

Caroline Sheaffer-Jones*

FAITH, REVOLT AND ALBERT CAMUS' THE JUST ASSASSINS

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Abstract: In Albert Camus' play *The Just Assassins*, religion and spirituality are of paramount importance, as can be seen especially in the interaction between the protagonist Kaliyev and the devoutly religious Grand Duchess, who expresses her steadfast view, for example, in the following words: "There is no love far from God" (289). However, is this religious conception of 'love' exactly what is at the heart of Camus' play *The Just Assassins*? Indeed there is a different notion of spirituality, associated with revolt, which is more central to Camus' writings and notably his major theoretical text *The Rebel*. What sort of spirituality is put forward and how might it be differentiated from religious convictions and the coming of the kingdom of God? In what sense is there a spirituality in *The Just Assassins*, particularly in the relentless revolt by Kaliyev and the members of the fraternity? Furthermore, is there not a fundamental position of 'faith' implied not simply in religion but also in the conception of knowledge itself? Jacques Derrida has discussed this question in "Faith and Knowledge," in *Acts of Religion*, among other texts, where he describes a notion of 'faith', which precedes the opposition between religion and reason. In what way might there be, in Camus' *The Rebel* and play *The Just Assassins*, a 'faith', which is distinguished from religious beliefs and which is necessarily linked to justice and the limits of revolt.

The "kingdom of God" is not something one waits for; it has no yesterday or tomorrow, it does not come "in a thousand years" – it is an experience within a heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere...

(Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* 159)

That man is the indestructible that can be destroyed?

(Maurice Blanchot, "The Indestructible" *The Infinite Conversation* 135)

Faith and religion might appear to be far removed from Albert Camus' important notion of revolt or rebellion, expounded in particular in his theoretical work *The Rebel* (1951) and evident in the play *The Just Assassins* (1949). However, there is a kind of spirituality which persists in these writings, although it is distinguished from religious faith. Moreover, this spirituality is not conceived in isolation from history, as is apparent from Camus' meticulous analyses of insurgencies in past civilisations in *The Rebel*, but clearly emerges against the backdrop of Western thinking. In short, without simply turning his back on the history of religious spirituality, Camus maps out new positions

* University of New South Wales, Australia.

which stand out markedly from traditional perspectives. With reference to *The Rebel* and *The Just Assassins*, I argue that Camus outlines a path concerning faith, which is certainly less about a theological idea of eternity or life after death and more about the world, revolt and limits.

It is notable that, in a reading of Camus, particularly *Reflections on the Guillotine*, Jacques Derrida designates, in *The Death Penalty*, a certain opposition between Victor Hugo's abolitionism, based on the belief in Christ's transcendence, and the abolitionism of Camus, whose position he qualifies as "immanentist humanism" (209). However, it is apparent that there is a spirituality at the very least in *The Rebel* and *The Just Assassins*, where Camus exceeds such a standpoint of immanence, while differentiating his views from religious transcendence. In what sense, therefore, might there be a notion of faith in Camus' *The Rebel* and *The Just Assassins*? Are there any comparisons, which might be signalled between this faith and some of Derrida's perspectives on this question, particularly relating to justice? In this article, I make some brief, general comments firstly on Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone", published in the volume *Religion*, and discuss faith, revolt and revolution in Camus' *The Rebel*. I then consider several dialogues in *The Just Assassins* and finally, I reflect briefly on the limits of faith, sacrifice, survival and justice in these texts.

The Promise of Faith

In rethinking the so-called 'return of religions' in "Faith and Knowledge", Derrida emphasises the wider problems grounding this idea and brings into question the belief in a simple opposition between religion and reason. He writes:

Why is this phenomenon, so hastily called the 'return of religions', so difficult to think? Why is it so surprising? Why does it particularly astonish those who believed naïvely that an alternative opposed Religion, on the one side, and on the other, Reason, Enlightenment, Science, Criticism (Marxist Criticism, Nietzschean Genealogy, Freudian Psychoanalysis and their heritage), as though the one could not but put an end to the other? (5)

In an analysis of the underlying complexities which make the opposition between religion and reason untenable as an alternative, Derrida shows that they have "the same source" ("Faith and Knowledge" 28). Above all, insisting on a fundamental notion of faith, Derrida underscores "the act of faith" or "the appeal to faith" without dogma which "inhabits every act of language and every address to the other". He adds: "The universalizable culture of this faith, and not of another or before all others, alone permits a 'rational' and universal discourse on the subject of 'religion'" ("Faith and Knowledge" 18). Thus, Derrida points to a broader notion of faith, not simply within the purview of religion but which grounds and precedes the so-called opposition of religion and reason, as it is in every discourse, every address to the other and in the desire for justice. Rather than signifying the realisation of truth in the world or beyond in the kingdom of heaven, this conception of faith signals the impossibility of such an event and affirms a certain necessity of the unknown.

In *The Rebel*, there is also a faith, which does not equate with religious beliefs and which would be more elementary than the opposition between religion and reason, as is evident in Camus' extended deliberations on Western civilisation, Christianity and logic, particularly dialectical logic. The faith, which he describes, is linked to a conception of justice yet not one which is simply realised in time. In his detailed studies of rebellion, Camus brings into question not only the idea of the advent of God's realm on earth at the end of time, but equally the realisation of truth in revolutionary ideologies. In the section on "Historical Rebellion" in *The Rebel*, in the sub-section "State Terrorism and Rational Terror", Camus draws a striking comparison between Christian beliefs on revelation and those in some revolutionary movements. Under the title "The Failing of the Prophecy", he writes the following:

The revolutionary movement at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth lived, like the early Christians, in the expectation of the end of the world and the advent of the proletarian Christ. (Camus, *The Rebel* 210)

Just as the evangelical coming became remote and faith became "pure desire [*tension*] for the kingdom to come" (211, Camus, *L'homme* 242), a comparable movement emerged from the "revolutionary coming". Camus sees Marx's prophecy as the "passionate annunciation of an event that will take place in the very far future" (222), and expresses his reservations about the struggle to achieve a classless society, as well as the conception of faith required. In short, Camus exposes the problem with faith which requires sacrifices in view of a distant realm, be it through the path of religion or purportedly rational ideologies. The notion of faith to which Camus might subscribe would not pertain to a logic entailing the realisation of an apocalyptic event or the alternative of religion or reason.

Faith in divine transcendence or in the establishment of the "revolutionary coming" are at once outlined and contested in *The Rebel*. Rather than a conception in which faith is directed towards the distant fulfilment of a kingdom to come, Camus affirms, above all, the world and its unfathomable beauty. In effect, what is put forward is not the accomplishment of truth or the nihilism of revolution, but the notion of revolt or rebellion, and the crucial importance of limits. Such a position is not simple. Camus states:

Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow, one is right. It is in this way that the rebel slave says yes and no simultaneously. He affirms that there are limits and also that he suspects – and wishes to preserve – the existence of certain things on this side of the borderline. (Camus, *The Rebel* 13)

Camus also notes: "The rebel [*le révolté*], in the etymological sense, does a complete turnabout. He acted under the lash of his master's whip. Suddenly he turns and faces him. He opposes what is preferable to what is not" (Camus, *The Rebel* 14, *L'Homme* 72). Through revolt or rebellion, unlike in absolute revolution, human beings refuse to be reduced to history. "History, undoubtedly, is one of the limits of man's experience; in this sense the revolutionaries are right. But man, by rebelling, imposes in his turn a limit to history, and at this limit the promise of a value is born" (Camus, *The Rebel* 250). Indeed this "promise of a

value” is the creative revolt of human beings at the limits of the unknown. Thus, revolt does not lead to a promised land; it is not simply the means to ends, but rather it asserts yes and no, that is, ongoing contestation: “I rebel – therefore we exist” (Camus, *The Rebel* 22). It is also evident, in Camus’ *The Rebel*, that there is inevitably always a faith, at the limits of history, which is not just realised; a faith which participates in the creation of history and which is not tantamount to religious faith or the advent of truth.

Limits

Unlike many revolutionary movements, revolt, as described by Camus in *The Rebel*, is a relentless confrontation, which always operates at the limits of the unknown and whose goals are not realised once and for all. Such revolt is certainly manifest in *The Just Assassins*. This play is based on events in Moscow in 1905, when a group of terrorists threw a bomb at the czar’s uncle, the Grand Duke Serge.¹ Camus brings to the stage various interactions among the participants in the terrorist act against tyranny, including the protagonist Kaliayev, who is also called Yanek, Dora, Stepan, Annenkov, who is the head of the group, and Voinov, as well as dialogue between the religious Grand Duchess and the protagonist Kaliayev in prison, prior to his execution. The importance of limits are brought to the fore, and hence also necessarily a conception of faith and love for mankind, which is distinguished from religious beliefs and ultimately also detached from revolutionary goals. Although meticulous planning for the terrorist act took place, Kaliayev failed to throw the bomb in the first instance because the Grand Duke was accompanied by two children, his niece and nephew, in his carriage near the theatre. Faced with the unpredictable, Kaliayev stopped short of causing the maximum destruction by his action.

The members of the group meet to formulate their moves together. Unlike the protagonist, Stepan believes in the view that “everything is permissible” (Camus, *The Just Assassins* 257, translation slightly modified, *The Rebel* 57). In Act II, an exchange between Stepan and Dora, who is supportive of Kaliayev’s actions, crystallises the arguments.

Dora: Yanek’s ready to kill the Grand Duke because his death may help to bring nearer the time when Russian children will no longer die of hunger. That in itself is none too easy for him. But the death of the Grand Duke’s niece and nephew won’t prevent any child from dying of hunger. Even in destruction there is an order – and there are limits.

Stepan [*vehemently*]: There are no limits! The truth is that you don’t believe in the revolution, any of you. [*All, except Kaliayev, rise to their feet.*] No, you don’t believe in it. If you did believe in it totally, completely; if you felt sure that, by dint of our struggles and sacrifices, some day we shall build a Russia, freed from despotism, a land of freedom that will gradually spread out over the whole world; and if you did not doubt that then, freed from his masters and his prejudices, man will lift up his face, that of true gods, toward the sky – what, I ask you, would the deaths of two children weigh in the balance against that? (Camus, *The Just Assassins* 258-59, translation modified)

¹ See the “Prière d’insérer (1949)”, insert in the “Appendices” to Camus, *Les Justes, Œuvres complètes*, III, 57.

While for Kaliyev, Dora and the group of terrorists, actions must operate within certain limits, balancing on the one hand the attack on tyranny and on the other every attempt to preserve the innocent, by contrast for Stepan, who maintains blind faith in the revolution, any means to an end are justified. Clearly, what remains problematic is his dream of man with the face of “true gods”, with absolute freedom, and a faith which, in view of the promise of a kingdom to come, refuses to see the priceless dignity of singular, innocent lives here and now in the world.

If the protagonist avoids carnage by not killing the innocent children accompanying the Grand Duke, he does murder the Grand Duke. For this, he insists on meeting his death, one life to be given, the privileges of birth left aside, for a life taken, no more, no less. The Grand Duchess tells Kaliyev: “There is no love far from God”, to which he retorts: “Yes, there is. Love for the creature” (Camus, *The Just Assassins* 289, translation modified). The insistence on love for other human beings far outweighs faith in divine transcendence, as Kaliyev’s story about Saint Dmitri also attests. In a conversation with Foka, the executioner, Kaliyev recounts that Saint Dmitri had an engagement with God, but along the way he stopped to help a peasant, whose cart was stuck in the mud. Saint Dmitri ran to the meeting, but God was not there any more. When Foka asks: “And so?”, Kaliyev responds: “And so there are those who always arrive too late, because there are too many bogged carts on the way, too many brothers to help out” (Camus, *The Just Assassins* 279, translation slightly modified). The faith of Kaliyev and the fraternity of terrorists is directed towards the people and the limits of revolt.

What is apparent, in effect, is that Camus’ notion of revolt necessarily implies a certain faith, which is very different from religious beliefs in transcendence. Moreover, while revolt is indeed an affirmation of limits, it cannot easily be defined in terms of ‘immanence’. Above all, it operates at the limits, which are not simply given, but always created and refashioned. In a way, it is through transgression that limits might be affirmed; it is as if, paradoxically, they came to the fore in the very act in which they were overstepped or set aside. Not reducible to the known, revolt takes place at the boundaries, affirming neither the kingdom to come nor the truth of revolution. In *The Just Assassins*, Kaliyev and his friends make a sacrifice in view of a different world order but which cannot be about the realisation of pure paradise. Prepared to fight for a notion of justice and yet also recognising the necessity to pay the ultimate price for his actions, Kaliyev sacrifices his life, rejecting a pardon and any beliefs in an afterlife, in the face of the unknown. Like others, he has faith in a world, in which justice is renewed and oppression overturned, which necessitates, precisely, ongoing contestation. In the endeavour to combat tyranny, in a revolt which marks out the boundaries of subjugation and the impossibility of absolute freedom, Kaliyev draws a line.

At the same time, to commit murder is obviously to infringe the law and to pass beyond the limits. In a way, the protagonist precipitates at once his death and that of the Grand Duke, destroying himself and another, one other, in a kind of reckoning, almost as if he were godly, which is also his downfall. The metaphor of the heart and the deadly cord are entwined in love which cannot but be tempered by sorrow. It is evident in the play that there is a following of rebels, who are somehow linked by death, marking out

the limits of revolt. At the close of the play, it is agreed that Dora will give her life next, to help to bring about change and to stem tyranny. No doubt her singular life will be offered in revolt against that of an oppressor, in an act which will certainly not be accompanied by the wholesale slaughter of the innocent, as unlimited freedom is denied. Finally, she asks to be next to throw, or in effect to receive, the bomb:

Dora: “You *will* give it to me, won’t you? Then I shall throw it. And, after that, one cold night...

Annenkov: Yes, Dora.

Dora [*weeping*]: Yanek! A cold night... and the same cord. Everything will be easier now”. (302, original emphasis, translation modified)

This broken chain of love and sorrow, where the heart and life blood are inescapably tied to the cord in the affirmation of revolt, echoes the epigraph from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* at the start of the play: “*O love! O life! Not life but love in death*”. It is as if the interruption of death were the incomprehensible tie or cord, linking human lives together in what might perhaps have something in common with an “unavowable community”, such as described by Maruice Blanchot in his reading of Georges Bataille’s community of Acéphale in *The Unavowable Community*.² In revolt, faith is maintained in human beings’ ongoing struggle to the death. It is as if in a renewal at the limits of life and death, a new order might always be envisaged.

Justice and Beliefs

In Act IV of *The Just Assassins*, Camus stages a confrontation between the views of Kaliyev, as a member of the terrorist fraternity, and those of the devout Grand Duchess, who visits the protagonist in prison after the murder of her husband. This follows Kaliyev’s encounter, in his cell, with the executioner and then the head of the police department, Skouratov, who tries to bargain with the prisoner for information about his friends, but the protagonist refuses to betray them. The Grand Duchess, who believes in the kingdom of God, tries to persuade Kaliyev to pray to God with her and to repent, however despite the compassion which he feels for her, he remains steadfast in his insistence not on the love of God but of the creature. No doubt echoing the story of Saint Dmitri, he states: “I do not count any more on the meeting with God. But, in dying, I will keep the engagement which I made with those whom I love, my brothers, who are thinking of me at this moment. To pray would be to betray them” (289, translation modified). These words make it clear that what counts for Kaliyev is not the realm of God but the combat for justice for human beings in the world. If earlier, in taking leave of Dora and his friends, he indeed crossed himself before an icon, it was not a sign of faith in a kingdom beyond but related no doubt to his final words to them about Russia: “Au

² In his discussion, Blanchot also mentions in passing Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, or *The Demons*, which of course he distinguishes from Bataille’s absence of community (see *The Unavowable Community* 12-16, note 7, 58). Camus adapted Dostoevsky’s novel for the theatre (Camus, *Les Possédés*, *Œuvres complètes* IV 1957-1959, 395-514).

revoir. I... Russia will be beautiful” (272, translation modified). Furthermore, when the Grand Duchess insists that God unites, Kaliayev responds: “Not on this earth. And my meetings are on earth” (290, translation modified). Clearly, the protagonist’s actions concern the human and, in a kind of role reversal, he states that he forgives the Grand Duchess and those of her kind for the evil done to him, whereas the Grand Duchess says that she will seek his pardon from God, and also mankind, a pardon which he rejects.

At issue, are different beliefs in a notion of justice; in dialogue with the Grand Duchess, Kaliayev does not consider his action a “crime” but an “act of justice” (286), given that the Grand Duke was the incarnation of supreme injustice perpetrated on the Russian people for centuries. Kaliayev’s fight against tyranny is not about faith in the realisation of a just realm once and for all, but rather it is a combat, which is always ongoing, among all those who are linked in a fraternity against evil. It is a revolt, in which the rebel says both yes and no, because justice is not simply accomplished. Revolt, as an affirmation of limits, marks a resistance to omnipotence, wherever it may be imposed. Thus, neither the Grand Duke’s power nor Stepan’s support for indiscriminate force, which also kills the innocent, represents a way forward. Revolt is not about an event which might bring salvation or about a “revolutionary coming”. Moreover, there is a faith in Camus’ notion of revolt, which concerns the affirmation of measure as opposed to unbridled power, and this is evident in Kaliayev’s initial inaction, when he is suddenly faced with the innocent niece and nephew accompanying the Grand Duke. Above all, if there is no vision of paradise except on earth, it must also be recognised that the negotiation of limits are always in play, as in the discussions of Kaliayev and his friends.

In writing about justice, distinguished from law (*droit*) and calculation, in “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’”, Derrida calls it an “experience of the impossible” (16). Justice concerns the incalculable and decisions are not simply made according to a set of rules, which are already established, hence the difficulty yet crucial importance of the notion of address to the other. “Address – as direction, as *rectitude* – says something about *droit* (law or right); and what we must not forget when we want justice, when we want to be just, is the *rectitude* of address” (Derrida, “Force of Law” 17, original emphasis). The notion of address in the language to the other is the basis of a faith more fundamental than the opposition between religion and reason, as Derrida argues in “Faith and Knowledge” (18). It relates to a notion of justice, to that which Derrida describes as a messianic opening to the coming of the other, yet not in the form of a revelation which simply arrives in the future (*Religion* 17-19, *Rogues* xiv-xv). Derrida writes about the “*just* opening”, a kind of “messianic opening”, in discussions on a “democracy to come” in *Specters of Marx*; the “messianic opening”:

to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited as such, or recognized in advance therefore, to the event as the foreigner itself, to her or to him for whom one must leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope – and this is the very place of spectrality. (82, original emphasis)

Derrida underscores an affirmation of the unknown and the opening of justice, which cannot be realised as an event.

Indeed it is necessary to emphasise that Camus' notion of justice and revolt is also about a certain "experience of the impossible" (Derrida, "Force of Law" 16), in so far as it involves the insistence on limits, which are not merely given or programmable. Importantly, in the absence of clear-cut rules, decision-making necessarily asserts limits, not the unlimited freedom of "everything is permissible" (Camus, *The Just Assassins* 257, translation slightly modified, *The Rebel* 57), and justice is not simply realised. Revolt implies a certain affirmation of faith, not faith in the coming of the Messiah and the advent of truth, but in human beings and their ongoing unfinished, interrupted work in the world. Thus, Camus' position might be compared to what Derrida has outlined, from a different perspective, as the "just opening", a kind of "messianic opening", in discussions on a "democracy to come" in *Specters of Marx*. Revolt entails contestation at the limits, not in a world which is simply given, but one which is in creation. In *The Just Assassins*, Kaliayev and the fraternity of terrorists, together and in succession, come face to face with the unknown in the fight against oppression. It is also a combat with mortality, as each one of the links in the broken chain, affirms the necessity of faith in a certain freedom, as opposed to untenable beliefs in the unlimited freedom of tyranny. Thus, in revolt, Camus exceeds any conception of "immanentist humanism", while remaining in concert, from a different perspective, with Derrida's assertion of a faith more fundamental than religion or reason. Writing about the world, in the light, which "remains our first and our last love"; about our brothers, who "breathe under the same sky as us"; above all, therefore, about "living justice", and no doubt, as Derrida would say, a certain "spectrality", Camus states towards the close of *The Rebel*:

All may indeed live again, side by side with the martyrs of 1905, but on condition that it is understood that they correct one another, and that a limit, under the sun, shall curb them all. Each tells the other that he is not God. (306)

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