

REVIEW

Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), ISBN: 978-0226251714

Sacred Attunement is Michael Fishbane's most recent contribution to a prodigious body of work that spans several decades. This book represents the studied and careful explication of a distinctly Jewish theology for a modern era, strategically eliding the dense, logic-driven, and archaic connotations of a "theology proper" with its heavily analytical focus on divine attributes, actions, and capabilities. (32) Fishbane's approach is refreshingly creative, and though dense in its own way, remains sensitive to the fine-tuned intricacies and complexities of a world always brimming with divine possibility and sacred value. Indeed the goal of his project is to assist the observant Jew in remaining attuned to this ever-present divine reality, the fullness of which rests just beyond human perception. *Foucault Studies* readers might find the practical application of this project quite interesting, because Fishbane deploys the language of "care of the self," which recalls volume III of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*.¹ By stripping his theology of the miraculous, the messianic, and the violent dark side of God, focusing instead on the practical, the quotidian, and the fashioning of the self, Fishbane's approach becomes a way of life—more about ethics than abstract philosophy of religion. (108)

A notable strength of this book is that Fishbane updates Judaism in a way analogous to what Foucault did for Greek philosophy. Foucault referred to the "care of the self" among Greek writers as a "precept of living"² that "took the form of an attitude, a mode of behavior; it became instilled in ways of living."³ Fishbane takes up similar emphases by recalling pieces of rabbinic tradition that emphasize self-care as a mode of living. For example, Fishbane highlights a key exhortation from the Torah about performing religious duties, "you shall do them" (Leviticus 26:3), that was reinterpreted by one ancient tradition as "you will make (or refashion) yourselves [by the doing of Torah]." (xiv) This ethical outlook takes practical form in the careful modulation of speech, in quality relationships with people, and in being aware of the phenomena of life and nature. (41-43) Each of these helps fashion the self, making it more mindful of the sacredness of existence as a whole. Fishbane writes, "An important fea-

¹ See also Michel Foucault's lecture, "Technologies of the Self," in *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow, translated by Robert Hurley, et al (New York: The New Press, 1997), 223-251.

² Foucault, "The Hermeneutic of the Subject," in *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, 94.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality, vol. 3.*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1986 [1984]), 44-45.

ture of theology is to provide modes of self-cultivation, whereby a person might develop spiritual perceptions and be guided toward types of God-mindedness.” (108)

This development is fostered by the fissures or unexpected events that disrupt routines (birth, death, love, tragedy, 19-20), and can awaken the human to the “Other of more exceeding depths and heights.” (x) Literature, art, and music can also serve this function, because each rends the veil of everyday life and language, providing a glimpse of the transcendent. (23-32) This new state of awareness is a fundamental aspect of self-care for Fishbane (22), and is reiterated throughout the book. He writes, “The artistic imagination thus involves intentional acts of rupture...against our worldly habitude. In this way, it attempts to *cultivate the self*” [24, italics original],” while theology takes these unexpected moments of fissure, when “transcendence” pierces through the ordinariness of life, and tries to sustain them as normative. (x, 33) Theology’s task is to “*attune the self*” [34, italics original]” to the significance of these moments, each of which points to Being itself. As a result, there is a connection between self-fashioning/care/attunement and the mindfulness of transcendence (41), or more colloquially, between ethics and theology proper.

Fishbane’s notion of the divine, of “God,” makes this ethical outlook possible, because he blurs the distinction between a single cosmic Subject, and the totality of existence. In this way his theology can be classified among the more liberal, nontheistic, approaches to theology. “God” for Fishbane is a sacred movement or posture, a possibility or potentiality unencumbered by overly detailed philosophical speculation. He writes, “the One Who says, ‘I shall be’ [in Exodus 3:14] is the Ground of the actual potentiality of that which shall be at every moment.” (54) Here Fishbane draws from the well of Jewish scripture to extract a notion of the divine that has a well-established history in both early 20th century philosophy of religion, and liberal Protestantism. It is an image of God without a distinct personhood. Not a cosmic actor in the world, occasionally intervening in response to human petition, but a spiritual force or presence that abides by natural laws. Not a “He,” “She,” or “It,” but a “That,” a “Who,” and a “Ground of Being.”

William James in his famous lectures on Pragmatism was one of the first in North America to articulate such a conception of God, followed by Alfred North Whitehead, Paul Tillich, and then by more recent writers like Bishop John Shelby Spong, Marcus Borg, David Ray Griffin, and John Cobb. Though diverse in their respective ways, the unifying feature for each is an earnest wrestling with the identity of God in a scientific age built on the bedrock of Darwin’s natural selection. For each one God has been ripped from the sky; and Fishbane’s depiction of God is no different: “...God is in *this* (earthly) place;” (35) “...everything is tangibly here ‘below,’ and there is no invisible realm ‘above’ to which the mind (or spirit) might turn...” (12) He asks, “is there any room for theology [i.e., a notion of God] as such—or has it gone the way of all heavenly things [that have disappeared in a scientific age]”? (12) It is a question made possible by what Foucault referred to as the “modern episteme”—a scientificity that dispossessed humans of any unique teleology, whether of special creation or future judgment, and likewise dethroned the Monarchial Divine.

Like his many predecessors, Fishbane is attempting to rebuild; yet he does so in a distinct way by turning to self-care. Theology’s task is to attune human sensitivity—he calls it “mindfulness” (97, 102, 108, 110-112)—to the many surging pulsations of divinity. “The work

of theology," he writes, "is to cultivate a fuller attunement of the mind and heart to all that is happening in one's life-world so that one can respond more fully to each occurrence." (113) Notice that the task is not to help one *think* more clearly about the divine, demarcate fine points of theology, or more precisely interpret sacred texts, but rather to be more mindfully attuned to living reality, because only in reality can one encounter "God" the "ground of existence." This approach is quite common among religious groups, since similar concerns for mindfulness can be found in the Christian mystical tradition in the writings of Thomas Merton or the Desert Fathers, and in the Buddhist tradition in the work of Thich Nhat Hanh or in the Dhammapada of the Theravada Canon. In this sense, Fishbane has isolated the one clear way forward for religious practitioners to preserve their spiritual sensibilities in a scientific age; namely, to harness the mystical power of mindfulness/sacred attunement and focus it meditatively on both the divinity that is always receding "into unknown and unsayable depths," (201) and on the nurturing and fashioning of the spiritual self.

Fishbane's theology is also a specifically *Jewish* theology. By anchoring his approach in the millennia old traditions and rituals of Judaism, he is able to lock together amorphous conceptions of divinity with an established religious system, thereby nicely blending the speculative and the concrete. The core of this theology is the Sinai covenant and its foundational Torah-text. (46-48) Sinai is an "axial moment of consciousness" (47) when YHWH's violent thundering is funnelled into human speech (60) in a fixed, written form ("Written Torah"), which is then supplemented by oral tradition ("Oral Torah"). Both, however, are mere human testimonies to the divine reality that precedes them in the Torah *kelulah* (All-in-All), which emanates from divinity, and bears the imprint of infinitude. (160) This latter Torah has a pulsating quality like divinity itself, appearing in a specific cultural form through Moses, but is nimble and elusive, a divine voice whose whisper is barely discernable.

Tied closely to the Torah tradition is the importance of hermeneutics. Fishbane points to four methods of traditional Jewish interpretation of the textual data, but then broadens their usefulness to interpret human reality (63), promoting self-development (109) and self-care: *Peshat* centers on a text's plain meaning, and attunes one to the everyday details of life (105); *Derash* reformulates scripture in theological and legal terms in response to the challenges of religious life and belief, and opens one to the possibilities beyond daily routines (105); *Remez* allegorizes textual allusions to uncover deeper moral, philosophical, or psychological dimensions, and also offers new hints of insight that may overhaul one's thinking (106); and *Sod* discerns the spiritual or mystical elements of texts and life, and is more sensitive to divine truth and mystery. (65, 107) With the last of these Fishbane detects the possibility of movement into a "more metacommunicative dimension" (97)—a higher level of "God-consciousness" or mindfulness—that can be cultivated through four domains. With the eye, ear, mouth, and body the self can be trained to perceive traces of divinity in both texts and life. The eye can meditatively see through texts and life events (98); the ear can detect the sounds that form the words (99); the mouth can modulate the rhythm of breathing (100-101); and the body can be completely present for both reading/recitation and sensitivity to the human self as a being within Being. (102) This hermeneutical process involves attuning one's entire self to the pulsations of divinity. It is a "sacred task" (102) fostered in the Jewish home (176-178), the syna-

gogue (178-181), and the community or homeland. (181-183) And it is “the ultimate goal of theology.” (102)

Fishbane’s theology is probably both a culmination and a stage. On the one hand, he seems to have successfully consolidated mysticism, reverence for tradition, practicality, and a fluid notion of the divine under one umbrella theme of self-care that will equip observant Jews in an increasingly secular and scientific age. On the other hand, his work, like that of theologians in every generation, is a stage. To do theology is to engage in a perpetual conversation with both the voices from the past and the new voices of the contemporary culture. This ongoing discussion alters the established tradition, constantly breathing new life into its ancient rituals and ideologies, preventing them from becoming dry bones. Fishbane has made his contribution to this process and others will follow, building on the new foundation he has laid.

David A. Kaden
University of Toronto
Department and Centre for the Study of Religion
Jackman Humanities Building
170 St. George Street, floor 3
Toronto, ON M5R 2M8
Canada