
Review of Jacob Taubes, *From Cult to Culture: Fragments Toward a Critique of Historical Reason*. Ed. by C.E. Fonrobert and A. Engel, with an introduction by A. Assmann, J. Assmann, and W.-D. Hartwich. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

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Jacob Taubes (1923-1987) was a significant Jewish intellectual with solid ties to the United States and Europe, especially Germany. He was a recognised scholar of Judaism in particular and of religion in general. His dissertation was published in 1947 and appeared in translation as *Occidental Eschatology* in 2009; this is his only book since his broad interests were better represented in essays and lectures than in a focused work. A collection of essays on Pauline theology appeared in 1996 and in translation as *The Political Theology of Paul* in 2003. The present collection of essays spans 30 years, 1953-1983, and comprises 22 essays and lectures gathered into four topical sections. They are not arranged chronologically. The original German publication of the collection, *Vom Kult zur Kultur*, appeared in 1996 and was intended to present an overview of Taubes' thought. 12 of the 22 essays in the collection were originally in English and the editors of this English volume have incorporated the originals. The lengthy introduction is by the editors of the German edition and it provides detailed background on the scholars and issues that Taubes is engaging in each essay.

Taubes speaks and writes in a sharp polemical style which necessitates the introduction providing the intellectual setting for each article. He often makes bold and grand claims, both to emphasise his views and to spur, if not force, further debate and discussion. Argument and discussion, not impersonal exposition, are the heart of the intellectual endeavour for him. His hermeneutic, indeed, approaches a text as a palimpsest that partly conceals whom or what the text is written against and disguises much of the actual content and argument. Reading Taubes is challenging and most readers, as this reviewer, will find that their engagement with and response to his individual offerings will relate more-or-less directly to their familiarity with the writers and topics that Taubes is struggling with.

Taubes is fascinated with religion and religiosity, mainly Judaism and Christianity, both in their ancient and modern manifestations and in the lengthy, complex history that lies in-between. The title of the collection, *From Cult to Culture*, reflects his concern with the relationship, often antagonistic, between religion and culture. He celebrates those religious aspects that are "world-denying", that challenge the complacency of culture, of society and tradition in general or in a specific, time-bound form, and urge it on to change and to develop. Hence his on-going reflections on apocalypticism and Gnosticism, both of which regard the present world and society as ephemeral in varying ways.

Taubes does not argue for the resurrection of some ancient cult or mythic mode of apprehending the world. He is not nostalgic about past history. But he does believe that the energy or forces embodied in ancient or at least older modes of cult and myth long outlive their specific historical manifestations and are with us today. He wants to keep this energy as a powerful way of challenging and changing the contemporary world. In this vein a large part of his polemic is against modern, liberal theology, whether Jewish or Christian, that he regards as too accommodating to contemporary society, as having lost its "world-denying" force.

Taubes regards “cult” and “culture” as irreconcilable opposites that are bound to one another. He is not given to the dualistic modes of apocalypticism. There is no coming “messianic age” in which one of the forces will win out definitively over the other. This relates to his notion of the Copernican turn, named after but not restricted to the massive turn in thought and worldview effected by Copernicus. A Copernican turn is a transition in which the “new” exists in a dialectical tension with the “old”. The title “From Cult to Culture” points to such a transition, not to an evolution from one to the other that leaves cult/religiosity behind.

For Taubes the development of historical consciousness, of historical reason, is a major Copernican turn connected historically to the astronomer’s heliocentric view. He is well aware of the irony of studying historical reason historically and is intensely interested in developing a full history of the rise of historical reason (see “Four Ages of Reason”, pp. 268-81 in section four; historical reason is the fourth stage, the stage from which we survey the past). Part of this turn is that there is no longer any place, any mythic point, from which we can objectively view the past. Our historical consciousness itself is subject to the vagaries of historical change. A historical work is both about the former time being studied and about the present time, about scholars and why and how they are investigating the past. “The Iron Cage and the Exodus From it, or the Dispute Over Marcion, Then and Now” (pp. 137-46 in section two) analyses just this dual interest of history.

The four sections in this collection and some of the essays in each section can provide a glimpse of the range of Taubes’s interests and writings. Section One, “Law, History, Messianism”, includes four essays that have an explicitly religious tenor. He discusses and challenges thinkers such as Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, and Nachmal Krochmal (a contemporary of Hegel) on the value of Messianism – Taubes sees it as positive since it urges action in history – and the differences between Judaism and Christianity, where he discusses Paul and the development of a philosophy of history. Taubes here and elsewhere in the collection expounds the provocative view that Paul and much of Christianity after him can be best understood as beginning from an inner-Jewish heresy.

Section Two, “World Alienation: Gnosticism and its Consequences”, comprises six articles that concern the history of gnosticism in its Jewish and Christian forms and its development of its own dogmatic myths centering on the clashes of “this world” with the spiritual realm. With typical shifting focus and style, Taubes reads and disputes writers widely separated in time and thought such as Marcion, Hegel, Heidegger, Hans Blumenberg, Franz Overbeck, and Walter Benjamin to name only a few. His topics include Gnostic myth, “ugliness” in Christianity, surrealism, and the demystification of theology.

Section Three, “Theology After the Copernican Turn”, includes five essays that treat theology, ancient and modern, more from a philosophical, than a theological, point of view. For Taubes the Copernican turn of the heliocentric universe upsets not only the Ptolemaic cosmology but also the medieval theology of hierarchy, of the great chain of being, in which the world can be related to the divine realm by way of analogy. He finds earlier antecedents to this denial of analogy in Gnosticism and in Joachim of Fiore which locate the divine in human interiority, not in the similarity of the lower (humanity) and the higher (God). The result of the turn is the various dialectical theologies that view God and world in opposition in diverse ways. He traces a theological-philosophical trajectory involving this turn from Luther to Hegel and to Barth and Tillich.

Section Four, “Religion and Culture”, is subtitled “Toward an Archaeology of Modernity” in the introduction to the German edition. It comprises seven essays that in themselves well represent Taubes’ wide-ranging interests and his polemical, biting style. Max Weber and Sigmund Freud, amongst others, can be added to the list of thinkers that he engages. The section continues his argument that culture accommodates humans to the strange and often brutal world around them; it renders the world too familiar. Religion, with or without God, is the primary force that can challenge this tyranny of culture, that is, religion in its Gnostic and related “world-denying” forms.

This is a challenging collection of essays that can be intimidating in the sheer range of the scholars, topics and times engaged by this formidable thinker and polemicist. Individual essays or groups of similar essays can force us to reread and rethink them as well as search out and read the works that Taubes is engaging with, whether in agreement or dispute. Finally, this volume is more aligned with the “Critical Theory” part of our ejournal than with “The Bible”; Taubes has much to say about Judaism and Christianity and their responses to and appropriations from the Bible but little about the reading and study of the Bible itself.