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Book Review, Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (1993)

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BOOKS

Belief and Language

Stephen Carter. *The Culture of Disbelief*. New York: Basic Books, 1993, 277 pp.

In his book *The Culture of Disbelief*, Yale law professor Stephen Carter makes a powerful point about our political culture's tendency to discount any policy view that is infected with the taint of religious motivation. In contexts as varied as the fights over public school curricula, the problems in accommodating religious beliefs in the administration of the military and prisons, and the painful national struggle with life issues like abortion and euthanasia, Professor Carter hammers home the sensible notion that a policy view should be accepted or rejected on its own merits, without regard for its motivating source, religious or otherwise.

All of this is based on the premise that, in fact, American popular culture, in Carter's words, "con-

signs Americans who take their religion seriously to the lunatic fringe," an assumption challenged by Michael Kinsley in his review of the book in the *New Republic*, who asks "Does anybody really think it's harder to stand up in public, in 1993 America, and say 'I believe in God,' than it is to stand up and say, 'I don't?'"

I think Kinsley and Carter are both right—Kinsley in his insistence that there is an expected, perhaps even mandatory, level of subscription to religious belief that serves as a baseline for popular discourse, and Carter in his concern that any discernible nod toward religion is one that demeans the power of religion in people's lives, that, again Carter's words, treats "God as a hobby." What troubles me, though, is that Carter himself seems unwilling to fully engage that potential power as a force in discourse, except when it fits with a predetermined set of rational justification principles. It seems to me that Carter has bought into what I'll call the "Culture of Rationality," and he carefully constrains his discussions accordingly. Perhaps Carter himself has a fear of being consigned to the lunatic fringe, especially by the notoriously cynical legal academy.

In a review of the book in *First Things*, law professor Phillip Johnson of Berkeley uses as a structural metaphor this comment made by the sociologist Peter Berger: "If India is the most religious country in the

world, and Sweden the least religious, then America is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes." Professor Johnson then notes Carter's "ambivalence about whether he wants to be a Swede or an Indian"—notably, Carter's conclusionary stance on the teaching of creationism in schools as wrongheaded because it's "shoddy science, not science at all, really." Moreover, this apparent inconsistency runs through much of the book; that is, on the one hand Carter condemns the cultural hostility toward religion while on the other he dismisses in cursory fashion the *substance* of views, like those of the creationists, as ultimately unsound.

In my view, the crux of the problem can be seen in Carter's epistemological chapter (Ch. 11), in which he successfully argues that the discomfort with religiously-based claims stems from the inability of post-Enlightenment thought to deal with claims that don't fall into neat categories of facts vs. values. For example, the statement that there is life after death is a factual claim, but isn't testable by "scientific" mental observation. Carter faults the so-called liberal mind for simply rejecting such a factual claim without accounting for what might be a rational basis for making it—namely, that it comports with plausible interpretation of the Bible. So, according to Carter, religious claims should not be trivialized as irrational because they defy materialistic proof; instead they may lay claim to "rational-

ity” because they are testable by reference to a text, God’s word (even though he is at great pains to repeat his personal disagreement with many Christian text-based claims). But Carter’s defense of the rationality of religious claims itself rests on a notion of rationality that presupposes the existence of some external confirmation—either material observation or a text.

Carter does not take, or even typically consider, the scarier epistemological step: that there may exist truth for believers that is not testable by *any external means*. Neither here, nor I would guess in any other forum, is there serious consideration given to the epistemological possibility of knowledge that is not “rational” in the sense of being testable by external forces. Ironically, too, it may be precisely the “irrational” aspects of religious life that believers who might be expected to reject religion in this technologically sophisticated and highly cynical culture find most compelling.

It’s not surprising that Carter doesn’t take on such precarious epistemological issues. Being called irrational is about the worst epithet that one can level at one’s opponent in serious debate, especially in the legal academy. And here it may be worth considering whether it’s especially hard for people whose gender or race has historically been considered less “rational” to champion serious consideration of notions that fall outside comfortable post-Enlightenment dialogue. For women and people of color,

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whose membership in the cult of rationality was hard-won, there are considerable risks to challenging that structure. But until we do, we cannot be satisfied that our culture is really taking our religion seriously.

Laura Gaston Dooley

Walter L. Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature According to Bakhtin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

The last fifteen years have witnessed growing dialogue between schools of Biblical and literary criticism as Biblical studies have explored questions of genre, imagery, and narrative. These years have also seen increasing employment of the ideas and concepts of the Russian thinker and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who spent much of his life examining the dialogical nature of language. Walter R. Reed weaves these trends in his fine and timely study of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, *Dialogues of the Word*.

Approaching the Bible as a literary scholar, Reed situates himself between the poles of historical and theological readings. The historical approach, Reed argues, emphasizes the Bible’s fragmentary quality, its “multiple sources and layers of redaction” (167), or, to use Bakhtin’s term, its centrifugal thrust. The theological seeks to preserve the centripetal: it consolidates by emphasizing the unity of scripture’s revelation. A literary reading “notes the tensions between the assertions of discord and assertions of concord” (169), but seeks finally to locate “particular sites of coherence” (170) within the Biblical antholo-

gy.

Why turn to Bakhtin in such work? Reed offers three reasons. Bakhtin himself analyzes and celebrates the struggle between unifying and dispersive tendencies within utterance and text. Second, Bakhtin “acknowledg[es] different historical ‘layers’ within any utterance,” and so is especially useful in approaching the process of canon formation (15). Third, one of the central themes of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament is God’s dialogue with His people, and, as a rich theorist of dialogue, Bakhtin offers much in the approach to this dialogue.

Indeed, Bakhtin proves to be of valuable assistance in Reed’s learned, detailed chapters. In one chapter, he employs Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope to analyze the significance of particular contexts of time and place, three “paradigms of communication” in the Hebrew Bible: law, prophecy, and wisdom (47). The books of the law, for example, transpire in the liminal space of wandering, the wilderness. There, the image of the “house of God” is found in the tabernacle, its portable character reflecting the law’s “lack of geographical fixity” (68). Later, therefore, the prophetic books criticize “the false sense of security” the people feel once the house of God is located in the temple. Finally, in books of wisdom such as Proverbs and Job, the house of God is “creation itself. . . a cosmic dwelling built by God for all his creatures” (72).

Reed presents an extensive and splendid analysis of Job in a separate chapter and illuminates much in this puzzling, mysterious book. The author of Job questions all three of the above authoritative genres as law, prophecy, and wisdom are conflated into a “discourse of justice.” Job’s author rejects such discourse as it “rests on the concept of a covenant or treaty with specific requirements” (128). Yahweh’s voice from the whirlwind, and Job’s