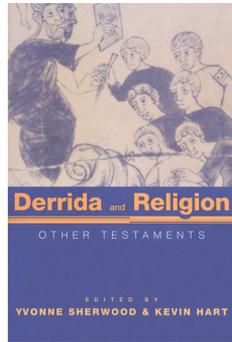


○ REVIEW OF YVONNE SHERWOOD AND KEVIN HART'S *DERRIDA AND RELIGION*

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Matthew Chrulew reviews Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart, eds., *Derrida and religion: Other testaments* (New York/London: Routledge, 2005).



‘Derrida’ and ‘religion’: in this conjunction of oft-misused buzzwords is joined the threat of obfuscation and the potential for groundbreaking critical thought. As Derrida might say – the later Derrida as aporetic thinker who is privileged in this volume – the possibility of the worst is necessarily bound up with the promise of the best. And it is the task of scholarship, as it is of living, to seek this incoming, unknowable alterity, and to avoid its attendant dangers, by responsibly selecting from the inheritance that one receives – indeed, that one *is*.

It was under themes such as these that a conference devoted to the conjunction of Derrida and religion was held within the joint SBL / AAR meeting in Toronto, 2002, from which two volumes have emerged: *Derrida’s Bible* (Sherwood 2004) and that currently under review, *Derrida and religion* edited by Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (2005). It is a wide-ranging and stimulating book, and the many threads that criss-cross the essays will be pulled at for a long time to come.

Of course, the discussion of Derrida in studies of religion has, by now, a substantial history, at least since Hart’s own *The trespass of the sign* (Hart 2000, originally published in 1990). This discourse, however, has been largely theological – or a-theological – centring on questions of mysticism and negative theology, and their relation to the deconstructive apophatics of the ‘earlier’ Derrida. One of the aims of this collection is to present ‘other testaments’ on the relation of Derrida to religion, innervating this discourse of negation with the profoundly future-oriented ‘messianic’ dimension of Derrida’s later work. Thus rather than focussing on his earlier philosophy of iterability in *Of grammatology* and *Writing and difference*, or his essay on negative theology, the contributors to this volume prefer to discuss his later writings, such as *The gift of death* and *Le toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy*, as well as his essay ‘Faith and knowledge’ and his problematisation of autobiography in ‘Circumfession’.

True to their word, there is hardly a mention of negative theology; instead we find a wide range of essays on themes ranging from sacrifice to revelation, from touching to hospitality.

Matters of concern to religious studies such as Jewish-Christian relations, sexual difference, liberation theology and biblical hermeneutics are all treated, though in varying detail. The first section consists of the introduction and an insightful interview with Derrida entitled 'Époque and faith'. This plenary discussion brings out many of the themes in Derrida's engagement with religion, and in his characteristically disarming and patient answers he further develops suggestions elsewhere in his work, particularly on the questions of 'prayer' and 'faith'. The second section engages Derrida's treatment of the sacrifice necessary to hospitality, or what he dubs 'hostipitality'. Edith Wyschogrod and Gil Anidjar offers meditations on hospitality in the biblical narrative of Abraham, but the real standout is Cleo McNelly Kearns' discussion of how 'the figure of the Virgin Mary ... traces both the fault lines in and among the three Abrahamic traditions and the potential points of contact' (76). This feminine figure disrupts the often androcentric discourse of Abrahamic hostipitality – a relation occurring between fathers and sons, between brothers, between men and their enemies – by introducing pregnancy and maternity as instances of Abrahamic hospitality. Kearns then usefully relates this Marian tradition to the life and work of Louis Massignon, the scholar of Islam whom Derrida discusses in *Acts of religion*.

This theme of inter-faith relations is continued in part III, 'The Christian, the Jew (the hyphen)', whose five essays seek in various ways to configure Judaism otherwise than according to the traditional Christian view of a superceded legalism. The essays in part IV deal with a range of biblical texts, including Exodus, Amos, John and Revelation (I will discuss parts III and IV below), while the fifth section 'Sacrifices and secrets' contains, among its two essays, an excellent piece by Tyler Roberts defending (with the help of de Vries) Derrida's views on sacrifice against the charges of Radical Orthodox theologian John Milbank. Surprisingly, this is the only chapter dealing in any detail with what is now a significant movement in contemporary theology, but it is a good one.

The sixth section deals with aporias of possibility, the gift and justice as they relate to 'Revelation(s)' – as distinguished, by Heidegger and Derrida following him, from the general structure of revealability [*Offenbarkeit*]. Robyn Horner offers a close analysis of Derrida's relation to Marion's phenomenology, while Regina M. Schwartz makes the fascinating argument that – in distinction from the necessary excess of justice over the law in much of Western ethical thought – the law given to Moses in Exodus is to be equated with justice (through the first commandment which forbids idols). The last section, entitled 'La/Le toucher (touching her/him)', engages with Derrida's treatment of Nancy in *Le toucher*, with three essays focused on embodiment and sexual difference, and the last on liberation theology.

At the heart of this proliferation is a section entitled 'Reading a page of scripture with a little help from Derrida'. Literally the centrepiece of the book, this segment on the Book is also the site of the most productive and exciting work. Hugh S. Pypers stages a fictive epistolary exchange with Derrida on the tropes of blindness and light (particularly in relation to conversion), while Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt provide an illuminating reflection on the *tallith* as veil. (Both of these essays continue to interrogate the Jewish-Christian hyphen.) But the standouts are the three chapters that feature a biblical critic and a theologian – each a reputable scholar in their own right – speaking in dialogue, tag-team, or even in unison. Sherwood and Caputo follow the scorching prophecies of Amos and testify – as does the coda appended to that book – to the impossibility of their apocalyptic consummation. The death sentence Amos proclaims cannot be delivered as his words, like all words, 'make use of the structure of *écriture* which is why they

can and do turn around. The words that Amos finds to call for death also call for life and for the justice to come' (233–234). In Hart and Aichele's e-mail correspondence centred on the theme of forgiveness in the famous (though somewhat 'orphaned') passage of John 8:1-11, they also discuss the process of biblical interpretation itself, and the tensions deconstructive approaches have introduced into (or recognised in) exegesis. What is most fascinating in this simultaneously frank and polite exchange is how their disagreements over questions of reading and canonicity can be connected, as much as anything else, to personal experiences (though like anything else, never as a final cause) – witnessing to the ineradicable subjective dimension of scholarship present in what Aichele calls 'eisegesis'. The other pairing, and for me the most striking, is Catherine Keller and Stephen Moore's 'Derridapocalypse', a masterfully written meditation on the productive impossibility – indeed, the monstrosity – of the end. The editors are to be commended for setting up these meetings, and the authors for making them work.

It would be misguided to point out indiscriminately perceived 'exclusions', couplings of Derrida and X topic of religious thought that one might wish were covered, where X might equal Deleuze, animals, Buddhism, televangelism... X might equally equal infinity. (For an essay where X = infinity, see Cauchi (2003).) There are other forums, which any necessarily incomplete collection can only gesture towards and hopefully provoke. The editors are particularly aware that even within the book's 'Abrahamic' orientation 'Islam figures as [nothing] more than a strategic pressure exerted from the wings' (15). As they point out, 'there is more than enough difference, and far more than we can begin to take account of, in the complex space that is the "Judeo-Christian": not least of all in that tiny hyphen that joins and separates them' (16). But despite that surplus of difference, and because this theme *is* so heavily treated within the book's pages, it is here that one might legitimately feel an absence. In the course of his fabricated exchange with Derrida, Pyper asks rhetorically and parenthetically, '(and should I mention Žižek to you, M. Derrida?)' (169). Unfortunately, this is the only mention that Žižek gets – and Alain Badiou goes likewise undiscussed. Situated as it is in the middle of a section whose main theme is the anti-Semitic element of Christian supercessionism, this absence is regrettable, for it is in the work of Badiou (2003) and Žižek (2003) that an argument for the 'uniqueness' of the Christian legacy has been most clearly articulated, against what they see as the relativism of postmodern thought and the (neo-Jewish) other-oriented ethics of Derrida and Lévinas. As the introduction says, 'several papers gather around what might be called a deconstruction of Christianity from the direction of "the Jew"' (17) – five essays constitute the demarcated section, and the theme of the hyphenated Judaeo-Christian legacy runs through others in the book as well. Given this, we might have expected more discussion of the sort of position articulated by Badiou and Žižek, for it is a voice that is not simply anti-Semitic or Christian, and it is one that whatever its merits is being uttered loudly enough from high enough that it warrants discussion in precisely this place – in the interest if not of balance then of interest. A robust intervention in this debate would have further diversified this section, and provided links to Keller's joining of Derrida's pure gift with the Christian notion of grace (203), and Manoussakis' critique of Derrida's 'unsophisticated' reduction of the Eucharist to ontotheological presence (319).

Other than that, there are only minor gripes related to the restrictions of space. Some of the essays seemed at times to serve more to gesture towards the author's own corpus than rigorously push any new boundaries. And in the interests of readability, it would have been helpful in those chapters with multiple speakers (the interview and two of the collaborations) to separate each

voice with a blank line. But otherwise, there is little to criticise in this collection. The new engagements with Derrida and religion that it gathers are intriguing and timely, and signal a promising future where we might hope for hospitality in the important, complex negotiations that are integral to the question of religion.

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