

## DOSSIER

### “PODER Y SOBERANÍA: LECTURAS TEOLÓGICO-POLÍTICAS”

*Teología Política: El nuevo paradigma de la soberanía y el poder*

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**MIGUEL VATTER (ED.), "CREDITING GOD:  
SOVEREIGNTY AND RELIGION IN THE AGE OF  
GLOBAL CAPITALISM."  
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*Crediting God* is a timely volume. Increasingly, many scholars are viewing the resurgence of religion with fear rather than with an attempt at understanding (much less addressing) the phenomenon in question. This may be especially true in the United States where the twin events of 9/11 and the rise of an increasingly muscular Christian right have deeply affected the US polity –and with it, US academia as well. But even in so called post-Christian regions like Western Europe, the rise of religion as a political force (and especially the rise of organized Islam) is seen as a threat, one that is often met by resort to stereotypes, generalizations and a sense of doom or paralysis (alternating with xenophobia and racism). *Crediting God* takes the contemporary relationship between religion and politics head on in a variety of approaches, and methods. While no book can definitively resolve this complex and troubled relationship, *Crediting God* gives us a rich and vital sense of how such an undertaking might be further explored.

In his excellent introduction to the volume, the editor (and contributor) Miguel Vatter describes both the risks and opportunities of associating God with an absolute sovereign. On the one hand, such a connection ensures (or has worked to ensure at times) a strong basis for political order. Yet, at the

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same time, basing political order on religious principles risks bringing in a tremendous aporia, an absence at the center of authority and rule (one that can be readily filled by myriad claimants who say they speak on behalf of God). This is the basic conundrum that the essays in this volume deal with.

The first part of the volume offers a very useful overview of some of the main “axial” religions and the way that politics is shaped and informed by them. Fred Dallmayr begins the section by commenting on a paradox that is central to any consideration of religion and politics: in thinking about the relationship between the human and the holy city, Dallmayr sees a contradiction in terms. Dallmayr suggests that we be open to the indecision of the holy/city nexus, that we give up both on trying to control what this city will be (since we can’t) and seeking to abandon the project entirely (since we must not). In this way we are left, not unlike as with Derrida, waiting in anticipation of a polity that is “to come” even as we know it can never actually arrive (and hence leaving the situation far from resolved).

The following essay by Abdou Filali-Ansary does a wonderful job rethinking the position of certain Islamic scholars that have been rather sloppily considered as ‘liberal’ or ‘modern’ Islamic thinkers (or perhaps, he invites us to reconsider the meaning of those terms). He argues that scholars such as Ali Abd-al Raziq and Maaruf Rusafi on their own terms and are not enslaved to a western and thus, ultimately anti Islamic, ideology. He claims that with these thinkers, “the sacred is still there but it has another meaning.” (p. 61). It is this other path that Islam might have taken (or could still take) that is really the payoff in reading this essay.

Shmuel Trigano offers a fascinating study of the potentially radical political implications of Judaism. In what is perhaps his most important point, Trigano offers that the Jewish prohibition against idolatry –and the ban on representation that it demands– safeguards not only the aporia that is God, but also the position of the other within the immanence of the political. A space that cannot be represented is a space that is free (at least potentially) of projection, of hegemonic grasping after the other that often comes in the guise of neutral or friendly attempts at understanding and empathy. The political implications in this view harken –at least for this reviewer– to the work of Walter Benjamin (also considered in this issue by Hauke Brunkhorst and Samuel Weber) in terms of his own interest in the relationship between politics and idolatry. It may be fruitful to think further about this connection.

Ranjoo Herr engages with Confucianism as another axial religion. The inclusion of an essay beyond the usual treatment of Islam, Christianity and Judaism is welcome in and of itself. Herr looks at a fourteenth century Korean Confucianist scholar, Jeong Do-Jeon whose own careful examination and extrapolation of Confucian philosophy reveals an entirely alternative

basis for a kind of democratic polity (one that is rooted in the notion that “Heaven and the people are one and the same”) (p. 96).

Souleymane Bachir Diagne finishes out this section with an examination of the clash between Christianity and Islam in the formation of the modern Senegalese state. Especially in terms of his treatment of the relationship between the Christian Léopold Senghor and the Muslim Mamadou Dia, we see another instance of a “might have been” insofar as the rift between these figures ended a collaboration that might have created a pluralistic religious basis for the polity. This “might have been” spirit, typical of the essays in this volume, rather than being nostalgic or wistful, rereads the history of contemporary religiosity, not as a forgone conclusion but rather as a product of a contingent and contested history, one that remains radically open in terms of where we might all yet end up.

Part Two deals with the relationship between religion and the sustained power of global capitalism (in ways in which the former both enables and resists the latter). Georges Dreyfus argues that the failure of western liberal traditions has allowed identity politics and, through it, certain expressions of religious fundamentalism, to manifest, particularly in terms of India and the rise of the BJP. One question to pose to Dreyfus is why it is that a failure in western rationalism seems to have affected its source of origin –Western Europe– less than other parts of the world?

Hauke Brunkhorst invokes both Benjamin and Habermas in his fascinating exploration of the possibility for democracy in the face of global religion and capitalism. He evokes a vision of Benjamin whereby the presence of a “weak messianic power” becomes almost completely internalized in modern society, allowing for a potential “self-radicalization of modernity” from within (p. 149). Brunkhorst seeks to align such a vision with Habermas’ theory of communicative action. He argues that Benjamin supplies Habermas with a basis for universal solidarity “because the communicative concept of truth implies universal acceptability for all potential speakers, dead or alive, born or unborn.” (p. 152). One issue is whether Benjamin is so helpful for Habermas after all. While Habermas argues that a “post-truth” democracy could not function, Benjamin himself suggests that we are already “post-truth” and have been since Adam’s expulsion from paradise. For Benjamin, there are no truths to anchor our relations and communications, only the ruins and shards of truths that are no longer available to us.

William Connolly’s evocation of an “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” is both terrifying and edifying. It takes the current predicament of a rising evangelical Christian alliance with global capitalism out of the hands of a few, human agents, and reveals it instead as a kind of non systemic system, a machine that is “more potent than the aggregation of its parts” (p. 167). Connolly calls for a counter machine that includes

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pluralizing Christian evangelism. In the face of the resonance machine that he so perfectly describes and evokes, one wishes for examples of other countermeasures as well (something that Connolly provides more generally in other of his works).

Part three was probably my favorite part of the volume. It deals with the question of law, politics and religion. The first essay is a superb study of Schmitt's appropriation of Hobbes by Friedrich Balke. While noting Schmitt's commonality with Hobbes, Balke peels them apart to some extent. He sees Hobbes as offering more genuine popular buy in to sovereignty than Schmitt allows. Perhaps more importantly, via Foucault, Balke sees Hobbes as offering a rationale for the state based on preserving the life of each person, whereas Schmitt discerns between those who deserve to live and those who might not (the latter category representing "bare life"). In this way, Schmitt supplies a dark political theology for our age whereas Hobbes himself suggests a different possibility or path for political and theological work.

Miguel Vatter offers a superb reading of Leo Strauss that (in this reviewer's view) solves a real riddle in Straussian theory. The riddle involves the question of Strauss' relationship to classical texts and, in particular, to whether he condones or condemns the seeming compatibility between virtue and tyranny that emerges out of a text like Xenophon's *Hiero*. In his reading of that text, Strauss seems to reject the turn to tyranny even as he appreciates the classical tradition to the point where many non Straussians read him as accepting (and promoting) tyranny after all. Vatter's answer is that while Strauss does reject tyranny, his rejection is not based on principles that can be found within the classical tradition itself but rather come from Jewish law. Vatter convincingly argues that Strauss introduces Judaic notions of good and evil into his engagement with classical positions. Furthermore, in doing so, we see that for Strauss, natural law is not immutable (as it is for the Greeks) but rather fungible, offering a way to rethink our position as subjects suspended between Athens and Jerusalem.

Regina Schwartz's essay seeks to answer the Pauline view that Christ's sacrifice produces the possibility of justice in the world for everyone. Turning to Levinas, she argues that in the Hebraic tradition, justice can only be done by individual acts. Thus, rather than offering a "miraculous solution to human pain" (p. 220) this view of justice is inherently political because it anchors justice in specific, local moments.

Samuel Weber's wonderful essay on singularity anticipates a future project that is much to be looked forward to (as does Vatter's). The essay is a meditation on the ways in which the Christian power of salvation (or, more specifically, redemption from guilt) has been appropriated by the state and how this move might be resisted. He does so by turning, once again, to Walter Benjamin. In a beautiful and careful reading of Benjamin's essay

“Destiny and Character”, Weber shows how Benjamin sees our guilt as lying not in some original sin but precisely through the juridical categories that (re)produce that guilt. He looks to the singularity of comedy as one way to counter that guilt, a singularity that resists or even obscures the totality within which we are normally ensconced as subjects of the law. It is both to be hoped and expected that Weber’s book on singularity will expand on the political promise that comes with this potential for singularity.

Part four is nominally a section that revisits Tocqueville’s commentary on religion in the United States. In fact only the first two essays really touch on Tocqueville. José Casanova and Lucien Jaume both consider the ongoing relevance and prescience of *Democracy and America* in terms of the book’s religious themes. Both authors are interested in how for Tocqueville, religion actually strengthened democracy whereas today we normally think of religion as a threat to democratic values. Casanova speaks of series of Protestant “disestablishments” resulting in corresponding backlashes. In our own time, that backlash may or may not result in a “new hegemonic Evangelical establishment” (p. 272). Casanova does not want to commit to any predictions. Yet it would be worthwhile considering whether the forces that Tocqueville appreciated in US Christian movements remain at play in their latest iteration. Jaume perhaps speak more to this question by citing Tocqueville’s statement that “religion reigns [in the US] far less as revealed doctrine than as common opinion.” He notes that this also implies that democracy “also becomes a form of religion” (p. 279), an idea that remain useful in our own time.

Eddie Glaude does not reference Tocqueville per se but he does discuss contemporary African American Christianity in terms that are similar to Tocqueville’s (i.e. in historical and sociological ways). Glaude argues against the tendency to either ignore or despise the rise of Evangelism among African Americans. He lays part of the blame for this situation on the ongoing dominance of W.E.B Dubois (who he both appreciates and has issues with). Glaude argues that to ignore the political import of this relatively recent development is to miss out on a big part of the contemporary African Americans political movements. Glaude hints at the relevance of taking a new look at Evangelical Christianity among African Americans but it would be very helpful and, by his own argument, highly important to give more than hints. If this phenomenon suggests a political direction for African Americans –even if it is not the dominant one– it is important to identify and address what that direction might be.

Thomas Dumm’s essay serves as a fitting coda to this fine volume. He describes the requirement for members of a political community to face what he (citing Eyal Peretz) calls the “white event,” something he defines as “a catastrophe that shatters all possibility of knowing and places us in as close to an unmediated relationship to our life as it is possible to be” (p.

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305). The US institution of slavery is the one example he offers but it seems clear that Dumm includes contemporary practices of global capitalism and exploitation as other forms of this catastrophe. He argues that literature offers a way for a society like the United States to face its own catastrophes. Specifically, he discusses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* as works that urge and enable us to face what cannot otherwise be contended with. Turning then to Emerson and Cavell, Dumm illuminates a familiar path in this book: turning to our own traditions as a way to rethink what is, to see what might have been and what could yet be. For Dumm, unless we face the "white event" there can be no movement towards any other iterations of our present situation.

Clearly in such a massive undertaking as *Crediting God* there will be questions that remain unaddressed. It would have been helpful for example to think more about the question of the secular and to see if it itself is as innocent of the religious as we tend to think. Similarly, Vatter's call to think about other traditions that coexist or lurk within the grand narratives of the relationship between religion and politics (such as the republican tradition of civil religion) might have led to other explorations of what Connolly would call counter machines.

Overwhelmingly, these essays are united by a desire to see alternative narratives, counterfactuals and "what ifs" as a counterweight to a sense of an unavoidable destiny. If the future looks bleak not despite but because of an onslaught of messianism, it seems that turning to other messiahs, other forms of thinking about religion and politics, helps dispel a sense of the inevitability of a *Handmaid's Tale* style theocratic police state. Reading this book gave this reviewer courage to think not just about what might have been but also about what can be; not just in some utopian future but here, and now.