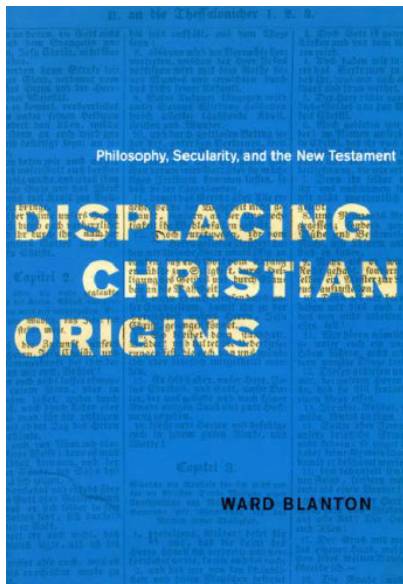


RBL 06/2008



Blanton, Ward

Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xi + 220.
Paper. \$22.50. ISBN 0226056902.

Claire Clivaz

University of Lausanne
Lausanne, Switzerland

In a quite short but dense monograph, Ward Blanton offers a metacritical reading of interactions between philosophy and biblical scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by reading three authors of each discipline: Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and David Friedrich Strauss, Adolf Deissmann, and Albert Schweitzer.¹ Based on the conviction that “every depiction of Christian origins doubles as an articulation of modern academic and social hierarchies” (167–68), Blanton’s purpose is to demonstrate that these philosophers and biblical scholars confirm Jacques Derrida’s diagnosis: the distinction between secularity and religion has to be understood as “a single movement of systemic ‘outbidding’ and a logic of ‘auto-immunity’” (167). Even if precise references to texts are sometimes missing (see esp. 25, 35–36, 70), Blanton invites us in a convincing way to “recognize that we have manufactured or imagined secularity as much as we ever manufactured or imagined religion,” a recognition that represents the “unfinished project of modernity” (66). In order to map this project, Blanton summarizes two main considerations in his conclusion. First, the secular reality has to be demystified “like its religious other” (169), which means that “the only way forward for critical thinking today is to risk the thesis of the ephemeral banality of the difference between ‘religion’ and ‘secularity’” (170). Second, Blanton asserts that “we must, increasingly, throw the

1. A big thanks to Mary-Hélène Müller for the English proofreading of this article.

distinction between religion and secularity back onto that immanent field of mediating technologies within which occurs their original splitting and setting into oppositional poles as religion and secularity” (173).

These two main considerations are rooted in Blanton’s reading of Derrida and Vattimo, which the introduction of the book (1–23) explains (7, 13). Chapter 1 compares Hegel and Strauss with regard to their readings of Christian origins, including a “Kantian excursus” (“Escape from the Biblical Aura: Hegel and Strauss on ‘Modern’ Biblical Criticism” [25–66]). The purpose of chapter 2, “The Mechanics of (Dis)Enchantment: Nietzsche and D. F. Strauss on the Production of Religious Texts in the Age of Industrial Media” (67–103), is to compare “the way [Strauss] and Nietzsche use the notion of a mechanistic, automatic and unconscious literary production to disparage the esthetic value of a given text” (69). Chapter 3, “Paul’s Secretary: Heidegger’s Apostolic Light from the Ancient Near East” (105–27), shows how Deissmann and Heidegger offer a secularized reading of Paul without paying attention to “the ancient (and modern) intertwining of religion and writing technologies of all sorts” (127). Preceding the conclusion (167–73), chapter 4, “Reason’s Apocalypse: Albert Schweitzer’s ‘Fully Eschatological’ Jesus and the Collapse of Metaphysics” (129–65), sheds light on Schweitzer’s criticism of modernity, showing that “‘truth’ could only appear, after the collapse of modern worldview construction, in the gaps, disconnects or schizzes within everyday structures of knowledge and recognition” (164).

In his introduction, Blanton affirms his hope to overcome the desperate observation of the philosopher Jacob Taubes: philosophy and biblical sciences no longer interact (2). If it is possible to show that Derrida and Vattimo’s considerations on the “legacies of religion in modern and contemporary critical thought” (7), including the consequences of the book market’s expansion in the field of philosophy (13), have precedents in modern and ostensibly secularizing philosophy from Kant to Heidegger, it becomes clear that “the shape of academic biblical criticism—with its own methods of disclosing Christian origins—continually influenced philosophical self-presentations” (9) and vice versa.

For example, David Friedrich Strauss accentuated the differences between the New Testament world and the world of the modern reader, influenced at the same time by his own life experience (being expelled from the academic staff) and by Hegelian modernity, as Habermas already noted (50). Hegel criticized sharply the nonreflexive historiography (49–50) in biblical scholars’ work, “who are haunted by a virtual or emerging identity *with which they cannot presently identify* and, therefore, as those who are in the grip of something that cannot be said” (45). In opposition to this kind of work, the German philosopher underlined, for example, the new religious experience of the Reformation as “an immediate relation to the Absolute in Spirit” (31). Strauss, who lost his academic job,

very enthusiastically experimented with a kind of “immediate relation” by using the popular print market extensively, which played “the role of a reflecting mirror” for describing religion (27). Nietzsche severely criticized such a fascination for the popular cultural market as a loss of the “German Spirit” (77) and considered Strauss a victim of a new mythology (103). Fascinated by this “newspaper popular market,” Strauss could only conclude about the New Testament “that a modern reader, face to face with ‘the humanity of those records’ (*das Menschliche jener Urkunden*) will feel ‘uncomfortable’ because he will sense this other self to be ‘undeveloped and crude’”(53).

Blanton rightly underlines in chapter 2 that such an aesthetic backdrop led Strauss to treat biblical literature as mere “mythology” in a pejorative sense (69). Moreover, the modern idealization of the “author” prompted Strauss to consider the biblical text as nonmodern and as a noncultural production, because it was produced by a collective author (70). In this, Strauss followed the work of Otfried Müller, *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftliche Mythologie* (1825), who considered that early Christianity did not have “authors” but only “relaters” or “compilers” (91, 94). Blanton denounces here the modern myth of the (other) self of modern authorship: “on the stage of ancient or mythical text production is being performed the final swoon of bourgeois authorship” (94). In chapter 3 Blanton shows that this modern idealization of authorship also deeply influenced the field of Pauline studies.

According to Kiesel, Heidegger was influenced by Adolf Deissmann’s reading of Paul and Pauline mysticism (107). On the one hand, Deissmann seemed to distance himself from the modern point of view by promoting the “Eastern light” “shining from outside the cage of European civilization” (111). But he, and Heidegger after him, defended an absolute vision of the Pauline authorship. Far from disappearing from Heideggerian writings, the question of the authenticity of authorship remained a strong concern of the philosopher. He stated that 2 Thessalonians “can only have been written by Paul” (122), assuming “an authenticity determined by the axiomatic of a situation rather than one of content” (118). But for Blanton, Deissmann and Heidegger forgot a very important point: Rom 16:22 reveals that the epistle was written by a secretary, Tertius. “Indeed, both of them will forget (and this in the very moment of the enunciation in which an authentic European modernity becomes indistinguishable from the lived experience of the apostle) the early Christian figure of Tertius and the masks, doublings, and play of mirrors this secretary sets in motion” (112).

In my opinion, Blanton exaggerates Tertius’s role on a symbolic level, seeing him as a “bizarre double” of Paul (113), even if Tertius is a clue to limit the modern idealization of authorship in the reading of Pauline literature. A better consideration of this literature could have helped Blanton to find already the relativization of authorship by Paul himself.

At the same time, a passage such as Gal 6:11 shows that Paul could use his own writing as an “affective pressure.” If, on the one hand, the notion of ancient authorship cannot be confused with the modern one, it is, on the other hand, not possible to think that ancient authors were not attached at all to their “selves,” as an anecdote narrates that a doctor named Gallien was disappointed when he saw that one of his books had been published under another name.² At the end of chapter 3 Blanton invites us to analyze better “the ancient (and modern) intertwining of religion and writing technologies of all sorts”: he could have used this advice for himself. On a general level, the biblical scholar that I am was surprised to see no mention of the present biblical scholarship or work in Blanton’s entire book. It is easy to deplore the fact that very few biblical scholars take philosophy into account (140), if philosophers do not read biblical research!

It is probably because Blanton does not consider present exegetical research that, in the last chapter, Albert Schweitzer appears more or less like the final word about the historical Jesus, understood as the “fully eschatological” Jesus who “represents another moment in the liberation of vitality from the desiccated thought forms of a modernity in decline” (153). Schweitzer, shaped by Kantian thought since his first work (135), describes in an acute way the collapse of modern thought, according to Blanton (140). In Blanton’s reading, Schweitzer is “the last biblical scholar” (155), and his writings are amalgamated with postmodern concerns: Schweitzer opened the way to “the now postmodern life raft or conversion to a mystical reality” (160). Blanton concludes the chapter with an appeal to the Kantian ethical imperative: a postmetaphysical reverence for life (165). The reader will not find here any problematization of the Third Quest of the historical Jesus, for example, since Blanton stops considering biblical scholarship after Schweitzer.

In doing a summary evaluation of *Displacing Christian Origins*, I will clearly distinguish between the metacritical reading offered by Ward Blanton—a very efficient and useful one—and the prospective part, rather weak. As for the metacritical reading, Blanton demonstrates very clearly the long common history and multiple interactions between “religion” and “secularization” in modern thought, from Kant to Heidegger. I can only hope that his invitation “to risk the thesis of the ephemeral banality of the difference between ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’” will be heard. Several authors have already proposed to demystify secularization: in 1994, R. Strak and L. Iannacone even proposed to renounce the term itself (“A Supply-Side Interpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 [1994]: 230–52). Wisely, the French sociologist Jean-Paul Willaime considers that we are now witnessing ‘the secularization of

2. On the question of ancient authorship and book market, see the indispensable monograph of Tiziano Dorandi, *Le stylet et la tablette: Dans le secret des auteurs antiques* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2000).

secularization,' a phenomenon that underlines for him an "ultra-modernity" more than a real "postmodernity."³ In my opinion, Blanton's book is a useful diagnostic on modernity, coming from an "ultra-modern" point of view, but does not offer sufficient clues to find the way to the next step.

Blanton encourages biblical scholarship to rethink its task, because it looks too much like a religious discourse (16, 53). The remedy is a metacritical reading of the history of the discipline (18), a point with which I totally agree. But after that? It is clear that we construct ancient objects through a double comparison with other ancient objects and with our contemporary settings, as Strauss did (59). But is it possible simply to "overcome" such a hermeneutical device (62)? Each time we are sure to have found something very specific to modernity, we should probably be cautious regarding the novelty of the alleged feature. For example, Cicero is able to consider at the same time Herodotus as "father of history," using usual and past standards, and as "author of numerous *fabulae*," using contemporaneous (and Thucydidean) standards (see Cicero, *De Legibus* 1.5). The Latin author is also doing a "double comparison," mixing present and past perceptions in a very "modern" way. Reading Cicero and Strauss, we can only become more and more aware of our ways of reading that always mix up past and present considerations.

At the same time, I would like to characterize present scholars as becoming more and more "switching" scholars, passing from one consideration to another or from one reference to another, as on a computer screen: it is a way of transferring to our present time the most interesting suggestion of Blanton: the interaction—from antiquity until now—between thinking and media. Since the discovery of multiple Jewish and Christian "new texts" in the last decades, and with the Foucauldian relativization of categories (apocryphal, canonical, patristic), the New Testament field is becoming a big network of texts. Temporal separations are now weaker: texts of the fourth century C.E. are used more frequently to get some information about the second century C.E.; authorship is also relativized: an anonymous author can be as interesting as Paul regarding early Christianity. By reading Blanton, we could ask ourselves whether such transformations in present biblical research are not influenced by our perception of—and life in?—the Internet space. The codex is known for having been important in Christianity's diffusion, the printing market in modernity's diffusion; the Internet will probably be known as having initiated the next step.

3. See Jean-Paul Willaime, "La sécularisation: Une exception européenne? Retour sur un concept et sa discussion en sociologie des religions," *Revue française de sociologie* 47 (2006): 755–79, esp. 756 and 775–79, 777: "L'ultra-modernité, ce n'est pas moins de religieux, c'est du religieux autrement."