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September 15, 2011

For the Political Theologies Seminar's "Sampling Political Theology"

*Genealogy, Memory, and the Danger in Political Theology*

I am focusing on two points for this presentation. The first is to complement Geoff's political-philosophical account with a very short genealogy of the theological side of political theology that concludes with questions about the current state of political theology. The second point is to address what might be simultaneously the most obvious and insidious danger for political theology—the instrumentalization of faith—and how one political theologian shows that political theology at its best is oriented by faith, rather than incorporate faith as a tool for a political project. The implication is that perhaps there is a fresh way forward for Political theology if it does not lose its foundation in faith.

*Carl Schmitt*

Carl Schmitt is considered the one to coin the phrase "Political theology." Of course there are figures that appear long before Schmitt, like Augustine and Aquinas who are topics of conversation in political theology, but it is with Schmitt where the narrative begins.

Schmitt was controversial while alive and his legacy is still contentious, not because he was excommunicated for a divorce and remarriage, although he was, but for his Nazi involvement before the second war. Schmitt was a jurist, and his work between the wars was highly critical of political liberalism (individualism), and its manifestation in Germany: the Weimar Republic. The depth of his involvement in Nazism is contested—even the Nazis who discredited Schmitt in 1936 did so on the basis that he was an opportunist—but it is more than

worrisome that his thought had difficulty accurately interpreting Hitler's rise, and for some Schmitt is seen to, perhaps inadvertently, pave the way for the Nazi dictator.

In Schmitt's short volume, *Political Theology*, he is famous for phrases defining sovereignty as "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception," and that the political follows the theological, "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development...but also because of their systematic structure...."<sup>1</sup> Schmitt is also known for defining the political as that which makes the friend-enemy distinction. Schmitt's sovereign exception is characterized by a voluntarist-nominalist conception of arbitrary authority above jurisprudence by deciding when the exception can be made and for whom. Combine the exception with Schmitt's definition of politics stemming from a broken theological reading that rooted the friend-enemy distinction in the command to love the neighbor and the result is troubling.

While Schmitt's thought is fraught with difficulties, nevertheless, his work is currently undergoing a revival of sorts as political theorists, philosophers, and theologians grapple with the rhetoric of exception to justify violent American responses to the attacks of September 11. As much as Schmitt's work may have been problematic, it seems to many today that he did grasp part of the underlying logic of political liberalism: the state is bigger than its jurisprudence, despite what the state may claim.

*Johann Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothy Sölle*

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<sup>1</sup> *Political Theology*, 5, 36: "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts. The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology."

Interestingly, “Political Theology” as a term was defined rather differently after World War II. Johann Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, and Dorothy Sölle are those with the closest association to the term. Rather than the dynamics of jurisprudence and liberal politics, the post-war generation dealt with death, suffering, and bourgeois Christianity—both on a structural scale and in their own lives.

While most people today know of Moltmann for his hope theology, few still remember Metz and even less remember Sölle. Metz I will get to later, but I do want to mention Sölle here. Sölle wrote much less than the other two, perhaps because for many years she was a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York for six months of the year, but mostly because she was an activist, or perhaps better put, a mystic who saw mysticism as political. Her best known English work was titled *Suffering*. It was largely an argument against a perverse theodicy: that saw human suffering as part of a greater good because the suffering is caused by an all-powerful deity. Sölle’s constructive proposal was a theology of solidarity—a conception of God who is powerless and suffers with humanity. Of the three, Metz, Moltmann, and Sölle, it was Sölle who was also a liberationist, although Metz and Moltmann did interact deeply with liberation theology.

### *Current camps*

While Schmitt and the post-war generation clearly defined what political theology was about during their days, the current discussion is characterized by a plurality of themes and camps.

Some are inheriting and putting forward the legacy of the Death of God theology from the 1960s. Here they recognize that Schmitt was correct in identifying the sovereign exception as constitutive to political liberalism, but the answer then is to get rid of all transcendence so there is no authority to decide the exception. Generally this is done in a thoroughly immanentist theology that pulls from the tradition of Spinoza and Deleuze. Clayton Crockett, with his very recent *Radical Political Theology*, is an example. He calls his theology a ‘radical theology’ to undergird a ‘radical politics.’ But this is not simply a rehashing of the Death of God, there seems to be an affinity between radical theology and process theology—the process theologian Catherine Keller, who has done work on power and love, speaks highly of Crockett’s book in which she features.

Then there are the continental philosophers, like Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek, who have apparently been called the new political theology.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, all three figures have written on St. Paul in some major way, like Badiou’s focus on Pauline universalism. Agamben, out of the three, draws most consistently and heavily from Schmitt and Foucault—the notion of exception is key to Agamben’s project. Žižek has done his own work on Christianity, but has also partnered in debate with John Milbank in works like *The Monstrosity of Christ*.

Which leads me to the next camp, the British: scholars like John Milbank, Philip Goodchild, Graham Ward, and Rowan Williams. And there is Philip Blond, a former student of Milbank, by advocating Red Toryism has the ear of the current Prime Minister. Only geographically and in addressing common themes like political and economic sovereignty do scholars like Goodchild, Ward, and Williams fit in this camp with Milbank—this is to say I do

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<sup>2</sup> Take for example, the journal *Political Theology*, with its guest editorial by Creston Davis that directed an entire issue on “The Continental Shift” (11.1)

not simply mean Radical Orthodoxy, whatever that was, when I mention Milbank. While each has done their own work, for the curious, all these names and more come together under a collection edited by Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, titled *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*.

Another camp seems to be made up by Stanley Hauerwas and his former students, like D. Stephen Long, Michael Budde, and William Cavanaugh, who, with Peter Scott, edited *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*. There are other former students like Therese Lysaught who may or may not accept the label of political theology, but this brings up an interesting point: how much of Christian ethics, particularly social ethics, overlaps or fits into political theology today? Is political theology reorienting the theological and ethical discussions, or becoming a meta-category?

This is an important question that would not only explore the interaction between political theology and liberal protestantism's focus on social ethics, but also how political theology today can be related to liberation theology. For Moltmann and Metz, they did political theology—or saw political theology as an outgrowth of fundamental theology—but they were not liberationists. They certainly interacted with liberationists, but they were not liberationists. But now, is political theology wide enough or has liberation theology expanded to allow for liberation theology and political theology to be fused, or one within the other?

My point here with the genealogy is to show that there are themes and topics that characterize political theology—like sovereignty and death—rather than a school of thought.

What we do not have yet is a consensus on the term political theology for the contemporary discussion beyond central themes.<sup>3</sup>

*The Danger of Instrumentalization and Handling Faith Appropriately*

These questions, and the lack of answers, indicate numerous dangers for political theology. Is political theology reframing liberal protestantism's predominant construal social ethics for the last hundred years? Is political theology too philosophical and not activist enough? And one wonders how much of political theology today is substantive and how much is marketing on a trend considering the increasingly prolific use of the phrase without clear definition. But these questions require more time to answer, not only more time than what is allowed for me to talk, but also more time for the professional discussion to work towards sorting itself out.

One danger I do want to address is simultaneously an obvious *and* insidious for political theology: that is, the instrumentalization of faith. I hope to show here that political theology at its best is oriented by faith, rather than incorporating faith as a tool for a political project, which is my worry with Clayton Crockett.<sup>4</sup>

Johann Metz is known in part for maintaining a dialogical emphasis on both the mystical—Christian faith—and the political—the social—in such a way that does not collapse

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<sup>3</sup> This much is admitted to by Michael Kirwan in *Political Theology: An Introduction*. But Kirwan does make the decision to bracket out liberation and feminist theology despite that they with deal with sovereignty and death in their own ways.

<sup>4</sup> Crockett forthrightly admits that he is fighting the religious right on the same plane of ideological politics. See the intro to *Radical Political Theology*. So he may not disagree that he is using faith, and then call into question that what I am saying here is simply another ideology. Considering Metz's propensity to seek to avoid ideology, and since he is the substance of my argument, I hope that a conversation about ideology will not be settled easily or quickly.

the two. In fact, they must be affirmed together, or in his estimation, the imbalance results in “either the reduction of following Christ to a purely social and political dimension of behaviour or its reduction to private spirituality.”<sup>5</sup> But how these categories are engaged is through a particular route, which is to say, Christian discipleship is both mystical and political. And Christian discipleship, for Metz, stems from memory, specifically *anamnesis* centered on Jesus. Thus it is the memory of Jesus that forms the community and the individual within that lives in both the mystical and political. Metz calls this memory of Jesus a dangerous memory—it is corrosive to the necropolitics of the *status quo*.<sup>6</sup> This is why Metz says that discipleship is class treason.<sup>7</sup> In sum, for Metz, faith is constitutive for the liberating life of Jesus to be embodied.

I hoped to have shown that for Metz, who actually has some interesting parallels to Hauerwas’s focus on narrative, that faith is not an instrument for a political ideology. Therefore, the way I like to describe political theology at its best, is teasing out the political implications of the deep Christian beliefs—to take seriously the idea of God’s rule, particularly as Jesus taught us to pray about the Kingdom and God’s will: “on Earth as it is in Heaven.” But of course with the recognition that, at the same time, the rule of God is also not-yet.

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<sup>5</sup> Metz, *Followers of Christ*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 210. The word necropolitics comes from Achille Mbembe, “NecroPolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11-40.

<sup>7</sup> Metz, *The Emergent Church*, 14-16. Class treason is Metz’s phrase, but the logic is found in love: “When the paraxis of Christian love is placed under the sign of this obedience, which forbids us to confuse the mystery of God’s will with the quite non-mysterious will to self-preservation endemic to our familiar patters of life, then something of the messianic power of this love may be revealed. It strikes deep into our preconceived patterns and priorities of life. It has power to change hearts, power not to increase sufferings but to take them upon itself. It has the power to show unconditional solidarity, to be partisan, yet without destructive hate which negates individual people. It combines within itself the program of holiness with that of militant love—even to the foolishness of the cross” Metz, *The Emergent Church*, 15.