

REVIEW

David Galston, *Archives and the Event of God: The Impact of Michel Foucault on Philosophical Theology* (Montreal McGill-Queens' University Press, 2011) ISBN: 978-0773537767

There is a vast literature on the significance of Foucault's work in rethinking theology as a side effect of language and power, and as a challenge to the religious a priori. Situated within this body of knowledge, Galston presents the reader with an impressive book that applies Foucault's concepts of the archive, the event, and genealogy to theology. In doing so, he explores the implications of thinking about theology as a product of the archive, and the concept of God as an event originating in the archive. In such a case, the main problem of theology becomes how the concept of God is epistemically permissible in the archive; not whether God exists as an a priori or not (see chapter 7). As such, Galston's work is an intervention into traditional theology's understanding of God as the absolute transcendental (as Schleiermacher would put it). It negates this notion, and invites the reader to think of theology as a hermeneutical problem. This shift not only calls the institution of theology into question by looking at the history of religion as sets of archives in which certain understandings of the God-form (as an effect of linguistic operations) are produced (see chapter 8). But should theology accept that there is nothing external to human experience and locate itself within the 'outsidelessness' of the archive, then it should also arrive at the 'im-possibility of God'; that is, its presence and absence at the same time, as Derridian deconstruction would suggest (see chapter 9). Thus, the question is not what Foucault thinks about religion, but how a Foucauldian way of thinking about religion enables us to understand how statements about God shape power relations in the archive (see pages 11, 12).

A major strength of the book is its organization, which appeals to highly trained academic audiences and to a general audience at the same time. It is organized in nine chapters, the first seven of which are mostly descriptive, and the last four that aim at consolidating the argument by bringing together the threads explored in earlier chapters. This layout has a pedagogical design which makes it accessible to the new entrants in the field. In the descriptive part of the book, Galston first explains Foucault's concepts, then introduces the ways in which we come to experience the 'normal' in the archive (as a consequence of the struggle between the articulables and the visibles), and finally, explores how events emerge within the episteme created by the repetition of statements. Building on this framework, Galston then poses the archivist question: how did the concept of God become credible as an event in the

constriction of possibility of the archive, and what does this mean to the philosophical contemplation of the idea of God? (chapter 8).

The later chapters examine the two paths the archivist approach can take to theology and highlights their differences from traditional theology. These are, a: archaeological theology which sees theology as ‘the history of systems of God’, and b: genealogical theology which is in favor of an orientation toward the non-event in the archive (chapter 10). In other words, genealogical theology is about ‘critical presence’—being outside while being inside the archive, or, to put it differently, being in a transgressive relationship to the archive, pushing its limits. However, there is an important distinction to maintain between genealogical theology and negative theology. Unlike negative theology, the former does not simply reject the transcendental tradition as in Nietzsche’s notion of the ‘Death of God’, but accounts for the historical persistence of transcendental categories by acknowledging them as side effects. Thus, God is not dead, but an archive event tied to a location which is continuously created and re-created.

These two paths replace the primacy of ontology with epistemology as the precondition of being in the archive, and taken together, they create the epistemological condition of thinking about the future of theology (chapter 11). Unlike the traditional theologies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that have linear histories progressing towards an end, an archivist approach to theology ‘produces its own horizon’ and ‘constitutes its past’. As such, it is characterized by epistemological emptiness; it only displays theological concepts in the archive. Unlike traditional theology, which finds meaning in revelation, genealogical theology as the practice of transgression in the archive dwells aimlessly. Transgression is about resisting the archival resolution while being in the archive. Applied to the concept of God, archaeological theology acknowledges it as a product, an event in the archive; genealogical theology resists the archival resolution in the emergence of this concept.

At first sight, this book seems to pose more questions than it provides answers to. It contains deeply researched analysis on an intriguing and a contemporary topic. The archivist’s understanding of religion, Galston proposes, can guide research that explores how knowledge about certain phenomena (e.g. Islamist fundamentalism) is archived, whether these phenomena can be seen as archive events, and if so, how institutions built around this theme (e.g. Homeland Security) become carriers of archival material. Due to the nature of the subject, the theoretical investigation to which the book afforded most of its space was to provide the researcher with a step-by-step analysis of the conceptual tools to be used in empirical analyses. Such a perspective would broaden our understanding of religion, and possibly break free from Orientalist conceptualizations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; making sense of them in our daily socio-political contexts while remaining loyal to Foucault’s archivist framework, which renders itself subject to disruption and revision. Overall, this book is timely and demonstrates in an innovative way the importance of Foucault’s approach to understanding religion within contemporary constellations of power.

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