

**Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*  
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Affect theory as a tool for analysis and reflection is an exciting but perplexing recent development in theological and biblical studies. Exciting, because of the interesting and engaged work that has emerged as gifted thinkers find their scholarly voices within its scope. Perplexing, because few books serve as accessible introductory texts for those new to affect theory, and even fewer show how it might be applied to theological and biblical studies. Most books on affect theory either do not speak explicitly to religious concerns or assume a deeper knowledge of concepts foreign to novices in affect studies.

Complicating the issue, affect studies has spawned numerous schools of thought, each commanding its own disciples. The apostle Paul, writing in 1 Corinthians 3 on those who profess to follow himself or Apollos or Cephas or Christ, had nothing on those who align themselves with affect theory's competing proponents. "I am of Deleuze" boasts one, while "I am of Sedgwick" intimates another. In the introduction to *Religion, Emotion, Sensation*, their new collection of essays on the connections between affect theories and religious studies, editors Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore tackle this issue head-on. They briefly identify the various taxonomies by which certain versions of affect theory are categorized, most notably the Deleuzian-Massumian processural track, which largely eschews the place of emotion, and the Tomkins-Sedgwick phenomenological track, which more readily embraces emotions. They also consider the eightfold categorization that Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe in their compendium, *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010). For their part, Bray and Moore adopt a triad of perception, which they call the psychobiological lens, the prepersonal lens, and the cultural lens.

Truth be told, grasping these distinctions, useful as they may be, is not essential for appreciating the ten essays that comprise this collection. Indeed, while each essay employs one or more these lenses, none are explicitly named again after the introduction. Only Donovan Schaefer's opening piece, "The Animality of Affect: Religion, Emotion, and Power," delves into the theoretical and methodological weeds found in the introduction. Anyone familiar with Schaefer's groundbreaking debut book, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (2015), will recognize some of the arguments in this essay, which functions as something of a précis of that larger work. It is also the only piece here that new students of affect theory may find hard to navigate; his keen insights breathe more easily in his book's expansive space.

The subsequent nine essays highlight this volume's great strength: because they all are grounded in concrete situations and texts, they help readers think more clearly about how

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affect studies pertains to real life. As Dong Sung Kim writes in his contribution, “One of the provocative characteristics of the recent theorists of affect and emotion is the turn to the personal and the corporeal, in terms of both the content and style of their writing” (112). Kim’s description exactly captures the best quality of this book: its contributors do not hide their personal connections to the questions they probe, but wear their affective hearts on their sleeves. While use of the personal is too often disparaged in academic circles as “unscholarly,” their unvarnished engagement with specific situations and texts enables those less familiar with affect thought to appreciate its contributions to biblical and theological understanding.

Bray and Moore also deserve praise for the creative pairings of voices and topics they have compiled here, which helps recreate the sense of conversation that surely occurred in the original live presentations at Drew University. In their essays both Gregory Seigworth and Erin Runions tackle concepts of debt as affective expression. Runions makes a particularly bracing argument for how notions of interest and debt are expressed through faith-based prison programs. In showing how the term “interest” may be understood as a state of curiosity, as money paid on investment, or as a personal stake or benefit, she creates a provocative wordplay that is further enhanced by her explanation of how “debt” functions in Christian atonement theory. Her description of how these ideas are then manifest in for-profit prison systems that contract with evangelical groups to aid in prisoner “reform” and repentance makes for what is perhaps this collection’s strongest piece.

The pairing of essays by Wonhee Anne Joh and Dong Sung Kim, both of whom examine situations from their South Korean heritages, is nearly as compelling. Both writers explore issues of grief, mourning, and the Korean concept of *han* in their pieces: Joh as these relate to what she calls “the unending Korean war” and the DMZ, Kim as they find expression in the collective trauma of the 2014 MV *Sewol* ferry disaster, in which 304 people died, including 250 Korean schoolchildren. As Korean Americans living and teaching in the United States, both Joh and Kim are especially interested in how affects can be experienced across time and space: they show how suffering experienced at a distance of both years and miles can nevertheless feel intimate and even traumatic.

While these are the book’s most obvious juxtapositions of essays, nearly all of the pieces resonate with one another in both overt and subtle ways. For instance, in what may be the collection’s most accessible essay, Alexis G. Waller contributes a fascinating exploration of the disputed apocryphal text known as *The Secret Gospel of Mark*. While it is not much discussed today, following Morton Smith’s purported discovery of the text in 1958, and into the 1980s, *Secret Mark* provoked much consternation and excitement for suggesting that Jesus may have had a homoerotic encounter with a young man. In its consideration of a specific (if not actually ancient) text, Waller’s work connects back to the collection’s most explicitly biblically oriented essay, which precedes it, A. Paige Ransom’s Rastafarian reading of the Samson story from Judges 16. And in his exploration of the affective nature of queerness, Waller’s piece also relates directly to what follows, Max Thornton’s “Gender: A Public Feeling,” which looks especially at ongoing tensions over gender identity in ecclesial circles. All three essays speak to the affects of hope and fear that texts and identities may arouse when individuals or groups are confronted by unexpected and possibly threatening alternatives.

The biblical connections are not limited to Waller and Ransom’s contributions. Nearly every essay engages in some way with biblical texts, making it a good choice for professors who are looking for a classroom text that brings affect theory into conversation with Jewish and Christian scriptures. Amy Hollywood’s fine closing essay, “Feeling Dead, Dead Feeling,” draws not only on the Psalms, but also on a range of poetic and prose examples (e.g., Susan Howe, Henry James, Robert Frost, Edward Lear), thus putting the psalter in conversation with broader literary traditions. Moreover, she provides a fascinating contrast with Schaefer’s opening essay, which argues for the prelinguistic dimensions of affect, by making an explicit case that “As our political horizons darken, we need literature and its affective play more than ever before” (206).

As exhilarating as these contributions are, both on their own and in dialogue with one another, the book suffers from several flaws. Throughout, a stronger editorial hand would have improved what is otherwise engaging material. Ransom’s essay almost surely was more effective in its original oral presentation, where the Reggae rhythms he invokes likely were more palpable. Something gets lost in its transition to print. Mathew Arthur’s “Writing Affect and Theology in Indigenous Futures” promised to be one of the book’s most powerful contributions, but run-on sentences and jargon undercut his tantalizing ideas. Minor copyediting inconsistencies and proofreading errors are annoying distractions in many pieces. The introduction promises a closing essay by Mark Jordan that does not appear in the book (11).

It’s unsurprising that Moore and Bray would compile a book that can appeal to a broad range of readers and uses. Moore is one of the pioneers of the use of affect theory (as well as other theoretical approaches) in the study of the Bible, and Bray’s recently published first book, *Grave Attending: A Political Theology for the Unredeemed* (2019), a remarkably creative work of theology grounded in affect theory. Published in Drew University’s “Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquia” series, which includes several volumes edited or coedited by Moore, *Religion, Emotion, Sensation* is another distinguished contribution to the burgeoning literature on affect theory and theology, a literature that is nevertheless seeking a truly accessible introductory text. Hopefully, someone is currently writing such a needed work. In the meantime, by focusing on affect in lived experience, this book takes readers to surprising and often exciting places, and fills in some key gaps in the field.



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