

TON GROENEWEG

## VOLUMINOUS QUESTIONS

Review of: Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.) (2006) *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. New York: Fordham University Press. 796 pp.

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Faced with an impressive volume like *Political Theologies*, a number of questions immediately come to mind. Why political theologies? Why now? And why in the plural sense? It has every appearance that politico-theological issues gained a new expediency, if not a certain fashionableness, in the wake of an era troubled by so-called Islamic terrorism, and its self-proclaimed adversary in the previous US administration, that waged its 'War on Terror' in scarcely veiled religious terms. (For whatever they were worth. In this respect, the book contains a revealing essay on 'Bush's God Talk').

But, of course, there is more. That the new interest in political theology dates back well before the events of September 11, 2001 is already apparent from the occasion of the book. It collects a number of papers originally presented during a series of conferences between 2001 and 2004, organized as a joint effort by the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis (ASCA) and the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at Harvard. This collection is supplemented with essays that were solicited afterwards, plus the occasional reprint of an older essay that further strengthens its conceptual basis. This has resulted in an exhaustive, even intimidating vol-

ume of essays carefully edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, and elaborately introduced by the former.

The book contains excellent essays by well-known scholars like Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Claude Lefort, Jean-Luc Nancy, Paola Marrati, Talal Asad, Werner Hamacher, William E. Connolly, Veena Das, Jürgen Habermas, Samuel Weber, and many others. *Political Theologies* also offers a platform to a number of less known scholars, some at the beginning of their academic career. That is certainly not meant as a depreciation. In fact, the quality of the essays in the book is quite high throughout. In between, some at first sight surprising contributors turn up as well. Authors like Pope Benedict and Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen might appear in the book in a deliberate attempt to broaden the scope and underline the immediate relevance of the issues at stake. As a whole, *Political Theologies* should give an impression of both the urgency and the multiplicity and profundity of questions already suggested by its subtitle *Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*.

Why is it, then, that theological issues invariably and persistently emerge at the horizon of questions concerning the foundation of the political? This is perhaps best explained in the essay by Claude Lefort, '*The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?*', the only essay in the volume granted the epithet 'classic' by Hent de Vries. And rightly so, if only because of its elegant positioning of the irreconcilability of religion and philosophy as key to an understanding of the political paradoxes of modernity. In a very concise critique of 'positivist fictions' about the political organization of society, Lefort explains why 'the very notion of society already contains within it a reference to its political dimension' (152), in as far as it cannot define itself in its own terms. The political dimension is not something that is added to society once its members decide about a 'social contract', but is integral to its very definition. This indeed brings religion and politics, the 'political' and the 'theological' in immediate proximity, as it becomes apparent that 'human society can only open onto itself by being held in an opening it did not create' (PT 157). The entire debate and reflection on political theology then seems to revolve around the question how this initial opening should be determined, once it is granted that religion defines it 'in terms that philosophy cannot accept' (157).

The ‘permanence’ in the title of Lefort’s essay is therefore not just a matter of a survival of the religious ‘in the guise of new beliefs and new representations’ which then will ‘return to the surface, in either traditional or novel forms’ (150). It is, in other words, not a matter of revealing that political concepts are ‘in fact’ theological concepts, or simply a ‘secularized’ version of these. A more profound imbrication of the political and the theological is at stake. The essays in the book explore this imbrication both in a historical and transcendental sense. And of course, ‘political theology’ is nothing but another name for the disruptive intersection of history and transcendence, that opens up the existential sphere of human society, our ‘being together’ – or, to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s more minimal expression – ‘being several’.

From this initial opening a bewildering array of questions arises, to which the almost 800 pages of the volume testify. These questions are more or less directly related to, connected with or simply juxtaposed to, ‘political theologies’ in the truly plural sense indicated by its title. Here the somewhat lengthy, but very useful introduction of Hent de Vries offers welcome assistance by more or less summarizing the main argument of all the articles, and categorizing them under four subsections. In fact, there could be many ways to classify and group the essays in this volume. I would just like to point out two clusters of essays, partly coinciding with the ordering of the book, that for me indicate some of the main orientations in the debate on political theology. By singling out these particular examples, I by no means suggest that they are necessarily the most outstanding essays in the book, though they certainly belong to the more challenging ones.

A first group of essays addresses the relationship between the juridico-political sphere, and the theologico-religious dimension in which it either is wrapped, delineated from, or co-constituted with, in a philosophical or transcendental sense. Nor surprisingly, these essays appear mostly at the beginning of the volume. The contributions of Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau and Jean-Luc Nancy are obvious examples. Apparent from this cluster of essays is the profound connection of the political not with just any form of ‘theology’, but with a specific Christian way of defining it. We would not be going far beyond the scope of these essays in presuming an

inextricable bond between the history of Christianity and the question of political theology itself.

This is most rigorously explained in the article of Jean-Luc Nancy, who stresses first that the division between politics and religion, or between autonomy and heteronomy, is inherent in the institution of the Greek ‘polis’, from where all ensuing models of state, including modern democracy, depart. The key problem then becomes how to include a relation to heteronomy in the constitution of state autonomy itself, without which state authority will ‘dissolve into “administration” and the “police”, which henceforth appear before us as the miserable remnants of what politics could or should have done’ (105). This calls for a kind of ‘civil religion’, for which the state of Rome (even if more in principle than in reality) served as the ideal reference point. Examples of attempts to reinstitute such ‘civil religion’ on the Roman model are for Nancy the French Revolution and Italian fascism. And notwithstanding the ambivalence of these examples, this call is today as valid as ever, in order to make state order ‘perceptible to the hearts of citizens’, to use Rousseau’s words (quoted by Nancy; 108), as a resistance to its rigorous autonomy.

It is with the appearance of Christianity, according to Nancy, that a second decisive moment occurs, namely the strict separation of ‘two kingdoms [...], the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar’ (106). Henceforth all heteronymous relations, all religious affects are placed in the first, and all matters concerning autonomy and law in the second. Then, when we have reached the stage where ‘Christianity has dissolved itself as a social religion, and because of that has tended to dissolve itself as a religion *tout court*, taking with it – again, as a tendency – all religions’ (110) a curious vacuum occurs. ‘Neither of the two kingdoms resists the other any more – except under the brutal form of fanaticisms’ (ibid.), which in fact is not a form of resistance, but of confrontation, not a resistance between two kingdoms, but a clash ‘between empires’ (ibid.). Since a return to ‘civil religion’ is impossible, we end up with the need to ‘rethink, from top to bottom, the whole question of the affect according to which we co-exist’ (110). At the end of his essay, Nancy gives a short sample of this rethinking of the ‘affect’ at the root of our ‘being several’, as is more elaborately worked out in his other writings.

Next to these far-reaching perspectives, a more tacit but no less fundamental set of questions is oriented towards an engagement with contemporary socio-political realities, questioning and interpreting them from a theologico-political perspective. A whole gamut of such issues is treated by different authors, ranging from Latin-American populism, the war in Iraq (Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo), post-Partition India-Pakistan, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Dutch upheaval after the murder of Theo van Gogh, and – above all – the ‘veiling’ affair that emerged most prominently in France in 2006 and led to a highly contested ban on wearing headscarves in French public schools. Three essays in the book are more or less exclusively dedicated to this issue, that raised fundamental questions about the foundations of what is considered to be Europe’s most secular state. One of these is the essay entitled ‘Trying to Understand French Secularism’, by the anthropologist Talal Asad, whose work is among that of the few authors in this book frequently quoted by other contributors.

Asad’s essay, in spite of its seemingly modest title, but in line with his earlier work on an ‘anthropology of secularism’, is a profound exploration of the historical, social and cultural affiliations of some of the concepts that determined the debate on veiling and its presumed religious and political significance. He relates the debate for example to the colonial history of Muslim-French relationships, to the complicated guilt-reversal complex in which the austere position towards (real or presumed) Islamism almost becomes a kind of *Wiedergutmachung* for everything that went wrong with French anti-Semitism, and to the specific character of French gender relationships, as implicated in the constitutional framing of French citizenship. By relating these genealogical traces and historical contingencies to the juridical and constitutional arguments involved in the veiling issue, Asad is able to show that the considerations that lead to the law, most notably in the Stasi commission report that formed the basis for it, are less principled and univocally ‘secular’ than they seem. In defining, for example, why wearing a headscarf is a religious symbol that should henceforth be banned from public schools, the state ‘acquires the theological function of defining religious signs and the power of imposing that definition on its subjects’ (524). That leads to the (not surprising, but in his case well

argued) conclusion that ‘whatever else *laïcité* may be, it is certainly not the total separation between religion and politics’ (525).

The significance of this careful unravelling of the intricacies and inconsistencies behind a legal provision that should define the mutual separation between religion and politics, or, in our terms, between the political and the theological, becomes clear at the end of Asad’s essay. In his seemingly modest plea to ‘content oneself with assessing *particular* demands and threats without having to confront the *general* “danger of religion”’ (526) it is easy to read an implicit warning against any urge to quickly and definitely decide about political-theological issues. It is maybe not surprising, in this light, that the explicit term ‘political theology’ appears only once in Asad’s essay, with a reserve that is hard to miss. That is a sobering voice in a context where, because of the very nature of the subject under discussion, careful analysis easily gives way to epochal questions and speculations.

As a whole, *Political Theologies* thus succeeds in raising highly relevant questions about the undercurrents that feed some of the main struggles of our time. It does so by approaching and exploring the riddling *trait d’union* of the ‘politico-theological’ from two different angles, as it were. Both as profound rethinking of the implications of what Jean-Luc Nancy has called the ‘deconstruction of Christianity’, and as the forceful questioning of some of the most established ideas about secularism and politics, as raised by Talal Asad against the horizon of newly emerging social, religious and cultural formations. For both perspectives, *Political Theologies* now provides an extensive and resourceful reference guide, that will fulfil its potential in the years to come.

Ton Groeneweg works for the development agency *CMC Mensen met een Missie* ([www.cmc.nu](http://www.cmc.nu)) on issues relating to religious identity.

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