Int J Philos Relig (2014) 76:229–233
DOI 10.1007/s11153-014-9467-0

BOOK REVIEW

Book Reviews

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Received: 26 June 2014 / Accepted: 30 June 2014 / Published online: 23 July 2014

Jacob Taubes, Occidental Eschatology. Translated with a Preface by David Ratmoko; Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2009, xxiii + 215 pp., $60.00 (cloth), $21.95 (paper)

Jacob Taubes, To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections. Translated by Keith Tribe with an introduction by Mike Grimshaw; Columbia University Press, New York, 2013, $18.50 (cloth)

Since 2004, there has been a minor publishing explosion of works by Jacob Taubes translated into English. Taubes did not leave a large body of work. The only work he published in his lifetime was *Occidental Eschatology*, his dissertation, published in 1947 and translated into English in 2009. Since 1987 with the publication of a small collection on Carl Schmitt (translated into English in 2013), several of Taubes' works have appeared in German and then received an English translation. In 1993, his seminar on the political theology of St. Paul was published and then translated in 2003. Finally in 1996, a collection of essays appeared under the title *From Cult to Culture* and these were translated into English in 2010.

Despite the sparseness of his published work, Taubes has influenced some of the most important contemporary leftist thinkers including Agamben, Badiou, Negri, Laclau, and Zizek who have found in Taubes and Schmitt a reconsideration of an apocalyptic political theology.

To Carl Schmitt: Letters and Reflections comes with an very helpful historical introduction by Mike Grimshaw that explains Taubes' relationship with Schmitt and each of the texts that make up this slim volume of 69 pages. There is a letter from

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Taubes to Armin Mohler in which Taubes writes, "What is there today that is not 'theology' (apart from theological claptrap)?" (p. 22) and to which Schmitt agrees in "Four Passages from to Armin Mohler" that "Taubes is right: today everything is theology, with the exception of what the theologians talk about. . ." (p. 26). There is also Taubes' "Letter to Carl Schmitt" and an "Extract from a Dispute about Carl Schmitt: Paris 1986" in which Taubes says that Schmitt spoke to him as an apocalypticist of counter-revolution. As an apocalypticist, Taubes was related to Schmitt, though from the same themes he drew contrary conclusions. Taubes claims that Schmitt thought apocalyptically from the "top down," from the elites, whereas Taubes thought "from below," the oppressed. Schmitt is the example of Taubes' concept of the "friend-enemy" (pp. 34–36). Finally, Taubes outlines his relation with Schmitt in "Thirty Years of Refusal."

Due to postwar shortages, Taubes' published dissertation *Occidental Eschatology* was trimmed some 200 pages. It was published in Switzerland after Taubes had already left for the United States and was unable to proofread the galleys. The book lacked elaborate notes and some of his contemporary readers, while acknowledging the boldness and originality of his ideas, questioned the supporting scholarship. A work of speculative daring, *Occidental Eschatology* is more interpretive than historical or philological and in this sense resembles the kind of nineteenth century speculative philosophies of history that were still being written in the mid-twentieth century by philosophers like Nicolas Berdyaev whose *Beginning and the End* focused on Christian eschatology and discussed many of the same figures as *Occidental Eschatology*. Like Berdyaev, Taubes provides less argument than provocative and insightful observations and proclamations. Against Schmitt and Lowith, Taubes endorses the eschatological tradition from the view of the oppressed. He sees apocalyptic seeing as "a theological delegitimation of political power as a whole" (p. xvi). This is the Taubes' sizable contribution to discussions of eschatology.

Occidental Eschatology is divided into four books. In Book 1 "On the Nature of Eschatology," Taubes gives his general theory of apocalypticism and includes late Israelite prophetic Messianism, Christian chiliasm, Gnosticism, and the secular philosophies of history of Lessing, Hegel, and Marx. Taubes begins by asking what history is (p. 3), and he answers that apocalypse gives history a meaning. In the poetic language that runs thought the book, Taubes labels time the Prince of Death and eternity the Prince of Life: "All apocalypse tells of the triumph of eternity." Apocalyptic negates this world in its fullness (p. 9). Apocalyptic texts negate the structure of this fallen world. Taubes claims that Israel is able through the exile to become a people without space, a "people of time" uprooted from space (p. 12). All notions of creation and redemption demand time (p. 13). The basic structure of apocalyptic is dualistic in the fallen world. Life is exiled from God and the reality of the world (p. 27). The world is darkness and death in which life is only an intrusion (p. 29). History is dialectical and reveals the enormous power of negation, but it is this negation that indicates the power and possibility of freedom. It unites the omnipotence of God and the possibility of God becoming "all in all." Freedom is history, the stage in on which this drama unfolds (p. 15). Taubes follows a circuitous idealist journey in which the separation from God in the fall is viewed positively as an upward step, away from an

unconscious unity, on the path to the fullness of the free choice of God by creation, a conscious unity.

In its first centuries, according to Taubes, Christianity tended to transform itself into a logos mysticism and the eschatological element tended to lose its political urgency. Christianity interiorized into a "drama of the soul. It is only later and on the fringe that apocalyptic reemerges and asserts itself" (p. 4). Taubes asks, what type of end has the Occident envisaged for history? Taubes' *Occidental Eschatology* traces the history of revolutionary positions that present themselves as nostalgic desire for the return of a distant God and the revolution is precisely the return of this self-exiled being through the realization of the eschaton, the Kingdom of God on earth. Taubes ties this apocalyptic element to Gnosticism and, like Eric Voegelin, though in much more positive terms, sees modern eschatologies as a rebirth of Gnosticism.

"Imminence is an essential feature of apocalyptic belief" (p. 32). Apocalyptic writings claim to be authored by ancient authorities, Adam, Enoch, Abraham etc. but that these texts were sealed and kept secret. "The fate of the world is recorded in the heavenly books and inscribed from the very beginning on the tablets of heaven" (p. 32). This leads to the apocalyptic belief that no one acts. Rather, things happen and there is no sense in resisting (p. 34). Taubes claims that the modern apocalyptic Karl Marx "is motivated by a lack of faith in mankind." History moves us. For the Gnostics, Cain is the epitome of the exiled man (p. 38).

Books 2 and 3 outline the history of eschatological thought from late prophetic Judaism to Joachim of Fiori and Thomas Muntzer. Here eschatology moves into history. With Joachim of Fiore, eschatology became a horizon for the future of history and a horizon of hope for modern times. In early Christianity, "There is a clear connection between enthusiasm for the Kingdom and communism" (p. 67). By adopting communism, the early Christian community sought to anticipate the economy of God's Kingdom (p. 67). But as the eschaton is postponed and the church allies itself with the powerful, eschatology is Platonized. Immanence is replaced by transcendence. Clement and Origen need to respond to the question "how can the rich man be saved?" So it becomes important for God to be an omnipotent Being for whom anything is possible. God creates the great chain of being which places the rich and powerful in their proper place in Being. Warnings are now directed to the poor who live in a dissolute fashion (p. 69). The great chain of being is thus a concession to ontology and to the structure of the world as unjust with the powerful where they belong. Apocalyptic opposes this notion of a static world. The key figure is Augustine.

Augustine does not fight chiliasm but reinterprets it in such a way that it loses its eschatological vigor. It becomes symbolic, not historical. "The Church is already the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven" (p. 80). The hope of the thousand year reign of the kingdom is finally driven out and individual eschatology becomes the predominant mode in the Church. Universal eschatology becomes the sphere of heresy.

Joachim of Fiore ushers in the modern age in eschatological thinking. Modernity is the third age, the age in which humanity becomes divine (p. 82). Moderns like Galileo define man as a speck of dust on the planet and ejected him from the center of the cosmos. In the Copernican view of life, there is an earth but no heaven. The world has no more heavenly archetype and is defined by one that is in the future. "The Ptolemaic

world was ruled by the Platonic concept of *eros,* which attracts the lower to the upper sphere. The Copernican world is ruled by the *spirit*, which invariably presses ahead. The ethics of Copernican man is an ethics of the future" (p. 88). Taubes sees this development stretching back to Joachim and opens the way to the spiritual religion of Sebastian Frank and Jacob Boehme. "Prometheus arises in Christ's Shadow" (p. 89). The Hegelian dialectic "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" can only be seen in terms of the Joachim's three ages (p. 91). Humanity will finally arrive at the point where all are free (p. 92). The dialectic finally results in the materialization of God. Taubes relates Hegel to Joachim. For both, world history is nothing other that the development of the concept of freedom (p. 92). Hegel, like Joachim, uses the concept of the three ages. The "all in all" in the future and is seen in eschatological terms (p. 93). Hegel's system does not conclude at some random point. "At the very end comes Hegel's absolute system, in which the real world has become "spiritual" in a Christian sense. Hegel's system ends where ". . . nothing is lost. All principles are preserved" (p. 94).

Book 4 discusses the secularization of eschatology in modernity starting with Lessing and moving to German idealism pointing to the Joachimite elements in each thinker along the way. Taubes focuses on the opposed but also complementary paths of Marx and Kierkegaard. What links Kierkegaard with the Hegelian left is the elevation of the brute fact of the given phenomenon. This is synonymous with negation in German Idealism. It is now the only significant form of reality. Taubes claims that even Kant appropriates Joachim. The kingdom of God on earth in the Kingdom of Ends reveals the Joachimite core of Kant's teaching (p. 147).

But Kant is the Old Testament of German Idealism and Hegel is the New. Jesus overcomes the law with love and moves beyond Kantian morality (p. 150). Hegel thinks love everyone as thy self was wrongly regarded by Kant as respect for the law which commands love (p. 150). Love cannot be commanded because in love all thought of duty vanishes (p. 150). Lovers are distinct only as they are mortal but love strives to annul even this distinction (p. 153). For Hegel, God is only God in the act of return, in the move into finitude. "Without a world, God is not God" (p. 160).

Like Joachim, Hegel conceives of the course of world history as a progression and thus a constant negation of any system that currently exists, just as the Joachimite Franciscan spirituals saw themselves as fulfilling the promise of the *ordo spiritualis.* The Hegelian left sought to change reality through the influence of Hegelian reason. They draw from the revolutionary consequences of Joachim's theology. Marx and Kierkegaard also seek to negate this world for the sake of another. Marx sets out to destroy the bourgeois capitalist world and Kierkegaard the bourgeois Christian world (p. 167).

The difference between Marx and Kierkegaard is that one faces *outside* and the other*inside.* One pins his hopes on the proletarian revolution where the other an interior Christian revolution. This corresponds to their differences in the interpretation of self-alienation. Marx sees society as a group of individuals alienated from each other where Kierkegaard sees a Christianity of the masses where each individual is alienated from himself (p. 176).

Taubes concludes *Occidental Eschatology* declaring that, with Hegel on one side and Marx and Kierkegaard on the other, the study is resolved. "For the entire span of Western existence is inscribed in the conflict between the higher (Hegel) and the

lower (Marx and Kierkegaard) realms, in the rift between inside (Kierkegaard) and outside (Marx)" (p. 191). The call for decision made by Marx and Kierkegaard marks the crisis that shakes the present age. As the Renaissance and Reformation ended the framework of the Middle Ages, Marx and Kierkegaard end the framework of the modern. They break open Hegel's end of history (p. 191). This creates the possibility of humanity finally finding its center in God. "All the measures of man will disappear and the measures of God will appear."

Taubes' works are both idiosyncratic and brilliant. They are probably too impressionistic and make overly grand claims about the history of theology, the theology of history, political theology, and eschatology. But the claims like those connecting Gnosticism, Joachim of Fiori, the Radical Reformation, Hegel, and finally Marx and Kierkegaard provide an important positive alternative reading to the similar claims made by Taubes' contemporaries Karl Lowith and Eric Voegelin, both of whom viewed such "Gnosticism" with disdain. Taubes' gives us a positive reading of the apocalyptic enterprise.