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Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith, by David Newheiser. Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 177. \$99.99 (hardcover).

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David Newheiser opens his book with a claim that resonates in my bones: “I wrote this book because I believe it is hard to hope” (1). Newheiser wrote his book before the world changing events of 2020–2021—the COVID pandemic, the BLM protests following the murder of George Floyd, the defeat of Trump in the Presidential election, the January 6th insurrection, widespread conspiracy theories, as well as anti-mask and anti-vaccine sentiment that is causing incredible suffering and death. In light of these events, it is getting even harder to hope every day. And, yet, despite the difficulty, what is the other option? Are we just to stop hoping and give in to the incredible despair that currently threatens to overwhelm us? Part of what makes hope so hard is that when hope seems almost impossible, it becomes most necessary. When read in this light, Newheiser’s book speaks not only to the increasingly hopeless situation in which we find ourselves, but also to the possible futures toward which our lingering hope, however meager and belittled it currently feels, calls us. As he notes, “disappointment is always possible—and yet people persist” (2). *Yes, yes they do.*

People persist in hope because despite so much that threatens to divide us, the human condition is inherently shared. Solidarity is an existential issue long before it is a political one. Newheiser recognizes this shared reality when he claims that hope “constitutes a disciplined resilience that enables desire to endure without denying its vulnerability” (2). “Daily life,” he continues, “depends on a hundred small hopes, and this is doubly true of our deepest commitments. Because complacency and despair exert a constant pull, hoping is hard, but it is also indispensable” (2–3). I really appreciate the way that he defines hope because it speaks to the way that hope is about who we are and who we are becoming, not simply about what we do or what we want.

In order to explore the implications of this tension between resilience and vulnerability, Newheiser turns to an unlikely pair of thinkers who mutually model how to stand for what matters, while lacking guarantees that we are right in our belief or that we will be successful in our actions: Dionysius the Areopagite and Jacques Derrida. The choice of Dionysius and Derrida is meant to speak to the way that hope, for Newheiser,



cuts across religious and secular approaches to human social existence. Rejecting the temptations to complacent self-assurance, on the one hand, and radical indeterminacy, on the other hand, Newheiser suggests that Dionysius and Derrida open us onto the realization that “hope offers a way to affirm particular policies while subjecting them to ongoing critique” (15). In this way, Newheiser’s book, although explicitly devoted to thinking about how hope functions in the immanent frame of a secular age while drawing on deconstruction and negative theology, is actually about the conditions for a flourishing democracy.

Newheiser’s book is best approached as a work of political theology that is situated at the intersection of continental philosophy of religion and political philosophy. His basic argument is that actual certainty, like invulnerability—in faith and in public life—is absent and so “between false confidence and paralyzing despair, hope persists without assurance” (155). Part of what is so difficult about our social context, though, is that people increasingly claim to be certain not only without evidence, but in complete disregard for it, and, despite nearly a million deaths from COVID in the United States alone, such claims often lead to a false sense of invulnerability. In such a context, cynicism is hard to avoid. Despite their striking divergences, though, Dionysius’s apophatic theology and Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy both provide examples of how to fight cynicism with hope. They show that self-critique is always necessary and yet affirmation must be made, nonetheless. Accordingly, despite the bad press that both thinkers have often received at the hands of critics and disciples alike, deconstruction is similar to *apophasis* in that neither is “simply negative” (150). Rather, each “holds affirmation and negation together in tension in order to open the possibility of unpredictable development. This requires self-critique, to be sure, but it also encourages bold affirmation” (151). Newheiser rightly realizes that even if the balance is hard to strike, whether in our churches or in our government, we must take the risk. Not rising to this challenge of critique amounts to abandoning religion to fanatics and politics to demagogues. (What is especially troubling is when these two join forces as seems to be the case with the rising tide of Christian nationalism in an age of Trump.) However, not being willing to articulate alternatives leads to a quietist void into which authoritarianism can all too easily step. As Richard Rorty says somewhere, *critiques are good, but alternatives are better*.

Newheiser’s point is that even such new alternatives must be, themselves, open to continued criticism. Thus, Newheiser argues, Derrida’s notion of the democracy to come speaks to the essential deconstructability of all concrete expressions of “justice.” Even if justice itself, if there is such a thing, is undeconstructable, our historical instantiations of it as “law” are not. Yet, law and justice go together such that we can’t become content with critical opposition to what is the case in the name of justice, nor can we think that our vision of what should be the case

is immune to being called to task for its injustice. "Rather than favoring justice over and against law," Newheiser writes, "Derrida acknowledges both demands. In practice, this means that we may pursue justice as best we can while acknowledging that our efforts are provisional and uncertain" (28). This awareness of the need for critique and affirmation is also the case, Newheiser suggests, with Dionysius's account of the divine as outstripping all predicative claims. God is "not" whatever we might say of God because God is irreducible to the proclamations we would make about the divine. However, this is not absolute negativity. Indeed, silence can become an expression of its own version of triumphalist complacency. Dionysius's apophatic theology requires that we resist certainty even about our own negations. Rather than doubling down on the "not," Dionysius's negation is better understood as a living commitment to a "perhaps" that serves to give us pause whenever we get tempted by any affirmation or negation that would shut down openness to critique. As such, Newheiser takes Dionysius to "juxtapos[e] affirmation and negation without giving either pole priority" (40).

One might suppose that when turning to such political ramifications, the best tools available for finding a balance between critique and affirmation would be epistemologically situated. Indeed, much of post-Rawlsian political theory has stressed the importance of public reason as an almost sacred aspect of liberal society. Though Newheiser does not explicitly deny the importance of public justification and the need for rigorous evidential commitments, he does contend that this epistemological focus often serves to occlude the ethical dimension that underwrites the lived enactment of belief that epistemology then attempts to explain. As he claims regarding Derrida specifically, "Derrida's work suggests that the epistemological question concerning the justification for political arguments is secondary to the ethical challenge posed by our vulnerability to danger" (130).

Even though I think his argument is underdeveloped regarding the status of public justification (i.e., I would argue that the emphasis on ethics doesn't displace the importance of epistemology, but simply resituates why it matters such that more attention needs given to epistemology, not less), I think Newheiser is generally right about Derrida and also right about the ethical stakes of epistemology. With this ethical orientation in place, he then turns to an engagement with Mark Lilla's argument for a rigorous separation between religion and politics (see Chapter 5). Drawing on his earlier account of the Derridian/Dionysian conception of confidence without certainty and humility without defeat, Newheiser claims that Lilla's separatism is not only implausible for religious individuals, it is detrimental to the very social vision that Lilla offers (109). "Derrida's work," Newheiser concludes, "suggests that the reason religion is dangerous is the reason it is indispensable: it opens imagination to a future that has not yet come into view" (131). How, then, might we maintain the

essential connection between religion and politics without falling into the triumphalist narratives that so often do become dangerous in the ways that Lilla worries? Newheiser claims that here Dionysius helpfully provides a “negative political theology” that serves to “desacraliz[e] every authority, including its own” (133). Accordingly, religion is rethought not as a matter of private reason, but as an ethical openness to what can’t be fully determined and yet must be “hopefully” anticipated in our belief and action. Democracy depends upon such hope just as hope depends on overcoming both the flat-footed dismissals of religion from political life and also the misguided and unsustainable self-protective theology operative within so many religious communities.

I appreciate Newheiser’s general argument and applaud the conclusions that he draws. It is smart strategy to appeal to the “atheism” of Derrida as a defense of religion, and to the “Christianity” of Dionysius to challenge all triumphalist temptations within Christian living. Moreover, the vision of hope as nested in humility and hospitality is deeply compelling. Throughout the book I found myself saying not only “I agree,” but “amen!” That said, there are still a number of ways in which I think Newheiser leaves important questions unaddressed or topics underdeveloped. Importantly, though, my critiques on this front are such that adequately addressing them would require a much longer book, and one of the genuine strengths of this book is that it is very concise. So, I offer the following as more of a call to the rest of us working in related fields to continue pushing forward on the paths that Newheiser has outlined.

First, although the whole book is devoted to hope, hope as a *philosophical* topic is not adequately developed. Newheiser’s approach draws almost entirely on critical religious theory and continentally-inspired radical theology. As such, Newheiser seems content throughout the text to define hope in a particular way that is consistent with those discourses without ever really engaging the mainstream philosophical literature on the topic in ways that show how his conception meets the objections that are well considered in such work. Even though I am sympathetic to the definition he offers and think that it can hold its own, it would be enriched with a more focused engagement with the philosophy of hope developed by scholars such as Aaron Cobb, Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, Joseph Godfrey, Joanna Hodge, Adam Kadlac, Matthew Ratcliffe, and Patrick Shade. There are many more who have been working in this area—especially from a phenomenological methodology—and I think that without a more substantive engagement with such literature Newheiser’s own account of hope ends up seeing a bit too *hopeful* (or optimistic, or broad, or general, etc.).

Moreover, even though I find Newheiser’s overall account deeply compelling, I find much of it underwhelming. Specifically, even if we grant every one of Newheiser’s conclusions, I keep asking whether these conclusions make much of a difference to our lived situation in democracies facing very real existential threats. This book is written for academics who

are invested in narrow debates about interpretations of deconstruction and negative theology. Admittedly, I am one of those academics and I find such debates deeply interesting and have attempted to contribute to them in my own work, but I am not sure how reading more Derrida, or reading Derrida more carefully, is likely to overcome rampant conspiracy theories, systemic racism, and the influence of money on democratic politics. This is not to say that philosophy and political theology don't matter, but simply that I am confused by what the aims of this book ultimately are. If the goal is to convince people like Mark Lilla that they are wrong about separatism, then fine, but that is a very indirect strategy given how clear Newheiser's concern for the future of democracy is. Alternatively, if the goal is to foster the very hope that he sees to be salvific, as it were, for democratic life, then such hope is likely to be confined within the very narrow halls of not only academia, but philosophy and religious studies departments who are reading Derrida.

Even though I think Derrida offers profound resources for all the things that Newheiser suggests, I worry that, despite the amazing clarity, precision, and even frequent beauty of Newheiser's writing, his book ends up repeating a common problem in continental philosophy: a focus on lived reality that ends up abstracted from the specifics of how to live. For example, there are reasons that most of the philosophy of religion/political philosophy intersection deals with epistemology. Namely, unless we can find ways to overcome the epistemic insularity that characterizes so much of religion within democratic societies, and the patronizing epistemic self-aggrandizement that characterizes so much of the discourse of those who reject religion within such societies, it is hard to see how we can even begin to talk about ethics. Granted, Newheiser might be right that we need hope to keep pushing to overcome such difficulties. As he notes, "hope acknowledges its vulnerability to disappointment but presses forward nonetheless; in this way, it models a circumspect commitment that is essential for the health of individuals and communities" (108). But, toward *what*, specifically, should we press forward? It seems that Newheiser's account of such individual and community "health" requires more than hope—it demands a determinate social vision that is worthy of not only our hope but of our action. He seems to admit this when he notes that we must engage in "bold affirmation," but I ask again, bold affirmations of *what*?

Newheiser might reply that the "what" is secondary to the "how." That is, the argument of this book is that we need a better appreciation of the way that religion and politics are mutually implicated in each other and that "hope" names the way that faith (whether the faith found in Derrida's atheism or Dionysius's apophatic theology) should be fostered within a secular age. So, he might continue, the specific content of such hope is not the point of the book, but instead remains left to others to fill in once they begin to cultivate hope as a way of life. Such a response is understandable, but I am not sure that it requires 150 pages of technical engagement

with Derrida and Dionysius to make the case that we need to show more humility in our epistemic commitments and more hospitality in our ethical ones. Though far too rare in our social contexts, such virtues are hardly unacknowledged as beneficial for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would term our “life together.” Hence, despite my substantive agreement with Newheiser’s specific claims about Derrida, Dionysius, and democracy, without a more developed account of the “what” toward which the “how” of our hope is directed, I remain a bit underwhelmed by where Newheiser takes us. Undoubtedly, what he says about the need for hope is right, but the specifics of what such hope involves either need to be filled in more concretely, or he needs to make a case for why Derrida and Dionysius are required for seeing humility, hospitality, and openness as social goods.

My critical objections notwithstanding, this book is excellent and I recommend it to anyone in political theology, philosophy of religion, or political theory. Even if it doesn’t get us all the way to the mountain top, it does provide important resources for the climb.

The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology, edited by Edward Howells and Mark A. McIntosh. Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 719. \$150.00 (hardcover).

CHRISTINA VAN DYKE, Columbia University

Although there is much of value in this 700+-page handbook, at the end of the day, what this volume passes over in silence renders it more a testament to exclusion than a go-to source for state-of-the-art essays on mystical theology. The volume is simply called *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, for instance, but a more accurate title would be *The Oxford Handbook of Western Christian Mystical Theology*: “Western” because only a few chapters even mention the immensely important Eastern mystical theological Christian traditions that stretch from late antiquity through today; “Christian” since the volume doesn’t address mystical theology in Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, or other traditions. In fact, (Western) Christian mystical theology’s *connections* to those traditions are also passed over almost entirely in silence. This omission is especially striking in the Jewish and Islamic cases, given that Jewish, Islamic, and Christian mysticisms have a long and important history of interaction and draw on many of the same texts (e.g., the Pentateuch, the book of Daniel and the other proph-

