

Chapter 1

WHAT IS POLITICAL THEOLOGY?

Mark Lilla in *The Stillborn God* has put a health warning on ‘political theology’. He sees it as a poisonous hangover from pre-modernity, and insists that we should turn instead to its alternative, ‘political philosophy’, for articulating our vision of conviviality. The reader has been warned.

As soon becomes apparent, however, there are plenty of other answers to the question, ‘what is political theology?’ A British theologian, Charles Davis, put the matter trenchantly:

Nothing could be more absurdly untrue to Christian history than the contention that the Christian religion as embodied institutionally in the Church is apolitical or above politics ... The Christian religion has always been thoroughly political, with social and political action the major vehicle of the distinctively Christian religious experience. Briefly, Christians find God in their neighbour rather than in their consciousness or in the cosmos. (Davis, 1994:58)

But how do we move from this kind of principled conviction to specific decisions and commitments – what we normally understand by the word ‘politics’? Another British theologian Nicholas Lash reminds us that ‘[t]he gospel does not itself provide the program for the politics that it stimulates and engenders’, giving us a clue to why this peculiar hybrid discipline called ‘political theology’ generates so much anguish. Christians who take their faith seriously know that it has political implications – that the gospel calls us to imagine and work

for a transformed world. However – here is the anguish – the Bible leaves no blueprint or manifesto for this transformation; only lots of options (some more feasible than others) about what kind of society Christians should be struggling for, and by what means. So perhaps political theology is meant to bridge this gap, between gospel inspiration and specific political commitments. Yet another theologian, Oliver O’Donovan, would seem to agree:

The passage from what God said to Abraham to what we are now to do about Iraq, is one which the intuition of faith may accomplish in a moment, and a preacher’s exhortation in twenty minutes. An intellectual account of it, however, can be the work of decades! (O’Donovan, 1996:ix)

Three Versions of Political Theology (Scott and Cavanaugh)

‘Political theology’, then, consists of prolonged and painstaking explication of insights which, in themselves, may seem obvious. What else might it involve? We have seen that one intriguing description holds political theology to be ‘a branch of both political philosophy and theology’, and we will need to keep this in mind. A good place to begin is the splendid and yet in some ways frustrating *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*¹, a collection of thirty-five essays on a considerable range of political theological themes edited by Peter Scott and the North American theologian William T. Cavanaugh. The frustration lies in the editors’ decision, for reasons of space, to shy away from any programmatic essay that would tell us what political theology is. The *Companion*’s introduction, though only five pages long, is suggestive. First, the editors assert the discrediting of Fukuyama’s thesis of the ‘end of history’ as a result of the 1989 triumph of liberal capitalist democracy. Osama bin Laden has ensured that ‘history has not finished with us yet’! The editors have an expansive understanding of ‘political theology’:

Theology is broadly understood as discourse about God, and human persons as they relate to God. The political is

broadly understood as the use of structural power to organize a society or community of people ... Political theology is, then, the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God's way with the world.

(Scott and Cavanaugh, eds, 2004:1)

Cavanaugh and Scott explore three different conceptions of the task of political theology. First, *politics is seen as a 'given', with its own secular autonomy*. 'Politics and theology are therefore two essentially distinct activities ... the task of political theology might be to relate religious belief to larger societal issues while not confusing the proper autonomy of each.' Secondly, *theology is critical reflection on the political. Theology is related as superstructure to the materialist politico-economic base, and therefore reflects and reinforces just or unjust political arrangements*. The task of political theology might then be 'to expose the ways in which theological discourse reproduces inequalities of class, gender and race' and to seek to reconstruct theology to serve the cause of justice. Thirdly, *theology and politics are essentially similar activities: both are constituted in the production of metaphysical images around which communities are organised*. All politics has theology embedded in it, and particular forms of organisation are implicit in doctrines of, for example, the Trinity, the church, eschatology. There is no essential separation of material base and cultural superstructure. The task then might be one of 'exposing the false theologies underlying supposedly "secular" politics and promoting the true politics implicit in a true theology'. (2)

The first of these three positions sounds familiar from Christ's injunction to 'give unto Caesar'. These words of Jesus are usually read to mean that the secular power has legitimate claims that must be recognised alongside the religious claims of the Church. Each has their 'proper autonomy'; if this autonomy is infringed then both sides suffer.² One small problem here is that this is precisely what the command of Jesus does not and cannot mean! Such a division of sacred and secular would have

been inconceivable in his time and culture, and certainly incompatible with the Kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming. If Charles Davis is correct, that 'Christianity has always been thoroughly political', then this *cordon sanitaire* (O'Donovan) is a distortion of the Gospel. Whether such a separation is even coherent is another matter; theologians have become increasingly vocal about its inadequacy. To mention two: Johann Baptist Metz, one of the key figures in European political theology, has consistently protested against the 'privatised' or 'bourgeois' version of European Christianity, which has prevailed in the modern period, but at an unacceptably high cost: the negation of any kind of prophetic (what Metz calls 'messianic') power to challenge and oppose injustice. This emasculation of Christianity is evidenced for Metz in a triple difficulty for contemporary Christianity: firstly, its domestication by the Enlightenment; secondly, the inability of theology to respond adequately to the questions posed by the Holocaust; thirdly, the plight of the suffering in the Third World.

Cavanaugh is a more recent critic of the modern insistence on keeping religion in 'quarantine'. He stresses that the implicit judgement of this insistence on separation – that religion must be kept private because it leads to violence, while the power of secular authorities is justified because it is directed towards the maintenance of peace and harmony – is false. The alleged volatility of religious belief is a highly serviceable myth, which the secular powers can use to reinforce the legitimacy of their own violence. He argues this through a re-reading of the so-called 'Wars of Religion': this term is anachronistic, he maintains, because on closer inspection these conflicts are more truthfully described as the birth-pangs of the modern state, out of which our contemporary notion of 'religion' comes into being, rather than wars fought on denominational lines (Cavanaugh, 1995; see discussion in chapter 5). As we have already seen, Cavanaugh's view conflicts with that of Mark Lilla, champion of modernity's Great Separation.

What about the second approach suggested by Scott and Cavanaugh, theology as *critical reflection on the political*? This is inspired by the critique of religion that we associate with Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx: here, religion is part of the

cultural ‘superstructure’ that mirrors the socio-economic base. As such, the religious beliefs of the rich and powerful will serve to maintain their interests, by masking the conditions of alienation and injustice on which their privilege rests. As the notorious verse from *All Things Bright and Beautiful* puts it:

The rich man in his castle,
the poor man at his gate,
he made them, high or lowly,
and ordered their estate.³

On this account, religion functions as an ‘opiate’ for the victims of oppression, offering some degree of anaesthetic comfort, but without possibility of emancipation. Such a bleak view of religion seems to be an unpromising basis for political theology – except that theologians would want to draw attention to the positive elements within biblical and church traditions. The strands of subversion and prophecy within Israel’s political traditions, as well as the assertion of God’s preferential option for the poor, can offer as incisive a critique as Marxist analysis. Theologians within this tradition, such as Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, have sought to engage in dialogue with secular theorists of the left (notably the critical theorists associated with the so-called Frankfurt School). They accept the validity of the claim that religion can be alienating and oppressive, but insist that it need not be. They go further in claiming that a purely secular emancipation is impossible, and that without recognition of the religious dimension the Enlightenment dream will forever end in disappointment, even disaster. These claims derive from some critical theorists themselves, such as Ernst Bloch, who theorised about hope, and Walter Benjamin, whose thought is laced with Jewish messianic speculations.

The dialogue between theology and the different strands of Critical Theory has given shape to post-war European political theology. The ‘unmasking’ of alienating forms of religious belief is crucial to the method of the theologians of liberation in Latin America, and that of Johann Baptist Metz, who criticised ‘bourgeois’ religion, as we have seen. The most important recent conversation partner for the Europeans has been Jürgen

Habermas, who has increasingly come to acknowledge the religious implications which others see in his work. As the title of Habermas' important book, *Knowledge and Human Interest* implies, one question is key: *cui bono?*: 'for whose benefit'? Who *profits* from theology being done this way rather than that, *in whose interest* is it to make such and such a claim about God? But the theologians, of course, do not end with this critique, as a secular critic would; rather it is the prelude to a more positive expression of liberative or 'messianic' faith.

The third approach to political theology suggested by Scott and Cavanaugh is the one best suited to a post-Marxist context, and it is the one they themselves would seem to espouse:

Theology and Politics are essentially similar activities: both are constituted in the production of metaphysical images around which communities are organised. All politics has theology embedded in it, and particular forms of organization are implicit in doctrines of e.g. the Trinity, the church, eschatology. There is no essential separation of material base and cultural superstructure. The task then might be one of 'exposing the false theologies underlying supposedly "secular" politics and promoting the true politics implicit in a true theology'. (2)

Hence Cavanaugh's analysis of the modern State as a 'rival' to the true political community, the Church, graphically expressed in his contrast in *Torture and Eucharist* (1998) of the Chilean state's 'anti-liturgy' of torture and the Church's practice of Eucharist. Cavanaugh draws our attention to the curious fact of the State's transcendent hold on us, even to the point at which we are willing to kill and die for it. And just as apparently secular realities (monarchs and presidents, flags and constitutions) are in fact imbued with transcendence, so religious concepts, doctrines and institutions, such as God and Church, have political implications.

So, thanks to Scott and Cavanaugh, we have three possible ways of understanding political theology. Political theology is concerned with:

- the maintenance of a *cordon sanitaire* between politics and religion;
- or with reflection on unjust and alienating political structures;
- or with the production of metaphysical images around which communities are organised.

Divine and Political Authority (O'Donovan)

Our second resource for delineating political theology is *The Desire of the Nations*,⁴ in which Oliver O'Donovan posits an 'analogy (grounded in reality)' between the political vocabulary of salvation which we find in the Bible, and secular use of these same political terms, 'between the acts of God and human acts, both of them taking place within the one public history which is the theatre of God's saving purposes and mankind's social undertakings' (1996:2). O'Donovan calls for an *expansion* of the horizon of commonplace politics, opening it up to the activity of God. Earthly events of liberation provide us with partial indications of what God is doing in history, but 'theology needs more than scattered political images; it needs a full political conceptuality'.

Such a strategy will also seek to enable political theology to break out of the quarantine that has in our time kept religious and political discourses distinct from one another, so as to avoid mutual contamination. By contrast, 'theology is political simply by responding to the dynamics of its own proper themes': Christ, salvation, church, Trinity. We see how this coheres with the scheme of Scott and Cavanaugh, reinforcing the inadequacy of the first of their three models, and affirming the value of the third. This is a matter of allowing theology to be true to its task: 'theology must be political if it is to be evangelical' (3). O'Donovan indicates how political theology of the Southern school (which includes, but is broader than, South American liberation theology) has proved its seriousness by bringing neglected theological themes back into circulation. However, while the Southern school is barely thirty years old, O'Donovan wants to investigate a much longer history of political theology. He discerns a 'High Tradition' which he dates roughly speaking from 1100 to 1650: at the beginning, the conflicts between

papacy and secular authority occasioned by the reforms of Pope Gregory the Great, at the other end, the early Enlightenment seeing the development of a political theory (Moral Science) which is independent of theology. For the most part, contemporary political theology is ignorant of this tradition – hence O’Donovan’s desire to retrieve it.

O’Donovan charges contemporary political theologians with a twofold neglect: as well as this High Tradition, we need to recover the biblical roots of political authority, specifically conveyed in the proclamation *Yahweh malek*, ‘God rules’. It is from this acknowledgement that both the Christian political vocation and secular political systems are ‘authorised’. O’Donovan also calls for more nuanced attention to the positive ways in which ‘Christendom’ has nurtured the early liberal traditions of politics and the secular.

We have seen that O’Donovan challenges the quarantining of religion and politics from each other. This separation, he suggests, arises from two opposed suspicions, a fear of contamination which works both ways. On the one hand, Augustine and Kant each assert that a ‘political theology’ can only be a corruption of theology (or morality) by something baser, namely politics. On the other hand, there is a widespread fear that the rightful autonomy of politics is under threat by religious revelation. ‘In the popular imagination of late-modern liberalism these twin suspicions have broadened and fused together’ and this division has become internalised: ‘Each of us has a mind partitioned by a frontier, and accepts responsibility for policing it’ (8–9).

Once again he commends the Southern school’s attempts to challenge this late-modern liberal consensus regarding the separation of politics and theology. What is often lacking from their approaches, however, is an account of theological *authority*. The only reason, ultimately, for taking up the cause of the poor is because it is a theologically given mandate; the alternative is to be caught in a never-ending game, of ‘allegations of sectional interest volleyed to and fro across the net, never to be ruled out of court, never to land beyond reach of return’. This highlights the limitation of criticism as a ‘total’ stance, what is sometimes referred to as the ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’: ‘Totalised

criticism is the modern form of intellectual innocence ... by elevating suspicion to the dignity of a philosophical principle, it destroys trust and makes it impossible to learn' (11). God commissions his prophets, but they cannot speak only of the errors of false prophets: they are also to speak positively, of God's purposes of renewal and mercy towards weak and fragmentary societies like the people of Israel.

Public Religions in a Post-Secular World

A third source for reviewing the 'theologico-political', though a more challenging one than the first two, is a collection of essays entitled *Political Theologies*.⁵ In his long Introduction to this volume, Hent de Vries offers the kind of programmatic essay that Scott and Cavanaugh shy away from in the *Blackwell Companion*. His concern is to re-open the enquiry concerning religion's engagement with the political (*le politique*) as well as with politics (*la politique*) under the conditions of post-secularity. In particular, the globalisation of markets and information media has had a 'post-Westphalian effect' of 'loosening or largely suspending the link that once tied theological-political authority to a social body determined by a certain geographic territory and national sovereignty'.⁶ This raises the possibility or desirability of a disembodied (virtual, transcendental) substitute for the 'theologico-political body'. De Vries recognises that 'religions contain both an integrative and a potentially disintegrating or even violent aspect of modern societies'; this ambivalence needs to be factored into any account of religion's relationship to the political, a relationship 'which is no longer obvious, let alone direct'. Our current problems are more elusive and delocalised than those of the past, placing great demand on our theoretical skill, and leaving us in need of new concepts and new research practices. 'No unified theory is currently available to hold these trends together in a compelling explanatory account or historical narrative' (8), hence the insistence on 'political theologies' as a plural noun.

In attempting to define 'political theologies' (pp. 25 ff) de Vries begins with Jan Assmann's definition of 'the ever-changing relationships between political community and

religious order, in short, between power [or authority: *Herrschaft*] and salvation [*Heil*]. He then traces the actual term ‘political theology’ through a number of authors,⁷ though rather mysteriously he makes no reference to the post-war political theology of Metz and others, whom we cited above.

But throughout these traditions, one question remains (de Vries, 2006:26, citing Lagrée). How are we to understand the co-ordination of these two adjectives, *political* and *theological*:

- as juxtaposition;
- strict separation;
- subordination of the political to the theological;
- subordination of the theological to the political;
- or interdependence?

The questions opened up by de Vries are a prelude to a daunting collection of thirty-four essays, in four sections: ‘What are Political Theologies?’; ‘Beyond Tolerance: Pluralism and Agonistic Reason’; ‘Democratic Republicanism, Secularism and Beyond’; and ‘Opening Societies and the Rights of the Human’. This includes classic texts by Jürgen Habermas and Pope Benedict XVI, Jean-Luc Nancy, Claude Lefort and Judith Butler. Hardly a book for beginners, *Political Theologies* is nevertheless an important resource, both for the breadth of its scholarship and its attempt (implied in the section titles) to look ‘Before, Around, and Beyond the Theologico-Political’. This volume augments the interest of de Vries in previous writings; arguing, for example in *Minimal Theologies*, for the continued and extraordinary relevance of theology to contemporary thought: ‘I would suggest that we could conceive of philosophical theology as the touchstone and guardian of universality, truth, veracity, intersubjective validity, even authentic expressivity in all matters concerning (the study of) religion and, perhaps, not religion alone.’⁸

An even more impenetrable collection of essays appeared in 2005 as *Theology and the Political: the New Debate*,⁹ and is certainly not for faint hearts. The Introduction from Rowan Williams sets out what he sees as the common conviction of these essays, that:

the fundamental requirement of a politics worth the name is that we have an account of human action that decisively marks its distance from assumptions about action as the successful assertion of will. If there is no hinterland to human acting except the contest of private and momentary desire, meaningful action is successful action, an event in which a particular will has imprinted its agenda on the 'external' world. Or, in plainer terms, meaning is power; Thrasymachus in the *Republic* was right, and any discourse of justice is illusory. (Creston Davis et al, eds, 2005:1)

In place of the 'barbarism' that is being rejected here – namely, the notion of meaningful action in terms of assertion, which raises 'the spectre of the purest fascism' – Rowan Williams sees these essays appealing to an understanding of action as *testimony*. For the Christian, the category of martyrdom is the most distinctive instance of this, rooted in the self-exposure of Jesus Christ to death 'at the hands of political and religious meaning makers'. So a dialogue between politics and theology opens up, with theology understood as 'the discipline that follows what is claimed as the supreme act of testimony, and thus the supremely generative and revisionary act of all human history: the Cross for Christians, the gift of Torah and communal identity for Judaism' (3). This is all well and good, though it is not clear exactly how this wide range of interdisciplinary contributions (Terry Eagleton, Zizek, Milbank, Daniel Bell Jr., Catherine Pickstock, Antonio Negri and others) constitutes a 'new debate'; while the horrendous opacity of too many of these essays renders the category of 'testimony' highly optimistic.

Setting the Stage: the Parameters, the History, the Crisis, the Gift

I attempt in the present book to provide an introductory overview of this vibrant and important area of Christian theological reflection, not least as it is being delineated in the three examples cited above: Scott/Cavanaugh, O'Donovan and de Vries/Sullivan, as well as other commentators. I will introduce themes and authors who are less familiar to a general English

readership: for this reason, I have for the most part steered clear of discussing Latin American Liberation Theology, which continues to inspire a wealth of literature and interest, despite its alleged demise, and whose significance as a ‘cousin’ of European political theology has been noted (see Petrella, 2006). There is a similar lack of attention to other theologies which could be gathered under the rubric ‘political’, such as feminist/womanist, black, queer, and so on, while the challenges posed by Islamic political theology will be addressed only indirectly.

The book is divided into four sections. The first two chapters after this introduction attempt to set out the parameters for political theology. This involves working with a rough and ready distinction in chapter 2 between ‘political theology’ and ‘political mythology’, which leads us to an understanding of politics as *‘katēchon’*, or ‘Leviathan’, or restraining force. In chapter 3, entitled ‘Love of the World’, I will invoke the contribution of Hannah Arendt, an important if idiosyncratic political philosopher. Arendt offers a strident critique of Christianity, arguing for its incompatibility with the sphere of politics, because Christians are incapable of nurturing a ‘love of the world’, and because the Christian virtue of humility ‘separates’ the agent from his or her deed. Though Arendt’s take on Christianity is quirky, it is one which political theology needs to take seriously, not least because Arendt’s own proposals have been influential for political philosophy.

The second section (chapters 4–6) offers a breathless historical overview of the patristic, medieval, reformation and early modern roots of political theology, taking up O’Donovan’s specification of a ‘High Tradition’. Important figures such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin will feature, as well as the challenge for political theology posed by William T. Cavanaugh’s ‘revisoning’ of the early modern ‘Wars of Religion’. The roots of this theology in the Enlightenment hope of Immanuel Kant will also be explored.

Twentieth-century European political theology is a theology of crisis, above all with the challenge of National Socialism, the collapse into barbarism of the Second World War, and the *Shoah*, the attempted systematic extermination of the Jewish people. Out of these disasters there arose a desperate need to re-

conceive our understanding of God, the relationship between Christians and Jews, and the nature of theology. Section 3 looks at some themes in this history (chapter 7), as well as the main figures in post-war political theology: Johann Baptist Metz, Dorothee Sölle and Jürgen Moltmann (chapters 8–9). In general, these thinkers are united by their insistence on keeping faith with the project of Enlightenment, despite its catastrophes, and therefore by a shared quest with Critical Theory (Frankfurt School) for the grounds of hope on which the task of Enlightenment may be carried forward.

By contrast, theorists associated with Radical Orthodoxy, such as John Milbank and William T. Cavanaugh, see in our post-modern condition an irreversible collapse of the project of modernity. They seek instead to resource theology from pre-modern thinkers, notably Augustine, offering a concept of political theology as ecclesiology, or doctrine of the Church, which we examine in the concluding chapter 11, together with public theologies in North America. Both this and the penultimate chapter (which explores the scriptural resources for political theology), draw attention to how questions of ‘eschatology’, or the ‘end time’, are crucial.

The respective section headings are straightforward, I think: ‘the parameters’, ‘the history’, ‘the crisis’. For the fourth section, which treats of the resources for political theology in ecclesiology, scripture, and eschatology, I chose the heading ‘the gift’. Somewhere I felt there should be a more explicit recognition of the ambivalence of religion in the public sphere. The word ‘*Gift*’ in German means ‘poison’.