

**Review of Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence and Belonging*
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015**

Robert Paul Seesengood, Albright College

Christian self-identity vis-a-vis Judaism is a stone in the shoe of scholarship on ancient Christian literature as the twenty-first century begins. Significant work re-thinking traditional Jewish and Christian self-definition and separation (wistfully put: “the parting of the ways”) appeared at the dawn of the twenty-first century (Boyarin 1999; 2000; Jacobs 2004; Lieu 2005); it merged in part with scholarship on Pauline self-designation and identity in the 1970s (Stendhal 1976; Sanders 1977 and their “new perspective” descendants) as biblical scholarship's contribution to larger, post-Cold-War conversations pitting neoliberal capitalism against populist nationalism and foregrounding Subjectivity and ethnicity. At present, the discussion is clearly finding an audience: 2015 saw the release of several dense tomes on the question (Sanders 2015; Dunn 2015; Lieu 2015; Gager 2015; Keck 2015), each presenting itself as definitive, each bristling with page-tapping citation and edgy polemic. In a year of so many “seminal” analyses, the most significant was the utterly brilliant Maia Kotrosits's *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*. Kotrosits has written a historically informed, erudite, and literate book that offers new insight and original argument. If these other books have a use, it is survey; at best they are recommended skimming (an afternoon with one of them will equip you with the salient arguments of them all). Kotrosits, in contrast, is required close reading for anyone interested in where the conversation could go next.

Kotrosits offers re-readings of 1 Peter, the Ignatian letters, the Acts of the Apostles, The Secret Revelation of John, Hebrews, the Gospel of John, and the Gospel of Truth along with a pristine essay on the current obsession with Empire and historiography in New Testament studies. These are considered against the generic “parting of the ways” debate. Kotrosits approaches her literature as a historian. But she also reads it via queer theory (temporality and trauma), diaspora/migration studies, and affect. Of these, her sharpest tool is affect. “Affect theory” is occasionally described as an emerging methodology in the humanities that focuses upon sensation, emotion, and feeling. Kotrosits very usefully, and correctly, avoids each element of that traditional description (her work here follows the best work applying affect to biblical criticism, e.g. Runions 2014; Koosed and Moore 2014). There is always the worry that biblical studies will reduce affect to yet another faddish “method” or approach and fail to acknowledge the vibrant diversity among affect theorists in their methodologies and allegiances; Kotrosits avoids this. There is a tendency among some new/queer historicists to fail in articulating the genealogy of affect criticism or in consistent historiography; Kotrosits avoids this. There is a temptation among some

literary and film critics to equate affect criticism with the study of the emotional potential of a work or the simple embodiment (the “feelings”) of thought and to abandon close reading; Kotrosits avoids this.

Rethinking's first chapter carefully reviews the literature in anticipation of later argument (in many ways, her review of affect criticism here is more orienting than the one in Kotrosits 2016). Kotrosits is influenced by Massumi (and, so, through him, by Tompkins and Deleuze) but her chief loyalty clearly belongs to Eve Sedgwick and Ann Cvetkovitch (esp. Sedgwick 2003 and Cvetkovitch 2003). The former line of affect criticism focuses upon psycho-somatic connections of affect and explores affect/feeling and emotion in the becoming-ness of experience and cognition; it looks at affect as a form of instantaneous, pre-linguistic, pre-sentient cognition. The strongest influence of this work upon Kotrosits is her (astute) recognition that affect recognizes (perhaps better re-cognizes if one isn't too tired of the meaningful hyphen) a compulsory element in communication and reading. The extra-cognitive response awoken by a text, artwork, image, etc. is not conscious or controllable. The Sedgwick/Cvetkovitch line of affect critique emerges from a paste of gender/queer critique applied to the larger shards of poststructuralism (particularly Freud-influenced conversations focused on the construction of Subjectivity and a refusal of Cartesian division of sensation and cognition in the formation of argument or of the intellect). Alongside a reappraisal of the scholar's un-invested, cool, controlled, scientific critique, there is also a reversal of the fetishizing of “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which sets the reader constantly in opposition to texts (a trend that Sedgwick 2003, 123-52 identifies as paranoia).

Kotrosits perceptively locates affect theory within hermeneutical approaches that “suggest ... the subjects and objects of knowing cannot be responsibly or reliably distinguished” (4). She writes:

Reframing the decades-long obsession with the subject and identity that had seized most theorizing circles—an obsession of which I have heartily partaken—affect takes the concept of the constructedness of the subject and identity performance seriously, but reimagines it with a new degree of rigor. It strips the term *identity performance* of its implications of individuality, ontology, and coherence (identity), and of its appeal to an act and an actor (performance), implications that are inimical to the very impulse for such theories in the first place (10; original italics).

Kotrosits reveals the connection of affect criticism to the scholarly community (or “the personal”)¹ and the dominance of Sedgwick and Cvetkovitch in biblical affect criticism. Affect as described by Kotrosits is remarkably resonant with the themes and agendas of feminist/queer criticism, but also feels an obvious outgrowth-but-correction of the autobiographical criticism of the 1990s and 2000s (a point she will clarify in her final chapter). Affect provides a much more consistent and rigorous

¹ Again, she develops this far more in her 2016 work. The two books are well-read in tandem.

intellectualism that remains tethered to close reading and avoids autobiography's explosive distraction of both critic and reader. Affect creates an invested reader, but preserves a reader who is *still reading*. Affect, in a similar way, corrects Wolfgang Iser's reader response (again, offering more theoretical complexity) and complements (if not facilitates) Barthes/Kristeva-influenced intertextuality. All of these threads knot in poststructuralist biblical scholarship. Kotrosits's survey of the intellectual archaeology of affect, for me, also explains the type (and location) of affect-oriented criticism that has emerged in biblical scholarship.

Kotrosits turns first to 1 Peter and Ignatius. Drawing analogy from Puar's queer critique of American exceptionalism (2007), Kotrosits offers mild chastisement to scholarship of Christian origins which, in turn, discovers some sort of Christian exceptionalism in the first century CE, while simultaneously challenging notions of Christian identity as, in its origins, deviant and focused upon alternative forms of embodiment, or "queer." Kotrosits ultimately settles upon "assemblage" as a means of describing the emerging "Christian identity" (using the latter term as per Lieu). Contradicting traditional readings of 1 Peter and Ignatius that see them as an extreme point on the continuum of Christian-Jewish identity (early steps toward separation), Kotrosits argues 1 Peter is best understood as a document dealing with the trauma of migration, alienation, and resettlement: "Read through affective and diasporic lenses, what these texts offer instead of an account of Christians is an understanding of the more fractal ways violence might have generated the conditions of possibility for a *later* 'sense' of Christian belonging ... They illustrate the various and terrifying distortions and new vectors of sociality that occur when the recalcitrance of national belonging meets colonial losses and violence" (61; original italics). 1 Peter draws on both Israel-grounded Jewish identity and Jesus's narrative as the oppressed to articulate the experience of migration/diaspora trauma (66-7). Ignatius uses Christ/Christian language to articulate—and feel—his coming execution (an execution, Kotrosits notes, that *he* frames as faith-motivated, but would likely *not* have been so understood by the Romans).

Chapter three focuses on Acts of the Apostles. Kotrosits reads it as "a diasporic account of the very strange confederations and rivalries constitutive of colonial life, and a melancholic epic of imperial romances and disappointments" (86). "Acts, like 1 Peter," she argues, "points to rather incidental and frictive conditions around the historical emergence of the term 'Christian'" (89) Kotrosits makes much of Shelly Matthews's thesis (2010) that Acts establishes, via parallels to 2 Maccabees, a comparison between Paul and Antiochus IV, where a righteous Jewish martyr provokes a sort of conversion (92-4). These comparisons, however, become hopelessly muddled, as does the language of conversion. Acts also draws from Roman national epic, the *Aeneid*, in its later chapters on Paul's missionary travels, again complicating its presentation of race and nationalism. As Kotrosits suggests, "rather than ancient supercessionist rhetoric, Acts illustrates the heated discourse of authenticity that is part and parcel of diasporic belonging" (95-6).

Chapter four examines the Secret Revelation to John. Kotrosits opens, as does Secret Revelation, with attention to the trauma that the loss of the Jerusalem Temple and the separation of Jesus's followers from the larger community of Judaism. She notices, "aside from the diasporic anecdote framing the story, it also seems that the Secret Revelation of John is reading Genesis through Second Isaiah, sharing Second Isaiah's sense of traumatic upheaval and homelessness, and borrowing Isaiah's imagination of a lofted divinity around which a diasporic population can coalesce" (121). She also suggests that "Second Isaiah's insistence upon monotheism and invective against idols arose because of pressures to maintain distinct identity abroad. Secret Revelation uses Yaldabaoth in a similar way, critiquing various notions of God found broadly, within a variety of communities, Jewish, Pagan and Christian identified. Secret Revelation 'throbs with vulnerability'" (141). Kotrosits uses the work of Anne Cvetkovitch (2003), particularly her queer approach to trauma, weaving together themes of nostalgia, loss, desire, and more (142-3).

Chapter five examines Hebrews and the Gospel of John. Kotrosits notes the general loftiness of both of these works, but also that "in these texts, transcendence never manages to get off the ground the way one expects" (149). The metaphors in both texts remain very "earthy," land-city-nation obsessed, and fleshly. Hebrews gives us the image of a temple curtain made from Jesus' flesh, and a roll call of triumphant faith that, again and again, "foregrounds loss and defeat" (150-5). Hebrew's complete dependence upon the very Judaism and Jewish text it claims to transcend is like "a blind date talking incessantly about *how completely over his ex he is*," even as "Hebrews fixes itself most energetically on exactly what it has ostensibly erased" (156; original italics). John's obsessive condemnation of "all the Jews" and "the Jews" (failing to note its own, inherent Jewishness) is disrupted by a close reading of the one time in the gospel when Jesus's own Jewishness is foregrounded: his meeting with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4.9). The discourse that follows laments the loss of two temples, Jerusalem and Samarian alike, two moments of imperial control and erasure.

Kotrosits again returns to Cvetkovitch in chapter six in her reading of the Gospel of Truth. Long noted for its powerful, sensual language of beauty, bodies, and implicit sexuality, Kotrosits notes that the Gospel of Truth also cannot quite escape bodies in pain, tortured bodies (particularly Jesus'). Sensuality, sexuality often (always?) intertwines with darker emotions of violence, aggression, and vulnerability. Kotrosits returns to Cvetkovitch's work on Dorothy Allison's novel *Bastards out of North Carolina* which blends poverty, loss, diaspora, violence, incest, abuse, and (lesbian) sexuality (181-5; Cvetkovich 2003, 100-5). Kotrosits finds similar energies beneath the Gospel of Truth. Though no mention is made of land or loss, Kotrosits observes the absence itself is notable, perhaps revealing a form of psychological suppression, a fear of vulnerability, perhaps one seen in the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, as well (the latter with its famously Freudian image of the "armour of Christ," Eph 6.10-20, protecting the traumatized soul/psyche from further wound; 190-4).

In chapter seven, Maia² turns to the question of history and empire, the backdrop to the diasporic traumas she has just traced. Her prose changes in this chapter, intentionally focused upon the personal and communal quality of scholars in a way that mirrors her remarks about scholarship itself. Opening with Kathleen Stuart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007), a book which is a series of autobiographical prose pieces, all narrated in third person, Maia moves to explore the affective reaction inherent in the scholar's engagement with her literature merged with a discussion of history-as-form-of-biography. Scholars intrude into texts as texts intrude into, and affect, scholars. Empire, again and again, is cipher for the current global, economic, or American hegemonic system, inviting language about a scholar's complicity in both historical re-imagination and current systems of oppression. But, perhaps most poignant, Maia turns to the language of autobiography, affect, community, and the injection of "the personal" and feeling into scholarly process. When reading is affective, scholarship becomes personal. Maia writes, "While I do wish to highlight the personal and the anecdotal as important pieces of the contemporary scholarly reflection on empire, this should not be mistaken for a simple call to revive autobiographical criticism" (220). She turns instead toward Jane Gallop's (2002) work that "has recently reclaimed liveliness and authorial presence in writing" (222) without becoming, itself, fully autobiography (as if anything ever was, or ever could be); it is a call for an invested, engaged, enmeshed author and text and reader and community. As Maia writes:

Without explicitly taking up affect, Gallop's reading of [Roland] Barthes offers an affective account of the contingencies and impacts of reading and writing. We are present in our work, but not self-present. Authors are lost to readers but still touch them. This speaks equally to our own writing, autobiographical or otherwise, and to the ancient writing in which we are so invested. Subjectivities mingle and scatter, move through and touch each other via the affectivity of writing and history ... Besides, no matter how systematized our readings, what we call historical work is inevitably a cobbling together of quirky and tangentially related fragments: pieces of texts found in trash piles, architectural detritus, the particles and slivers of more recent relationships, the fading marks and partial castings of events scattered across time, and the forces of our affectivity producing momentary coherences between all these things. (224-5)

I find here a resolution of several lines of thinking, reading, and work I have been engaged with for over a decade, and I understand it more clearly than before, more clearly than I would have alone. Thank you for that, Maia.

My review is long, and even so, I feel I have left out much. The book is a fresh, lovingly crafted stew of arguments which are both ferociously complex, enviably erudite, but also deceptively short. Describing the work of Brigitte Kahl, Kotrosits

² On the inter-animation of the Personal and the Critical, particularly in the Name, see Kotrosits (2016).

writes, “what stays with me most ... is the way her language often vibrates with multiplicative meaning, generating an affective field thick and ready for association” (210). I do not know if Kotrosits’s goal was to imitate this effect, but she has. I say above “deceptively short” because of the intensely complex and, at times languid seeming chapters which are more quickly read than fully grasped. More than once, I felt as if it were conversation with an erudite friend on an afternoon’s stroll, a conversation whose import I only really gleaned much later.

No book is without flaws or limits. I completely concede Kotrosits’s arguments regarding Ignatian martyrdom, yet, in the end, still find Boyarin’s reading more functional and plausible (though, I grant, it does not completely preclude hers). Kotrosits’s reading of Acts still seems a bit soft in the centre; I would like to see her return to address the pervasive Temple language (and its metaphoric extension to community. There seems to be a real, insurmountable focus on messianism there). Though Kotrosits cites Carla Freccero (2006) in her final chapter (220, n. 40) I feel there was a lost opportunity here to intersect with Heather Love (2007) and bring resolution to many earlier allusions to historicity, haunting, and queer trauma/memory. More than a few occasions, I was left wanting arguments to push further, yet I also have to admit this was not because together we hadn’t already raced breathlessly through dozens of rows of library shelving discovering new connections and intertextualities proudly and triumphantly displayed.

I opened asserting this book as the most interesting book on Christian origins to appear in 2015. I would say at the close: I think this may well be the most original and important book on ancient Christian identity to be written in the past decade(s). It is a quarter the length of “magisterial” studies such as Dunn, yet it is logarithmically more complex, ambitious, and subtle. I am reminded, in many ways, of the erudition, precision, and conversation-altering importance of Walter Bauer. I am convinced that the “affectual turn” in the humanities at large will have a significant influence upon biblical studies. I very much believe *Rethinking* will be frequently cited in that emerging work. And it should be. I cannot wait to hear the conversations that it will inspire, and plan to be very much among them.

Bibliography

- Boyarin, Daniel. 2004. *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Boyarin, Daniel. 1999. *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*. *Figurae: Reading Medieval Culture*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Cvetkovich, Anne. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dunn, J.D.G. 2015. *Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity*. Christianity in the Making, vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Freccero, Carla. 2006. *Queer/Early/Modern*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gager, John G. 2015. *Who Made Early Christianity? The Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gallop, Jane. 2002. *Anecdotal Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jacobs, Andrew. 2004. *The Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity*. Divinations: Rereading Late Antique Religion. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Keck, Leander E. 2015. *Christ's First Theologian: The Shape of Paul's Thought*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Koosed, Jennifer L., and Stephen D. Moore, eds. 2014. *Affect Theory and the Bible*. *Biblical Interpretation* (thematic issue) 22 (4-5).
- Kotrosits, Maia. 2016. *How Things Feel: Biblical Studies, Affect Theory and the (Im)Personal*. Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation 1.1. Leiden: Brill.
- Lieu, Judith. 2005. *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lieu, Judith. 2015. *Neither Jew Nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*. 2d. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark.
- Love, Heather. 2007. *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Matthews, Shelly. 2010. *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Puar, Jasbit. K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Runions, Erin. 2014. *The Babylon Complex: Theopolitical Fantasies of War, Sex, and Sovereignty*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Sanders, E.P. 2015. *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters and Thought*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Sanders, E.P. 1977. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Stendhal, Krister. 1976. *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)