

## Book Review

# *Critiques of Theology: German-Jewish Intellectuals and the Religious Sources of Secular Thought*

By Yotam Hotam

State University of New York Press, 2023. 255 pages.  
\$99 (Hardcover), \$34.95 (Paperback or e-book).

One of the deep-rooted beliefs of the Age of the Enlightenment was that critique is antithetical to religion. In fact, as Yotam Hotam notes in his noteworthy new book, *Critiques of Theology: German-Jewish Intellectuals and the Religious Sources of Secular Thought*, critique was often perceived as the “torchbearer of secular ideology” (1). The objective of critique was to aid humanity in liberating itself from its dependence on irrational religious faith and replace it with ethical values grounded in scientific investigation and rational knowledge. However, as we have been repeatedly reminded over the last few decades, this stark divide between the secular and the religious, or between critique and faith is certainly questionable, if not politically motivated. *Critiques of Theology* sheds new light on this long-debated topic by revisiting some of the great minds of the German-Jewish intellectual world. The list of those who turned to Judaism to discover new and previously unimagined solutions to the political challenges of their time—to the extent that even messianism became a prevailing trope of the period—is undoubtedly extensive. Hotam’s book narrows its focus to four luminaries—Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Hannah Arendt—who, to varying degrees, engage in this very project.

As Hotam acknowledges, the role of religion in general and of Jewish tradition specifically in the works of his protagonists has been widely debated. Nevertheless, Hotam offers a new and intriguing perspective with a fresh interpretation of their relatively underresearched writings. For instance, whereas many might seek clues for Freud’s theological bending in his last monumental work on Moses, Hotam closely reads his much earlier study *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*; and instead of Benjamin’s well exposed engagement with the Angel of History, we are directed to revisit a series of his texts from the 1910s reflecting his theory of youth. Hotam also delves into Adorno’s somewhat overlooked postwar studies on education and Arendt’s work on tradition. Indeed, the wealth of the material that Hotam explores to persuade readers is

truly remarkable, ranging from Freud's theory of laughter to Meister Eckhart's mystical symbolism, and from Roman political theories to Adorno's study of Kierkegaard.

Hotam's main argument is that these four figures provide valuable examples of what he terms "critique of theology", a critique that is "dependent on theology and that surfaces in different forms, within different intellectual disciplines and different sociopolitical contexts of the first and latter halves of the twentieth century" (4). Critique of theology, Hotam further explains, differs from the oft-used term "political theology" in that it shifts from the discussion about the emergence of political concepts and ideals to a discourse attuned to the nature of critique within an essentially Kantian conceptual framework. As Hotam explains, "in the strict Kantian sense, critique means a form of analysis of certain content or of an object of study that includes charting its sources (*Quellen*), scope (*Umfang*), and boundaries (*Grenzen*)" (5). In the chapter on Freud, to give short illustration of Hotam's claims, he puts forth two seemingly unrelated claims about Freud's work on jokes, which initially appear to be relatively divorced from either critique or theology. First, Hotam elucidates the subversive role of jokes in Freud by emphasizing them as responses to imposed social norms, cultural requirements, or rules of behavior. From a psychoanalytic perspective, he explains, laughter arises when a portion of mental energy previously invested in specific emotional pathways becomes unusable, allowing for its spontaneous release. According to Hotam, this release of mental energy exposes repressed thoughts and suppressed desire, to the effect that they can potentially challenge the laws that regulate human social and political realities. To connect this to a critique of *theology*, Hotam returns to the hidden content of Freud's jokes, and rightly reminds the reader that the sample of Freud's jokes in the book was not accidental; they were *Jewish* jokes about the Jewish—mostly Galician—world. Apparently, Freud was particularly fascinated with shorter, and often obscene Jewish jokes known as *Witz*. These jokes were extremely efficient in their critical function: they offered a short but powerful discharge of mental energy that efficiently releases previously repressed impulses. Put in the terms of Hotam's book, Jewish tradition thus offers a unique way for social critique: "Through such a capacity the critical mechanism of jokes reformulates a certain rebellious logic that relates in the Jewish religious tradition to the violation of eternal laws" (44). Hotam illustrates how the "religious"—that is, religious concepts, models or ideals—transforms into a reservoir of content that is available for critical theory. The theological content of Freud's Jewish jokes serves, for example, the transgressive engine that supports the critical function of jokes. Hotam, in this context, echoes Jürgen Habermas's renowned quest for religious "semantic contents and covert personal intuitions that can be translated and introduced into a secular discourse" in "Notes on Postsecular Society" [*New Perspectives Quarterly* 25.4 (2008): 29].

Hotam offers a similar intellectual maneuver in his discussion of Benjamin, Adorno, and Arendt. The chapter on Benjamin demonstrates how the mystical presentation of "youth" as the divine, eternal, and transcendent element of humanity informs Benjamin's early social criticism, especially his critique of social domination. The chapter on Adorno explores Adorno's lectures on education, especially, Adorno's attempt to combat the challenges of the oppressive modern world by calling for a "critical self-reflection" in education as a method that aims to reengage with theology in a manner that, in essence, represents "a reconceptualization of the educational concept of critique" (109). And in a somewhat Benjaminian reading of Arendt, Hotam points to her commitment to Roman political theology, especially the Roman concept of tradition, which grounds her analysis of the "modern 'crisis'" (144). Yet, in his engagement with Arendt (and to some extent with Adorno), Hotam offers a different, and, in my mind, more exciting perspective of the interrelations of theology and critique. I draw here on a similar recent argument of Ori Rotlevy in "Critique in A Post-Secular Age" [*Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 19.3 (Fall 2020), 436-452], where Rotlevy aims to show not only that critique is not inimical to religious tradition, but rather that it "ascertains a place for tradition as a medium in modernity" (438).

More specifically, Rotlevy claims that tradition is significant for the critique of modernity not merely in the contents it provides (in line with Habermas's project), but also in providing a model for the medium that is absent yet necessary for criticizing and transforming modernity. Hotam's work on Arendt shares the same sentiment in that, for Hotam, "the mechanism of critique *has* theological origins" (139, my emphasis). Critique does more than take advantage of religious content, or, in the context of Arendt, critique "not only takes Roman theology as an object of study" (138). Rather, Hotam's Arendt bases her concept of critique on the Roman theological tradition to the effect that "she endows this concept [of critique] with the task of tradition: the harking back to and thus the revealing of a shared 'origin' for society and politics" (138). Put shortly, Hotam uncovers how, for Arendt, theology is, in fact, the basis for critical argumentation. Theology is not just another realm of critical analysis, but the ground from which critique emerges.

Throughout his book, Hotam emphasizes that "the relation between the 'secular' and the 'religious' does not point to a contradiction, as one may assume, but rather to what can be called a secular–religious continuum." (162). However, to read Hotam against Hotam, it is not (only) a continuum that we should identify between critique and theology. Rather, we should recognize their profound and intimate interdependence. In that, *Critiques of Theology* provides an important example of the new generation of post-secular thinking.

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