**Book Review**


David Newheiser’s first published monograph is first and foremost a work of scholarship. In this book, Newheiser brings Jacques Derrida and Dionysius the Aeropagite in dialogue with each other. Yet he does so not simply by studying the explicit connections, already present in Derrida’s writing. Rather, he brings to light ‘the implicit connections between them’, which Newheiser suggests show striking similarities, despite differences at first glance (p. 8).

Newheiser certainly covers the more well-known aspects of these two authors, including deconstruction and negative theology, contextualizing these themes within contemporary scholarship, including Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo and Giorgio Agamben. Chapter headings such as ‘The ethics of uncertainty’ (on Derrida) and ‘Apophatic ethics’ (on Dionysius) serve as important signposts to the reader, as Newheiser skilfully draws out important similarities that will then contribute towards his main argument in this book: the concept of hope that he argues is ‘implicitly at the centre of their work’ (p. 8).

Having looked at each author separately in earlier chapters, Newheiser (p. 63) concludes that both Derrida’s deconstruction, and Dionysian apophasis, ‘enact an ethical discipline of openness to the unexpected’ that is characterized by hope, the subject of the middle chapters of the book. Newheiser (p. 65) recognizes that hope in the contemporary context is often presented as either a ‘false comfort’ that ‘denies the absurdity of existence’, via Camus or ‘transcendent meaning and dignity’ that ameliorates suffering with the promise of eternal blessedness. Newheiser suggests that another view of hope is possible, both on religious and secular grounds, via Dionysius and Derrida respectively. For both, hope ‘is predicated upon uncertainty’ that neither offers false comfort, nor beatific visions (p. 73). Both Dionysius and Derrida affirm the possibility of action based on ‘particular hopes’ with ‘determinate commitments’ that respects ‘the indelible vulnerability of human life’.
Such hope is ‘ethical’ in its orientation towards justice, and it is available to the religious and secular alike, concludes Newheiser.

With this turn towards ethics and justice, Newheiser explores a third important theme that emerges in the concluding chapters of the book. Here Newheiser considers the ways his account of hope can inform contemporary politics. Newheiser critically assesses the contemporary impulse to actively exclude religion from the public sphere. Inspired by Derrida’s writing on the subject, Newheiser seeks a more nuanced account that highlights the ‘theological genealogy’ that informs contemporary political life (pp. 110, 115). This genealogy also contains an ethical imperative, argues Newheiser. Any claim about a hard separation between religion and secular politics is also a claim of ‘metaphysical certainty’ that in itself may serve to address anxiety induced by instability (p. 119). Both Derrida and Dionysius offer ways to circumvent the separation between faith and politics. Derrida recognizes that ‘the complex web of relationships’ destabilizes attempts to build ‘complete and coherent’ systems, whilst Dionysius ‘develops a negative political theology that desacralizes every authority, including its own’, offering a theological self-critical commitment that is ‘politically potent’ (pp. 120, 133–34). Through this lens, political and religious commitments do not require epistemological certainty as the basis of action. Rather, both are sustained by hope as an ethical discipline that persists in action, even in the face of self-critical re-evaluation, and uncertainty about the future.

Newheiser is right to critically assess the exclusion of the sacred from public discourse. As he notes, a sense of the sacred continues to influence communal life, including politics. When practices that promote injustice are themselves ‘sacralised’, then the struggle for justice itself becomes more difficult. Yet, reintegrating the sacred into public life is far from straightforward. The ‘negative’ traditions of philosophy (via Derrida) or faith (via Dionysius) have to contend with more self-confident claims towards sovereignty and political authority. The continuing influence of Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology* (1922) is evidence of this, as political leaders turn to notions of strong sovereignty in times of collective crises, seeking to either restabilize or reconfigure their political communities. Schmitt’s answer to action in a time of radical instability is an assertion of political sovereignty that requires neither metaphysical nor epistemological certainty. One might even say that it is also a discipline of the will, even if it lacks the self-critical aspect of action that is so important in Newheiser’s account of hope.

Whilst the focus of this book was on making explicit the implicit dialogue between Derrida and Dionysius the Aeropagite, Newheiser
has also made a case for bringing negative theology into dialogue with contemporary political philosophy. Newheiser further links hope to ethical action and justice, and critically considers how this can inform contemporary political life. This makes the book important beyond simply academic scholarship. For the complex web of relationships that constitute modernity are not just a matter of conceptual ideas that share a genealogy. It includes those who hold what may appear to be irreconcilable perspectives, but who must nevertheless learn to inhabit the same spatial-geographic lived-world. This makes the book itself a hopeful and necessary ethical gesture in a time of significant social and political instability across the globe.

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