the drive of life and of differences, which are ultimately responsible for our individuality and subjectivity, and prevents us from becoming a homogenous mass exposed to desubjectifying forces. Furthermore, it makes room for responsibility and, therefore, ethics – as Bonhoeffer pointed out apropos of the death of God. In summary, Derrida offers a positive reading of the *Geltung ohne Bedeutung* or force-of-law, just as Bonhoeffer, Jünger, and the theologians of the death of God offer a positive reading of the death of God. To use again Caputo's words, for all of these authors, God or the messiah is not understood as a *causality* that delimits, closes and programs the world, but rather as a *call* to try to move beyond the current normative frame.

### *Final Remarks*

As stated at the beginning of this paper, Western contemporary nihilism has not only lead to the sterile 'everything goes' and the suffocating hyperlegislation, but has also been the object of fertile lucid and sophisticated readings. This paper has addressed two of them – two narratives on how to face the absence of God from the world, one belonging to theology, the other to the philosophical contemporary uses of the messianic tradition.

I hope to have shown, first, the subtle theoretical gestures that allowed a certain theology to celebrate the phenomenon of the death of God, which at first seemed to finish theology. Second, I also hope to have shown to which extraordinary point the logics at stake within the reactions to the death of God and within contemporary messianism resemble each other by suggesting that both of them include up to three different possible stages which present stunning similarities.

<sup>77</sup> In ROSÁS TOSAS, *Derrida's Way out of the Dead End of Contemporary Messianism*.

<sup>78</sup> See C. MILLS, *Playing with Law: Agamben and Derrida on Postjuridical Justice*, «South Atlantic Quarterly», 107 (2008), 1, pp. 15-36, for a comparison of the role that the law plays within Agamben's and Derrida's work.

<sup>79</sup> See BIELIK-ROBSON, *Tarrying with the Apocalypse*, for an exploration of how Agamben fails to provide a way out of the mythic stage. Nevertheless, in spite of the shortcomings of Agamben's proposal, his description of the current stage is lucid: it is undeniable that the perverse logic that informs phenomena such as Auschwitz and Guantánamo is also that of *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*. It must be pointed out that when Derrida, through the *messianicity without messianism*, seems to be defending the *Geltung ohne Bedeutung*, he is clearly *not* defending these practices. For this reason, a thorough study examining the subtle but crucial differences between Agamben's and Derrida's understanding of *Geltung ohne Bedeutung* should be undertaken.

Third, I have paid particular attention to one of these three stages for its high degree of sophistication and openness to diverging, even conflicting uses. It is a matter of a state that lies at the heart of Agamben's messianic logic. It consists of an intricate logic in regard to the law that is more insightful than other messianic conceptions of the law that tend to oversimplify their inner working: the stage in which the law is in force but is not applied (*Geltung ohne Bedeutung* or force-of-law). And I have suggested that, to a big extent, the same logic informs the core of radical theology from Bonhoeffer to Vattimo and Caputo. The following must, then, be pointed out: although messianism frames narratives consisting in the fact that God is *yet to come*, while the theology of the death of God copes with the fact that *God is gone*, the logic of the *Geltung ohne Bedeutung* is present in both of these movements.

Fourth, I have warned that, surprisingly, said logic is evaluated as extremely dangerous and undesirable by Agamben, while for radical theology it constitutes precisely a desirable point of arrival. Finally, I have suggested that a messianic narrative that does not oversimplify the role that the law plays within the redemptive process and that, at the same time, conceives the force-of-law as the most positive state we can aspire to, is to be found in Derrida's highly original *messianicity without messianism* – which, I pointed out, brings it close to the fertile theological reaction to the death of God.

In particular, I hope to have shown that Derrida's positive reading of the logic at stake within the *Geltung ohne Bedeutung* helps us see some more of the *ethical* positive far-reaching implications of the fertile reading of the death of God, which in the end turns out to be deeply messianic in a Derridean sense – it is not only that the death of God allows for a new creativity and a higher responsibility, as Bonhoeffer and Caputo highlight. It is also that this new creativity is closer to justice. The experience of the abandonment of God, to put it in Bonhoeffer's terms, or the powerless God of Caputo, do not throw us to a grey, dystopic world of injustice, loneliness, and terror, but provides us with the chance to *experiment* the call of justice and the possibility of making an effort to pursue it. Stated differently, Derrida's account of messianism helps us see why weak ontologies do not necessarily lead us to the end of ethics, but precisely place us in the midst of ethics – ethics understood as the exercise of a responsibility that cannot be delegated to any previous set of rules, as the challenging management of the irresolvable tension between law and justice to which the end of a fundamentalist view of the world leads us.

In short, the *messianicity without messianism* transfers the theological way out of God's death to the *ethical and political* debates typical of contemporary messianism that at the turning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seemed to have met a dead end, and do so in a postsecular tone<sup>80</sup>. Robbins and Crockett have warned about the fact that radical theology «has been insufficiently political and, further, that there has not yet developed a truly radical political theology»<sup>81</sup>. We would like to suggest that *messianicity without messianism* might be considered a manifestation of radical theology *charged precisely*

<sup>80</sup> As Hans Jonas maintains when addressing the notion of postsecularism: «“Post-secular” [...] doesn't express a sudden increase in religiosity, after its epochal increase, but rather a change in mindset of those who, previously felt justified in considering religions to be moribund» (H. DE VRIES - L.E. SULLIVAN [eds.], *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, Fordham University Press, New York 2006, pp. 2-3).

<sup>81</sup> ROBBINS - CROCKETT, *A Radical Theology for the Future*, p. 5.

*with a mainly political and ethical concern* – a political and ethical concern of a very specific sort: insofar as it is postliberal and postsecular, it is a matter of a political and ethical logic that is not totalizing, that is, that has less to do with *causality* than with an ongoing *call* that reaches no Hegelian synthesis, in Caputo's words mentioned above<sup>82</sup>. In this sense, *messianicity without messianism* would constitute a particular suitable notion to contribute to concoct the emancipatory political thought that, as Crockett proposes in his *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics*,<sup>83</sup> might be born at the postmodern intersection between the secular and the religious.

---

<sup>82</sup> Along a similar vein, but in a more ecclesiastic frame, Vanhoozer develops the idea that it is interpersonal dialogue with God, rather than impersonal causality, what defines God's relationship with the world (VANHOOZER, *Remythologizing Theology Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*).

<sup>83</sup> C. CROCKETT, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics After Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011.