

Review of Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014

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The focal point of Gil Anidjar's *Blood* is the "Christian Question"—that is, the question of determining what Christianity is, measuring its depth and boundaries. This is based, of course, on the more familiar "Jewish Question," which the book also explores. Indeed, that the "Jewish Question" is more "manifestly popular" (259) is evidence itself of the breadth and enormity of Christianity, for Christianity extends outside its theological and religious dimensions; it ebbs and flows between spheres, and circulates "ultimately as law and culture, from economics to science, and beyond" (257). In other words, Christianity is the unconscious of the modern West—the "Christian Question" is not asked, somewhat paradoxically, because Christianity is everywhere.

Following and adapting Carl Schmitt, Anidjar argues that all significant concepts of the modern state—specifically nation, state, and capital—are "liquidated theological concepts" (viii, 85, 121). This is so not only because of their "systematic fluidity" but also because they flow from Christianity and its singular use of blood. Blood, for Anidjar, is *the* element of Christianity and thus he traces the omnipresence of blood in its history. He seeks to understand how the blood of Christ's sacrifice came to unify (and divide) Christianity, how blood became a substance of kinship, how Christianity became a community of blood, and how all of this circulated into modern "secular" concepts and institutions.

In order to establish the novelty of blood as the substance of the community, Anidjar begins by exploring the Bible as a counter example of blood-based kinship. In regard to the Hebrew Bible (44-49), he argues that it knows of no such thing as blood lineage; instead, it traces kinship through names and memory. If it does use substances for kinship, they are "seed" (which establishes a link between generations) and the notable "flesh and bone" (which establishes a link of contemporaneity). The Hebrew Bible does not, moreover, equate blood with life as such (despite the history of interpretation/translation of verses like Gen 9:4 and Lev 17:11), and even as it places a central role to blood in murder and sacrifice, it does not distinguish between certain kinds of blood—blood is blood. The New Testament will take things a step further (49-53), as in the explicit use of "flesh and blood" in Paul's letters (in contrast to the Hebrew Bible's "flesh and bone") along with the remark that one is justified by Christ's blood (Rom 5:9). At the same time, however, Paul envisions a genealogy rooted in spirit, asserting that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 15:50). Still, there are strong progressions toward blood becoming a site of difference, particularly through the elevation of Jesus' blood—thus, the idea of the followers of Jesus drinking his blood (Matt 26:27-28; John 6:53-56) and the image of Christ's blood as a site of purity (1 Peter 1:19). According to Anidjar, therefore, the New Testament provides the essential building blocks needed to develop Christianity's "peculiar history" of blood, although it will take many centuries to fully coagulate.

This turning point occurs in the Middle Ages with the theological development of a "eucharistic matrix." During this time, papal authority promulgated the centrality of the Eucharist as giving a common blood to the Church as *corpus mysticum*. Accordingly, blood became a governing center of Christian life, leading to a refashioning of "embryology and genealogy, belief and ritual, laws and habits, persons and collectives, the state and the church" in hematological terms (39). The effects of this eucharistic matrix can be seen in the distinguishing between Christian blood and infidel blood during the Crusades (132-35). No longer was the shedding of all blood looked down upon, for the killing of an enemy of God was a meritorious act, not considered to be murder (while the killing of a Christian was tantamount to shedding the blood of Christ). Similarly, the hemophobia (and hemophilia) of the Inquisition sought to keep Christian blood "completely distinct, completely good, and more important completely pure" (134). This obsession over blood purity runs from the *estatutos de limpizea de sangre* of medieval Spain to its more modern counterparts in the "one-drop rule" of America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the "blood and soil" ideology of Nazism.

"Hematologies," the second part of the book, "engages the matter of blood and Christianity from a punctually thematic (and textual) perspective rather than from an extended historical one" (156). Anidjar begins this section with a chapter on blood in ancient Greece. Like his treatment of blood in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, Anidjar analyzes a number of texts (from Homer to Plato and Aristotle) to display how blood mattered to the Greeks across a large range of domains (with political, philosophical, medical, religious, and cultic purposes) and yet they never developed the idea of a "community of blood." This is followed by a chapter on melancholia, blood, and vampires. Freud's figure of the melancholic cannibal (caught in the oral and cannibalistic phase of libidinal development) is interpreted as a vampire, as Anidjar transitions from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to the hymns of the Wesley brothers and blood-soaked thoughts of Catherine of Siena in order to show how Christianity is "the religion of love as vampire religion" (199). The final chapter of this section reads Melville's *Moby-Dick* as both an account of Christianity and a critique of it, just as Ahab is both Anti-Christ and a Christ-figure (207). It is in this chapter, too, that Anidjar notes how whaling oil was the original "blood for oil," as it "whetted the human appetite for clean, efficient, and affordable illumination" (207-8).

The conclusion returns more explicitly to the "Christian Question" with a brilliant analysis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. In contrast to the numerous readings that interpret the book in light of Freud's relation to Judaism, Anidjar argues that the central concern of the book—and Freud—is in fact Christianity. A succinct formula is provided for this series of substitutions: "If Freud was a Jew, then Moses was an Egyptian. But if Freud was a Christian, then Jesus was a Jew" (248)—the "Jewish Question," so it seems, is really the "Christian Question." *Moses and Monotheism* narrates a version of the "essence of Christianity" (242), a story of murder (the shedding of blood), repression and displacement, and thus (self) exoneration. This last feature, innocence, is the noteworthy advance of Christianity; its "Jesuc distinction" (254) is its collective innocence (in place of collective guilt).

Immediately after this pronouncement of Christianity's essence and its advent of collective innocence, the last section of the conclusion asks again: "So what is Christianity? And why insist still on identifying blood with Christianity?" It is a

testament to both the book's merit and its weakness that any answer to those questions is more obscure by the book's end. That is, on the one hand Anidjar has rightly pointed out that "Christianity is plural and has been pluralized" (256), that it is something more than a "religion" in the narrow definition of the term. At the same time, however, Anidjar speaks of an "essence of Christianity," and even if this essence is not reducible to Christianity's religious dimensions it is still a jarring juxtaposition. If *Blood* is a critique of Christianity, as the subtitle to the book attests, then the book itself testifies to how problematic it can be to engage with something so elusive and pervasive. This becomes even more apparent when we consider that Anidjar's "Christianity" encompasses (nearly?) all of Western history, or at least its most important concepts and institutions.

To be sure, Anidjar is keenly aware of all of this. From the beginning, he cautions that "this book offers no explanation. And certainly no *historical* explanation" (x). The reader is even urged not to think of *Blood* as a book, but instead to imagine it as restless and unbound, to "think of it as an unfinished project of some premodernity" (xi). Indeed, like the Bible and *Moby-Dick*, *Blood* is encyclopedic in its scope (there are portions of the book, such as analysis of Auerbach's *Mimesis* or Hobbes' *Leviathan*, that are not covered in this review at all). Again, this is a potential drawback of trying to tie together such disparate and diverse material. Specialists in many disciplines, biblical scholars among them, will be sure to pick apart some of the finer details of *Blood*. This is particularly the case with the historical arguments that Anidjar outlines—though one senses that Anidjar is often using "historical" in the same (misleading) way that Freud used the term in *Moses and Monotheism* (as Freud's "historical truth" refers to a mythical or psychoanalytic truth beyond the more common understanding of history).

Blood is a book that requires patience and careful reflection. Readers will immediately notice Anidjar's playful writing style, full of pop-culture references ("there will be bloods"), academic musings ("Foucault says somewhere"), literary and philosophical allusions ("*mon lecteur, ma soeur*"), deliberate contradictions and rebuttals ("The one-drop rule has no history. This is not a completely accurate statement..."), and, of course, numerous wordplays on blood ("how did we get into this bloody mess?"). Though this can make for some rather dense reading, Anidjar is displaying, through a type of free-association, blood's omnipresence in today's world. Indeed, if nothing else, *Blood* offers the reader a staggering amount of data and ideas to work through. There is a cutting truth to Anidjar's bewilderment that one is so often able...

...to insist that Marx was a Jew (and an anti-Semite to boot), to claim that Freud was too...but begin to sound like a fringe lunatic when recalling that Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, and with them the traditions of liberalism, the accelerations of capitalism, and much else of "our modernity" (Nazism included) may suffer from a lingering case of Christianity (245).

With statements like this in mind one can certainly affirm that the "enormous question mark" (vii) that frames *Blood*, the "Christian Question," is a question worthy of further exploration.



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