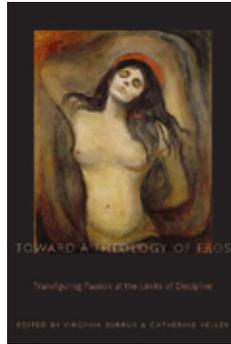


○ **REVIEW OF VIRGINIA BURRUS AND CATHERINE KELLER (EDS.), *TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF EROS: TRANSFIGURING PASSION AT THE LIMITS OF DISCIPLINE***

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I love a good title – one that not only intrigues and entices but also tells us something about the book’s content. This is the case with this collection of scholarly essays: the writings strive *toward* a theology of eros – a theology (or theologies) that is akin to eros itself, for eros is always an eros *offfor*. Always striving. Always wanting more. And, after reading this volume, wanting more is what I wanted – which is *not* to say that the collection is light or lacking: the essays are meaty, rigorous, thoughtful (indeed, some of them are too dense for the likes of me). There’s something in this volume for just about everyone (scriptural scholars, Plato specialists, medievalists, literary critics, philosophical theologians, etc.). However, as this review is only an overview, I’ll just say a thing or two about my personal favorites – and there are quite a few.

To begin with (I proceed according to the order my favorites appear in the text), Mario Costa’s piece is particularly interesting because it most comprehensively explores the question of desire as lack or excess. Costa details the work of those who have been definitive in figuring desire as lack (Nietzsche, Lacan, Freud, Derrida). Drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Marion, Costa counters this position by recalling the theological notion of desire as abundance – a re-positioning that is echoed by other thinkers in this collection. And I, for one, welcome and embrace the re-introduction and emphasis of desire as overflow. Ultimately, however, why choose? Doesn’t desire have to do with *both* deficiency *and* plenitude? Perhaps a future theology of eros may broach the question of this duality of desire. Speaking of plenitude, Keller’s two essays are typically brilliant. Her main piece is a discourse on the uses and abuses of the erotically-charged figure of Mary Magdalene. One of the many things that stand out about Keller’s writing is this: while she passionately promotes what is good and right (yes, let’s use old-fashioned words such as these), her incisive criticisms are undertaken with a certain sensitivity and forbearance; passionate recon-

struction merges with compassionate deconstruction in Keller's work. I'd also like to note just one thing regarding Keller's 'Afterward': she tantalizingly proposes at the end of that piece that the agape/eros binary (which is discussed by Virginia Burrus' in her excellent Introduction) be broached with the notion of '*amatory oscillation*' (oscillation being otherwise than synthesis or hierarchization): this intriguing, impressive, and promising notion left me wanting to hear more.

'Wanting to hear more' would probably not be a response from devout and pious Christians when it comes to the heavyweight Byzantine mystic Symeon the New Theologian's more risqué remarks. Derek Krueger hones in on a homoerotic parable in Symeon's *Hymns of Divine Love* with its intimations of French kissing and fellatio. After noting how this scandalous passage has been ignored, Krueger provides a thoroughgoing intertextual study of this astounding composition. Another impressive composition is Yvonne Sherwood's piece on the possibility of reading/interpreting the binding of Isaac as a sadomasochistic event. Sherwood acknowledges the dangers of such a possibility, and rightly offers a relatively lengthy caveat or *apologia* about the possible abuses of such a reading – and I, for one, find such humble and careful gestures extremely impressive and much-desired. But the essay left me (that's right) – wanting more. Whatever may be said of sadomasochism, the crucial point I picked up from Sherwood's essay is this: sadomasochism should (or could) be understood in the context of conditional submission and role-playing (with roles being open to obfuscation), thereby challenging our obsession with autonomy and control.

Another outstanding essay is Karmen Mackendrick's revisitiation of Augustine's passionate *Confessions*. Mackendrick convincingly argues that, rather than Augustine's stated aim of bifurcating love and lust, the binary is problematised by Augustine's desire to be seduced by God. As Mackendrick explains, seduction is (yet another) thing that complicates and undermines notions like coercion, consent, agency, and power. (A seductive notion, to be sure.) Mackendrick goes on to argue that the Augustine of the *Confessions* finds that worldly desires can be satisfied, but Augustine is not after satisfaction: this Augustine wants to burn – burn out – with desire for the elusive, seductive God. Mayra Rivera's critique of Emmanuel Levinas is another brilliant piece. Recalling Luce Irigaray's criticism of Levinas' polarization of ethics (which is purportedly outward) and eroticism (which is purportedly cyclical), Rivera then explains how the touching of bodies is a crucial supplement to the Levinasian face-to-face. Another powerful critique is Grace Jentzen's analysis of René Girard's influential work on violence: she convincingly argues that Girard frames desire exclusively as lack, and places too much emphasis on the role of violence in creativity and peace-making. What is required is the re-emphasis of desire as fullness and the passion for beauty and transformation. Yes.

Two other favorites of mine are Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid's provocative essay on 'fetishism' and Robert S. Corrington's tour de force through Emerson's radically contemporary cosmology, though their only drawback for me was their density (perhaps more accurately: their intensity) that had me occasionally lost or confused. The other essays also traverse a wide range of eros-related issues and themes: Plato's *Symposium* (Daniel Boyarin and Mark D. Jordan); the Pauline corpus (Diana M. Swancutt); media and digital technology (Sheila Briggs); medieval figures (Burrus on the *Baguines*); and, the Song of Songs (Amy Hollywood, Tod Linafelt, Richard Kearney, Eliot R. Wolfson – and, incidentally, either of Roland Boer's wicked musings on the Song would have been an excellent addition).

I would hazard a guess and say that theology – or, should I say, the most exciting and innovative theologies are heading in some urgently-needed directions: ecological theology is here to stay; political theology is also making its mark; and, radical theologies of love and eros are also – *finally* – arising. In other words, such theologies (which are obviously inter-related) are theologies that engage with the Earth, with the world of bodies. Thank Christ. As part of this eco-ethical-political movement, *Toward a Theology of Eros* is not ‘just’ an engaging, challenging, and sometimes-cheeky collection of essays having to do with the religiously ‘touchy’ subject of eros, but heralds and opens up – strives *toward* – a whole new direction in theology. Which is exactly what is needed, wanted.