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ANOTHER ABRAHAMIC RELIGION?

A review of Henry Sussman, *The Task of the Critic: Poetics, Philosophy, Religion*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. xi + 292 pp. \$75.00 (cloth); \$24.00 (paper). ISBN: 0823224651.

IN THE LAST CHAPTER OF *The Task of the Critic: Poetics, Philosophy, Religion*, Henry Sussman counts Abrahamic religions and finds there to be four of them: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and deconstruction. Though some such claim may have been recently on the verge of articulation among particular readers of and commentators on Jacques Derrida's writings, especially the texts explicitly addressing religion, Sussman's direct assertion that deconstruction constitutes a fourth Abrahamic religion will still be startling for not only many readers familiar with Derrida, but also and more so for most practitioners of the varieties of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. And even more startling to such believers might be Sussman's claim that the futures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam depend crucially on their receptivity to the effects deconstruction brings. What might these effects be, and what could Sussman mean to do by enumerating deconstruction as a fourth Abrahamic religion? These questions perhaps beg another: how can Sussman, a professor of comparative literature, claim the authority to discover and delineate a religion, much less to offer lessons to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?

Sussman anticipates this last question, and, in effect, his first six chapters prepare the reader to understand that the only authority Sussman claims in discussing religion is the authority of a critic. These chapters focus on the writings of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida to detail and to celebrate the stance of the critic as distinct yet borrowing from those of the poet, the philosopher, and the academic specialist. In unprecedented writings that combine philosophical sophistication, sensitivity to language's minute particulars, openness to wildly diverse materials, and urgent political engagement, Benjamin establishes for Sussman the model of the contemporary critic.

In his first chapter, "The Task of the Critic: A Game of Registers," Sussman

brings the persona of the critic forward: a close reader who carefully addresses the nuances of any given occasion for writing to modestly yet implacably exercise a responsibility to thought by skirting the boundaries of genre, by crossing the institutional demarcations of academic fields, and by saluting yet violating “no-trespassing” signs generally. The critic exercises the freedom “to wander [...] between the discursive parameters of poetic enunciation, philosophy, and close reading as the situation or occasion arises, demands, and allows” (166). And, distinct from writers strictly bound to genre or to discipline, the critic may and should respond to whatever circumstances become the occasion calling for an act of criticism. In the chapter “Walter as Critic,” Benjamin again provides Sussman his example. Through an astonishing variety of writings, “Benjamin undertakes the task of the critic” while adopting the “guises” of “media guru, bibliophile, children’s announcer, travel writer, [and] even food critic [...] so unwavering was Benjamin in his devotion to the critical occasion that none of the postures he assumed was beneath him” (71).

While institutions tend to favor styles of prose and choices of diction reproductive of disciplinary boundaries, the task of the critic entails the quest for a style in which the critic’s prose welcomes poetic outbursts. In crossing genres, the critic develops a writerly concern with style, as distinct from the scholar’s or the philosopher’s more regulative approach. The critic negotiates the boundaries between different “registers” of writing (among others, the scholarly, the philosophical, and the poetic) to attain momentary intensities of thought in which the breakthrough of critical insight corresponds with the critic’s text becoming a kind of prose poetry.

An exemplary instance of such critical prose for Sussman is Derrida’s essay on James Joyce titled “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce.”¹ Sussman’s chapter “Derrida as Critic: A Joycean Odyssey” reviews Derrida’s performance of this essay before an audience of Joyce specialists at the 1982 meeting of the International Joyce Society. Sussman demonstrates how, while certainly a kind of philosopher, Derrida also writes as a critic. By implicating his reading of *Ulysses* in Joyce’s complexly ironic anticipation of an institution such as the International Joyce Society, Derrida intervenes in that institution by contesting the boundaries the institution would establish to regulate what counts as a legitimate response to Joyce and by offering a subtle, challenging reading of *Ulysses*. The force of Derrida’s reading inheres in Derrida’s quasi-Joycean weave of puns, multi-lingual references, autobiographical ruminations, and analyses of modern communications technologies’ uncanny hook-ups with the messianic. In

¹ Jacques Derrida, “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce,” trans. by Tina Kendall and Shari Benstock, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992).

rigorously engaging the texts over which an institution claims authority while simultaneously contesting that institution's interpretive protocols through genre-transgressing prose, Derrida is a critic.

Sussman's notion of the critic as marginal to yet addressing formidable textual traditions, their histories of interpretation, and their institutional sites of ritual performance, empowers Sussman to describe deconstruction as a fourth Abrahamic religion. Sussman quickly points out that he does not expect the emergence of separate places of deconstructive worship, with their own institutionalized texts, interpretations, and rituals. Rather, as a fourth Abrahamic religion, deconstruction parasitically inhabits the margins of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As the fourth Abrahamic religion, deconstruction erodes the rigid and often violent boundaries demarcating the other three. Religions, "particularly those sharing adjacency or territorial coincidence," only exist as differentially related to other religions (184). The differential relations precipitate distinct religions that attempt to pose themselves as autonomous, as if the relation to other religions were a result of a remediable internal weakness or an avoidable outer catastrophe. Any religion occurs by way of the *différance* among religions, but given the "metaphysical aspirations, say toward purity and presence, common to the 'Abrahamic religions'," the irreducible and inescapable *différance* both thwarts and provokes attempts to establish clear or stable boundaries between religions (184). These boundaries frequently are inimical to the messianic promise of justice constitutive of but sometimes compromised by or even forgotten in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If there is a Judaism, Christianity, or Islam to come, one for which resolutely pressing the messianic promise of justice to be maximally operative does not necessarily entail a segregationist violence reactive to a globalizing world of nearly instantaneous world-wide telecommunications, long-standing communities' displacement, cultural mixing, and religious multiplicity, then some considerable deconstruction will have had to have occurred.

This deconstruction has been occurring all along in Abrahamic religions. In addressing religion, the task of the critic is to prepare the way for or to enact more intensive and contemporary instances of such deconstruction. The critic's task calls for as much interpretive audacity as it does tact and humility, since frontal assaults tend only to tighten borders. And a deconstructive engagement with religion is nothing like an assault anyway, but more like a delicate resplicing of the fine textual wires, the "pivotal tropes," that "already have the [religious] behaviors implanted in them, whether these are the making of sacrifices, the Eucharist, praying, or, in Judaism, donning the tallith" (179). So the deconstructive critic, argues Sussman, proceeds via modest interventions that may reengineer various Abrahamic tropes only because, in their *différance*, the

Abrahamic religions have always been open to differing from themselves, just as has the Greek or Platonic conceptual operating system shared by what emerged in the early centuries of the common era as Judaism and Christianity and then Islam.

Sussman runs through deconstructive treatments of Abrahamic topics such as the messianic, hospitality, and prayer. In doing so, Sussman rehearses deconstruction's special relation to a particular religious tradition: the Abrahamic. Yet each of these topics would require at least book-length treatment even to begin to conceive their specificity in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, much less also to follow their deconstructive workings among those religions. Rather than pretending to be a scholar of a particular Abrahamic religion, Sussman writes as a deconstructive critic who offers a broad yet incisive assessment of an event, the Abrahamic religions in deconstruction, while developing particular critical insights into specific aspects of that event. And, exercising the critic's penchant for political engagement, Sussman poses the following challenge to the loose and divergent community of critics sympathetic to or intensively engaged with deconstruction: now, when global socio-economic conflicts, imperial wars, and attempts at revolution increasingly embroil with religion for good and for ill, and when apocalyptically-inclined fundamentalisms influence or even take political leadership (consider President George W. Bush's White House meetings with Christian fundamentalists), a deconstructive reformatting of the Abrahamic religions could not be more timely, reducing tensions among and within the religions and helping their messianic promises of justice to find less violent but more effective opportunities for enactment. For any deconstructive critic, Sussman implicitly asks, what more worthy task could there be than to lend a hand in the elaboration of the fourth Abrahamic religion, that is, to contribute to the deconstruction of the other three?

Doing the one entails doing the other: the fourth Abrahamic religion, deconstruction, operates as a religion only parasitically of the other three, an uncanny parasite that was always an inhabitant of the hosts. This parasitism renders problematic the "oneness" of the Abrahamic religions. In the dynamic Sussman elaborates, the fourth Abrahamic religion, deconstruction, perpetually yet never finally emerges as one, while, in the deconstructive process, the other three risk losing their oneness in hosting the fourth. Or, more precisely: the fourth simply is the deconstruction of the other three, but that deconstruction suspends any such thing as "simply is," unproblematic "oneness," or "purity" for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, releasing the Abrahamic religions into a multiplication that vertiginously complicates enumeration in a logic Derrida's phrase *plus d'un* encapsulates: simultaneously, more than one and no more one. At this point, with integral oneness as much as innumerable multiplicity

becoming specters haunting and perhaps short-circuiting enumeration, the reader might ask: why enumerate deconstruction as the fourth Abrahamic religion?

To dismiss Sussman's enumeration as a kind of publicity stunt would be a mistake, but, in counting religions, Sussman commits himself to considerable if unavoidable strategic risks. As Sussman is quite aware, a crucial question for Derrida is: how does one count religions? Any would-be enumerators of Abrahamic religions might stall their counts indefinitely upon reading Jacques Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone."² There Derrida elaborates the "autoimmune" dynamics by which religions attempt to become "one," with any given religion immunizing itself against its others by committing an autoimmune violence against itself as other. Yet an entity's autoimmune disorders render the entity vulnerable to incursions compromising the entity's "oneness." To take up Sussman's computing analogies, autoimmunity operates something like a strange computer "firewall" that itself burns openings allowing entrance to unorthodox visitants, which entrance disturbs oneness, setting off a fresh bout of autoimmunity. Entangled in autoimmunity, a count might stutter indefinitely (O ... On ... ~~One~~), or at least can only proceed to enunciate "one" (allowing for a "two, three, four") by engaging in some violence.

No escape from autoimmunity exists; attempts simply to exclude it become examples of it. The question for Derrida is the invention of deconstructive engagements with oneness, strategies for less violent ways of arriving at "one." Always inseparable from a particular but finally illimitable context, such a strategy would install into the relevant enumerative operating system a software program hygienic of the hygienic drive to oneness. Such programs are indistinguishable from viruses. For Sussman, the programmer responsible for such an installation is the deconstructive critic.

How does Sussman negotiate autoimmunity? Sussman's chapter title, "The Fourth Abrahamic Religion?," seems precipitously to credit the achievability of a count, as does Sussman's provocative and broad declaration: "I propose to posit the attitudes and positionalities known as deconstruction as a fourth and hypercritical station in this collective Western advent and adventure" of the Abrahamic religions (176). As the argument of "Faith and Knowledge" might predict, Sussman's enumeration contemplates the deracination of religions.

² Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Sussman imagines the advent of deconstruction to dismantle the drive to “purity” on the part of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam:

The purity mandated and implemented by these faiths is multidimensional. It is conceptual, operational, and demographic. It not only establishes denominational, sociological, and communal boundaries, it sets distinctive styles and tonalities for the very rhythm of life. [...] Do the features of a historically evolved communal lifestyle dissolve when the platform of purity supporting this continuity is stripped away? (224)

Here Sussman considers a religion’s deconstruction possibly to signal the end of that religion’s concomitant social realm. Once a religion’s Platonist or other discursive strategies for purification undergo deconstruction, the religion may cease to reproduce or to inhere in any specific community. Sussman’s somewhat condescending phrase “communal lifestyle” arguably thinks of religion as ornamental to and so detachable from a social configuration that, after the dehiscence of the ornament, may lose any reason to be. Freed from being the belief system by which a community defines itself against other communities, the religion becomes something the diversity-sensitive may deign to acquire: “it will be surely possible to mix and match wisdom that has accrued over the course of all three enduring Abrahamic religions, for there will no longer be a site or a rationale for their mutual exclusivity and segregation” (232). For one’s “communal lifestyle” to “dissolve,” with one’s religion becoming one more “diversity” item to “mix and match”—such an eventuality, a trigger for autoimmune violence, now comes to many around the globe under the auspices of the United States’ “preemptive war” on Iraq and global “war on terror.” A thread of Sussman’s thinking may benefit from more attention to the complicity of the USA-centric notion of “diversity” with the deracinating socio-economic, technological, and military logics that inflame autoimmunity and so fuel violent attempts to establish the “mutual exclusivity and segregation” of religions.

Not only is the term “diversity” difficult to untangle from its USA-centric provenance. As instituted by governmental, corporate, and educational organizations seeking legitimacy, the logic of “diversity” arguably derives from a particular Abrahamic religion, Pauline Christianity, and so may hardly be a neutral arbiter of religious debate or conflict. Sussman concludes that “a deconstructively nuanced religion” will facilitate “a celebration of the diversity and otherness in occasions, worksites, and settings that bring people together and foster their responsiveness and responsibility” (239). How can this last sentence avoid being an echo or paraphrase of Paul?: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.28, NRSV). For Paul as for the hegemonic ideology of “diversity,” differences of class, gender, ethnicity, and

religion only find acceptance when ground down or etiolated so as to harmonize as one (in Christ Jesus then, in global capitalism now), any “otherness” undergoing the necessary domestications. To deploy the term “diversity” may be to side with a particular Abrahamic legacy. A similar worry dogs Sussman’s use of the term “religion,” a term most tied to and congenial with the Christian heritage, especially as Sussman tends to cast religion as a set of beliefs and practices unbound to any specific ethnic, tribal, regional, or national community. Such a conception of religion derives in large part from early Christian orthodoxy’s imposition of borders separating such orthodoxy from Christian “heresies” and from Judaism.³ But if these concerns about “diversity” and “religion” are at all valid, they only suggest the quite difficult problem any critic of religion faces: how does one think about religions to help bring about their less violent coexistence without allowing Christianity to sneak in as the religion of reference that surreptitiously determines the critic’s interpretations and judgments? How is the deconstructive critic to respond to the Christian-derived templates for religious manifestation that “globalatinization” enforces?⁴

In conclusion, *The Task of the Critic* provides readers important lessons as to how deconstructive thought, or simply the event of deconstruction, is vital to the futures of the Abrahamic religions. Even if against aspects of his argument, Sussman helps us to realize that to dismantle a border segregating religions does not necessarily result in the religions losing all distinction. The fine grain of Sussman’s analyses shows Sussman thoughtfully questioning the compulsion to preserve boundaries yet highly attentive to and wary of the violent erasure of distinctions. Dismantling the borders separating religions may actually help to release the *différance* among religions and to give them a chance to learn how a religion can remain distinct without clinging to segregation. Or rather, as Sussman teaches us to think, since religions stem from and so can never be done with their *différance*, and since the workings of autoimmunity never simply disappear, all there may be are certain ways of dismantling borders that constitute less violent ways to set borders. Sussman helps us to understand that the fourth Abrahamic religion, rather than bringing the other three to an end, may give them another beginning.

³ For a recent, forceful, and deconstructive elaboration of this argument, see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁴ On this question, see Jacques Derrida, “‘Above All, No Journalists!’,” trans. Samuel Weber, in *Religion and Media*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

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