

## **Ludger Hagedorn / Rafael Zawisza (eds.), Faith in the World: Post-Secular Readings of Hannah Arendt**

Review: Ludger Hagedorn / Rafael Zawisza (eds.), *Faith in the World: Post-Secular Readings of Hannah Arendt*, Chicago University Press / Campus Verlag, 2021, 251 p34,95 EUR

Hannah Arendt's writings continually refer to theological concepts and religious narratives. However, the theological dimension remains an often overlooked and underappreciated undercurrent in her work. This collection of essays, edited by Rafael Zawisza and Ludger Hagedorn, takes on the task of addressing this lacuna. It explores the impact of religious thinkers such as Gershom Scholem and Rudolf Bultmann and examines Arendt's use of biblical narratives, revealing how theology helped shape some of the crucial concepts of Arendt's secular political philosophy. As such it is a welcome addition to the field of Arendt studies.

The book consists of nine essays and an epilogue, divided into four thematical parts. It starts with two essays on the topic of love. First, Sigrid Weigel contends that nestled within the pages of Arendt's *Denktagebuch* lies a framework for an unwritten treatise on love. By meticulously retracing the different entries in the journal and combining them with Arendt's reflections in *The Human Condition* Weigel reveals how the topic of love in its different states occupied Arendt's thought for much of the 1950s. While the assertion that these entries are "obviously conceptual reflections for an emerging book" (40) might be an exaggeration, they do enrich the Arendtian view on love, moving it away from the predominantly Augustinian focus and revealing a more secular underpinning.

Agata Bielik-Robson offers an interpretation of Arendt's substitution of *amor Dei* with *amor mundi*, which she portrays as a manifestation of a Marranic cryptotheology. Bielik-Robson uses the Marranos, who were forced to convert to Christianity but were suspected of maintaining a hidden tradition of Judaism, as a metaphor to explore how Jewish thinkers such as Arendt diverge from the philosophical mainstream. She examines how Gershom Scholem, and his interest in Lurianic metaphysics, influenced Arendt's transformation of the ideas of Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Duns Scotus, paving "a way towards an innovative *theology of immanence*" (69).

The second part of the book explores Arendt's early encounters with Christian theology. Here, again, we find that the Marrano metaphor offers a fertile perspective for examining Arendt's thought. Drawing upon Bielik-Robson's work, Rafael Zawisza uses Arendt's Marrano religiosity to explore how she separates natality and plurality from a transcendent origin. He offers a close reading of Arendt's doctoral dissertation *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* to demonstrate that her secularism was preceded by a

deconstruction of theology which was specifically directed against the doctrine of original sin. Zawisza shows how Arendt traces the origin of the human race to Adam rather than to God, allowing her to proclaim the world's independence from the absolute. By tracing how Arendt extracted secular meaning from theological narratives and adding her own idiosyncratic understanding (96), Zawisza effectively demonstrates how Arendt's dissertation can be read as the cryptotheological matrix that influenced her later work.

Next, Jim Josefson examines Arendt's debt to the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann. He reconstructs Bultmann's influence by connecting hints found in letters Arendt wrote to Karl Jaspers and her scattered theological reflections with Bultmann's writings from around the period that Arendt studied with him. Despite the scarcity of references to Bultmann in her work, Josefson asserts that Bultmann played a pivotal role in shaping Arendt's understanding of the task of political theory. In order to prove this he traces the parallels in their thinking on space, historical events, truth and freedom.

The third part of the book comprises two essays that argue that Arendt maintained a secular perspective even in her closest proximity to religious or biblical subject matter. In the first essay, Martine Leibovici juxtaposes Hannah Arendt's and Michael Walzer's writings on revolution, the biblical Exodus and the theme of liberation. Leibovici's analysis highlights that while both are secular readers of the Bible, their different readings of Exodus affect their understanding of the political challenges presented in the text. Leibovici presents Arendt and Walzer as examples of engaging with the Jewish tradition anew. Through their different approaches, they showcase various ways in which this tradition can serve as a source of inspiration for secular culture.

Subsequently, Christina Schües asks the question to what extent Arendt's concept of natality can be regarded as a remnant of religion, considering the significant influence of religious sources on its development. By dissecting two phenomena related to natality, trust in the world and the promise inherent in birth, Schües illustrates how Arendt reconfigures religious fragments away from man's relationship with God and towards the world. This highlights that Arendt's post-metaphysical thought goes beyond a mere secularization of religious remnants.

The fourth and last part is dedicated to the consequences of secularization for politics. First, Roger Berkowitz explores Arendt's ideas on transcendence and immortality to answer the question of what is needed to build a shared and meaningful world after the old world has been shattered (172). He examines the cost of the loss of immortality in the modern world and claims that a political theology which allows "transcendence from our mortal lifespan into an earthly immortality" (174) is required to construct a meaningful and durable world.

In the next essay, Milan Hanyš demonstrates how Arendt overcomes the theological dualism of good and evil. Through an analysis of Arendt's readings of *Billy Budd* and *The*

*Grand Inquisitor*, Hanyš sheds light on the tension between the absolute good and the political good. Additionally, Hanyš examines the shift in terminology from radical evil to the banality of evil, interpreting it as a change in focus rather than a fundamental change of mind for Arendt. The reflection on absolute goodness and radical evil allows Hanyš to illustrate how, for Arendt, religious or moral concepts become perverse and destructive when applied in the public sphere.

In the final essay, Aishwary Kumar offers a critique of violence with an eye to formulating a new theory of political freedom. Kumar analyzes in parallel the writings of B.R. Ambedkar and Hannah Arendt to excavate the different elements that make a regime of political cruelty possible, such as obedience, mendacity, indifference and alienation. To understand the theological and political aspects of such cruelty, Kumar introduces the new category of a 'jurisprudence of neglect' which explains how people can be prepared to accept and enable the complete abandonment of minority groups. While the essay focuses specifically on political cruelty in India, the analysis compellingly exposes risks at the heart of liberal democratic life worldwide.

The book concludes with an epilogue written by Vivian Liska that examines how residues of religious tradition can be embedded, transposed and translated into secular political philosophy, where they help think through new ways of living together. Liska uses the figure of Abraham as portrayed in Kafka's and in Arendt's works to demonstrate that a transition from religious to secular language is not only possible but can contribute to our understanding of human rights.

The main strength of the book lies in its capacity to serve as a collection of examples of what Arendt called 'pearl diving'. Each essay presents, in its own way, an illustration of Arendt's exercises of deconstruction, reconfiguration and translation of the Christian and Jewish religious traditions. They vividly demonstrate how Arendt time and again delved into these traditions; unearthing experiences, ideas and concepts that could help her understand the world, while also carefully extricating these pearls from their relationship to a transcendent God or an afterlife and making them fit for her secular political theory. Agata Bielik-Robson convincingly argues that Arendt's background as a thinker in a "nowhere land between two religions" (62) made her, like many other Jewish thinkers of her time, exceptionally suited for such exercises.

Furthermore, the engagement with concepts and thinkers from the Judeo-Christian theological traditions, rather than from the Western philosophical tradition, allows a reinterpretation of Arendt's philosophy in refreshing and challenging ways. This is clearly demonstrated in Jim Josefsen's reading of Arendt's political freedom in the light of Bultmann's thinking on *kerygma*, as well as in Agata Bielik-Robson's use of the Marrano metaphor. Nevertheless, merging Arendt's political theory with religious concepts at times also creates an interpretation of Arendt that seems alien. For instance in Bielik-Robson's assertion that "According to Arendt the only thing that can keep us *in between*

the paralyzing horror of the mortal doom [...], and the escapist phantasy of immortal life [...] is *beauty*.” (74). Or when, the combination of Christina Schües’ interpretation of the promise inherent in birth with Arendt’s reflections on promising and forgiving in *The Human Condition*, leads to an impoverishment of the political significance of these actions.

Overall, the book offers a collection of essays that highlight the many ways in which Arendt engaged with concepts and thinkers from the Judeo-Christian heritage, providing a richer understanding of how theology shaped Arendt’s secular political theory.

### *An Dufraing*

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