

## BOOK REVIEW

David Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 184. ISBN 9781108498661

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Dionysius the Areopagite was not much of an eschatological thinker. In one of the only passages where he reflects on final union with God, he mentions an obscure ‘Christoform feast’ by which we shall be filled up with a light that is ‘above’ intellect, above illumination itself (*Divine Names*, 1.4, 592b-c). Instead of eschatology *per se*, Dionysius loved to play with the term ‘hyper’, prefixing it in odd places and wedding it to already charged philosophical terms like ‘being’. The ‘beyond’ and the possibility of its processing out to meet human intellects was essential to the Dionysian task of describing our naming of the Divine as altogether inadequate. Further, in the Dionysian idiom, ‘beyond’ initiates an approach to the dialectical (a word we should now use with extreme caution after reading this book) that is a process of speaking about, or as he characteristically puts it, ‘hymning’ God. *Hope in a Secular Age* brilliantly reclaims this process as an ethical exercise. In using names that refer always imperfectly to God, there is an engagement with self-critical responsibility. Newheiser thereby grasps the temporal dimension in religious epistemology, that is, faith-affirmations, because they are inherently tenuous given their object, open to the possibility that things might be different in the future.

The twentieth century undoubtedly witnessed a remarkable new chapter in the rich history of the reception of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus, for it became a landmark among deconstructionist thinkers like John Caputo, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jacques Derrida. This latter constitutes the nodal point through which Newheiser reads Dionysius. Newheiser addresses the concern that despite claiming that God is beyond being, Dionysius nonetheless secures access to God and therefore to the possibility of a secret political authoritarianism (pp. 100-101). After all, the same Dionysius who wrote that the light of God is beyond intellect also spent chapters of his work describing the theurgic process that initiates cooperation with this divinity who gives substance to legal hierarchy and society (see *Eccles. Hier.*, 429c-d). If there is a weak point to this monograph, it is in the lack of engagement with this latter element of Dionysius’s own thought, influenced as it was by an Iamblichan-Proclan doctrine of securing synchrony with the divinity through ritual.

Through exegesis of Dionysius and Derrida in chs. 1–2, Newheiser sketches the ambivalent epistemology embedded in the language of faith for an age suspicious of the claims of religious certainty. Because negative theology unsettles every claim to represent the divine, it reflects openness to the future – the future of new political configuration, the future of unexpected discovery, the future of renewed senses of justice. Derrida and Dionysius are working with the same grammar: Derrida’s characterization of democratic politics as a ‘critique both of every existing political regime and of our understanding of democracy itself’ (p. 32) is analogous to Dionysius’s argument that ‘even the best names for God refer to God’s causal activity in the world’, and not his essence (p. 46). In chs. 3–4 on the features of hope, Newheiser can even engage Derrida’s more radical concepts from the inverse analogy with Dionysius’s thought. Derrida’s ‘awaiting without horizon’, for instance, is a rich ‘hypercritical faith, one without dogma’ (p. 72). Newheiser takes Derrida not as denying religious faith altogether but as claiming that ‘faith is not exhausted by any particular religious tradition’. This is a language that our uneschatological Dionysius might not have spoken, but that we may recognize as an unwitting extension of his project. The interpretation of Derrida as a hopeful philosopher and Dionysius as a deconstructionist theologian opens onto a wider discussion about prominent criticisms of the political value of faith in a secular society, addressed in ch. 5. Human and divine concepts of sovereignty have analogous structures. And yet radical critical and deconstructions thinkers like Mark Lilla are concerned that in this pale comparison, religion offers false comfort to the anxiety of temporal existence (cf. pp. 112–13). Through hopeful negativity, Newheiser suggests that Christian views of sovereignty can be rendered not to superimpose assumptions on to other traditions but to cultivate the ‘dangerous’ virtue of hospitality, which ‘constitutes a welcome to the other . . . [and] marks the distinction between ethics and the realm of law and politics’ (p. 122).

One of the most critical of Dionysius’s twentieth-century readers was Giorgio Agamben. This radical Italian political philosopher raised the point that the Dionysian angelic hierarchy could be viewed as nothing more than the veneer of political theology. A providential economic structure whereby God’s will expresses itself through the angels is deboned and repackaged in the model of the modern state, where citizens are offered the enticing but tautological idea of freedom within an elaborate schema of bureaucratic management. Newheiser’s remarkable engagement with this particular aspect of deconstructionism, embedded in ch. 6 on ‘Negative Political Theology’ has gained considerable traction in the wake of *Hope*’s publication and Newheiser’s continued work in this area. Agamben’s reading would be correct if major interpretations of Dionysius prevailed (cf. Louth and Golitzin on pp. 53–55), namely the view that affirmations about Christian worship and ecclesial hierarchy are somehow ‘bracketed’ by negativity (p. 139). Rather than a vacuous circularity that sneaks in sovereignty through mystery, the Dionysian programme is a cultivated ambivalence to *both* affirmation and negativity. This is why ‘dialectic’ is such a problematic term when speaking about appropriations of negative theology for today. Using political theology, Newheiser shows us that hope is the disruptive ‘play of elements that preclude perfect coherence’ within a political or conceptual structure (p. 144).

As Dionysius makes clear, 'we learn in the best way we can' through the symbols of Christian discourse and practice (p. 60). But the hastening of a better future comes through the thawing of the apparently frozen conceptions of power and security we coordinate through the divine names ('power', 'eternity', 'will/decision', etc.). With Newheiser, if Christians are to desacralize secular authority, then we must also extend this in a sense to our own ecclesial structures (cf. p. 150). Bold, succinct and wieldy, one unexpected contribution of this volume should be its use within discussion about the theoretical basis of modern doctrinal decisionism. It would be unwise for the wider Church to ignore Newheiser's voice and miss the opportunity to infuse expressions of power with a refreshing coherence, at once open to the future and anchored in the tradition of Christian mysticism.

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