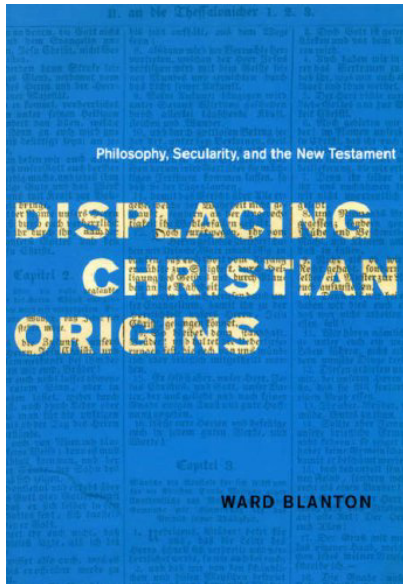


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Blanton, Ward

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

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I.

The purpose of this book (a revised version of the author's Yale dissertation written under Dale Martin) is to explore commoditization of the Pauline voice (43) among New Testament scholars and philosophers and to think generally about religion and philosophy on the topic of modern secularization of culture by documenting their centuries-long interconnectedness. In this study, Ward Blanton takes a closer look at the "secularizing" projects of scholars in the disciplines of theology (David Friedrich Strauss, Adolf Deissmann, and Albert Schweitzer) and philosophy (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger), with an eye to their relationship with the media (e.g., rapidly expanding popular book market). The book has four chapters in addition to an introduction, "Interdisciplinary Maps of Religion and Secularity: Toward a Critical Present," and a conclusion, "Displacing Christian Origins as Displacements of Religion and Secularity." The chapter titles are: (1) "Escape from the Biblical Aura: Hegel and Strauss on 'Modern' Biblical Criticism"; (2) "The Mechanics of (Dis)Enchantment: Nietzsche and D. F. Strauss on the Production of Religious Texts in the Age of Industrial Media"; (3) "Paul's Secretary: Heidegger's Apostolic Light from the Ancient Near East"; and (4) "Reason's Apocalypse: Albert Schweitzer's 'Fully Eschatological' Jesus and the

Collapse of Metaphysics.” A bibliography and short subject index (219–20) are also included.

II.

Despite the book’s acknowledged interest in interdisciplinary dialogue and reaching a wider audience, its style hampers its accessibility to (particularly) scholars of the New Testament not current with the professional jargon of Continental philosophy. In fact, this book is so bogged down by jargon that, for reasons to be offered below, it is hard to escape the notion that, against professed goals, it is deployed purposely to exclude New Testament scholars from the conversation. Blanton’s book is highly allusive. It is densely packed with a wide range of, sometimes contradictory, allusions to his sources, whether ancient or modern, from theoretical and other traditions. The work of Henri Bergson (26), Hans Frei (99), Marshall McLuhan (13, 77–78, 83), and Karl Kautsky (119) serve as examples. At the same time, Blanton’s allusions are extremely casual. Only sometimes does he cite his source or indicate the location of a passage in a source. He refers, for example, to Paul’s distinction between the “letter” and the “spirit” (e.g., 36), but the biblical reference (2 Cor 3:5–6) is never identified. Blanton cursorily deploys loaded concepts such as Derrida’s “outbidding,” with which, if one is not familiar, one will have trouble following his arguments (e.g., 5–12, 27, 36, 41–49, 167). One may also have trouble following his arguments on account of heavy reliance on technical terminology *sans* definitions. For example, he applies expressions such as “religion” (esp., e.g., 7, 99, 145, 171), “modern”/“modernity”/“nonmodern”/“unmodern” (7, 34, 66, 84, 85, 91, 94, 102, 108 [2x], 109, 140, 147, 163), “secularize” (34, 169–71), “medieval” (e.g., 41, 92), “myth” (e.g., 63, 66 [2x], 83, 85, 86, 101, 102), “bourgeois” (71, 95, 100 [2x], 101), and “Pharisaical” (e.g., 27, 41, 168) widely as themes, not in their traditional senses, yet without explaining what he means. The book is simultaneously *rich* with the language of economics. The words “economy” (e.g., 6, 11, 25, 26, 34), “gamble” (e.g., 16 [2x], 21, 25, 37, 49), “stakes” (e.g., 6, 20, 35, 40, 143), “wager” (167) and, as above, “outbidding” occur repeatedly. Numerous ideas and concepts are “doubled” (53, 59, 60, 61, 62, 69, 71, 75 [2x], 13 [2x], 121 [1x English; 1x German], 160), “inverted” (e.g., 26, 71, 76, 99), “reflexive” (25, 27, 52, 53, 62 [2x], 65 [3x], 66 [2x], 169, 170, etc.), or the result of “rupture” (e.g., 62, 64 [2x], 65), “ruse” (e.g., 55, 58, 62) or based on Blanton’s “intuition” (e.g., 4, 19). Blanton also either spawns neologisms or uses words that are obscure beyond expectable scholarly recognition, such as “originary”/“originariness” (e.g., 9, 27, 167), “worldification” (29), “immanentization” (29), “misrecognize” (31), “laicization” (35), “governmentality” (35 [3x]), “mediatic” (36), “benumbing” (37), “hierarchalizing” (40), “undecidabilities” (102), “mondialatinization” (105), “philosophicoreligious” (107), “Christianness” (118), and “pasted” (153). The mirror is a dominant metaphor (e.g., 6, 25, 83, 90, 99, 102, 113, 117, 133). Even the autoimmune disease AIDS gets its chance as symbol (see also J.

Derrida). On one occasion, it represents D. F. Strauss's frustrations with the historical method (90; see also 66 [2x], 167, 171).

At this point an example of Blanton's prose might be helpful. In the final sentence of the book, a place where we might be sure he would go to the trouble to be completely trenchant and transparent, Blanton continues in his verbose and jargon-laden vein:

We must continue to think, in short, of productions of religion and secularity as they occur within the same basic, world-forming gamble. Or, to shift registers only slightly, we must, increasingly, throw the distinction between religion and secularity back onto the immanent field of mediating technologies within which occurs their original splitting and setting into oppositional poles as religion and secularity. We must acquire an ear for these performative events of religion and secularity. (172–73)

Blanton touts as the aim of his project: finishing “the unfinished project of modernity” by recognizing “that we have manufactured or imagined secularity as much as we ever manufactured or imagined religion” (66). His means of accomplishing said aim is: “significant expansions of the work of Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo on the legacies of religion in modern and contemporary critical thought” (7). The results of his investigation are extremely positive: “not even Nietzsche perceived” what Blanton discovers: “that the industrial imprint of this splitting of enlightenment from myth could likewise be discerned in Strauss's interpretations of the New Testament, at the heart of which is the presentation of an early Christian text production whose collective, unconscious, or automatic processes become that with which the truly modern reader cannot, must not, or will not identify” (103). Readers of this book will have to decide for themselves whether Blanton reaches his goal. In any case, unlike Nietzsche, he seems largely uninterested in communicating perspicuously.

III.

As noted above, the bulk of the book deals with a perceived “territorial struggle” (35) over Christian origins by philosophers and New Testament historians. The book's starting place is recent critical theory that purportedly exhibits a preoccupation with early Christianity—and with the apostle Paul in particular. This claim is not corroborated in the book anywhere but strikes this reviewer as plausible. Blanton is certainly correct to complicate the facile distinctions between religion and secularity used by modern thinkers. Furthermore, his thesis that the two entities share more in common than previously thought is helpful; it is, after all, the uncomfortable conclusion of the third treatise of Nietzsche's *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. Blanton's proofs for the thesis are,

however, somewhat thin. His first idea is that Continental philosophers such as Hegel and Kant relied on metaphors and ideas of early Christianity for their projects of secularization. Such a claim is not new. Rather, it is a well-rehearsed fact of nineteenth-century German idealism that Christianity provided a foil for a wide variety of philosophical and other (even scientific) projects. Standard bibliographical works on the topic span volumes. William Baird provides excellent summaries on the New Testament side in *History of New Testament Research* (vol. 1: *From Deism to Tübingen*; vol. 2: *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann*; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992 and 2002). Blanton's second claim is that historians of early Christian literature also engaged contemporary philosophical ideas as a means of biblical interpretation. This idea is even more elementary. In his introductory textbook, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* ([4th ed.; Wiley-Blackwell, 2006], 174), Alister E. McGrath explains that Christian theology has, over the centuries, nearly always taken its cues from philosophy. McGrath rolls out the following list: early Christian apologists = Platonism; Middle Ages = Aristotelianism; Reformed theology = Ramism and Cartesianism; late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century theology = Kantianism; nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology = Hegelianism; modern period = existentialism. Furthermore, with respect to New Testament studies, that Rudolf Bultmann's exquisite yet deeply flawed commentary on the Fourth Gospel was inspired in large part by Bultmann's close friendship with Martin Heidegger is common knowledge. To be sure, vexing questions remain about these scholars' relationship, as well as about the general relationship between philosophy (including but not limited to Continental philosophy) and Christian theology. One may wonder, for example, why theologians look to philosophers or how Christian dogma impacts philosophical developments. Outside of such an insular *geisteswissenschaftliche Aussicht*, one might even ask how both hard and soft sciences influence both philosophy and theology (thinking, perhaps, of Teilhard de Chardin). In any case, Blanton never raises such crucial questions of prolegomena. Even in its brief moments of lucidity (on 2 Thessalonians [esp. 115–19] or on the life of Albert Schweitzer [esp. 129–32]), the book offers little that is new or insightful. Tertius's role as the author of Romans (Paul's "bizarre double" [113]) is much more "disconcerting" to Blanton than any of the biblical historians he fails to cite. The importance of media to the modern projects of imagining religion and secularity is also not established. For this reviewer, that book production even constitutes a good critical question about these projects remains in doubt. Given Blanton's largely dismissive caricature of New Testament studies, it is perhaps not surprising that he proffers purported insights as new. This reviewer suspects that most scholars will see through this, however.

IV.

A tension in Blanton's book is how his style expresses aloofness from the academic world

that he presumably seeks to engage. Divergent opinions are hardly, if ever, considered. He rarely takes any responsibility for precise definition, demonstration by argument, or competing interpretations. He discloses no uncertainty. Likewise, his implied audience makes no demands. They require no thesis, no proofs, and no real results. Who *are* these readers?

I suspect one might consider the abstractness strategic. This review testifies in part to the fact that the book eludes criticism because it makes precious few definite and discernible claims. Any goal of, for example, bringing New Testament scholars up to date on their legacy as agents of secularization or alerting philosophers to their appropriations of Christian origins is lost (18), as Blanton offers no bridge. On the contrary, he unfortunately emulates the insidious provincialism of some philosophy, securing his membership in their club before barring the door for other well-intentioned interpreters. Yet Blanton's prestige comes at a cost. Historical critics may not be Blanton's equals, but they are also not so quick to care. Of academics, they are perhaps the most alert to the cost of credulity.

Most disturbing, however, is the remote distance at which this book exists from lived experience. Not only does it have nothing to say about biblical interpretation on the street or in the pulpit; it offers nothing to the study of Christian origins or even the history of the academic study of Christian origins. And this does not have to be the case with such interdisciplinary investigations, as attested by the well-written and useful book by Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). Blanton's, however, is an essay of verbal politics that uses words subversively to exercise power through intellectual disdain. "Repulsion" is a theme throughout this book (25; see also 54 [2x], 65, 66, 70, 84, 90). From this repulsion, it seems, Blanton speaks at page 11 directly to New Testament scholars: "NT scholars should not be as frightened as they usually seem to be by the kinds of questions I am only introducing here, so let me throw them an inspirational bone." To this, I would simply respond that my experience of our guild is very different. Historical critics—past and present—have never struck me as dogs frightened by a question, appeased by a promise of inspiration, or hungry for a "bone." On the contrary, they have consistently impressed me as an intrepid host refusing to settle for less than a hypothesis, definitions of terms, an argument, and results—that is, *Wissenschaft*.

Perhaps due to their common interest in Continental philosophy, Blanton's prose, and even project, falls victim to many of the same traps as those that ensnare UC Berkeley Professor Judith Butler. Nowhere are these traps better explicated than in Martha Nussbaum's review of Butler's work ("The Professor of Parody," *The New Republic*; available online at <http://www.akad.se/Nussbaum.pdf>). Nussbaum describes the problem succinctly: "Some precincts of the continental philosophical tradition, though surely not

all of them, have an unfortunate tendency to regard the philosopher as a star who fascinates, and frequently by obscurity, rather than as an arguer among equals.” Loose allusions without adequate citation, jargon, and neologisms create an air of authority, but this air is rapidly dispelled by a sober assessment of gains. This book itemizes too few.