

# Religion & Philosophy

## DECONSTRUCTION IN A NUTSHELL:

### *A Conversation with Jacques Derrida.*

Edited by John D. Caputo. Fordham University Press. 200 pp. \$25 cloth, \$17.95 paper

Though now on the wane, deconstruction raged like wildfire through departments of literature and philosophy a few years ago. It injected a racy spirit of rebellion into otherwise settled academic pursuits. Practitioners of this often murky critical method were clear enough when it came to saying what deconstruction did. They relished terms such as “transgression,” “disruption,” “undermining,” “dangerous rereading,” and “risky undertakings.” Poems, plays, novels, philosophical works—now called “texts”—were scrutinized for fault lines and self-destructing forces lurking within them. It became common to claim that what was absent in a text carried more weight than what was present.

Nor was deconstruction mere literary exotica. In the campus culture wars, deconstruction seemed uniformly to take aim at the “West” while promoting a variety of causes: radical feminism, gay rights, *tercermundismo*, and the generic appeal of anyone (or anything) construed as the Other. Because these causes were seen as inverting traditional categories of thought, they themselves remained (temporarily, at least) out of the line of fire. Deconstruction’s rhetoric, when not opaque, urged revolution, melodramatic aggression, even terrorism.

This volume suggests that deconstruction has been misunderstood. It records a conversation with Jacques Derrida held at Villanova University in 1994 at the inauguration of a doctoral program in philosophy. A long commentary by philosopher Caputo follows. Derrida declares his admiration for Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and the institutions that teach about them. He adds, however, that deconstruction does not merely seek to reproduce the past but to open up the new

even as it remains in contact with the old. If so, then why all the fuss? Philosophers have always reread and reconceptualized their predecessors in search of other truths. In this new mode, Derrida sounds like a politician practicing spin control.

The intemperate tone of Caputo’s commentary belies—one is tempted to say deconstructs—Derrida’s effort. At one point, he repents of the “violence” he himself inflicted on Derrida at Villanova—meaning not that he assaulted the philosopher but that he asked him to speak in English for a limited time. It is typical of deconstruction to characterize the constraints of ordinary social events as “violence.”

Deconstruction has been misunderstood by many critics as mere nihilism. In theory, it claims a perpetual openness to greater understanding and new perspectives. In practice, though, it has had all the effects of nihilism. The rhetoric of its advocates, by turns impenetrable and reckless, and their refusal of “premature closure” (meaning acknowledgment of truth), have often been wielded as weapons of intimidation. After such fireworks, it will take more than one conversation or commentary to clear the air.

—Robert Royal

## INSIDE THE VATICAN:

### *The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church.*

By Thomas J. Reese. Harvard University Press. 317 pp. \$24.95

As you walk from Saint Peter’s Square along the Via di Porta Angelica toward the entrance to the Vatican Museum several blocks away, the massive Vatican City wall on your left rises higher and higher, until it is no longer possible to see over the top. In this, his third book on the government and politics of the Roman Catholic Church, Reese, the author of *Archbishop* (1989) and *A Flock of Shepherds* (1992), takes us behind that wall. Combining historical research, on-site observation, and interviews with more than 100 key



players, Reese does a remarkable job of mapping the baffling, venerable, multilayered bureaucracy that serves the pope.

On the larger questions of church governance in the 21st century, Reese is less penetrating. For instance, he correctly points out that the Vatican has, like other large bureaucracies, developed a life of its own. But he does not explore whether the curia's growing power has begun to eclipse that of the college of bishops—or whether the Vatican will allow local churches and episcopates greater control over their own affairs, including the appointment of bishops. The reluctance to address these thorny issues is regrettable, not least because of their relevance to the

Vatican's current troubled relationship with the Catholic Church in America.

On the prospects for change, Reese offers little in the way of realistic prediction. In passages studded with phrases such as “there is a need” and “it might be better,” he makes his own wishes clear: more collegiality, more lay involvement, more openness in the Vatican's way of proceeding (not to mention larger doses of faith, hope, and love). But despite his careful reportage, he does not give a sense of how many in the Vatican share his sentiments, and how many continue to regard the church as a fortress against a threatening world.

—Thomas M. Gannon, S.J.

## Arts & Letters

### GENESIS:

#### *Translation and Commentary.*

By Robert Alter. Norton. 324 pp. \$25

### GENESIS:

#### *A New Translation of the Classic Biblical Stories.*

By Stephen Mitchell. Harper Collins.

161 pp. \$20

We credit episodes from the Book of Genesis with a vivid and irreducible simplicity, so etched are they into the minds of countless Bible readers. Yet biblical scholarship reveals the text itself to be full of knots and snares. The more attentively it is inspected, the more elusive it becomes, like a Seurat painting that dissolves into dots when approached.

The stories in Genesis are the work of at least four different writers—probably more. These authors are distinguishable by style and narrative practices, including the various names they give to God (Yahweh, Elohim). Perhaps five centuries, the interval between the tenth century B.C. and the fifth, separate the earliest portions of Genesis from the latest, and it was only in the fifth century B.C. that an editor, sometimes known as “the redactor,” wove together the various strands of received narrative. Those who believe in the divinely inspired character of the Bible would have God directing the redactor's choices. To nonbelievers, the redactor is more akin to Homer, who also gave a final masterful shape to

materials that had existed independently for centuries.

These two new translations of Genesis, each with its own individual eloquence, seem directed to different audiences. Alter, professor of literature at the University of California at Berkeley, includes a running commentary on his translation. At times, those comments—philological, literary, historical—leave room on the page for no more than half a dozen lines of translation. This is a Genesis for patient readers at ease with ambiguity and irresolution.

Alter is especially good at conveying the feel of a language that routinely juxtaposes phrases or sentences without the use of subordinating conjunctions (the practice is called “parataxis”). The insistent “there-ness” of Genesis (as of Homer) derives in good measure from the power of parataxis. In a world described by language that lacks the habit of grammatical subordination, every event is a defining event.

Mitchell, an accomplished translator of poetry and religious texts, offers “a new translation of the classic Bible stories” intended for readers who want a swift, uncluttered narrative. The whole of each elegantly designed page is translation; notes and comments are saved for the back of the book.

More significantly, Mitchell omits some parts of the biblical text and rearranges others, because he wants to strip from every