

Trajectories of Dealings with Religion in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000161>

Received: 26 August 2025; Accepted: 04 September 2025; Published: 03 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the ways in which contemporary continental philosophers engage with religion as a critical and interpretive resource rather than a matter of metaphysical belief. Focusing on the works of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, John D. Caputo, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Slavoj Žižek, the research draws on a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to examine how religious motifs—such as messianism, transcendence, the Other, and the sacred—are rearticulated within philosophical discourse. Through close textual analysis, three core themes emerge: the ethical invocation of the infinite, the deconstructive engagement with religious language, and the political function of religion in post-secular thought. These themes reveal a shared strategy among the thinkers studied: to keep religious ideas ethically and philosophically open while resisting doctrinal closure. The study contributes to scholarship on post-secularism by demonstrating how religion continues to inform philosophical inquiry, especially in relation to ethics, justice, and community. Rather than advocating a return to theological orthodoxy, the study highlights how these thinkers destabilize both religious and secular assumptions in order to rethink the conditions of ethical life. The findings suggest that religion, when approached through interpretive and critical frameworks, offers a powerful lens for engaging with the complexities of human existence, finitude, and responsibility in contemporary thought.

Keywords: Post-secular philosophy, Continental thought, Deconstruction, Ethics of the Other, Weak theology

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, religion has returned as a serious point of discussion in contemporary continental philosophy. Far from being a relic of a bygone era, religious thought is increasingly recognized as a vital element in rethinking ethics, politics, and metaphysics in the post-secular context. Philosophers such as Jean-Luc Marion and Jacques Derrida have contributed to this shift by exploring how religious motifs persist in secular discourse—not as outdated dogma, but as philosophical provocations that continue to shape human experience and social life. These developments point to a growing discomfort with strict secular rationalism and suggest that religious language and thought still offer unique resources for philosophical inquiry (Leung, 2021; Grondin, 2019; Lambert, 2016).

This renewed interest in religion, however, is not without tension. Continental philosophy's engagement with religion remains deeply ambivalent—both critical and appreciative, skeptical yet drawn to its ethical and metaphysical possibilities. Thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas reframe religion through an ethical lens, emphasizing relational responsibility over doctrinal belief. Derrida, in conversation with Levinas, pushes further by deconstructing religious categories while still invoking their philosophical weight. This double gesture—of critique and retrieval—reflects the broader uncertainty about religion's place in a supposedly secular world. It also opens important questions about how concepts like faith, transcendence, and the sacred continue to operate in contemporary thought (Hammerschlag, 2017; Bielik-Robson, 2021).

This study investigates how leading continental philosophers—particularly Derrida, Levinas, Caputo, Marion, and Žižek—engage with religion in their work. Through close reading and interpretive analysis, it traces the thematic and conceptual shifts in their approaches to religious discourse. Rather than asking whether these

thinkers are religious, the study asks how they use, resist, and reconfigure religious ideas to challenge the limits of secular modernity and offer alternative ethical or political imaginaries (Leung, 2021; Bekalp, 2024; Bielik-Robson, 2021; Derrida, 2020; Ng, 2015).

Rationale of the Study

The philosophical treatment of religion in contemporary continental thought matters beyond its academic context. It shapes how we think about secularism, pluralism, and ethical responsibility in increasingly complex and diverse societies. The ambivalent stance of these philosophers mirrors broader cultural tensions around belief and reason, tradition and critique. By examining how religion is reimagined in their work, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of postmodern ethics, the role of metaphysical language, and the potential for dialogue between the secular and the sacred. In a time when rigid binaries no longer suffice, exploring this terrain offers valuable insight into how philosophy can engage meaningfully with questions of value, identity, and the human condition (Zeng, 2023; Jabeen & Ain, 2021).

Objectives of The Study

This study aims to explore how religion is engaged, reinterpreted, and problematized within contemporary continental philosophy. It focuses on key thinkers who have contributed to the so-called "religious turn" in post-secular discourse and seeks to understand how their philosophical work reshapes the boundaries between the secular and the sacred.

The specific objectives of this research are:

1. To examine how contemporary continental philosophers—particularly Derrida, Levinas, Caputo, Marion, and Žižek—engage with religious thought in their writings.
2. To identify and analyze key themes, conceptual shifts, and interpretive strategies that characterize these philosophical engagements with religion.

These objectives guide a qualitative, interpretive inquiry into the evolving place of religion in postmodern continental thought, with an emphasis on how religious language and motifs inform ethical, political, and metaphysical frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Philosophy and Theology: A Historical Tension

The historical relationship between philosophy and theology has long been defined by both convergence and tension. While philosophy traditionally aims to ground knowledge in reason and logic, theology often appeals to revelation and divine authority. Thinkers from antiquity to modernity have wrestled with this division. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, sought a synthesis between reason and faith, while Enlightenment philosophers distanced themselves from theological frameworks, emphasizing human autonomy and rationalism (Grondin, 2019). This rationalist turn marginalized religious thought in mainstream philosophical discourse and reinforced a binary between the sacred and the secular (Stepanyan, 2023). However, the emergence of post-secular thinking challenges this divide. Recent scholarship acknowledges that theological ideas remain embedded in philosophical language and ethical reflection, signaling an ongoing need to explore how these traditions interrelate rather than oppose one another (Zhu & Liu, 2023).

Key Thinkers

Contemporary continental philosophers have revisited the role of religion with nuance and complexity. Jacques Derrida, for example, famously deconstructed metaphysical certainty, yet his work continually engaged with religious motifs. His notion of "messianicity" and reflections on faith reveal a persistent dialogue with theological concepts, not to affirm belief, but to explore its philosophical residue (Derrida, 2020). As Keenan

and Kadi-Hanifi (2019) note, Derrida's work uncovers the hidden theological scaffolding within ostensibly secular thought.

Emmanuel Levinas's emphasis on the ethical encounter with the Other reframes human responsibility as a quasi-theological demand. His ethics draws from Jewish thought but expands its implications to philosophy more broadly, making ethical obligation a primary philosophical category (Bubniak, 2023). Caputo, through his formulation of "weak theology," takes a different route—arguing for a theology of openness, where religious meaning emerges not through doctrine but through interpretive engagement with uncertainty and vulnerability (Mason, 2021).

Jean-Luc Nancy approaches religion through its historical decomposition. His work on the "deconstruction of Christianity" does not merely critique dogma but probes how Christianity's cultural forms continue to structure philosophical assumptions (Leung, 2021). Žižek, drawing on dialectical materialism, provokes further by suggesting that Christian theology itself offers a critique of ideology. He challenges both secular atheism and traditional belief by using religious language to rethink subjectivity, ethics, and social order (Gabay, 2019). Together, these thinkers illustrate the wide range of ways in which contemporary philosophy continues to wrestle with religious inheritance.

Core Themes

Several recurring themes shape these philosophical engagements with religion. One such theme is negative theology, which interrogates the limits of language in expressing the divine. Rooted in mystical traditions, negative theology suggests that any assertion about God is ultimately inadequate. Both Derrida and Marion explore this idea by emphasizing the ineffability of the divine and resisting theological closure (Wise, 2023; Hendricks, 2016).

Another core theme is messianism, which surfaces not as a doctrinal claim but as a horizon of hope or expectation. In Derrida's writing, the messianic becomes a figure for openness to the future, a commitment to justice that is always deferred (Stepanyan, 2023). Levinas's ethics of the other echoes this openness, positioning responsibility not as a choice but as an encounter that precedes autonomy (Bubniak, 2023). Meanwhile, Nancy rethinks community not through theological unity, but through shared exposure to meaninglessness—what he frames as the absence of grounding that paradoxically binds us (Zueva-Owens, 2019).

The idea of the **event** further underscores these themes. Often associated with disruption, the event challenges stability and certainty. In both theological and philosophical registers, it represents an encounter with something beyond one's control—demanding a reconfiguration of meaning and ethics (Wise, 2023). These themes point to a broader effort within continental thought to keep philosophical inquiry open to religious depth without reverting to doctrinal authority.

Debates on Secularism and Post-Secularism

In the wake of modern secularism, a growing number of philosophers argue that religion has not disappeared—it has transformed. The term post-secularism signals a refusal of the simple narrative that modernity inevitably leads to the decline of religion. Instead, thinkers like Derrida and Žižek contend that religion continues to shape political, ethical, and cultural frameworks, even when not explicitly acknowledged (Madsen, 2021; Gabay, 2019).

This perspective has implications for how we conceive of secular identity and pluralism. Rather than seeing religion as a threat to secularism, post-secular thought explores how these categories intertwine. Nardelli (2024) suggests that secular philosophy can still bear traces of theological meaning, complicating traditional oppositions. Others argue that genuine dialogue between secular and religious worldviews requires philosophical openness rather than defensiveness (Soleh & Rahmawati, 2023). These debates shift the discussion from exclusion to negotiation—how religion and secularism can co-exist and inform one another.

Critique of Enlightenment Rationality

Many of these thinkers also critique the Enlightenment's elevation of reason as the supreme form of knowledge. While Enlightenment ideals brought important advances in science and human rights, critics argue that this legacy also produced blind spots—especially in relation to emotion, faith, and ethics (Oppy, 2019). Derrida's deconstruction dismantles the illusion of pure reason by exposing the rhetorical and ideological underpinnings of Western metaphysics (Chatterjee, 2021).

Levinas offers a powerful rejoinder to Enlightenment rationality by placing ethics before epistemology. In his view, rational systems cannot account for the depth of human obligation, which arises not from logic but from vulnerability and encounter (Hendricks, 2016). Caputo similarly resists rigid epistemological frameworks, advocating instead for a philosophy that embraces the uncertain and the unfinished (Keenan & Kadi-Hanifi, 2019). These critiques do not reject reason altogether; rather, they seek to expand its scope—to make space for experiences that elude strict calculation yet remain central to human life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study analyzes primary philosophical texts (monographs, essays, interviews, and public dialogues) by Derrida, Levinas, Caputo, Nancy, and Žižek, together with peer-reviewed secondary commentary. Inclusion criteria were: (a) explicit engagement with religious or quasi-religious motifs (e.g., messianicity, hospitality, transcendence, event); (b) substantive treatment of ethical or political implications; and (c) publication within contemporary scholarly venues or authoritative editions. Exclusions covered purely exegetical summaries without theoretical development and texts whose religious themes are incidental rather than argued. The temporal frame prioritized late-20th to early-21st-century works that shape post-secular debate, while allowing classic antecedents where conceptually necessary. To support replication or extension, all texts were located via library catalogues, publisher series, and citation tracking of core articles/chapters; search strings combined philosopher names with terms such as religion without religion, messianic, deconstruction, weak theology, community, and event. For each author, passages were sampled through iterative hermeneutic reading cycles that identified recurring conceptual nodes and then subjected to cross-comparison across the corpus..

Sources and Materials

The primary data for this study consists of published philosophical texts, including monographs, essays, interviews, and transcripts from public dialogues. These sources represent the core materials through which each philosopher articulates their approach to religion. While this study is largely theoretical, secondary materials such as critical commentaries and peer-reviewed articles are also used to contextualize and deepen interpretations.

If empirical interviews are included, they will involve scholars specializing in continental philosophy or theology. These interviews would be conducted using open-ended, semi-structured formats designed to elicit nuanced insights about how religious themes are interpreted and reinterpreted in the philosophical canon.

Data Analysis

The analytical process follows thematic and interpretive reading strategies, guided by hermeneutic principles. Initial readings of the primary texts aim to identify recurring themes such as negative theology, messianism, and the ethics of the Other. These readings are then subjected to deeper interpretive analysis, where the aim is not only to describe themes but to uncover the philosophical logic, ethical assumptions, and discursive shifts that these themes carry.

The analysis is recursive rather than linear: texts are revisited multiple times in light of emerging insights, and interpretations are refined through comparison across thinkers. This interpretive strategy also accounts for the

historical, linguistic, and conceptual contexts that shape each philosopher's treatment of religion (van Manen, 2016).

Ethical Considerations and Researcher Reflexivity

Although this study is primarily textual and does not involve vulnerable human participants, ethical considerations still apply. If empirical interviews are conducted, informed consent will be obtained in compliance with institutional ethical review protocols. Participants will be anonymized unless they explicitly consent to attribution.

Researcher reflexivity is central to hermeneutic phenomenology. The interpretation of religious themes in philosophical texts cannot be entirely separated from the interpreter's own philosophical orientation and worldview. As such, the researcher acknowledges their positionality as a reader trained in both philosophical and theological traditions, and committed to openness, critical engagement, and conceptual rigor. Reflective journaling and peer debriefing will be used throughout the research process to mitigate interpretive bias and ensure trustworthiness (Finlay, 2002).

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the interpretive findings from a thematic analysis of key continental philosophers' engagements with religion. The following three themes emerged as central across their works: (1) *Ethics and the Infinite*, (2) *Deconstruction and Religious Language*, and (3) *Religion Without Religion: The Political and the Sacred*. Each theme reflects how religious motifs are not simply preserved but philosophically reconfigured.

Theme 1: Ethics and the Infinite

A central theme, particularly in the works of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, is the ethical significance of transcendence. Levinas emphasizes the primacy of ethics over ontology, arguing that our responsibility to the Other arises before any reflective knowledge or will. This relationship with the Other, he suggests, bears an infinite character—it cannot be reduced to reciprocity or symmetry but persists as an open-ended ethical call (Bubniak, 2023).

Derrida, engaging Levinas's insights, expands on this idea through his exploration of "forgiveness," "hospitality," and "the gift," all of which rely on the notion of impossibility. These acts are ethically valuable precisely because they defy economic logic or calculability (Derrida, 2020). The infinite, then, becomes a site of ethical demand—an unmeasurable space where the sacred enters human relation.

Theme 2: Deconstruction and Religious Language

A second theme that cuts across the texts is the critical reinterpretation of religious language. Derrida's formulation of "religion without religion" offers a framework in which religious concepts remain philosophically powerful without requiring doctrinal belief (Keenan & Kadi-Hanifi, 2019). Rather than dismantling religion altogether, deconstruction unveils its internal contradictions, thereby preserving its openness to reinterpretation.

Caputo's "weak theology" resonates with this approach. He proposes that faith is not about metaphysical certainty but about exposure to a call that resists closure or finality (Mason, 2021). This vulnerability is not a weakness in the pejorative sense, but an ethical and spiritual openness that finds strength in its refusal to dominate. Religious language, in this context, becomes a space for rethinking divine presence—not as sovereign authority but as a provocation to justice and transformation. In weak theology, revelation is not a metaphysical guarantee but an event that "insists" without securing ontic presence. Consider Caputo's construal of prayer as exposure rather than petition: its force lies in unsettling the will to mastery, not in positing a sovereign guarantor. Critics worry that such weakness dissolves normativity into affective openness; yet Caputo's move can be read as intensifying ethical demand by uncoupling it from authority and thereby

foreclosing domination. On this reading, “weakness” is not deficiency but a discipline against sacralized power—converging with deconstruction’s refusal of closure while preserving religion’s ethical provocation.

Derrida’s textual strategies—such as deferral, aporia, and trace—allow him to retain the resonance of religious symbols while freeing them from metaphysical fixity (Leung, 2021). This keeps religious discourse alive within secular philosophical inquiry, allowing it to remain generative rather than dogmatic.

Theme 3: Religion Without Religion: The Political and the Sacred

The third major theme engages with the political dimensions of religious thought, particularly in the works of Nancy and Žižek. Although more implicitly engaged with theology, both thinkers acknowledge that Western political structures are deeply informed by religious imaginaries.

Nancy’s work examines how the residue of Christian metaphysics continues to structure our understanding of community and meaning. His emphasis on shared vulnerability and exposure challenges any totalizing conception of unity, offering instead a fragmented solidarity rooted in the absence of absolute grounding (Zueva-Owens, 2019). In this vision, religion is not reasserted but reinterpreted as a communal structure that holds space for difference.

Žižek, by contrast, reclaims Christian theological motifs such as the crucifixion and universal love to critique capitalist ideology and liberal tolerance. He provocatively argues that religion, particularly Christianity, contains revolutionary potential precisely because it introduces rupture and contradiction into the symbolic order (Gabay, 2019). Žižek’s return to Paul (universal address beyond identitarian partitions) targets liberal-pluralist “tolerance” as a depoliticizing management of difference. The event of agape functions as an internal break in the symbolic order—an insistence on equality that exposes ideology’s conciliatory myths. Far from crypto-theology, this is a materialist use of theological grammar to re-stage antagonism and collective commitment. Objections that Žižek instrumentalizes Christianity mistake the point: precisely as non-doctrinal, the motif becomes politically available to name emancipatory rupture.

These political readings align with themes of messianism and the event—moments that interrupt normative time and order. The messianic, as discussed by Derrida, is a figure of deferred justice, one that never arrives but always calls (Stepanyan, 2023). Similarly, the notion of the event, present in both Derrida and Marion, emphasizes interruption and unpredictability, underscoring the ways in which philosophical and political life are open to transformation (Wise, 2023; Hendricks, 2016). (1) **Platform governance of the sacred:** Content-moderation rules on “blasphemy” or “religious offense” enact algorithmic *hospitality* and *forgiveness* in procedural form, exposing tensions between protection from harm and openness to the Other. Deconstructive “religion without religion” clarifies why categorical rules misfire where meaning is contextual and intertextual. (2) **Humanitarian corridors and “secular sacrality”:** Relief campaigns framed as unconditional aid mobilize quasi-liturgical gestures (witness, vigil, memorial), aligning with Levinasian ethics of asymmetrical responsibility while resisting doctrinal capture. (3) **Civic symbols and contested neutrality:** Disputes over headscarves, faith-based oaths, or religious holidays in public institutions show how post-secular democracies negotiate shared space: Nancy’s “community without common essence” and Derrida’s messianic *à-venir* illuminate why juridical settlement rarely exhausts ethical claims.

An overview of the key thematic findings, along with the associated philosophers, is provided in Table 1 for reference.

Table 1. Summary of Thematic Findings and Associated Philosophers

Theme	Summary	Key Philosophers
1. Ethics and the Infinite	Explores how ethical responsibility arises from the encounter with the Other and transcends calculable moral systems.	Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida

2. Deconstruction and Religious Language	Examines how religious language is reinterpreted through deconstruction and “weak theology,” retaining ethical power without doctrinal closure.	Jacques Derrida, John D. Caputo
3. Religion Without Religion: The Political and the Sacred	Investigates how religious motifs inform political critique, community, and secular ideologies in post-secular thought.	Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek

DISCUSSION

This chapter reflects on the philosophical significance of the themes identified in the findings and situates them within broader debates in post-secular thought. By drawing connections among the works of Derrida, Levinas, Caputo, Nancy, and Žižek, the discussion highlights how religion, far from being dismissed or reclaimed uncritically, is reconfigured in ways that challenge both secular reductionism and religious orthodoxy. The discussion unfolds across three interrelated dimensions: philosophical implications, religion in post-secular thought, and cross-readings and critical reflections.

Philosophical Implications

The interpretive findings demonstrate a shift in how continental philosophy treats religion—not as a system of belief to be accepted or rejected, but as a space of ethical and metaphysical provocation. Levinas, for example, foregrounds the ethical relation to the Other as a form of transcendence beyond ontology (Bubniak, 2023). This relation resists closure, grounding responsibility in a structure of infinite demand. Similarly, Derrida explores forgiveness, hospitality, and the gift—concepts that evoke religious themes while functioning within a framework of undecidability (Derrida, 2020).

Caputo extends this reconfiguration through his “weak theology,” which resists metaphysical certainty and emphasizes interpretive openness (Mason, 2021). Rather than grounding religious claims in ontological truth, Caputo emphasizes the insistence of the divine as an event that cannot be domesticated by doctrine. Both Derrida and Caputo challenge the Enlightenment ideal of transparent rationality, proposing instead a posture of humility, interruption, and unending interpretation (Leung, 2021).

These philosophical strategies reflect a broader move away from binary categories—such as faith/reason, immanence/transcendence—and toward a more nuanced understanding of ethical and existential vulnerability.

Religion in Post-Secular Thought

The analysis affirms that religion remains central in post-secular philosophy—not as a return to dogma, but as a critical resource. Derrida’s notion of “religion without religion” (Keenan & Kadi-Hanifi, 2019) exemplifies a mode of engagement that preserves the ethical and spiritual force of religious discourse while resisting institutional closure. His messianic logic, in which justice is always deferred, allows for a continuous opening toward the Other and the future (Stepanyan, 2023).

Žižek, from a different angle, retrieves Christian motifs to critique ideology and modern subjectivity. He treats religious narratives as subversive tools, arguing that Christianity contains the seeds of radical emancipation (Gabay, 2019). Nancy, meanwhile, reconfigures religious community not through metaphysical unity, but through shared exposure and finitude, pushing post-secular thought toward a deconstructed model of belonging (Zueva-Owens, 2019).

These approaches do not seek to reinstate religious orthodoxy. Instead, they recognize that theological languages and structures continue to shape ethical and political life—often in unacknowledged ways.

Cross-Readings and Critical Reflections

Although the thinkers examined differ in tone and metaphysical commitment, their shared philosophical posture reveals a common thread: they use religion as a lens to critique reductionist narratives of modernity. Derrida and Levinas both emphasize the ethical weight of the impossible; Caputo and Derrida hold open the space of belief without fixity (Mason, 2021; Keenan & Kadi-Hanifi, 2019); Nancy and Žižek highlight religion's lingering effects in secular political imagination (Gabay, 2019; Zueva-Owens, 2019).

Tensions remain. Žižek's critical materialism resists Caputo's spiritual openness, and Nancy's sparse ontology diverges from Levinas's ethical transcendence. But these divergences are productive: they suggest that post-secular thought does not converge on a single model of religion, but rather opens multiple pathways for thinking the sacred in relation to ethics, politics, and community.

What unites these figures is their resistance to philosophical closure. Whether through messianic delay, ethical demand, or ontological ungrounding, each thinker uses religion to reopen questions that Enlightenment rationality may have prematurely foreclosed (Hendricks, 2016; Wise, 2023). In this sense, religion in continental philosophy is less a belief system and more a provocation—one that continues to unsettle and reorient contemporary thought.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary continental philosophers engage religion not to reinstall dogma but to probe its conceptual residue. Derrida deconstructs metaphysical certainty while keeping messianicity as an ethical horizon; Levinas reframes responsibility as a quasi-theological demand rooted in encounter; Caputo radicalizes this openness into a *weak theology* of insistence rather than presence; Nancy tracks Christianity's cultural afterlives in community; Žižek redeploys Christian motifs to expose ideology. Together, they chart how sacred language continues to shape ethics and politics without doctrinal closure. The study's key theoretical contribution lies in its articulation of a non-metaphysical engagement with religion—an approach that keeps sacred language open and ethically charged without committing to theological finality. By offering a comparative reading across diverse thinkers, the research highlights the philosophical productivity of religious motifs in continental thought. Looking ahead, future research might expand on these findings by engaging non-Western traditions, empirical perspectives from religious practitioners, or the application of post-secular ideas to contemporary political and ethical challenges. Ultimately, this study affirms that religion remains deeply relevant to philosophical inquiry, not as a source of doctrinal authority, but as an invitation to reimagine ethics, responsibility, and the conditions of human coexistence in a pluralistic world.

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