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Brian Britt. Religion Around Walter Benjamin. The Pennsylvania State UP, 2022.

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Brian Britt. Religion Around Walter Benjamin. The Pennsylvania State UP, 2022.

Abstract

Review of Brian Britt. *Religion Around Walter Benjamin*. The Pennsylvania State UP, 2022. xvii + 233 pp.

Keywords

Walter Benjamin, religious and intellectual history, Modernism, Germany, 20th century

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This book examines the historical, cultural, intellectual, and especially religious contexts surrounding the life and work of the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). It is the eighth volume in the *Religion Around* book series founded and edited by Peter Kaufman. With volumes on religion around Shakespeare and Bono, around Emily Dickinson and Billie Holiday, the series has earned a reputation for insightful examinations of refreshing diversity, originality, and intellectual wingspan. Brian Britt's volume on Benjamin continues that tradition. Britt is an eminent Benjamin scholar. He has authored numerous articles and several monographs on Benjamin, including *Postsecular Benjamin* (2016) and *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (second edition, 2003). But while these earlier studies focused on theoretical conceptualizations of religious agency and Benjamin's reflections on scripture, this volume brings Benjamin's life and work into dialogue with the diverse religious landscapes around him. What ties together Britt's earlier analyses with the present publication is an intense interest in the survival of religious traditions in modern secular contexts. Here Benjamin's and Britt's interests intersect. Although Benjamin generally avoided affiliations and kept his distance from religious institutions, he, too, was fascinated by the meandering paths of traditions and their adaptations in different contexts and guises.

Britt is particularly interested in the blend of sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory contexts surrounding Benjamin—Jewish renaissance, Christian thought, and secular dimensions—and his goal is to read Benjamin's work anew in light of these diverse influences. He achieves it by doing two things: first, by constantly changing the lens, alternating between religious landscapes, topographical readings of the modernist metropolis, biographical passages, and textual exegesis, and second, by broadening the religious framework to include lived religion and everyday religious practices. Expansive background explanations reach back deep into German history (Reformation, Enlightenment period, the ideal of *Bildung* in the nineteenth century) and look ahead, beyond Weimar, to the rise of National Socialism and the Second World War. Deftly avoiding the most heated debates about the extent to which Benjamin's work reflects Jewish ideas, Britt weaves connections between many trends and developments. In a quintessentially Benjaminian endeavor, he teases out that which is hidden or overlooked—in some cases overlooked even by Benjamin himself. Britt operates like the Benjaminian historiographer whose quasi-archeological gaze reveals superimposed forms of former life and the palimpsestic nature of social and cultural institutions, structures, and practices. He expands the scope of "religion" far beyond belief, membership, or affiliation to include a wide range of popular practices that arguably take on

quasi-religious qualities: visiting museums or public parks, shopping department stores, or going to the cinema. Using again a Benjaminian lens, Britt argues that all these activities and civic spaces replace in the modern secular context the divine as the object of worship while maintaining some of the religious energy in new cultural forms. This attention to lived practices and popular entertainment is in sync with Benjamin's esteem for the everyday and the epistemological quality of its objects and institutions, and it also draws on definitions of "lived religion" by Nancy Ammerman and Meredith McGuire, moving Britt's project from religious theory toward a sociology of religion.

The book's five chapters loosely follow a chronology. Unfolding the tensions between religious liberty and religious nationalism, Britt revisits the period of Jewish emancipation and German national unification, focusing on the Jewish minority in Berlin and its relationship with Prussian Protestantism. Britt surveys Berlin's religious geography and demography during Benjamin's childhood and adolescence and pays particular attention to religion in schools and universities, the youth movement, and Zionism. He brings into focus what easily goes unnoticed or remains visible only in the margins: continued high rates of participation in life cycle rituals, popular lived religion such as the observance of high feast days or the Sunday Sabbath, and the construction of many of the city's religious landmarks, Christian as well as Jewish. Interleaved with readings from Benjamin's texts, Britt discusses the unprecedented impact of World War I on the religious world, in particular Benjamin's scathing criticism of religiously hyped German nationalism, pressures to endorse the union of state and church, and attempts to endow the horrors of technological warfare with an apocalyptic, cultic status. Britt points at new experiments in religious thought during Benjamin's wartime exile in Switzerland and delves into the theological, political, and artistic debates of the Weimar Republic. His vivid picture of this turbulent period includes discussions of Benjamin's main works from this period, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*On the Origins of German Tragic Drama*) and *Einbahnstraße* (*One-Way Street*), both in different ways documenting his engagement with traditions and their survival. Concluding with an examination of the Nazi period from the 1930s to Benjamin's death in 1940, Britt highlights how Benjamin's exile writing reflects an increasing interest in Catholic contexts, apocalyptic traditions, and the direct violence that surrounds him.

What this book adds to the vast literature on Benjamin is more than a tremendously learned and carefully crafted examination of contexts and intersecting dynamics of religion, culture, and politics that influence him. Balancing historical and cultural specificity with broader developments in Modern Europe, Britt situates Benjamin's life and oeuvre in a sort of palimpsestic fragmented collage—a uniquely apt mode of representation that pairs modernist aesthetics and Benjaminian hermeneutics with an acutely performative

incisiveness. Zooming in on continuing forms of religiosity usually obscured by the dominant narrative of secularization, Britt provides an original perspective—and undertakes a rescue project in its own right.

Despite some heavy conceptual lifting, Britt maintains a conversational tone that keeps his readers engaged over the book's 358 pages. Thirteen illustrations, sixteen pages of crisp endnotes, a slim index (229-33), and an economic bibliography offer support to the interested novice and the Benjamin specialist alike. Although academic readers might occasionally wish for a more encompassing scholarly apparatus, this is an enriching and entertaining read for anyone interested in Benjamin, Religion, German Modernism, Berlin, or the study of early twentieth-century history, literature, and philosophy.

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