Edward Baring and Peter E. Gordon, eds., *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*, Fordham University Press, 2014, 296 pp., $28.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780823262106.

The Trace of God will prove extremely useful for anyone interested in the broad topic of Derrida and religion. The rich essays in this volume do not seek to make positive claims, instead they delve into the ways in which Derrida's engagement with religion develops, often in contradictory ways. In the first chapter, "'Et Iterum de Deo': Jacques Derrida and the Tradition of Divine Names," Hent de Vries explains the interconnectedness of deconstruction and religion. By discussing some examples of the indecisiveness of Derrida's project of engaging with religion, he writes that Derrida "remains at once near to and far from—indeed, *infinitely close to and at an infinite remove from*—the archive that makes up 'religion'" (13, original emphasis). He concludes by highlighting the implications of this indecisiveness: "Derrida has taught us that distinction and often opposition between tradition and modernity, between the thinking of infinity and of infinitude, theism and atheism, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, theology and idolatry, prayer and blasphemy—in short, between our being either on the 'inside' or the 'outside' of our historical legacy, including its contemporary contestations—is, on closer scrutiny, no longer pertinent. And, perhaps, never was" (37).

In "Not Yet Marrano: Levinas, Derrida, and the Ontology of Being Jewish," Ethan Kleinberg demonstrates the richness and shortcomings of "*être-Juif*," as it functions in Derrida's writing. Kleinberg locates Derrida's answer to the "Jewish Question" after the Holocaust in a temporal zone "between an elected past and a future to come," where the hidden Marrano, the secret Jew, neither assimilated nor annihilated, forcefully exclaims: "I am *still* here!" (58, original emphasis). In her essay, "Poetics of the Broken Tablet," Sarah Hammerschlag continues with the ethical and political consequences of the way Derrida connects his own Jewishness to the figure of Marrano in order to poeticize Levinas's concept of Jewish election.

Edward Baring's chapter, "Theism and Atheism at Play: Jacques Derrida and Christian Heideggerianism," argues that Derrida's fascination with religious questions started earlier than his so-called religious turn in the 1990s. He traces the context for the earliest formulations of deconstruction to Derrida's reading of a particular Christian Heideggerianism that emerged in the early 1960s. He concludes that it would be wrong to assume Derrida's deconstruction developed elsewhere for different purposes and then was belatedly applied to theological matters. "Habermas, Derrida, and the Question of Religion" is the title of a chapter by Peter E. Gordon who offers a reconsideration of the long

philosophical entanglement between these two dissimilar theorists, Derrida and Habermas, at the intersection of religion and politics. Similarly, in their chapter "Abraham, the Settling Foreigner," Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly have a Derridian reading of Kierkegaard and Hegel's take on Abraham and sacrifice. The theme of atheism is picked up again by Richard Kearney in his chapter entitled: "Derrida and Messianic Atheism." He gives a detailed analysis of what Derrida meant by atheism, and by focusing on "messianic" atheism, he develops his own project of an ana-atheism (208).

As expected the contributors have reached differing conclusions. For example, in "The Autoimmunity of Religion," Martin Hägglund sets out to save deconstruction from religion and to preserve it as a valuable theoretical approach with radical atheism as its core. But in his essay, "Unprotected Religions: Radical Theology, Radical Atheism, and the Return of Anti-Religion," John Caputo takes issue with that by arguing that there is a place for deconstruction within theology. He goes on to caution that he is generally "nervous about 'religion,' given the historical violence and recent 'reactionary meanness' it has provoked" (151). After calling the atheism attributed to Derrida by Hägglund "absolutely ridiculous," Caputo goes on to highlight the usefulness of Derrida's deconstruction for any project of religious renewal: "Deconstruction is a way of rereading and reinventing religion—or anything else—not of eradicating religion by means of a radical atheism" (155). Caputo's essay merits especial attention from Muslims concerned with the renewal of the lived experiences of their faith in radically alternative, open-ended, and democratic ways that sidestep both the violent Islamist ideologies and the anti-religious radical secularists.

The editors of this volume rightly point out the value of Derrida's deconstruction for taking on traditions of religious thought, especially Islam: "Indeed, the need to engage productively and openly with other religions, especially Islam, has never felt so pressing" (10). To that effect they have allocated one of the ten chapters of this book to Derrida and Islam (the only chapter that I am fully qualified to write about). This is a generous gesture toward opening needed venues of inquiry into Islamic religious thought rooted in Derrida's ideas, especially given that Derrida's engagement with Islam is scarce.

The contextual and biographical outline of Derrida's life could tell us something about the scarcity of his engagement with Islam. He primarily interacted with European Jewish and Christian thinkers, even though he was born to a Sephardic Jewish family in Algeria. Anne Norton's chapter, "Called to Bear Witness: Derrida, Muslims, and Islam," is a rich and erudite study of Derrida's engagement with Islam, first in terms of the historical and political demands that shaped his early life in Algeria, and then in Paris. She locates Derrida vis-à-vis Islam in an ambiguous, "magic, ghostly, *geistliche* place," which is both the place of his birth in Algeria and Europe, but is neither. Norton focuses on Derrida's *Rogues*,[1] written in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, and in the midst of the "war on terror" and the parallel designation of certain countries as "rogue" states. She explains that in *Rogues*, in a chapter entitled "The Other of Democracy, the 'By Turns,'" Derrida argues that Islam is unique in its refusal of democracy. "In this work Derrida exiles Ishmael from the covenant, names Islam the enemy of democracy, philosophy, and reason, and then gestures toward defects, inadequacies, and reversals in this refusal of Islam" (89). Derrida goes on to qualify his assertion by stating that there are "very few" governments demonstrating such antipathy to democracy. But Norton is quick to take Derrida to task for not specifying which governments these are. Saudi Arabia and Iran, if those are Derrida's intended governments,

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

do not fit such description, the former is a wasteful decadent hereditary monarchy alien to Islam, and the latter has some semblance of democracy.

Norton continues to take Derrida and his commentators who have been "generous" or too accepting in their readings of his work to task in similar fashion. For example, Derrida supported the Algerian army's coup after the victory of Islamist groups in the 1991-1992 election, calling it an "interruption" by "the state and the leading party" (97). He also went on to characterize the military coup and cancellation of the election as the intervention that saved democracy from itself, doing it for democracy's own good to immunize it from a much worse assault. Commentators have been kind to Derrida, arguing that he was concerned with the theoretical nature of the military's intervention not with its political effects. This is not too far-fetched because Derrida does elaborate on his concept of "autoimmunity" in *Rogues*, arguing that democracy is governed by an internal autoimmune logic, a gesture of self-preservation which in the very act of defending itself causes its own demise. Democracy relies on "sovereignty" to determine exceptions (90). Democracy's efficacy in establishing a unified sovereign "people" depends on overlooking the plurality of people and multiplicity of communities. By inevitably omitting these pluralities, democracy essentializes the "people" (*demos*) and immunizes them, so to speak, against difference and otherness to its own detriment. Without sovereignty the "rule of people" will not be achieved, and with sovereignty democracy remains an impossibility. We can appreciate the theoretical value of Derrida's position and the close connection of his concept of autoimmunity with his other theoretical concepts such as *différance* and aporia. But Norton points out that Derrida's statement was delivered to endorse a political position at a specifically political event organized to demonstrate solidarity with Algerian intellectuals (92).

In concert with French intellectuals and Western governments, Derrida advocated for military suppression of democracy in Algeria. He even presented the military coup as evidence of Islam's hostility to democracy and European secularization. Norton's words speak to this situation: "Rarely has the postcolonial continuance of colonial authoritarianism shown itself so clearly" (92). She points out that the lessons Derrida takes from the Algerian coup are faulty. First of all, that democracy is vulnerable to its own suicidal autoimmunity, Norton contends, is faulty because the Algerian coup was not the work of democracy but the Algerian military (92). Moreover, Derrida's assertion of Islam's hostility to democracy, which in Derrida's view is a European process dependent on secularization, is wrong. He overlooks the case of forced secularization in Kemalist Turkey and Pahlavi Iran and admits that his errant knowledge of Islam is based on "the little" he knows. He is also mistaken about Islam's philosophical tradition positing that Aristotle's politics was missing in Islamic philosophy. Norton rightly argues that the substance of Derrida's errors are not as important as his "willingness to construct Islam as antidemocratic based on what he himself calls his own ignorance, and his deliberate marking of that ignorance in the text" (93).

To his credit, Derrida evokes the young Muslims of Paris suburbs, the unemployed, the deviant, the outcast and displaced as those among whom democracy is being born. Despite his disavowal of Islam and his Arab past, Derrida sides with these "democratic rogues," leading Norton to note that he "bears more than a passing resemblance to these young men" (97). Derrida links the democracy (which is yet to come) to the Muslim rogue. He sees himself as the rogue, the wandering Marrano, "one of the pretended converts hidden in the open after the *Reconquista*." Norton observes that we can even see the Muslim hidden in him, echoing the call to "bear witness" as in the Muslim testimony of faith, the *Shahada*, which echoes the Jewish *Shema*, bearing witness to the horror of Holocaust.

In light of recent violent events perpetuated by the "European" and thoroughly "Western," yet deviant, outcast, Muslim "rogue," one cannot help but wonder how Derrida would have evaluated them now? In line with his position on the Algerian coup perhaps he would have argued for a security coup against all rogue European subjects (who happen to have a Muslim background). As irrelevant as these speculative biographical questions may be, they point to a more important question: what is the theoretical relevance of Derrida's position on autoimmunity and sovereignty to the recent events in Europe? Can deconstruction be a way of re-imagining Europe, just as it is for religion? If it is possible to reread a religion without religion (see John D. Caputo's chapter in this volume), why not reinvent a Europe without Europe? Some non-European scholars (Nelson Maldonado-Torres, for example) have pointed out how many European philosophers critique European modernity while they are equally concerned with saving European/Western modernity. They often overlook radical options beyond the horizons of European thought. Indeed, not long after the publication of Derrida's *Rogues*,[2] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, critiquing the epistemic racism of Eurocentric knowledge production, asked: "Why not [try] to understand the deeply theoretical claims that have emerged in contexts that have known European coloniality?" He further added: "Why not engag[e] seriously Muslim intellectuals?"[3] Echoing Susan Buck-Morss we can ask, why not re-imagine a different globalization and universality? Why does globalization facilitate easy production, communication, and border crossings for Western subjects and capital, but always maintain a spatial outside, an other (people, territory, epistemology) against which it can conveniently define itself?[4] In the works of important Western theorists there is a theoretical turn to renew religious faith (cf. Caputo's chapter as well as Martin Hägglund's in this volume). Yet as Buck-Morss in the preface to the second edition of her book points out, it is not religion in general, but Pauline Christianity which has suddenly become fashionable: "If religion has been allowed back on the theoretical agenda, it is St. Paul who monopolizes the discussion."[5]

Arguments for negotiating the relationship between religion and modernity offered by Muslim thinkers are generally overlooked. By way of examples we can mention the works of the Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush and more importantly the most exciting and diverse contributions of Muslim "feminists" like Amina Wadud, Kecia Ali, Zareena Grewal, or Ayesha Chaudhry. Works that specifically engage Derrida's theories seem to fall on the margins of scholarly engagement by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars; for instance, Mohammad Arkoun's *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?*[6] and Ian Almond's *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi*,[7] in which he demonstrates a similar deconstructive process found in the writings of the thirteenth century Muslim mystic Ibn 'Arabi, deserve special mention. Almond is clear that he is not trying to make a premodern Sufi into a postmodern theorist, nor transform Derrida's writings into a form of Islamic mysticism. Along the same lines we can note that the best example of Derrida's radical atheism is found in the *Shahada*, the first and most important pillar of Islam: "There is no god but the God (Allah)." Derrida's "radical atheism," as explained by Hägglund in the book under review here, is already implicit in the *Shahada*, the basic testimony of Muslim

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[2] It was originally published in French in 2003; the English translation was published in 2005.

[3] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge," *City* 8.1 (2004): 29-56.

[4] Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, (London, Verso, 2003).

[5] Ibid., viii.

[6] Mohammad Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?* (London: Saqi Books, 2007).

[7] Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi* (London: Routledge, 2004).

faith. Rejection of all gods in this formula already assumes an atheism that is not a matter of personal convictions, opinions, or ideologies, but a "structural atheism" that, to borrow from Hägglund, "characterizes a priori every relation to whoever comes or whatever happens" (197). Put differently, negation of all deities includes the negation of all that can be known of Allah as well. This rejection of all that can be possibly known of God is a kind of negative theology that still assumes the existence of a transcendent God, but it seriously destabilizes the dogmatic determinism of Ash'arite theologians, or the First Cause/Prime Mover of the Muslim philosophers, and even the religious claims of contemporary violent jihadis. The premodern Sufis were well aware of this. For example, they articulated the divine as a speculum, reflecting whatever we are back to us (see, for instance, the twelfth-thirteenth century Persian Sufi Farid al-Din 'Attar's magnum opus, *Conference of the Birds*). In Jalal al-Din Rumi's project of differential interpretation of esoteric secrets we find echoes of Derrida's *différance*: the perpetual deferring of the presence of the secrets in the differing of interpretations (from each other and from the secrets).[8] As Derrida points out, to defer (*différer*) cannot mean to retard (*retarder*) a present possibility, to postpone (*ajourner*) an act, to delay (*surseoir*) a perception already now possible.[9]

The editors of this volume point out that the question of "Derrida and Religion" is complex. Its indeterminacy resists easy answers and leaves it open to interpretive possibilities. Contributors to this volume have reached similar and differing conclusions about the place of religion in Derrida's work. As Norton's chapter demonstrates, this book and Derrida's work in general have much to offer to those who are concerned with studying and understanding Islam and Muslims. What should be also equally clear is the ways in which resources offered by Islam can deepen our understanding of Derrida's thought and enrich his project of deconstruction.

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[8] Mahdi Tourage, *Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism* (Leiden, Brill, 2007), 79.
[9] Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 303.