

○ **REVIEW OF HENT DE VRIES AND LAWRENCE E. SULLIVAN (EDS.), *POLITICAL THEOLOGIES: PUBLIC RELIGIONS IN A POST-SECULAR WORLD* (NEW YORK: FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2006)**

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*Political Theologies* is a timely volume. Its essays address the schism of state and religion just as both of these modern ideas appear to have reached a crisis in their relationship with the other. It is the quality of many of the critiques here, though, that they position themselves in the greater time of philosophy and theory. Their sensitivity is European, coming as they do from a 2004 conference in Amsterdam of the same name. The founding contradiction of secular and sacred looms here, but the terms in use are largely from secular traditions. This appears not to worry many of these authors, whose frequent identification with democracy and pluralism often subsumes the theological into religion under the authority of the state. That democratic theory has so often recognised religion as its constitutive other becomes a convenient means of understanding not religion itself, but the haunting of the political by the religious. The spectre of the repressed has always been good fare for critical theory, and in these essays the religious is that which has returned once again to haunt the pretences of modernity. The state's strategies for keeping itself in power turn out to be religious in some way or another, turning the distinction between the two into a problem of its own accord. One is reminded of Adorno's suggestion that in fact the modern world is more deluded than any previous society, that it suffers more from the messianic and mythic than any other. The extra-democratic allusions of nationhood have become a problem for political theory, whose ideals have long presumed a certain *sensus communis* rather than a *theologico communis*.

Benedict Spinoza looms large in the background of this collection, as the author of *A Theologico-political Treatise* (1670) that radically re-interpreted the Old Testament in both a demonstration and argument for speech free of religious pathologies. Many of the presumptions that Western philosophy and theory make about religion are visible in this Spinoza tract, as the ignorance, unreasonableness and tyranny of the theological becomes a means for arguing the supremacy of reason. Similar strategies appear in essays by Ernesto Laclau and Thierry de Duve.

Laclau's 'On the Names of God' is a deconstruction of languages used to describe God, in the manner of Paul de Man but extending briefly and without sympathy to mystical experience, the market economy and postmodern ethics. De Duve, in turn, takes the opportunity to declare his disdain for the religious, awaiting the post-religious with glee.

Largely, however, *Political Theologies* reverses Spinoza's strategy to target the political rather than the religious, to construct hauntologies of the political and expose the unreasonable rule of reason. Thus it is that the very definition of the political, as a space for reason and communication to mediate all conflicts, comes under close examination. Essays by Judith Wilde, Marc de Wilde and Judith Butler, for instance, take theorists living in Weimar Germany as their theme. Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt identified the ways in which their own state was becoming extralegal, and offer means for thinking through more contemporary states of exception that loom larger and larger in contemporary times. De Wilde argues, after Benjamin, that history is only comprehensible because of theology, while Butler examines the intimacy of violence and law, again after Benjamin. The arguments of Jurgen Habermas, Chantal Mouffe and Pope Benedict XVI offer sophisticated secular structures by which the pluralism of belief might be negotiated. The Pope's argument for secular governance would appear to prove the arguments of Jean-Luc Nancy and M.B. Pranger, elsewhere in this volume, that the state is dependent on theological metaphors to assert its power. Yet the positivism of arguments for secular government are also impoverished as critique, their accounts of legal, democratic and global ideals innocent of the contradictions within which these ideals are situated by other writers. Their strategies for a renewed sense of democracy may, however, prove the only effective means for resisting the twists and turns of the perpetual war being waged on so-called democratic values today. At least they share a language with this state, the discourses of democracy so easily mobilised in the current fever for this system of governance.

Part of the problem with these and other essays is the ease by which they define politics. It is presumed all too reasonably to be the assembly, the public, or the negotiation of plurality. By contrast, the theological remains luminous, its construction in turn dependent on insufficient understandings of the political. In all cases it assumes a place exterior to the state, as that which is private or repressed by the public and secular. Its very definition is political rather than theological, its terms taken from the aspersions that modernity cast against it. Even Spinoza, whose disdain for the theological discourse of his contemporaries is so evident in *A Theologico-political Treatise*, recognised in *Ethics* (1677) that the religious tendency runs deep into notions of freedom and reason. One seeks in vain the views of those who would support a religiously founded state, for example, or for the doing away of the state altogether. Such radicalisms are here subsumed by democratic truisms such as plurality and tolerance. In essays like these (Habermas, Mouffe and Benedict), political theory appears little different from the democracies that have sponsored it, and to which religion remains some alien or prehistoric entity to be reckoned with. It is not only the theological that is excluded by these democratic terminologies, but economic and gender critiques as well. The political requires radicalising here, outside of the liberal-democratic hegemony that has grasped its imagination.

It is to other essays in this massive 800-page volume that we can turn for examples that interrogate the political, rather than presume it. Wendy Brown, for instance, asks precise questions of the constitution of liberalism, exposing the way in which its individualism is constituted by a non-individualised other. The schism of state and culture becomes that between those who have

culture and whom culture has, those in the grip of culture no longer individuals, but unreasonable and uncivilised. Three other strong essays come from a tradition of thought that is largely askance of political theory. These are feminist essays, that address themselves to the constitution of state power at the price of women's sexuality and visibility. Veena Das's essay reveals how, during the partition, India and Pakistan created order out of the disorder of the abduction of women for marriage across borders and religions. This account of a gendered statehood makes more complex the model of politics so often recited in other essays here, the simple contrary of state and religion here turned into a duplicitous relationship between patriarchal terms. The contradictions and conflicts that appear to flare between them would appear after Das's argument to be a problem of power rather than of any constitutive difference. Immediately following are essays by Markha G. Valenta and Yolande Jansen that similarly consider the Muslim veil, and how it is that this garment has become such a forceful issue in contemporary European statehood. Valenta's 'How to Recognize a Moslem When You See One' describes the way in which the state of exception is manufactured as a crisis by which France and the Netherlands are able to reinvent themselves. Jansen's answer is less theoretical and more historical, once again demonstrating how it is that the price of the national and religious identification is paid by women.

It would be impossible to account here for the sheer diversity of these essays and their themes, suffice to say that by the end the volume, which runs to 800 pages, their subjects veer further and further from the subject at hand. Excellent essays on power grids, Bergson, American politics and surrealism appear somewhat misplaced in conversations about the state and its compromises. If there is some message to be gleaned from the volume as a whole, perhaps about the relationship between politics and religion in contemporary times, it would be the insufficiencies of the political alone for a theory of the state, which vastly exceeds the limits of those definitions of political proposed here. It would be interesting to read instead of an account of the state from the point of view of religion, to compensate for Mouffe's agnostic pluralism with the inclusive monotheism of the Sufi's, for instance. Or to turn to the theologies of the land maintained in the fourth world as a redress to the largely spatial constitution of the national and political. Yet it is through the democratic, spatial and ultimately political that Western thought is practiced in its analysis, and is thus ill equipped to think theology on its own terms. It would appear that the fate of political theory is tied up with volumes like this one, in which it confronts its own restricted economy, and is forced to rethink its relations. Mired in religious discriminations and pushed upon by a state of perpetual war, the Europe that spawned this volume is holding onto its democratic heritage as a first line of defence. If I am conflating European government with its critical discourse here, it is because they share in this volume at least the same institutional basis, the same liberal terminology. It is through a volume like this one that the crises of the state comes to be shared by theory itself, and within which theory may have a greater role to play in some less militarised and policed future.