

**Review of Linda Martín Alcoff and John D. Caputo,  
eds., *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of  
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*Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion*, edited by Linda Martín Alcoff (Professor of Philosophy at Hunter College and CUNY) and John D. Caputo (Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion and Humanities at Syracuse), is a text based on partial proceedings from the conference 'Postmodernism, Culture and Religion 2: Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion', held at Syracuse University in April 2007. While aiming to unite feminist discourse with contemporary continental philosophy of religion, the volume also sits neatly within contemporary discourses of post-secularism. It asks about the place of religion in the (primarily Western) world and its evolving relationship to ostensibly-secular societal structures. The volume's contribution to this discussion is in its effort to complicate the alignment of issues of feminism and sexuality purely with ideologies of the secular. It accomplishes this well, but not without issue. Some entries are, at times, overly-celebratory of religion. And there are points where the mixture of chapters threatens to create a text without a clear focus within its (understandably broad) parameters, an issue with many edited collections.

The initially striking factor once one begins the text is its curiously bifurcated introduction, which is literally cut in two. The first half, presumably by Alcoff, plays out as a cogent overview of the volume's contributors and purpose. The latter, written in Caputo's religio-deconstructivist style, is solely focused on the seventh chapter: Hélène Cixous's 'Promised Belief'. Bearing this in mind, the first impression of the text is that its two editors did not as much collaborate as write two separate introductions which were sutured together. The intention here may have been to represent a refusal to adhere to a singular perspective where heterogeneous viewpoints are synthesised and homogenised into an impersonal whole. This impression of heterogeneity continues throughout the work.

Bookended by its divided introduction and the multivocality of a roundtable discussion, the text weaves its way through seven distinct contributions, by Sarah Coakley, Mark Jordan, Catherine Keller, Saba Mahmood, Kelly Brown Douglas, Gianni Vattimo, and H el ene Cixous, respectively. While on the surface the articles appear often wildly different in focus, there are a number of thematic intersections between articles. Mahmood and Douglas ground their entries in the lives of ordinary women (though Douglas is filtered through a literary frame); Coakley, Keller and Cixous draw on notions of the gift; Douglas and Keller highlight the bodied nature of Christ, and thereby of Christianity. It is perhaps in this intersectionality that the text best conveys its grounding of theology in the lived experience of human beings and in this-worldly issues of feminism and sexuality, and where its true unity shines through. This is displayed most succinctly in the roundtable discussion, which encapsulates several of the themes present in the individual chapters. It is also the only place (outside Mahmood's entry) where the problematic concept of 'religion' is considered directly, an interesting omission by the other contributors given the theoretical inflection of their contributions.

Coakley performs an exegetical reading of the *akedah* with Isaac standing as cypher for Woman-under-Patriarchy. By focussing on Isaac's submission and the 'gift' of divine intervention that rescues him from his father's hand, Coakley draws a distinction between a 'false patriarchal sacrifice' and an 'authentic and discerning' form of "'sacrificial" posture' in which one's false desires are purged and brought in line with God's: between sacrifice 'for-the-world' and sacrifice 'for-God', the latter which is freeing, and the former which reproduces the violence of male dominance. Coakley, therefore, reinterprets Christian notions of grace as a force that frees women from earthly patriarchy. Keller does similarly, albeit in a different fashion. Instead, she focuses on a theopoetics of the body, flitting between an established theology which spiritualises (thus undermining) the embodied, carnal nature of the incarnation in favor of a feminist theology which might reclaim it. By analysing the 'gift' of a corporeality 'clothed... in divinity', reconfiguring the theoretical aporia of the impossible gift as the gift of possibility itself (p. 70), Keller attempts to pave the way for an 'intercarnality' in which grace becomes manifest in the 'asymmetrical reciprocity' of human beings (p. 71). This intercarnality eschews a 'logic of the One' in favor of a celebration of multiplicity that deconstructs monotheism in favor of a panentheistic divinity tied irrevocably to the body.

Juxtaposing these theologies of grace seeking to liberate women from enmeshed social structures, are the contributions of Saba Mahmood and Kelly Brown Douglas, who draw upon the experiences of communities of women believers negotiating their identities within patriarchy and global power relations. Mahmood investigates the reception of texts by Muslim women authors in the West, specifically by conservative political parties who benefit ideologically from depictions of Islam-as-barbarism. She goes on to examine the cultural ellisions and omissions employed by commentators (and by the authors themselves) in order to reinforce the binary opposition between 'us' and 'them'. Mahmood goes on to deliver an indictment of liberal, secular ideology as seeking to homogenise religiosity into a privatized subjectivity where an individual's accepted 'spiritual truths... command no epistemological or political force' (p. 94), or are 'destined to become either extinct or provisional' (p. 98).

Alongside and in contrast to Mahmood, Douglas examines and testifies to the tension between African-American women and Christianity. Looking at the

often sexualized representation of black women, Douglas interprets sexuality as a path to human self-understanding which is basic to all we are and thus also to our relationship to God (p. 105). Her approach is literary and theological, utilizing Ann Petry's novel, *The Street* as a gateway into the self-expression of (some) black women's sexuality under white hegemony via the tradition of blues music, which rejects what Douglas views as a Platonised Christianity that demonizes the body. While admitting that the rules of Platonised Christianity had their place in circumscribing social relations, Douglas presents her solidarity with the blues women whose faith was not dependent on a Christianity that demonized them but instead pointed towards the bodied nature of an incarnate God.

Adjoining these investigation of theological negotiation within the structures of power, Jordan adopts a Foucauldian perspective in analysing how Christian discourses about sex paved the way for, were eclipsed by, and subsequently appropriated modern discourses of sexuality, becoming 'now and at once the vanquished predecessor, the constant alternative, and the chastened collaborator of discourses about sexuality' (p. 47). Steering through the intertwining of sexuality and identity in modern life, Jordan notes that 'some Medieval Christian moralities would understand having an identity as damnation' (p. 53), and thus highlights simultaneously the absurdity and necessity of contemporary Christianity's reliance upon notions of heteronormative sexuality. This reliance is also critiqued by Vattimo, who approaches it via the category of nature. Vattimo configures Joachim of Fiore's teaching regarding the Age of Spirit as an age of post-truth, post-nature spirituality focused on the idea of charity, in which the natural order has been overturned and is no longer necessary to the articulation of faith. Highlighting the Christocentrism of the volume, he turns to the New Testament idea of loving one's enemy as an overturning of the status quo in charity's name. Vattimo's entry is both briefer and less focused than Jordan's, adopting a more conversational (sometimes confessional) tone that acts as a segue into Cixous' concluding piece.

Cixous' contribution comprises a meditation on the mysteries of death and belief (two concepts which, for Cixous, become inextricably linked) centered on her lifelong friendship with Jacques Derrida. She rejects any identification with a tradition, noting that claims to election become inevitably transfigured into war (p. 136), instead tracing the contours of a broader sense of believing. This belief forms the basis of a critique of the violent, patriarchal reassertion of (a certain type of) religion which does not rely on the fiction of a neutral, secular space earlier critiqued by Mahmood. Cixous conceptualizes religion here as a movement of faith – not faith in a specific creed or deity, but in life which gives room for, but is not thrall to, death. Her contribution is a good conclusion, since its poststructuralist rendition of religiosity reveals, perhaps most profoundly, that any religion that returns within contemporary (Western) society can never be as it once was.

In summary, the volume is an ambitious amalgamation of perspectives. Its multiplicity is its strength, tying the entries together through symbolic and ideological similarity. *Feminism, Sexuality and the Return of Religion* rejects the urge to catalogue or homogenise, embracing a structure more reflective of the heterogeneity that suffuses its subject matter.