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Reviews

HOPE IN A SECULAR AGE: DECONSTRUCTION, NEGATIVE THEOLOGY, AND THE FUTURE OF FAITH by David Newheiser, *Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, 2019, pp. ix+177, £75.00, hbk

This book has been written, according to the first sentence, because the author (currently at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne) believes that 'it is hard to hope' (p. 1). As the subtitle suggests, the book perhaps originated in Dr Newheiser's discovery of the life-long fascination the French philosopher Jacques Derrida had ('deconstruction') with the writings of the late 5th /early 6th century Christian Platonist who adopted the name of Dionysius the Areopagite ('negative theology'), the judge baptized by St Paul in the course of debate in Athens with a number of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (*Acts* 17:16-33).

Obviously, the focus is on a special case of hope. People do not normally find hoping hard. On the contrary, as Newheiser agrees (p. 154), hoping for this or that is one of the most basic features of human life. For Christians, we may say, hope culminates in a confident expectation of ultimate blessedness (p.67). What Newheiser contends, however, is that, by reading Pseudo-Dionysius with the help of Jacques Derrida, such certainty — 'complacency' you might say – should give way to practising hope as 'resolute persistence in the face of uncertainty' (p. 64).

While there is much to prompt innovative thought in Derrida's immensely prolific work, one frequently recurring theme is that, in many different ways, people claim to possess something stable and immutable in their lives, attempting thus to assuage anxiety at the vulnerability of human life. Deconstruction, by contrast, sets out to unsettle this, by revealing that every socio-political and linguistic-conceptual system (including Christian theology) is constitutively open to endless revision (p. 18). Half of Newheiser's book deals with the possibility of deconstructive analysis in the case of politics, tracking Derrida's idiosyncratic version of Marxism. For readers primarily interested in Christianity, the other half deals with the light that Derrida's approach sheds on negativity in language about union with God.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), born in then French colonial Algeria, son of a wine merchant, in a not very observant Sephardic Jewish family, was expelled from school under Vichy government anti-Semitic regulations — soon allowed back (however) after US troops landed, in November 1942. Jackie (as he then was, after Jackie Coogan, the star in *The Kid*) had his bar-mitzvah (which Algerian Jews called 'communion'), as a matter of

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routine. His deep interest in religion developed during his student days in Paris and was to be sustained for the rest of his life. The paper best-known among theologians, 'How to avoid speaking: denials', was delivered originally at a conference in 1986 at Hebrew University, Jerusalem. He discusses Pseudo-Dionysius in conversation with Jean-Luc Marion, once one of his students and already by then much respected in theological circles (the most eminent French theologian of his generation, teaching now at the Chicago Divinity School as well as the Sorbonne). But long before that, in his early student days (p. 127), Derrida was reading such authors as Gabriel Marcel and Simone Weil. His closest friend at the time, Michel Monory, was a practising Catholic, letters to whom he repeatedly concludes 'Pray for me'. It sometimes sounds as if he would have liked to be a Christian. From the outset, anyway, however expansive and wilfully obscure (as many think), Derrida's work has always been intertwined with Christian theological motifs.

Pseudo-Dionysius is first mentioned in 1947, in an essay submitted in a course on Christianity and Hellenism. Then, in 1961, at the start of his teaching career at the Sorbonne, Pseudo-Dionysius comes into a lecture on the medieval schoolmen (p. 91). For Denys Turner, Newheiser reports, though disagreeing (p. 95), Derrida's Denys (as Turner calls him) is 'little more than a dismembered torso'. Newheiser's book makes that judgment seem wayward. No doubt the great translation of Pseudo-Dionysius that Maurice de Gandillac published in 1943 brought his writings to scholarly attention in Paris — young Derrida must have been among the first enthusiasts. In any case he was actually being taught by Gandillac (1906-2006), also born in Algeria, and by this time by far the most influential philosophy lecturer in Paris. It was Gandillac who arranged Derrida's postgraduate research in the Husserl archives at Louvain and supervised the resulting thesis.

Gandillac had studied with Etienne Gilson at one stage. There is no sign that Derrida ever had any interest in Thomas Aquinas, or even in Thomism as the 'system' it was supposed to be. Gandillac's translation was instrumental in encouraging several Thomists to press the case for the Platonic side to Thomas Aquinas's work. Unless long forgotten texts turn up, we shall never know who the pseudonymous author was, or (more importantly) why he adopted the name. It looks likely, however, that, by returning to the New Testament account of how the Apostle Paul held his own in debate with Greek philosophers, this unknown Christian Platonist sought to demonstrate the compatibility — even the continuity — between Pauline Christianity and the Neoplatonic tradition, by symbolically putting on the identity of the eminent Athenian whom Paul's arguments converted. Allusions to the pagan Neoplatonist philosopher, Proclus (412-485), have enabled scholars to date Pseudo-Dionysius to the late 5th century. The case has been conclusively established by the French Dominican scholar, Henri-Dominique Saffrey, starting with his research at Oxford (Saffrey's death occurred on 19 May 2021, at the age of one hundred).

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Thomas Aquinas had no problem about borrowing ideas from Pseudo-Dionysius. He did so quite lavishly in his treatment of the Angels. As regards the negative theology, Thomas saw it as confirming his view that language does not apply to God in its ordinary sense but only by exceeding itself (p. 45). Saying just that, though, is to miss how radical Pseudo-Dionysius's position is, as Newheiser objects. For Pseudo-Dionysius, Christian doctrine is 'profoundly unstable' (p.46), — which is a good thing! The tension between affirmation and negation, between saying and unsaying, between the cataphatic and apophatic, endlessly renewed, in language about God, is never resolved. Instead of blatant contradiction, obviously to be rejected, or contraries which simply cancel one another out, Pseudo-Dionysius envisages the possibility of an affirmation that acknowledges its being always negated. Here, disagreeing with Denys Turner's judgment that Aquinas and Pseudo-Dionysius are 'actually quite close', Newheiser goes with Fran O'Rourke's magisterial *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (1992), concluding that Thomas plays down the dominantly 'apophatic' and effectively 'agnostic' element wherever he can (p. 46, footnote 23). For Pseudo-Dionysius, even the best names that we have for God never refer to God but only to God's causal activity in the created order, whereas for Thomas it is exactly the opposite (*Summa Theologiae* Ia 13,2): 'When we say "God is good", the meaning is not "God is the cause of goodness" … but whatever good we attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God and in a more excellent and higher way' (p.46). What could be clearer? Furthermore, this crucial difference between Thomas and Pseudo-Dionysius turns out to be central to Newheiser's thesis: namely, that this negativity in Christianity is not a linguistic operation, as it is for Thomas, but rather an ethical transformation on the believer's part, enacting self-dispossession progressively, in the dynamic tension between endlessly repeated affirmation and negation in language about union with the unknowable God (p. 47). Late in his life, in an interview on faith (pp. 145–6), describing how he prays, we learn that Derrida combines the anthropomorphic images from his childhood with the scepticism of Feuerbach and Nietzsche about God's even existing. There is nothing static in this conflicted practice. Then, quite revealingly, he tells us that he rejects the idea of prayer as grounded in certain knowledge of its object: 'it would simply be an order — "just as though I were ordering a pizza!" (p. 146). It is as if the project of construing Christian faith as an affirmation of union with God that is necessarily uncertain, and doing so with the complexity that is beautifully analysed in this fine book, ultimately rests on what is surely quite a controversial picture of what praying is like.

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