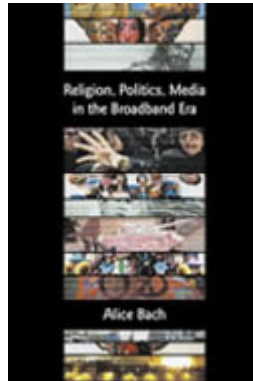


○ REVIEW OF ALICE BACH'S *RELIGION, POLITICS, MEDIA IN THE BROADBAND ERA*

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Richard Walsh reviews *Religion, Politics, Media in the Broadband Era* by Alice Bach. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press; 2004. ISBN 1905048076.)



Bach's book has three movements: (1) a statement of her general perspective (chapters 1–2); (2) a critique of the culture of the recent religious revival (chapters 2–6); and (3) an attempt to create an alternative, resistant space. Positively, Bach advocates the postmodern intellectual's freedom from disciplinary and academic boundaries. The broadband era makes this both possible and unavoidable as it inextricably intertwines politics, media, and religion (including the Bible, Bach's initial area of specialisation). Fittingly, Bach's book is available only electronically. Negatively, Bach attacks self-aggrandising enclosures in multiple forms: the territorial defense of disciplinary boundaries; the academic contempt for the popular (and the related, self-marketing desire to be a public intellectual so evident in the recent rush to offer timely comment on media events like *The Passion of the Christ*); and Eurocentrism.

Throughout, she attacks 'the pattern' of the recent religious revival, 'where the American flag has become intertwined with the Cross, the Nightly News is reported by journalists in bed with the military, and twelve-step programs are as hip as a new dance craze'. This pattern troubles her because it is a Manichaeian 'Siren song', calling all 'to join God, to be on the right side' (p. 4). Ignoring perspective, it proffers an ideology and an interpretation as truth. For Bach, both Bernal – the author of *Black Athena* who posits the African origins of classical culture – and his Eurocentric opponents, for example, are guilty of this self-aggrandisement. Failing to nuance their interpretations and failing to acknowledge their interpretations as such, both fall into a Manichaeian opposition to one another. For Bach, Robert Funk's Jesus Seminar is guilty of the same kind of self-certainty.

In subsequent chapters, Bach pursues this 'idolatry' in various aspects of culture. In chapter three, she critiques the religionists who read films, only to find and report the biblical/religious codes lying close to the surface of their own minds. She strongly critiques the 'false unity' that

such interpretations assume and assert between contemporary film and biblical tropes. Not incidentally, this elision of cultural gaps ascribes biblical authority to contemporary Manichaeism. Instead of commenting on film herself at any length, Bach focuses on the 'reciprocal and heuristic relation of the spectator to the work' (p. 36) and on the 'cultural engine that spits out Bible movies, so certain about right and honor and God on our side' (p. 41).

In chapter four, she addresses religious marketing directly. The recent revival of 'biblical correctness' means huge economic successes for 'Christian businesses', for Christian books and films targeting children like VeggieTales, for films like *The Passion of the Christ*, and for a capitalist revival of a new cult of relics, now featuring largely plastic items. Despite the rhetoric about faith in these enterprises, Bach finds only a faith in merchandising and a 'Christianity-lite' that offers unchallenging moral lessons and supports a broader cultural Manichaeism.

In chapter five, Bach – in a fashion reminiscent of Robert Jewett's *The Captain America Complex* – attacks the American civil messianism that is the political form of this Manichaeism. After September 11, 2001, the Bush administration employed rhetoric about the United States as a redeemer nation that masked the violent and exploitative character of its foreign policy. Failing to investigate the administration's claims, the media simply repeated the administration's message. Religious evangelicals joined the imperial task force by targeting Muslims for conversion. The result is a movie, held over by popular acclaim, featuring George W. Bush in the role of 'the American action figure Moses' (p. 71) and substituting the law of force for the force of law (p. 90).

In chapter six, Bach continues her analysis of the media's creation of reality (cf. Baudrillard) by comparing the media's presentation of recent First Ladies with biblical stereotypes about admirable wives and mothers (e.g., Prov 31). Given the nature of American culture, the esteemed First Ladies are the 'first consumers', not the thrifty, productive wives once imagined by biblical authors. Thus, the media and the populace are more comfortable with Laura Bush, the model 1950s wife, than with Hillary Rodham Clinton. The shenanigans of the Bush daughters, however, illustrate risible cracks in this construct.

Finally, Bach offers a non-violent alternative to the unholy cultural union of religion, politics, and media. Her final two chapters resist and, thereby, expose the recent, religious 'pattern' as the construct that it itself is. To this end, Bach connects Rizpah (2 Sam 21) and recent Women in Black, each of whom protests imperial violence simply by standing as silent witnesses of it. Particularly concerned with violence against women, Bach calls attention to the constructed nature of 'rape' and to the naturalising justifications of that violence inherent in rape's 'normal' biblical and American understandings. By contrast, she extols Liz McAlister and the Plowshares, those who risk themselves like Rizpah in nonviolent challenges to the violence of war. In fact, Bach opens her book by acknowledging those who suffer imprisonment for peace.

Bach finds her resistance to American 'normality' in a method that she terms reading 'like Persephone' (pp. 114-115). Like Persephone, such readings move back and forth between divergent spaces, in Bach's case between the safety of the academy and risky public spaces. Like Bhaba's hybrid, such readings try to occupy a third space, a space that strives to avoid both the Manichaeism of empire and its colonised opponents.

Finally, Bach lauds the popular, temporary memorials erected in New York City after September 11, 2001. Like Rizpah, they, too, are silent, non-violent witnesses on behalf of victims. They do not call for redemptive violence. Instead, they resemble women's altars through the

ages, religious spaces outside male hierarchies; altars that connect the sacred and profane without becoming altars of death and sacrifice. Using Shapiro's phrase, Bach describes these altars as examples of 'femmage', the conscious combination of disparate parts into an aesthetic, functional whole (p. 146). That conscious, obviously constructed creativity is her final riposte to the media's artificial 'nature' of things.

This resistance involves Bach in two important paradoxes: (1) she practices in chapter seven what she critiques in chapter three, that is, linkages between the present and biblical tropes; and (2) she extols in chapter eight what she decries in chapter five, that is, memorials to September 11, 2001. Why, then, is she not guilty of that which she critiques?

She admits that she is 'tempted' to link her voice to silent women, like Rizpah, in the past (p. 144). More than tempted, she has fallen, but, unlike those she critiques in chapter three, she is not guilty of naivety. Her interpretive linkage is a deliberate, political act. Her resistance to the recent religious revival and its media constructs is not the truth. It simply resists that which presents itself as the cultural 'natural' (in Barthes' sense). Further, her strategy of reading like Persephone enshrines the theoretical refuge of two spaces – her academic (biblical) specialty (Rizpah) and contemporary public action (the Women in Black) – rather than the essentialising, false unity that she decries.

Finally, Bach also offers a political-ethical justification for her linkage: if the linkage is not made, one leaves silent, women victims of the past to 'gynocide' (p. 134). The voice that she offers these past victims is that of the Women in Black, Liz McAlister, and the Plowshares. Accordingly, the memorials to September 11 that she extols are non-violent and non-Manichean. The temporary, popular altars to the victims in New York City were altars of connection and community, not platforms for divisive violence like those erected by the spokespersons that Bach critiques in chapter five. In short, if she is guilty of what she attacks, her hermeneutic, politics, and ethics differ. Perhaps, then, we should end as she began: Blessed are the peacemakers.