

# Against 'Political' Theology

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In the fair land of the post-secular, where Emperor Reason has put off the new clothes of neutrality, trading them for the local garb of tradition, and when Religion has returned from her banishment in land of mere feelings and experience, partially self-imposed, are these two now fit for marriage? Now that naked Reason has put back on the garments of particularity, of local community, of partiality, and Religion has returned to the social, even political, arena, can this kingdom flourish amid this union, and what offspring will they bare? Or might an illegitimate child, otherwise known as fundamentalism, raise its ugly head, ruining this happily ever after bliss? Is this land of the post-secular an ancient fairy tale with a happy ending or modern morality play offering a stern warning? Or perhaps an epic combining elements of both? Like all good stories it depends on who is telling it, and what they think of the emerging main character, political theology.

Mark Lilla, in *The StillBorn God*, sees the return of political theology as a catastrophe, betraying the foundations of political philosophy. For Lilla, political theology always depends upon a picture of reality linking together God, humanity, and the world, basing its claims on divine authority and/or cosmological speculations, each of which reduces the political to a subcategory of the theological. For Lilla, the hero of modernity comes in the dashing figure of Political Philosophy who separates the religious from the political and speaks of politics purely in human terms. "For public policy must

be based on publicly arguable reasons,” he says.<sup>1</sup> Lilla calls this the Great Separation, first articulated by Hobbes, and extended by Locke and Hume.

But rather than building on the successes of the Great Separation, Enlightenment philosophers slowly distorted this great Hobbesian Hero of Political Philosophy, reducing him to a partially schizophrenic, mostly bumbling citizen of modernity. Lilla reads Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel as inadvertently transforming modern political philosophy back into a political theology, opening the door for a messianic backlash in the early twentieth century when liberal theology began to crumble (i.e. Barth and Rosenzweig). Against Hobbes, Rousseau introduces the goodness of the natural sentiment of religion, *if* it is uncorrupted by dogmatic speculations. Rousseau thought that the suppression of religion made humanity less human. Kant followed by reintroduced God through the backdoor of morality. Kant confuses the issue of political philosophy and political theology because while revelation does not inform the dictates of reason or politics, morality, which is separate from reason or politics, required faith in God. Rather than modern Epicureans like Hobbes and their theological rivals trading on clear contrasts between reason and revelation, state and church, innovation and tradition, Kant developed a “novel kind of theological-political fantasy” where the priest and prince lie down in moral peace.<sup>2</sup> With Hegel the final move is made toward a thoroughly modern political theology (and note should be made of “thoroughly *modern* political theology”) when he claims that the priest and the prince, and the philosopher, have always been talking about the same things in different ways, and that religion should be acknowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God* (Vintage Books: New York, 2008), 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

as a principle conduit of truth and knowledge, rather than as the principle power for producing fear and ignorance. Religion, for Hegel, is the source of freedom and truth for everyone; while philosophy is such only for some. So Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel inaugurate a dangerous new trajectory in modern thought, opening the door much too wide for theology.

And in a sense Lilla is surely correct in his assessment of this new this modern political theology. When a huge anthology like De Vries and Sullivan's *Political Theologies*, containing selections from philosophers, political scientists, historians, and sociologist, offers only one essay by a theologian,<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict, and another volume with "political theology" in the subtitle says next to nothing about God, theology, or any actual existing religion, using instead Lacanian theory as a cipher for the divine,<sup>4</sup> it is easy to confirm Lilla's suggestion regarding the emergence of a thoroughly modern, might I add, humanistic (or anti-humanistic) political theology. Or perhaps it is better to say a secular political theology. One need only consider the work of Slavoj Žižek, who could be properly called an atheist political theologian. Whether this is the fall of politics by theological corruption, or the cooptation of theology for politics, or something else altogether, is up for debate (a debate hopefully conducted through this seminar in the months to come).

### ***The Political***

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<sup>3</sup> Hent De Vries, Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santer, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

But just what is this “political” that is placed before theology, to the delight of some and consternation of others? With Jeremy Valentine, it is helpful to note the difference between ‘politics’ as the practical activities of power from the ‘the political’ which seeks to “ground, explain, or distinguish and locate these activities as a specific sphere of thought or action.”<sup>5</sup> There can be roughly three ways the political does this. The first is the modern approach seeking to ground particular politics in a presumably self-grounded political field. This was initiated by Hobbes, but continues currently in the works of Rawls and Habermas. For Rawls the political is grounded through the conception of ‘justice as fairness’ legitimating laws according to public reason. For Habermas the political is grounded in non-instrumental communication and rational consensus. From this perspective, the political is a self-grounding, or relatively transparent object of research that gives direction to our actual practices of power, or our material and regional politics. Against this approach are the anti-moderns who seek to place the origin of the political within a premodern or classical context. Here Valentine places Strauss and Arendt for their longing to return to some originary *polis* or *sittlichkeit* lost to humanity by modern liberal individualism. Either of these two options sees the political in substantive terms, and philosophy merely as an activity, such that political philosophy means to philosophize about the political, an object secured in advance. In this way, the word “political” has crept from its adjectival form into being used more as a noun.

Against these tendencies Valentine notes a third option, the post-foundationalist, which admits that the political is always connected to a contingent formation or

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Valentine “The Political,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2006), pp. 505-511.

expression of a particular politic. Or more radically, the political is the failure of every practiced politics to ground itself, and this failure is itself part of politics. Examples would be Jean-Luc Nancy's inoperative community, Laclau and Mouffe's hegemonic struggle, Sheldon Wolin's fugitive democracy, and William Connolly's agonistic pluralism.<sup>6</sup> This option sees the political in more of the original adjectival use, such that what counts as political is merely the theorizing of or on the practice of politics itself, but usually with the tragic assumption of fundamental antagonism or struggle. This usage is retained in the more popular, and often pejorative use of "political" as in, "Oh, she's being so political about these issues," meaning that one is biased or partisan. These differences between the substantive use "political" as a noun and its use as an adjective often lead to confusions when discussing political philosophy or theology.

### **'Political' Theology**

So where does this us leave regarding "political" theology? If the political falls into either of the first two modes, functioning more as a noun, becoming an autonomous object of study or a lost human situation, then theology has more than likely become a mere civil theology or civil religion *or* is engaging in a nostalgic idealization of either politics or theology, or both. We should be against this mode of "political" theology. In a certain sense we should adopt the posture of post-foundational political theorists where the political is always the particular expression of an actual existing politics (with a special emphasis on a politics of liberation or equality). But these theorists often risk absolutizing the tragic, finite aspects of human existence making agonistic struggle the final horizon of politics (often in the form of saying that this struggle is the only option

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 508-511.

against fascism, and therefore this struggle is itself the means of keeping the peace). This is the route of much recent “radical political theology” which feels it necessary to add ‘radical’ as an augmentation of both political and theology. But it seems that what ever might be theological in this kind of radical political theology is again overdetermined by the political, albeit now as constitutive gap or failure rather than substantive object. But if this is the case, shouldn’t we again be against political theology? Indeed, I would say this last form is more of a political philosophy of religion, with scare quote around at least one of those word (‘political’ philosophy of religion or political ‘philosophy of religion’).

But what remains? As many of you have probably already thought, just as there is no such thing as ‘religion’ generally, but only particular religions, so also with political theology. There is only Christian, Jewish, Islamic, or Hindu political theologies. Each particular religion has its own engaged politic of which political theology is its expression, but not merely in a descriptive, but also prescriptive, sense. Only along these lines would I say that we could be *for* ‘political’ theology. For the Christian tradition, of which I am the most familiar, it would be something like a ‘politics of Jesus,’ the depth of which this seminar hopes to plum. But, to conclude, why, when Jesus declared, “Which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven or rise, take up your mat, and walk,” or proclaimed the Son of Man to be the Lord of the Sabbath, or responded that one give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s, or when he remained silent before Pilates questions, surely Jesus, his supporters, and opponents all understood these as social, theological, and political in nature leading inevitably to his death, why is it that only now *political* theology makes these explicit? Surely this is not a revelation only recently

made, but rather a remembering of theology itself, a forgetting cause by...(choose your own culprit: Enlightenment, nominalism, Constantine, Hellenization, Paul,..). If this is not a revelation but a remembering, why speak of 'political' theology and not just again of theology itself? And if so, in our fair land of the post-secular, with the marriage of Reason and Religion, does our story end with the return of theology? Perhaps. But we have to get to the end of the tale first!