

**Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World.***

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**Clayton Crockett, ed. *Religion and Violence in a Secular World: Toward a New Political Theology.***

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### **The Return of Political Theology**

Like all such 'turns' by which the humanities are narrated, the recent theological turn, or return of religion, has those who view it cynically, as a fashion, and others who treat it more positively, as an apposite engagement with contemporary events. Certainly this debate now occupies a place at the forefront of critical theory, as indicated by the numerous books, collections and journal issues devoted to the theme.<sup>1</sup> But there might seem something particularly frightening about this trend; for many secular academics, theology and religion should have been excised from the public sphere by an Enlightened politics long ago. While they might see the upsurge of, for example, religiously-motivated violence as the proof of religion's poison, there are others for whom such worrisome contemporary

events signify instead the need for careful examination of what is, after all, an enormously complex and influential element of the political.

Two recent volumes, *Political Theologies* (edited by de Vries and Sullivan) and *Religion and Violence in a Secular World* (edited by Crockett), provide the means for orientation amid this theological turn. These patient, provocative and nuanced analyses are welcome in a time when popular criticisms of ‘superstition’ fail to take seriously or even grasp the reasons for religion’s enduring presence in human societies (let alone to question the terms of their own atheistic and/or scientific opposition). Indeed, for all the bemusement and anger of secularist commentators, what the contributors to these collections demonstrate is that an understanding of political theology is essential for the interrogation of so many of today’s important questions—not only the renewal of religious belief but also the decline of secularism more generally, as well as questions of globalisation and the nation state, of pluralism and democracy. The political, it seems, is still theologico-political; perhaps it is permanently or necessarily so. This suggestion is explored throughout the de Vries and Sullivan volume, which reprints Lefort’s famous essay among many other new works that discuss ways, from the abstract to the concrete, in which religion continues to provide challenge, sustenance and scandal to contemporary Western and global politics and self-understanding. The Crockett volume does likewise, while also giving more room to the suggestion or hope that there might even be ways to renew this unshakeable theologico-political heritage towards radical or revolutionary ends.

*Political Theologies* is a formidable book, containing thirty-four essays (divided among four thematic parts) as well as a comprehensive, 88-page introduction by Hent de Vries, the author of *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* among other books, and editor of other important volumes in the field.<sup>2</sup> This introductory text (titled ‘Before, Around, and Beyond the Theologico-Political’) does a lot more than present the volume, though it does this expertly, reviewing the previous work of the many well-known contributors (from Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau to Talal Asad and Wendy Brown) as well as engaging in some detail with the included essays. Moving from radical Jihadism to Spinoza, from philosophy to the everyday, de Vries also provides useful background on further works and events that set contexts and precedents for the discussions that will follow. He weaves among this his own careful argument regarding the theologico-political, coming to some preliminary conclusions regarding the use of this term and its operation (in roles ranging from descriptive to normative) in contemporary and historical debates.

The book includes essays from three related conferences, as well as a

number of other selected contributions, including some important reprints, making it an indispensable anthology. The volume's thematic grouping passes the reader through a number of important areas of debate. The more philosophical opening sections include, as might be expected, reconsiderations of the work of Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, as well as reflections on Greek polytheism and on Augustine, on mysticism and on scripture, and some important interventions on the subject of 'tolerance'. Jean-Luc Nancy's 'Church, State, Resistance' provides an introduction to his 'deconstruction of Christianity' project, which occurs (like many of the reflections in this field) in the trail of Claude Lefort's 'The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?' (reprinted here, as mentioned) as well as Lefort's student Marcel Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World*.<sup>3</sup>

These theoretical discussions gradually give way to a more particular, historical focus. There is a good group on questions of European secularism and Islam as the 'internal Other', in particular the head-scarf controversy in France and the populist challenge to multicultural tolerance in the Netherlands. One finds throughout a consistent questioning of the meaning and operation of what is called 'secularism', perhaps best summed up in Talal Asad's assertion that there are '*qualitatively different forms of secularism*.' (507) Further, against overly rationalist accounts of subjectivity and communication, there is a welcome emphasis on the affective element of demonstration. In particular the essays of Matthew Scherer, on 'Saint John' Rawls, and of Bhri Gupta Singh, on Gandhi, make use of provocative comparisons with Christian hagiography in order to bring out the performative dimension of secular forms of knowledge and resistance. They show that the conversion to belief of one's followers or readers rests on not only argument but the inspirational demonstration of exemplary behaviour.

These thematic consistencies are punctuated by numerous distinctive and often intriguing contributions. Two of the best are on the theme of scandal: Antónia Szabari contributes a wonderful essay on Luther's scandalous speech in the Reformation, and Rafael Sánchez describes the operation of 'monumental governmentality' in South America by reference to the prank by which 'the general's colored panties blew a gaping hole in the theologico-political balloon of the Venezuelan Chávez regime' (401-3). A pair of essays on the religious preconditions of secular states by Jürgen Habermas and the current Pope (which institution Luther referred to as 'the real Antichrist', 'raised up by the devil' in *The Smalcald Articles*<sup>4</sup>) are followed by one on George W. Bush's 'God Talk'. One of the final essays is Thierry de Duve's 'Come On, Humans, One More Effort if You Want to Be Post-Christians!', a lively exploration of Christianity as the 'religion of the exit from religion' (in the wake, like so many, of Gauchet) that takes in the

French Revolution's translation of the New Testament's 'faith, hope, and love' as 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' as well as meditating, via a Lacanian reading of St. Joseph's ambiguous fatherhood of Jesus, on potential post-Christian understandings of gender and embodiment.

The collection maintains throughout a scholarly tone, steering clear of the more polemical arguments that have characterised interventions in political theology such as Slavoj Žižek's, which seeks not only to interrogate but endorse the Christian legacy, if only in its overcoming. All however take very seriously the theologico-political and are post-secular in the sense that they interrogate the question of the 'outside' of the political, whether indicated simply by the 'sacred' character of French republican *laïcité* and the American Church/state separation, in Lefort's statement that 'humanity opens onto itself by being held in an opening it does not create,' (157) or in Habermas's somewhat reluctant admission that 'civil society ... derives sustenance from spontaneous and, if you like, "prepolitical" [including religious] sources.' (254) However, like the seemingly obsolete models of secular neutrality put into question throughout the volume, this 'returned' religion is plural and differentiated in form and effect. Such is demonstrated in the volume's many affirmations of agonistic pluralism as a model for political engagement within a differentiated society, one not simply 'multicultural' but featuring many cross-cutting forms of religious and cultural identification that often undermine or go beyond republican or national allegiances.

If the de Vries and Sullivan anthology leans more towards the political aspect of political theology, the volume edited by Crockett is on the whole more engaged with the theological dimension, though it is not a matter of 'apologias' but instead 'using the resources of religious traditions as well as contemporary philosophy to grapple with difficult problems of religious and political violence.' (1) Indeed this explicit focus, in relation to which many of the contributors draw explicitly on the earlier work of Hent de Vries on just this theme,<sup>5</sup> has seemed particularly urgent in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks through which the terror of religious violence once more entered so spectacularly into the collective imagination.

In his introduction, Crockett frames the collection in terms of what he calls, drawing on earlier work, 'secular theology'.<sup>6</sup> For those hesitant about the use of the term 'theology', Crockett provides a useful bridge in his mention of Tillich's reference to 'ultimate concern': 'insofar as our desires manifest desires for truth, justice, and salvation that ultimately concern our being and nonbeing, they are formally or inherently theological, whether or not they confess more recognizably traditional theological doctrines.' (11) In opposition to the medievalist nostalgia of the Radical Orthodoxy movement,

Crockett draws on thinkers such as Gauchet and Asad in order to problematise any easy understanding of the secular modern as beyond religion. He then turns to Giorgio Agamben's rethinking of (im)potentiality as an important resource for efforts towards 'a truly radical political theology' (13) that is capable of tackling today's most urgent instances of violence, able to rethink not only the sovereignty of God but also 'to theorize political power without appeal to the notion of sovereign authority, which is always religious in some way' (14).

The essays develop from historical engagements with specific thinkers, issues and events to more general philosophical and theological explorations of the possibilities for responding to violence. There are essays on Kant, Levinas, and Derrida, on terrorism and on Auschwitz, on witch hunts as a modern phenomenon and on the phenomenology of the absurd. Carl A. Raschke offers an unflattering appraisal of contemporary pagan trends in which '[t]he "witch" serves as an omnibus metaphor for *stifled alterity* on the whole.' (47) Engaging with the heterological histories of Michel de Certeau, Raschke argues that witch-hunts were a product not of the dark ages but of a nascent modernity. Martin Kavka provides an illuminating and historically astute reflection on what is at stake in reading today the postwar Jewish writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel, articulating plainly a question that is essential for all reflections on postsecular political theology: 'what are the criteria by which we distinguish good and bad efforts at letting God into the public sphere?' (122)

Among the philosophical essays, the more explicitly theological contributions are well worthwhile. Against the theory of atonement and sacrificial exchange proposed by Anselm, B. Keith Putt seeks to restore, via René Girard, an Aberlardian account of Christ's exemplary suffering. Jeffrey W. Robbins reassesses the tradition of radical theology, arguing that it has to date been insufficiently political, and making his own connections with the work of Jean-François Lyotard on the postmodern condition as a response to terror as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's influential argument regarding global empire and the multitude. Robbins short essay provides a useful genealogy of radical theology—from the 'crisis' theology of Bultmann and Bonhoeffer, through the 'death of God', 'postmodern', and 'liberation' theologians—ultimately arguing that 'there is no radical political theology. What we have instead is either a radical theology that effectively deconstructs the theological tradition while maintaining ambivalent or essentially conservative in its basic political philosophy, or a radical political theory of liberation that remains essentially conservative in its basic theological commitments.' (200-1) What is needed, he argues, is a combination of these two critiques that is both politically and theologically radical.

There is ultimately little consensus among contributors as to what the precise contours of a such a theology might be. In seeking for the means to articulate a response to both terrorism *and* the militaristic, us-vs-them reaction to it, not to mention other forms of religious (or indeed divine, sovereign) violence, we find thinkers searching once again among the resources of religious thought. As Robbins argues, 'if the modern history of secularization has taught us anything, it is that we are never entirely rid of religion, and that the return of religion, whether for good or evil, remains a potent vehicle of political mobilization and, correlatively, a potential source of continued violence and aggression.' (195) One gets the sense that we are once again only at the beginning of this inveterate discussion. Scholars wishing to engage with the current resurgence of political theology could hardly do better than work through both of these volumes.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, the special issue of *Angelaki* 12(1), Creston Davis and Clayton Crockett (eds.), and Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (SIC, Slavoj Žižek (ed.); Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (eds.), *Religion and Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- <sup>3</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
- <sup>4</sup> Timothy F. Lull (ed.), *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 513, 512.
- <sup>5</sup> Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).
- <sup>6</sup> Clayton Crockett (ed.), *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001).