

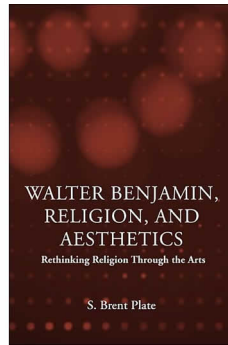
## ○ REVIEW OF S. BRENT PLATE'S *WALTER BENJAMIN, RELIGION, AND AESTHETICS*

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Erin Runions reviews S. Brent Plate's *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics: Rethinking Religion Through the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2005).



In *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics*, Brent Plate offers a valuable and innovative model for thinking about religion. Plate deploys the work of Walter Benjamin to develop a conception of religion that takes aesthetic experience – and its material grounding in sense perception – seriously. Plate uses what he calls Benjamin's allegorical aesthetics to interrogate categories in the study of religion that privilege stability, completion, interiority, and transcendence – categories such as the sacred, myth, symbol, creation, and redemption. He argues that Benjamin's conceptions of allegory and art destabilise these categories, by prioritising exteriority, process, and movement over interiority, fixity, and stability.

In the first chapter, 'Aesthetics (I): From the Body to the Mind and Back', Plate redefines aesthetics in Benjaminian terms. Rather than conceptualising the realm of aesthetic as that of art and beauty, Plate returns to a pre-Kantian notion of aesthetics as sense perception. Aesthetics, he suggests, can be thought, following Benjamin (and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten long before him), in terms of reception of sensual experience. Such an understanding implies that the field of aesthetics has more to do with boundary transgression (between the body and the world, between self and other), than with determining the boundaries that give art its status as art. Aesthetics is not simply analysis of art, truth and beauty, it is creative reception of sensual experience. Aesthetics is about the reception of everyday experience, rather than about analysis of objects cordoned off in museums. Moreover, for Benjamin who was deeply influenced by Kabbalistic thought, this creative reception of experience is first destructive and then creative. Aesthetics, in Plate's reading of Benjamin, is about taking the world apart, rummaging through its ruins, and putting it back together in creative ways. As a model for methodology in the study of religion, an Benjaminian aesthetic approach would valorise an inventive approach to study, one that would revel in pulling traditions apart and putting them back together in new ways.

Plate develops the heart of his argument through the reading of Benjamin that he gives in the two central chapters of the book, 'Allegorical Aesthetics' and 'Working Art: The Aesthetics of Technological Reproduction'. In these chapters, he looks at the final chapter on German baroque allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), and the famous essay, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), respectively. Plate uses Benjamin's discussion of baroque allegory to envision a mode of religious thinking that interrupts the vertical movement of traditional religious concepts (mystical unity, the symbol, the sacred), and puts them into motion horizontally and aesthetically. The relationship between allegory and the symbol, Plate argues is much like the relation between metonymy and metaphor, between image and word, or between the ruin and the polished artwork. The former term in each pair (metonymy, image, ruin) troubles any notion of secret, originary, interior, or final meaning that the latter term more traditionally harbors, and is focused more closely on arbitrary relations, as well as material ruptures and discontinuities. Thus, interesting for Plate are the fragmentary, time-bound, transient, and contiguous (yet not smoothly continuous) aspects of material/aesthetic religious practice that do not create a total, eschatologically oriented system, but rather privilege movement, reform, and social change. Plate argues for a form of religious study that looks at a religious tradition as a collection of fragments and distilled images that can be rearranged in productive, regenerative, and constantly shifting ways. As he puts it, 'The allegorical mode is a process of demythologizing and remythologizing without a final stable order' (79). Ideally, material and historical fragments of religious traditions are collected, arranged, and then dispersed.

Benjamin's analysis of the mechanically reproduced piece of art works in similar ways as the analysis of baroque allegory, for Plate. The technologically reproduced and dispersed work of art disrupts a more traditional way of thinking about an artwork's authenticity, mystery, authority, and sense of distance – what Benjamin calls its aura. Traditional conceptions of religion also have this sense of aura, Plate argues. But, he suggests, religion might rather be thought of in the way that Benjamin thinks of the technologically reproduced work of art – i.e., as that which brings observers closer to the subject matter, allowing them to perceive it in new ways. In these terms, the material/aesthetic medium (for art, and also for religious practice) becomes more important than the message. Here again the ideal movement is away from interiority (inner truths) to exteriority (sensual experiences), away from contemplation toward distraction and dispersion. This kind of analysis moves away from understandings of religious experience as personal and subjective, toward those that understand it to be a form of 'social interaction in the material world' (106).

The final chapter of the book, 'Aesthetics (II): Building the Communal Sense', suggests that this way of thinking about aesthetics and religion relocates the *sensus communis* – that place of mediation between the senses and the mind under debate since the time of Aristotle – from the individual mind (interior) to the social body (exterior), so that it becomes a community of sense/sensation. So for instance, religious ritual can be analysed not for the mystical individual experience it provides, but for the kind of community memorialising, which – unlike the fixity of monument making – is creative, continually ongoing, and open to new forms of communal meaning-making. With the focus on building a new sense of community, Plate is playing with the revolutionary Marxist and utopian impulses within Benjamin's thought, as well as with his thoughts on architecture and urban space in the *Arcades Project* (begun in 1927, and published posthumously).

Plate's discussions of Benjamin's conceptions of allegory and art – and the connections between these ideas – are illuminating and suggestive, moving back and forth between exposition of Benjamin and Plate's own argument about religious aesthetics, which he develops through related structuralist, poststructuralist, literary, gender and psychoanalytic theories. In many ways, his methodology uses the model that he outlines in the book: he takes fragments of Benjamin's thought and disperses them, mixing them with other theoretical arguments, to create or simply indicate new avenues of thought. Some of these are tantalisingly fleeting, but point to exciting possibilities for further development. So for instance – to mention but two of these many moments that were particularly interesting for me – Plate suggests lament as place where religion and politics (prayer and protest) might meet in aesthetic form (45). (This suggestion comes in a discussion of Benjamin's analysis of German *Trauerspiel*, which Plate translates as lament-play, as primarily concerned with the mundane and the transient aspects of life over and against the more vertically oriented transcendental themes of tragedy.) He draws on Hebrew Bible scholarship (e.g. Tod Linafelt's *Surviving Lamentations*), to make this suggestion, and I could imagine scholars of lament fruitfully developing this point further, in conjunction with Benjamin's thought. Elsewhere, elaborating on Freud's idea of the ego as constructed through interaction with bodily surface, Plate moves in the direction of thinking of the ego as fully exteriorised through sense perception. He indicates that such a conception of the ego would necessarily affect notions of the self as it interacts with community, ritual and art (113, 141). This provocative and exciting reading of Freud deserves further elaboration, which I hope either Plate or one of his readers will produce.

Beyond engaging the reader in creative thought, Plate's book is also a stimulating intervention into the methodological debates on the study of religion. This book joins the work of those such as Russell McCutcheon in critiquing *sui generis* classifications of religion, arguing instead for analyses of the social location and interactions of religion. Plate's use of Benjamin's theory persuasively takes up such arguments and provides a vision for how the study of religion might be done differently. Moreover, along with J.Z. Smith and Wendy Doniger (18), Plate acknowledges the inventive role of the scholar in the study of religion. Rather than trying to disavow or curtail scholars' creative work, Plate affirms it, in part as a way of critiquing notions of religion(s) as autonomous sphere(s). Like these other scholars, Plate is concerned with the ethical creativity of the scholar, and so his work necessarily rubs up against the important question of the positioning of the scholar with respect to the tradition under study (i.e., as insider or as outsider).

The implicit and important question that this book opens up for readers, then, is what difference a scholar's positionality makes to the efficacy of the allegorical aesthetic approach. The examples Plate gives of an allegorical aesthetic approach to religion working are of reform movements *within* religious traditions (the *bhakti* movement in South Asia, and the Protestant reformation in Europe). On the other hand, his methodology suggests that the scholar, like sense perception, would ideally be liminally situated, both inside and outside the tradition under study; the scholar would be engaged in both sensing and creating new meaning out of material and historical fragments of a tradition. Certainly this methodology works very well for scholars who are both insiders and outsiders to the cultural traditions they study. For instance, one could say that this kind of allegorical aesthetic approach has been taken up, to some degree, in biblical studies, especially by those working through the postmodern turn in biblical interpretation. As this very journal attests, many biblical scholars are no longer engaged in trying to determine

what the biblical text ‘really means’ (interiority) but rather, are interested in the social uses, literary pleasures, and patriarchal pains of the biblical text (exteriority). Biblical scholars can and do work with textual and historical fragments, as well as material/aesthetic uses of the Bible to build new creative interpretations, oriented toward social change and community building. Many biblicists, I would argue, are in precisely the liminal position envisioned by Plate: most all are receptors in a culture foundationally influenced by biblical ideas, but many are external to, or at best critically engaged with, particular communities that read the Bible for its meaning. What is exciting about Plate’s theory of religious aesthetics for postmodern biblical studies is that it provides it with a compelling and generative (not to mention timely) *raison d’être* within the study of *religion*, and gives it a vision for communal and ethical outcomes.

The issue remaining, then, is whether and how this appealing approach to religion can be taken up by scholars who study cultural traditions that are not their own. What would be the effect of scholarly rummaging, bricolage, and inventiveness in such cases? What would insiders have to say about outsiders’ invention? Plate cautions against colonial appropriations, and suggests that ‘the poetic nature of allegory involves an openness to the other’ (76). What form can this openness best take, so as to avoid the trap of paternalistic creator, collector, or curator? At this point, Plate’s focus on multiplicity, transience, and process, over against final bounded objects (or productions) of knowledge is key to resisting replication of oppressive power dynamics. Yet what if in some, maybe many, cases outsiders do not have the sense perceptions appropriate for engaging other cultural traditions? How then can outsiders step into a place of liminality? Here Plate’s work touches on many of the important ongoing questions about the possibilities and limits of religious scholarship that I hope will be taken up as part of the ongoing methodological discussions on the study of religion.

In sum, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, and Aesthetics* brings a fresh reading of Benjamin’s fragments to bear on the ongoing debates on the nature of religion and the methodological complexities of the study of religion. It is a significant contribution to the postmodern study of religion that raises important questions and provides a vision for religious study that could certainly help to disrupt the stereotyping of religious traditions and ossification of religious viewpoints so much at work in present political configurations of power.

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