

KEVIN LEWIS

University of South Carolina

MISCHIEF, IDOLATRY, AND THE DEMONIC:
TOWARD A HERMENEUTIC OF PLAY

Biblical hermeneutics, studied reflection upon interpretation of scriptural passages, has not remained static in method or approach over the centuries. It has manifestly evolved in response to evolving cultural forces generally, as the needs and opportunities of Christian communities have changed and changed again over time. As numerous scholars have observed, the writers of the books of the New Testament are already to be found re-interpreting works of the Hebrew Bible, the "Old" Testament."

This writer cannot claim to have become thoroughly immersed in the long history of evolving biblical interpretation, nor to have immersed himself in the development over the past two centuries of the academic enterprise of newly named "hermeneutics" as a field connecting formal theology and philosophical theology and epistemology with developing linguistic and literary theory.

But what is especially relevant in this more "recent" enterprise of formal hermeneutical reflection - relevant now and especially to this writer - much of it lately conducted by philosophers and linguistic theorists without professed confessional religious interest, has been the wide ranging use of theory and reflection drawn from disparate academic quarters. As a field of inquiry with several foci, and in becoming interdisciplinary, hermeneutics has perhaps appropriately been described recently as now a "minefield."¹

An innovative hermeneutic from a new perspective such as I propose may indeed benefit those in Christian communities who seek suggestions for how now in an increasingly skeptical, secular time to "read" and to embrace not only challenging scriptural passages but the confessional language which has long arisen and arises still out of acquired personal faith (in doctrine, liturgy, homily, personal and public prayer, as well as intimate conversation).

¹ David Jasper's term in *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), a useful primer. Also helpful is David Klemm's collections, *Hermeneutical Inquiry: Vol I, The Interpretation of Texts* and Vol II, *The Interpretation of Existence* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1986; eds. Charles Hardwick and David Duke, for the American Academy of Religion, Nos. 43 and 44 - for the evolution of such reflection over the past two centuries. See also Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth, and Language-Games* (London, Macmillan, 1977) and John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutical Project* (1987), followed by *More Radical hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (2000), both published by the Indiana University Press. And of course cf. Paul Ricoeur in many publications over his career.

In awareness of my limitations as a scholar trained and encouraged to risk working across lines that traditionally separate disciplines such as theology, philosophy, literary and cultural studies, but also in the belief that that careful, measured interdisciplinary projects hold potential for re-invigorating reflection and offering vital new insights, I offer what follows as a useful contribution to ongoing hermeneutical reflection. The interdisciplinary license and latitude in what follows reflects one individual's integration of disparate career recognitions. Though I intend the proposal argued to serve and provoke a wide readership, the path will be haunted inevitably by the autobiographical.

I will sketch a proposal of a more timely, more serviceable hermeneutic by, in turn, developing the relevance of disparate, perhaps heretofore unlikely sources, connecting the dots, as it were, to offer a theory of interpretation that may, for some, meet the need for a new *way* to read the Bible and to use traditional religious language with personal authenticity and commitment.

I shall connect, as it were, John Calvin's analysis of what he observed to be our ingrained penchant for idolatry with relevant deconstructionist analysis of textual language as problematic in continental "theory" of the past sixty years, and then with the biblical presentation of the threat posed by the demonic to evangelism in particular, and to embrace of the communicated "Word" generally - with Paul Tillich's philosophical theological reflections on the "demonic" as it relates intimately to the "divine."

And then, in moving to a conclusion, I will suggest the usefulness of dialogue with relevant poetries especially that of W.H. Auden where it plays inevitably with the demonic in pursuit of the divine - for more than ever this is a time when the religious imagination will benefit from dialoguing with the literary.

These sources will help to suggest the relevance of a hermeneutic which counters uncritically "literal" interpretations of scripture and creed, but also, and fundamentally, which must question the vexed term "belief" itself as the appropriate method of expressing commitment to the meaning of biblical narratives, teachings, and subsequent creedal formulations echoed in personal and public expression. I will suggest that people of faith should consider discarding our uncritical use of "believing" and "belief," and rather instead "play" the propositional, figurative language of biblical Christianity, in recognition that within this language we meet the continuing threat of the demonic at play with us for its destructive ends not ours.

(One of the demonic - or the mythic "Devil's" - most successful accomplishments is to have used against the faithful the secular, skeptical assumption that this demonic is no longer relevant. Another is to have influenced people of faith uncritically to understand by "belief" what secular scientific rationalism understands by it as "foundational," to the modern mind.) We cannot "beat" the mythical Devil (the demonic) in pursuit and expression of faith without first acknowledging the ongoing existential threat of the demonic.

I offer a hermeneutic not for those inclined to what fundamentalists and atheists alike appear determined to assume, namely the strictly post-

Cartesian, foundational rational-empirical sense of the “literal.” What follows is for those of us wanting to persist in the faith, well-educated in the damaging effects of “rational” secular inquiry or simply grappling for a means of embracing religious “truth.”²

By faith I mean here the alternative, subjective, existential sense of foundational personal vision inspired by biblical Christianity. I draw upon inspiring sources which might well appear otherwise unrelated.

The path toward my concluding proposal of a better way to interpret scripture as well as formal religious language generally is indeed experimental and exploratory: interdisciplinary. It will lead to a challenging suggestion that an appropriate new theory of biblical interpretation should now seriously reconsider the modern concept of “belief” (if not the pre-modern “*credo*”) as hopelessly mired in a secular, positivist rationalism fatally at odds with the communication and embrace of biblical Christianity.

Note this first: previous contributors to the enterprise of hermeneutics would seem to agree that such reflection can be generally differentiated into a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion. For this writer, there can be no escape from the hermeneutical circle informing what amounts ultimately to acknowledging a faithful, apologetic purpose: what scripture and traditional religious language responding to scripture generally “mean,” at least for me, is affirmed in an abiding presumption.

The question for this writer is not *what* a scriptural passage means in personal truth (or for appropriate response in “*doing* the Word” as a person of motivating faith) so much as *how* does or can it hold decisive existential meaning when such “truth” is so easily rejected as subjective delusion by our reigning cultural skepticism? The writer is a person of faith who presupposes, as do many others, the highest order of truth in the Christian message “revealed” in the Christian Gospel.

The question addressed in what follows is how can we be captured and re-captured existentially by Scriptural “truth” when we inhabit a thoroughgoingly secular, skeptical age? This “how” requires tenacious examination and may well, of course, frustrate even those of favouring predisposition and intent. No one can offer proof (as we currently understand “proof”) of the “truth” of this or any other great religion adequate to meet the skeptical demands of the age. So, the question of a fruitful, effective hermeneutical method, adhering to the tradition of faith as well as to the circumstances of present day cultural understanding, is paramount.

I.

I take enabling encouragement for a hermeneutic of play (and for the side-stepping of “belief,” but more of this below) from an extraordinary observation offered by the founder of my Reform Church tradition. It perhaps will not shock and may indeed enlighten and inspire the reader to be

² See especially Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays in Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

reminded that John Calvin in the ponderous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* offers us this elegant and liberating observation, “postmodern” in its prophetic implications: “The mind is a continuous idol-making factory.” (*Unde colligere licet hominis ingenium perpetuam, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricum.*³)

This is one of the more disturbing or perhaps appetizing of the implications he draws from his unrelenting fundamental primary doctrine of Original Sin. “Belief” as employed by secularized religious moderns will forever linger under the permanent threat of damaging idolatrous misuse and meaning. A timely hermeneutic must now pursue the implications and the opportunities for corrective revision of inappropriate interpretations subservient to what has become of “belief,” thanks largely to the prestige of modern science, in our time.

To pursue this further, Calvin observes that we naturally, mindfully, draw idolatrous conclusions and form idolatrous perceptions when it comes to religious or any other belief, but for him especially religious belief. We are formed, as sons and daughters of the original sinners, Adam and Eve, to fall naturally into idolatry as a consequence of inheriting our fallen identity as human beings.

What particular force or power ensures this state of things? The power of the demonic, the deceiving and destroying force built into Creation. Idolatry is of the mythic Devil’s game, which he, the personified demonic, plays skilfully as he goes to and fro in the earth, in history, in our time now as well as in biblical times. Human intelligence, regardless whether “saved” by the grace of the all-powerful God, no matter how learned in the world’s terms, is nonetheless subject to the skilled deceptions of the demonic powers present in the world. To ignore this situation, as for Calvin’s Reformed tradition “ever reforming,” is to ignore whatever we may now mean, if we regard it at all in a secular age, by “damnation.”

But, here, an additional caution must be raised. Calvin exempted writings of canonized scripture from threat of idolatry, in their origin and delivered down through centuries, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit is understood by his seventeenth-century faith to have guided not only their writers, redactors, and translators but the committees which later canonized them. We, however, cannot and should not agree with this exemption, despite that we do agree that in some decisive way these scriptural texts are indeed divinely “inspired.”

What we now know, four centuries after Calvin, from historical-critical interrogation of scriptural texts over many generations, suggests that we should complicate any simplistic understanding of “divine inspiration.” We need to re-think this essential tenet of our faith, in part for the way in which it has come to permit, uncritically for so many Christians, a latter-day secular understanding of the “literal” meanings of scripture to triumph over meaning expressed in the very different hermeneutical context of pre-modernity – centuries before the emergence of scientific method as we know it now.

³ Latin edition, 1559, Vol. I, ii, viii.

Modern “literal” interpretations have opened the way to rabid demonic exploitation of idolatry – threatening harmful scriptural misinterpretation. Recent historical-critical grappling with the formation and transmission of the biblical texts – note especially the work of the biblical scholars gathered in the controversial Jesus Seminar in recent years – suggests that politicized scriptural texts, along with texts of all other varieties, should now be approached, too, as writings which in origin and in subsequent reception, faced then and face now the threat of idolatrous misunderstanding.

The writing and reading of religious, even “inspired” religious texts remains circumscribed by fallen human intelligence, as well as fallen human spirit and will. This is to take nothing away from the certain faith, when given, that Scripture contains the inspiring Word of God. Rather, it is to caution Christians, present and prospective, to exercise caution and perhaps agility, too, in the reading and interpretation of Scripture. We must rely finally on the hope of true understanding as offered only by the grace of God. And so “divine inspiration” must be re-theorized, ultimately on an individual basis, to meet this threat as it applies even to scriptural texts.

Idolatry in Christian history has, of course, been a subject addressed again and again, ostensibly always to serve the purpose of sustaining the biblical Christian vision and protecting it from misinterpretation and abuse. Of the many such instances that could be lifted up for note here in support of a timely anti-idolatry hermeneutic, one very recent is to be found in James Woods’ *New Yorker* review of Terry Eagleton’s criticism of the “new atheist” phenomenon addressed in *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (2009).

Wood, in referring to the blame for anti-semitism in Christinity cast upon the “idolatry of the man-God” by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and to Eagleton’s attempt to counter Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens with a Roman Catholic, “Thomistic God” hardly incarnate at all, concludes, “But Christianity is a form of idolatry.” Without elaborating he concludes, re. Adorno and Horkheimer, that “For them, the Incarnation brings the absolute closer to the finite, and makes the finite absolute; it turns spirit into fleshly magic.” And, for support of this rhetorical perspective, Wood reminds us that in another recent book, *Saving God* (2009), Mark Johnson contends that *most* religious belief is in fact idolatrous.

If not unavoidable, even the Incarnation is nonetheless critically susceptible to idolatry. And Wood finds himself in agreement with Johnson’s observation that “idolatry is a natural human impulse.”⁴ Calvin would agree. The demonic, as I shall argue below, remains permanently in business taking advantage of this situation.

II.

⁴ James Wood, “God in the Quad,” *New Yorker* (August 31, 2009), 75-79.

But, first, this reminder of the arguably prophetic dimension of recent “deconstructionist” theorizing – as it relates to my proposal. If no longer quite as arresting, but as intellectually challenging today as it was in the 1960’s, 1970’s, and 1980’s, the “deconstructionist” movement that accompanied and followed the so-called “linguistic turn” toward language interrogation and analysis in analytic philosophy has produced theorizing that bears upon the construction of a new, more relevant, more promising biblical hermeneutic.

I respect those scholar-theorists who have worked hard to assimilate, whether they agreed with each other or not, the intent and achievement of one contributor to the linguistic, deconstructionist discussion in particular, Jacques Derrida. I have fathomed the intentional difficulty of Derrida just enough to cherish respect for his earlier, controversial work especially. But I am no obsequious follower of his or of any of the innovative great philosophers from whom he derived influence, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Nor am I versed in the variously focussed subsequent literatures of deconstruction well enough to carry out my own interpretive summary and judgment of the initiatives and achievements that comprise them.

I wish only to draw fleeting attention here to those aspects of Derrida’s methods and apparent goals that would seem not only to echo but possibly even to support my hermeneutic suggestion that a person of persisting or would-be genuine faith should consider what amounts to a kind of gaming of religious texts, starting with Scripture, and to do so in order to, consciously and conscientiously, out-manuever our putative natural human tendency to idolatry – with the help of the invoked grace of God.

The deconstructive philosophers and their sympathetic followers, to my knowledge, did not apply their language analyses directly to Scripture or other derived religious writings. They refrained, it would seem, as focussed academic philosophers, having enough on their plates in the way of problematizing philosophical texts to not want to open further battle lines with traditional religionists. But their studied critiques, Derrida’s most especially, were directed at *writing*, at “discourse” generally, if especially of course at the writings of academic philosophy, of literature, and of the “human sciences” generally.

When Derrida writes, “... language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique,” one might imagine that he includes religious writings under this apparently comprehensive rubric.⁵ But, if toward the end of his career he addressed the issue of religion directly and to pallid effect (see below), as a younger man in the 1960’s and 1970’s he apparently did not, concentrating as surely he thought he must, on his work as a philosopher hoping to awaken his profession to the deception and danger of allowing “monologisms” (systems of projected coherence) everywhere implied but unspoken in language, in “discourse,” to remain unchallenged.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1980), 284.

But to establish my frame of reference here, note that religious language is employed by people of faith in a way different from how they, apart from their faith, and of course the non-religious employ the language of the secularist, post-Enlightenment world view influenced by science and analytical, rational-empirical philosophy. The “truths” of religious faith are not of the same order as the “truths” determined and sought by “enlightened, rational” reason through the procedures of scientific method upon which moderns habitually confer overwhelming prestige. The modern (and post-modern) religious have Ludwig Wittgenstein to thank for helping us to recognize, if we are willing epistemologically, and then, if compelled, to embrace religious talk and religious writing as ordered by the “rules” of a different but equally human language “game” than by those of the secularist “game” played by science.⁶

Wittgenstein’s “game” is an important, nicely suggestive term for the sort of worship, prayer, and discussion language commonly employed within historical communities of religious faith. “Game” suggests “play,” and it is the “play” of and within all language as theorized by deconstructionist, postmodern continental philosophers and their followers which I will here invite for consideration into this experiment in hermeneutics, applying it especially to religious language. In the early Derrida and the inheritors of his multi-question-begging theory of the playful, undecidable *differance* to be addressed primarily in written texts we meet a considerable source for a more insightful hermeneutic.

Derrida’s early deconstructionist writings on language and the logocentric tendency, taken as intrinsic to metaphysics, to reduce (and perhaps betray) all writing to a stable meaning have attracted and frustrated general readers, literary critics, and philosophers since the 1950s. Inspired to his own kind of creativity as a scholar by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Saussure, among others, Derrida is perhaps most famously known for his attribution of both “difference” and, especially, “*differance*” (as in “to defer” in English) to textual language, in effect attributing to language, especially to language employed by the philosopher naively pursuing fixed truths, effectively an endless undecidability of meaning.

At the heart of this analysis, of course, lies the observation that there can be no self-evident, one-to-one link between “signifier” and “signified.” For, as in Saussure before him, language is to be understood as a “differential” network of inconclusive meanings. For Derrida this applies to writing, to texts, more than it does to speech. Thus, an inherent effect of textual language, no matter how clearly it is employed by philosophers, unintended and unrecognized, is disruption of any apparent meaning conveyed. Language as it deflects and complicates a philosopher’s intended use of it, through the inevitable elements of metaphor and other suggestive figurative devices, ensures that philosophy texts, when deeply engaged, pose literally endless problems of interpretation.

For Derrida, running so deep in Western thought that they respect none of the conventional boundaries, lie paradoxes of meaning produced not just in

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe, 1953 (Prentice Hall, 1999).

philosophy but across all varieties of discourse.⁷ Textual language, in short, has been presented to us by Derrida and his followers as inherently mischievous – that is, inherently tending to make mischief with the message that a writer labors to convey.⁸

And so, readers of philosophical texts have been warned by this Derridean cadre of linguistic theorists not to place innocent trust in the clarity and precision of the language that writers have duly chosen to convey their message and meaning. Writers will do their best in writing to capture and communicate meaning. But then readers must struggle both with and against the resulting texts to derive what provisional individual meaning possible but never a finally established meaning. This difficulty newly identified by Derrida extends beyond the long-recognized challenge to writers to take into strategizing consideration, as they must, the knowable etymology of words they employ as evolved to the moment of their writing.

I emphasize my drawing upon the early Derrida, for the later Derrida addressed religious issues, as in the collected essays in *Acts of Religion* (2002)⁹ But he does not in those later essays employ the language theory of “*differance*,” at least not in the influential way that he did in earlier writings. Nor does the later nor the early Derrida treat the language of scripture or of creed and prayer when he addresses the language of “monologic,” “logocentric” philosophy.

The time has come to explore the consequences of submitting religious language as such to the possible usefulness of Derrida’s critique. For we should now acknowledge that even and especially the language of Scripture can and should be read as inherently, if not intentionally of course, mischievous. Its language, otherwise privileged by divine inspiration, should be regarded as hardly different despite its authority as “inspired” writing, from the monologic philosophical language Derrida analyzes. As we move beyond Calvin’s conferral of exemption upon scriptural language, we move beyond Derrida’s effective decision not to submit scriptural language to the innovative critique with which he treated philosophical “discourse.” We do so to take a further step toward the experimental hermeneutic we propose below.

I borrow here for my purposes Derrida’s use of “*difference*,” which his expert interpreter, Christopher Norris, summarizes thus: “Writing is the endless displacement of meaning which both governs language and places it forever beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge.” Because of the imputed differing “*difference*” (between signified and signifier) of Derrida’s,

⁷ Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 21.

⁸ To borrow a somewhat similar supporting perception from Hans Georg Gadamer, for whom, as he argues, texts cannot have intrinsic meaning, we can never confidently recover or discern an author’s intent in a text. For the mischief inherent in all language, especially in that of “truth”-pursuing philosophical texts, prevents it. So the reader ultimately cannot hope to understand a text in order to apply it. Rather, he or she can only hope to apply it in order to give it personal understanding. See *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., tr. Joel Weisheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. with Introduction by Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).

the reader cannot hope to escape or to overcome the “snares of textuality,” that is, of language endlessly deferring its meaning or meanings. “*Differance*” perpetually sets up, as Norris puts it, following Derrida, “a disturbance at the level of the signifier.” As a result, sense must remain “suspended between the two French verbs “to differ” and to “defer,” both of which contribute textual force in a passage of writing, but neither of which can fully capture its meaning.”¹⁰

We must contend, to put it differently, with a conception of language as an endless play of signifiers in contrast to the logic and force of fixed “transcendental” signifiers. The problem is compounded in translated texts; as Derrida writes in the essay *Positions*,

for the notion of translation of one language by another we would have to substitute a notion of *transformation*: a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We will never have, and in fact have never had, any ‘transfer’ of pure signifieds.¹¹

We should now apply this to scriptural texts.

The early Derrida famously objected to any response that he might be offering another system of interpretation following preceding systems. He objected to any suggestion that in his critical writing one could detect an “essence” of strategy. Sympathetic critical readers credit him with pursuing a new and entirely different *mode* of thinking instead of simply moving to new thoughts within inherited categories supporting inherited systems. His deconstructionist project is intimately tied to the respective texts interrogated, for as Christopher Norris notes, his project “can never set up independently as a self-enclosed system of operative concepts,” and it resists strenuously “any kind of settled or definitive meaning.”¹² Derrida objected playfully, to being “understood.”

The relevance of Derrida to an exploratory biblical hermeneutic is suggested whenever he refers to the “transcendental signified,” in other words, to a central or unifying concept independent of language which is to be found, as he observed, throughout the history of metaphysics. This is what metaphysics has historically sought, a “transcendental signified” (or “presence”) independent of language. But, as Derrida wants to show, the language of metaphysics (or of philosophy generally, and, ultimately, all discourse) deflects or complicates in several possible ways this project.

Whether a mere projection or a brilliant insight on Derrida’s part, he gives us a forceful approach to historical or current texts based on the reminder, as Norris sums it, that “There is no language so vigilant or self-aware that it can effectively escape the conditions placed upon thought by its own pre-history

¹⁰ Norris, *Deconstruction*, 32.

¹¹ Derrida, *Positions*, tr. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 31; quoted in Alan Bass’s “Translator’s Introduction”, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), xv.

¹² Norris, *Deconstruction*, 31.

and ruling metaphysic.”¹³ No Derridean deconstructionist ally that I know of has wanted to apply this conclusion and its consequences to religious texts starting with Scripture itself. But now we should, as it will help in the formulation of a timely biblical hermeneutic.

Divinely inspired texts, and of course doctrinal and confessional formulations as well as liturgical language derived from the faith instilled by these texts, nonetheless for being “divinely inspired” do remain texts created and then translated and edited in historical time by historical writers.¹⁴ Derrida argues that philosophers have been able to impose their various systems of thought only by ignoring, or certainly suppressing the disruptive effects of language.¹⁵ The cherished belief that scriptural texts are divinely inspired has made it all the easier for persons of faith to ignore Derrida’s “disruptive effects of language” – to the detriment of the actual inspiring Word.

Specifically, the element of his analysis, which should be applied in a new hermeneutic begins with, or at least fundamentally includes the notion that all writing effectively presents a “free play” of undecidability within every system of communication, every discourse. To quote Norris again, the operations of writing “are precisely those which escape the self-consciousness of speech and its deluded sense of the mastery of concept over language.”¹⁶ By this reckoning, in all writing, in all texts, the assumed and trusted connection between signifier (language) and signified (any and all referents including the “transcendental signified”) has been shown to be problematized at best and deceiving at worst.

So, the response to this situation, argues Derrida, is to acknowledge that finite language is in effect a field of “play” – to quote him, “a field of infinite substitutions because it is finite ... [and] there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions.” By “play” then, Derrida appears to mean that in reading one must recognize and respond as he or she will to the de-stabilized and de-stabilizing condition inherent in the signifying language. Play, or “free play,” is required because all written content lacks definitive meaning, and thus the adequate communication of information intended by the writer can never be assured.

At risk of complicating this facet of Derrida’s theory that I find especially relevant, I note his additional observation: “The *overabundance* of the signifier, its *supplementary* character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*.”¹⁷ No meaning of a term is fixed, rendering definitive definition effectively impossible. So, every term necessarily requires a supplement or supplements, something or some things which help it exist and be understood.

¹³ Norris, *Deconstruction*, 22.

¹⁴ Contrast, of course, the evolving critical approach to the texts of the *Hebrew Bible* and the *New Testament* with the binding traditional Islamic teaching that the *Qu’ran* was composed in heaven in Arabic by Allah and delivered piecemeal directly to Prophet Muhammed over several years.

¹⁵ Norris, *Deconstruction*, 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁷ Derrida, “Structure Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), 289, 290.

Thus, the view of historical language or “discourse” as inherently destabilized leads to the need in reading to understand the consequent need for careful, reflective but never decisive playfulness in order to receive as much of the intended meaning of the text as possible, realizing that one can never reach anything but one’s own limited, “supplementary” reading. Of the two kinds of interpretation Derrida posits in “Structure, Sign, and Play,” one dreams of deciphering a fixed truth, and the other, more appropriate, and I quote Culler here, “...affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics and of onto-theology – in other words throughout his entire history – has dreamed of full presence, of reassuring foundation, of the origin and end of play.”¹⁸ The bequiling term Derrida employs, as noted above, to suggest this inescapable difficulty is *Differance*.

For our purpose, and because of this imputed undecidability within language in any system of communication, this skeptical view can lend support to Calvin’s rather harsh diagnosis of the condition of human consciousness, that we cannot help but function as each one of us a “continual idol-making factory.” We struggle to detect and to express the truth. But we are so often misguided in our occasional belief that we have found and can communicate divine truth. Divine inspiration does not automatically overcome this problem; for the Word comes to us not *in* but mysteriously *through* the written, translated, edited words. We are congenitally victims of effectively idolatrous language in which the signified is confused with the transcendental signifier, in which that which can only be symbolized (the divine) is confused with the symbol itself.

Ambiguity is our fate, and as Timothy Beal noted in a recent *The Chronicle Review* article, “The Bible Is Dead; Long Live the Bible,”¹⁹ “Ambiguity is the Devil’s playground.” Let us adapt the often confusing, complicated language theories of Derrida’s deconstructionist project as effectively supportive of Calvin’s anti-sacramental, prophetic theology and our experimental hermeneutic. And we turn to a neglected, fairly recent philosophical theology of the demonic for a nicely related additional source upon which to build our hermeneutic.

III.

We proceed first by a reminder of Scripture itself (which makes no claim to be taken “literally”) and, specifically, of the references to the demonic (the Devil, Satan, Beelzebub) scattered through the Synoptics, the Pauline letters, and *Revelation* – remembering, of course, the serpent’s role in the drama of the Garden of Eden, and the power ascribed to Yahweh’s familiar, Satan, in *Job* – a power and authority accumulated “from going to and fro in the earth.”

We turn to Scripture to recall the biblical demonic in its considerable appearances. In the New Testament, as in the Old, the demonic is personified

¹⁸ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Deconstruction* (Cornell University Press, 1982), 131.

¹⁹ Timothy Beal, “The Bible is Dead; Long Live the Bible,” *The Chronicle Review* (April 17, 2011).

in the figure variously named Satan, the Devil, Beelzebub, and occasionally broken out into the company of demons generally. Much has been written by historian critics about the evolution of the “Devil” as concept and figure, and we need not linger here on subsequent treatment accorded this depraved mythic figure all the more threatening because he possesses our worst human characteristics in the extreme. *Matthew* gives us the fullest picture of the *mano a mano* temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (4:1-11), followed by the analogy of the sower of weeds whose purpose is to defeat the “good seed” (13:36-40).

In *Mark* 4:14,15 we meet a Satan who immediately steals the saving “word” sown in audiences by Jesus. Here in *Mark*, as elsewhere the demonic is associated typically with the “things of man” (8:33), as in *John* we are referred to the Devil as “the ruler of this world” (12:31). Paul in *Acts* 5:3 receives his conversion mandate to help willing listeners be delivered from the “power of Satan” (26:18). Paul warns the Corinthians to guard lest they be “outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs” (*IICor.* 2:11). And then he is figured as the malevolent “god of this world,” metaphorically blinding the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the Gospel (*IICor.* 4:4). For the sake of Jesus as the Christ, Paul tells us, he embraces the “thorn in his flesh” given by a messenger of Satan – for the good of his evangelizing mission (an example, I suggest, of strategic “playing” the Devil for the good of that mission [*IICor.* 12:7-10]).

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, he warns that the second coming awaits the revealing of the “son of destruction” who falsely proclaims himself to be God, with wicked deception empowered by the “activity of Satan” (2:1-11). In *James* 3:15 we are warned of “earthly demonic” wisdom, and in *I John* 2:14 readers are praised for having successfully overcome “the evil one.” Then in *I Timothy* 5:15 readers are cautioned against “straying after Satan.”

Among the references to the power and designs of the demonic, threatening the spread of the Word, of course we meet in *Revelation* reference to “the deep things of Satan” – his threatening work is not simple, not easily confronted (2:24). The text that inspired *Paradise Lost*, *Rev.* 7-12, gives us the heavenly defeat of “the dragon and his angels” by archangel Michael and his company, his throwing down to earth where subsequently, in anger, the “ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan” will play his deceit and destruction while he may, until bound finally in the bottomless pit until released if only for a little while at the end of the thousand years predicted in *Rev.* 20: 2,3.²⁰

The canny reader of Scripture and creed, as Martin Luther reminds us in his booming “A Mighty Fortress,” though attacked by temptation to misadventurous interpretation, must know how to keep the revealed God on his side:

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo
us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through
us:
The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;

²⁰ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL.: Crossways Bibles, Division of Good News Publishers).

His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

That “little word” must be discerning, in the hope of enabling grace.

We will profit here by re-examining the power and authority ascribed to the traditional demonic as it was recovered from neglect by influential previous theologians and interpreted for our time by Paul Tillich, suggesting, I propose, a heretofore unremarked affinity with Calvin’s picture of the “idol-making factory” threatening within each of us.

The “Protestant Principle” as interpreted by Tillich and of course many others in this tradition, we are reminded, most generally combines conviction of faith with careful, tentativeness of reading or expression. “Tentative” here, as we shall argue below can be interpreted further as a need for playfulness, that is, for intentional, individualized gaming of the inherent idolatrous tendency in human nature or the mind itself – echoing usefully Ludwig Wittgenstein’s observation, noted above, that religious language, written or spoken, should be taken as but one in a repertoire of language “games.”

Tillich was perhaps the one great Protestant theologian in the last century who, upon reflection, determined that, given as he saw it the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition, and in the belief in original sin, in order to ensure the divinity of the Divine Creator, people of faith must acknowledge in their lives the contrary presence of the demonic. Tillich went to great length in *The Interpretation of History* (1936) to plead for recognition and appropriate apprehension of the demonic understood existentially, “abstractly” rather than, metaphorically, through the person of the cartoon Devil of popular culture.²¹

Without belief in an adversarial, evil-intending demonic force tempting the faithful to commit a particular idolatry understood as worship of the religious symbol rather than that which the symbol symbolizes, Tillich reckoned that the faithful, despite otherwise favourable appearances, will miss if not effectively betray the very divinity (God) they purport to worship and obey. His theological purpose was to encourage in the faithful an unrelenting self-criticism lest the intrusion of the demonic prevent us from grasping and being grasped by the God beyond the constructed images that conventionally express God.

Tillich’s persistent warning of this kind should fall on fertile ground in those, this writer among them, brought up in the Reform tradition. Putting aside the sometimes painful struggle with John Calvin’s over-riding concern for the great distance from his creatures of the Christian God, and with his perhaps over-bearing doctrine of Original Sin, we will note how Tillich, in his own way, drawing upon many precedent theological and philosophical writers, would seem to echo Calvin’s observation, quoted above, concerning the “idol-making factory” with which we are born and somehow must make our peace.

²¹ Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History*, trs. N.A. Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey (Scribners, 1936).

Having noted the theme of the demonic in 1936, to which I will return below, note first how he touches upon it in the later, better known *The Protestant Era* (1948) and his *Systematic Theology*, Vol I (1951) He had complained in *The Protestant Era* that the demonic had become obsolete in contemporary theology, and recommended that its “abuse” in the Middle Ages (the cartoon figure of the Devil) should “not forbid right use.” For, as he observed, we meet in the center of Luther’s as well as Paul’s experience “the structural, and therefore inescapable, power of evil” which should inform exploration of the “structural character of evil in our period.”²²

Tillich, of course, developed this thinking from influence by precedent figures, Duns Scotus, Luther, Jacob Boehme, and Friedrich Schelling, his dissertation subject. From this tradition Tillich took the impetus for advocating the “demonic depth in the divine nature itself,” giving it dialectical treatment – a reiterated theme in the lecture courses of his in which I enrolled as a Harvard undergraduate in the 1960s.

In order to plead “the structural character of evil in our period,” all the more threatening for our habit of ignoring it, Tillich linked the demonic with the countering and ultimately triumphant “divine structure, ... the Gestalt of grace.” It is through grace that we must be grasped by the divine to achieve a personal faith in which the continuing demonic threat is defeated. But he insisted that we acknowledge and then combat “the demonic *in* the divine nature itself.” (my italics)²³

In short, the demonic potential in the divine is structural, and it carries the potential to conquer the divine, in history if not eternally. Tillich made much of the concept of “ecstatic” reception of divine grace. For him, historically it has been ecstatic experience through which the transcendent divine is revealed, as it were, “grasping” the individual into true faith. But Tillich acknowledges that the demonic also can and does take possession of the individual. At the same time he insists upon a decisive difference of quality and character: “...while demonic possession destroys the rational structure of the mind, divine ecstasy preserves and elevates it, although transcending it.”²⁴

In the original 1926 essay, “The Demonic,” included as a long Chapter Three in *The Interpretation of History*, then in better translation by Garrett Paul in 1989, Tillich’s acknowledged purpose is to “strengthen the prophetic spirit of our era.” He observes that the term demonic, “when it has not degenerated into an empty cliché, always retains this meaning: the unity of form-creating and form-destroying power.” The demonic, as fundamentally linked to the divine, combines destructiveness with creative form in a defining dialectic.

As an aside, Tillich warns that in “starkly religious times” the demonic becomes so closely tied to the non-dialectical, merely negative figure of Satan that, in the process, in losing its power of creation, it becomes an “unreal concept.” We must grasp the metaphysical essence of the demonic, that is, the

²² Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (University of Chicago Press, 1948), xx, xxi.

²³ *Ibid*, xxi, ii.

²⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I University of Chicago Press, 1951), 114.

grounding of the destructiveness in *form*, in the “ground of being,” that ultimate “depth” “where ‘being’ is an expression for the unconditional, transcendent mystery beyond which thought cannot go, because thought rests upon it.” But then, as he insists, the ground of all being is also an inexhaustible abyss. By this path, putting aside the merely negative mythological figure of Satan, Tillich comes to the conclusion that “the demonic, by way of contrast [to the satanic], always entails the divine, the union of form and destruction of form; that is why the demonic can acquire existence, albeit an existence characterized by tension between the two.”²⁵

The argument in this essay is indeed challenging, but along the way we meet recognizable, helpful insights, e.g., the passage which begins “The demonic comes to fulfilment in the spiritual personality.” Those “spiritual” among us have the most to fear from the demonic power as we pose “the primary target of demonic destruction.” The “something else” of the demonic “contains the vital powers within itself, but it is also spiritual – and spirit destroying.”

The presence of the demonic in a person is best indicated when the ego’s disruption manifests an ecstatic, creative character in spite of all its destructiveness, only to be combated successfully by “the state of grace.” For “possession and grace are corresponding states, the demonic and the divine are correlated in their power, [and] both possession and grace exalt the spirit.” But we note: “...where grace unites these powers to the highest form, possession uses them to contradict the highest form.” Tillich accentuates the profound kinship of the demonic and the divine to make his point, that “...it is in the domain of the sacred, the holy, that we find the abyss, the unconditional power that invades our reality.”²⁶

Tillich continues, addressing “the role that the demonic plays in all historical creativity,” and suggesting that all serious historiography should include “the elements of the mythical [the divine, the demonic], else it will never rise above mere description of discrete finite entities.” We must recognize “how every moment [of life, of history] is suspended between the divine and the demonic.” And so all serious interpretation of history must employ “the mythic consciousness, with its insight into the dialectic of the divine and the demonic.”²⁷ This notion was echoed at a distance by Timothy Beal in a recent issue of *The Chronicle Review*, where he notes simply that “Ambiguity is the Devil’s playground.”²⁸

Our intellectual-cultural situation in the second decade of the twenty-first century, in ever-changing historical flux, suggests, I propose, that we regard carefully Tillich’s perspective on the history of the great religions:

The demonic is the negative and positive presupposition of the history of religions. All higher, individual, historically oriented religions emerged from a demonic substratum. It was through their

²⁵ Paul Tillich, “The Demonic,” tr. Garrett Paul, in *Paul Tillich on Creativity* (63-94), ed. Jacquelyn K. Kegley (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), 63, 66, 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69, 89, 70, 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁸ Timothy Beal, “The Bible is Dead; Long Live the Bible,” *The Chronicle Review* (April 17, 2011).

struggle with the demonic that these religions attained their particular form: the form in which they exert a compelling power over consciousness, and from which the demonic element, as their substratum, can never disappear.

We think in only two dimensions, argues Tillich, and in our secular age we cannot or will not see what he calls the “third dimension above and beneath” us, the dimension *both* divine and demonic, “breaking through form, exalting and corrupting.” Gone, he laments is our fear of old (expressed through myth), reminding us that in the biblical period “one of the chief arguments of the Christian apologists was that Christ had conquered the demons.”

We stand forever as creatures of history “in the midst of the contradiction between the divine and the demonic,” where only careful and constant discernment of this dialectic will enable us as best we can to know or to see the creative-destructive power of the demonic infused in our lives along with the divine.²⁹ The embrace of this dialectic is not only vital to the interest of Christian religion and all of humanity, but suggestive of our need of a responsive new biblical hermeneutic.

IV. CONCLUSION

Recognition of the demonic as structured within and against the divine, of the threat of idolatry ingrained permanently in the mind even and especially of the faithful, and of the inevitable disruptive mischief in language, even that of Scripture, reckoned by the “linguistic turn,” calls for an innovative response in hermeneutical reflection of the moment. An adequate response by a hermeneutics of faith will of necessity incorporate a challenging hermeneutics of suspicion. A profound grasp of the “structured” divine, gathered from the Word of God in Scripture and reinforced by a community of faith, must be complimented – to meet the ever-increasing challenge of present secular cultural circumstances and of faith itself – by a profound grasp of the “structured” demonic. We must be clear about the consequences for theory of biblical interpretation and for the uses we make of creedal, confessional language derived from these recognitions – in individualized personal as well as common experience.

Shifting to the testimony of another writer and poet, here briefly I will note that W.H Auden in the aftermath of his “re-conversion” to Christian faith in the late ‘thirties, when he subsequently wished to invite and to proclaim this faith in the divine into his poetry provides instructive illustration of acknowledging what we now identify as the predicament and the prophetic opportunity launched by theorizing following the “linguistic turn.” In his poetry of the ‘forties, Auden crafts strategy to address the risk perceived in the attempt to embrace the truly sacred, implicitly embracing something like that Calvinist caveat along with the Tillichian insistence on confronting the demonic.

Before Derrida arrives on the scene, Auden proposes a Derrida-like gaming of language in hopes of conveying divine truth. His poetic project of that time

²⁹ Tillich, “The Demonic,” tr. Paul, 76, 82, 83, 87.

would seem to be, in great part, one of protecting as best he can, by means of playful poetic language, his religious testimony from falling into unintended, misdirecting idolatry. He offers, as it were, a timely hermeneutical lesson for people of faith generally. Consider one illustrative passage from Auden's "New Year Letter," re. The "Devil" (whom he was to identify as "the father of Poetry" in an accompanying note):³⁰

For he may never tell us lies
But half-truths we can synthesize:
So, hidden in his hocus-pocus,
There lies the gift of double focus,
That magic lamp which looks so dull
And utterly impractical,
Yet, if Aladdin use it right,
Can be a sesame to light.³¹

We remember that Soren Kierkegaard told us, prophetically in the previous century, that "a poet is not an apostle, he casts devils out only by the power of the devil."³² Auden at the time of reconversion decided that he would need to understand his poetic practice "as a religious activity" in the vein of Kierkegaard, thence to approach his task as "unpredictable, isolating, and anxiety-ridden." Thus, with Kierkegaard, Auden understood that the man of talent, even more than the man of wealth, is that "rich man" in the Biblical passage for whom it is so difficult, perhaps near impossible, to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

It was Reinhold Niebuhr who brought Paul Tillich to Auden's attention, and, in particular, Tillich on the demonic in *The Interpretation of History*.³³ For Tillich, artists and intellectuals in modernity who care about the divine must summon all available resources at their command to discern the omnipresent but oh-so-subtle demonic presence and oppose it as they are able. The destructive power of the demonic is always to be found merged, inextricably, with creative, productive energies. Here recall again Calvin's warning of our innate idol-making tendencies.

The consistently self-conscious strategizing of poetic (and religious) language is a *sine qua non* for this sort of poetry and – I would add also for discerning, critical conduct of the Protestant faith generally. The conversational, witty address of an Auden must be propelled by a fundamental irony, cosmic in perception, linguistic in expression. The poet's skill set must include unrelenting self-examination and self-correction (up to but not eventuating, we hope, in paralysis) lest the vulnerable gift of his or her language be allowed to betray the gift of his or her vision. Employing the language of metaphor and symbol, such a poet may well make strategic use of the demonic, especially when the convenient figure of the mythic Devil,

³⁰ "The Devil, indeed, is the father of Poetry," Auden observes in a Note to line 826 in Part II of "New Year Letter," *The Double Man* (Random House, 1941), 116.

³¹ W.H. Auden, "New Year Letter," lines 826-33, 42.

³² Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, tr. Alastair Hardy (Penguin Classic, 1985), 90.

³³ Cf. Brian Conniff's entry, "Christianity," in *W. H. Auden Encyclopedia*, ed. David Izzo (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 52-56).

traditionally imagined as both deceiver and adversary of the religious, can be employed to identify and confront the threat of idolatry. But more of this literary application in a later essay.

Our major challenge, identified above as the need now to consider replacing in the vocabulary and the minds of people of faith the term “belief,” of course demands further explanation. I proceed knowing full well, of course, that the implementation of such a proposal will be well-nigh impossible for a majority of Christians un-prepossessed by such worrisome self-questioning, so fixed over the centuries has been embrace of “believing” the Word of God in Scripture and incarnated in the person of Jesus as the Christ. It was fixed early by the formulation and adoption of confessional statements comprising the creeds which has helped to unify Christian communities early and late.

“Credo” (“I believe”) has been the natural, lead-in to the personal and collective confession of faith for centuries. I proceed knowing full well that already people of faith have for generations projected upon “belief” their own convenient personal meanings. And, of course, in the Fourth Gospel we are told that Jesus as the Christ asks followers not to believe *in* him exactly but to believe *into* him (*pistue eis*, 3:18) opening opportunity for creative interpretations in response.

But clearly “I believe” meant something different in the centuries before the early modern coming of the procedures of natural science to revolutionize the Western intellectual landscape, wherewith the “I believe” of the faithful lost ground upon which to stand (entailing discomfiting qualification and compromise). This is common knowledge, of course, but people of faith still, after centuries of “modernity,” have not made the corrective adjustment if not by discarding “I believe” then by re-theorizing it firmly in a way or ways needed to cope with the prestigious “I believe” of our “enlightened,” rational, sceptical, secular scientific age. We should not question the “I believe” of the faithful in the centuries before the advent of modern science. We cannot know well, from our late vantage point, what it could actually have meant in the pre-modern mind.

That said, however, and in consideration of the newly recognized undecidability in language itself, the faithful now should no longer cherish an “I believe” which no longer can mean what it meant for pre-moderns, and, moreover and to the point, has been decisively, perhaps painfully but also understandably taken over, reduced and effectively deformed by rational-empirical procedures of verification and falsification. To ask of the faithful that we retain traditional usage of “I believe” has increasingly become a demand for unwitting perjury, for a dishonesty nothing like the “scandal” of what was asked of converts and the faithful for centuries before the coming of science and Descartes’ doubt in order to believe. Wittgenstein on language “games” can help here a little but not enough. The problematic “newness of life” now promised to “believing” converts and the faithful cannot resemble the “newness of life” offered before modern science captured and shrivelled to its own purposes the “I believe” of the traditional *credo* confession.

Following the prophetic advice of James P. Carse in his recent book, *The Religious Case Against Belief*, we should let the rational-empirical, analytical secular (as well as the religious formed permanently and unwittingly in that

sort of mind) have their diminished “belief.”³⁴ But note: slowly but surely modernity has taken it into a permanent Babylonian Captivity. The religious who have broken through this repressive mind to become truly “persons of faith” should let it go to avoid distracting epistemological skirmishes.

The texts of the Christian Bible did not then, in their various origins, and need not now require modern scientific “belief.” As Carse puts it, religion has always transcended the narrow boundaries established by “belief,” which restrict thought, encourage hostility, and risk dangerous, wilful ignorance not sanctioned by great religious vision. The once, presently, and would-be religious should replace dangerous reliance upon belief with a fuller, more adequate expression of the challenge to an interrogating commitment to faith.

It is not the place here to weigh the possible relevance of the “neo-pragmatic” philosopher Richard Rorty’s work as a whole over his career. But it is useful to note and perhaps to find means of adapting a theme of his that would support a new hermeneutic that casts off “I believe” for a better concept and term. His consistent theme of the contingency in historical philosophical formulations speaks an historicist’s conviction that no vocabularies are inescapable in principle.³⁵ What he applies to philosophy I suggest we apply to historical religious vocabularies, wherever to the advantage of traditional religious vision struggling for expression through those vocabularies.

We should be ready, when prompted that is, to shift our vocabulary and to launch new, more serviceable terms. To observe that no vocabulary in historical philosophy is final, as does Rorty, is one thing. To apply this observation practically to the particular traditional use of “I believe” in the religious context is quite another. But to be pragmatic in the service of traditional religion, where vision and evolved circumstances would seem to call for the taking of such a risk, the re-wording of our faith commitment, should be considered.

The language of Scripture and of traditional formulations is, I propose, contingent in the sense Rorty ascribes to this term, despite its divine inspiration, as well as threatened by idolatry and its gaming by the demonic. The faithful do well to live carefully, of course, with this inevitable contingency. Here I propose only that “I believe” has become too much to ask, robbed as it is of its now elusive original meaning. It should be replaced, at the start, as individuals see fit, by a term or terms, by a language which more faithfully conveys the original scandal of the Gospel than does or can “I believe” today. I suggest: I “embrace” or “affirm” – or, to make a point, “I play.”

The example of poetic imagination producing poetic texts of faithful “play” can provide an inspiring example to those among the faithful perhaps reluctant to discard “I believe” as epistemologically inappropriate. Many, of course, will refuse to acknowledge that belief has been so thoroughly taken over by science. Many will not conclude that they can no longer personally make “I believe” mean for them what they wish it to mean.

³⁴ James P. Carse, *The Religious Case Against Belief* (New York, Penguin, 2008).

³⁵ Cf. especially Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

But this is a losing battle. Our faith is increasingly losing its hold and its effectiveness. One great answer, as I have suggested above in comment on Auden, and in light of Derrida's perhaps prophetic warning about language, is to find one's own playfulness in reading, interpreting, and embracing Scripture for the sake of the infusing Word it contains despite the mischief of that containing. Of course, I mean by "play" not an instrument or agency of amusement but a serious dialectical juggling of language for its divine meaning, recognizing the threat of the structural demonic itself at play within the mischief of language that we would rather avoid or deny.

The verb "to game" is relevant here. The risk of playing and gaming as it implies losing as well as winning is to be embraced in the faith and trust, as Luther put it, that "one little word" shall defeat the demonic, that by the ultimately triumphant grace of God the demonic will be defeated by the divine.

Such a hermeneutic ploy proceeds admittedly from this writer's going "to and fro in the earth" while carrying deeply planted personal faith. Hence the proposal is not at all exempt or immune from demonic threat. The reader will decide whether this proposal serves more the divine or more the demonic, and especially in light of the weight given above to the ever-so-worldly source, Derrida's mischief-making *differance*. No one escapes the creative-destructive, divine-demonic dialectic. Nor should we allow ourselves to avoid considering it.

In the Protestant prophetic, if not in the Catholic sacramental strain of biblical Christianity, the gift of faith to the individual by the grace of God incorporates what I would call imaginative discernment as this plays in individual experience. We play our experience to find in it, as in biblical texts, the divine, the holy. There are no earthly rules for this play. It is for each individual, responding to Scripture, teaching, and varied experience, to play this possibility each in his or her own way.