

CARL RASCHKE
University of Denver

THE RELIGION OF POLITICS: CONCERNING A POSTMODERN POLITICAL
THEOLOGY "TO COME"

A Review Essay

Hent De Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (eds.). *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. Paperback. 796 pages. ISBN-13:978-0-8232-2644-3. ISBN-10: 0-8232-2644-1.

Mark Lilla. *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Hardback. 334 pages. ISBN 978-1-4000-4367-5.

"The religion of politics," wrote the Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz, "was born from the ruins of Christianity." The political, "or more precisely, Revolution—co-opted the other function of religion: changing human beings and society." It "was the construction of a universal church."¹ From the standpoint of both world and Western history, the present day secular liberal dogma in the West of the necessary dissociativity of the religious from the political is the most curious of eccentricities. The principle derives, as does the American doctrine of the "separation of church and state," from a radicalization over time of Enlightenment anti-clericism and the deep suspicion among eighteenth century *philosophes* about the overreach of political sovereigns, whether democratic or autocratic, especially whenever the power of God might be invoked to abridge the free exercise of human reason and the freedom of the citizenry. The radicalization gathered momentum only in the twentieth century—in America the "non-establishment of religion" did not morph into "strict separationism" until an infamous 1948 Supreme Court decision—as positivist science threw religion as a whole on a broad cultural defensive and the secular utopianisms of socialism, communism, fascism, and Deweyan "democratism" routed all otherworldly hopes as legitimate expressions of collective human longing.

Militant secularism can, if we pursue Paz's dictum, be regarded as the "universal church" of right reason and techno-scientific hegemony. Just about a generation ago this universal church seemed as secure for the long term as the Roman Catholic Church during the high middle ages. But the world has changed drastically in the last forty years. In the same way as unexpected and untoward historical events—the Black Death, the Great Schism, devastating dynastic wars over two centuries, and finally the printing press—brought down the Medieval Church and its once unquestionable dominion, the great cultural upheavals of

¹ Octavio Paz, *Convergences: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 47.

the 1960s and 1970s, the eclipse of Western economic superiority, and the broad Islamist revival are in the process of bringing down the church of right reason.

If the “church” is under siege today as it was in the sixteenth century, who are its critics and antagonists? Or better yet, who are the protagonists of the current “reformation”? The slippery sobriquet of “postmodernism,” at least in Western letters and learning, has become an omnibus term for this complex shift in values, world view, and discursive practices. The phrase may be useful, or thoroughly useless, depending on where we locate ourselves in the conversation. And sweeping, diachronic analogies between the contemporary era and Europe of almost five centuries ago may turn out to be more intellectual grandstanding than profound insight.

Nonetheless, historical sea changes do invite comparison. Just as the Reformation of the Sixteenth century was transformed within a generation from a “monks’ controversy,” as it was first labeled by the Catholic hierarchy, within Christendom to a struggle for the thrones as well as the souls of Europeans, so the “new reformation” is turning political as well. And as the earlier battles continued for the next hundred years under the guise of what historians have labeled the “wars of religion,” so the current tussle is likely to go on for much of the remaining century. In fact, a recent issue of *The Economist* devoted an eighteen-page feature spread to what it calls the “new wars of religion,” profiling everything from the tenacity of fundamentalists in America to the meteoric growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America to the spreading influence of Islamism in Turkey. The implicit message? The intimate relationship between religion and politics will define most of the leading trends of what might be termed the new “global postmodern,” or everything that is *globopomo*.

The beginnings of the age of the global postmodern in this sense can, without debate, be traced back to September 11, 2001. That, of course, cannot be considered the inaugural date for either “postmodernity,” which is in Derridean argot simply a “supplement” to the writing of the historical that can never dated. Nor does it have anything to do with the unfortunately overanalyzed theme of “globalization” which designates a confluence of cultural, economic, social, and semiotic processes that once in a not-too-distant time were investigated under the rubric of “modernization,” or “secularization.” 9/11 has become a kind of historical benchmark, a turning point similar to August 1914, September 1939, or May 1968, when the world all seemed to change at once, and unforeseen and uncalculated forces were loosed upon the planet and dramatic and irreversible shifts set in motion.

It was at that moment, for better or for worse, that the idea of the religious inextricably fused with the concept of the political (Hegel, in fact, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, fought for the supremacy of the *saeculum*, had characterized them as “inseparables”), if only at the time because of the ideological motivations of the Muslim plane hijackers who took down the twin towers. The Islamic tradition with its tribal and collectivist sentimentality, to which the Roman dyad of *religio* and *politia* (for example, the Ciceronian

distinction between private conscience and state obligations) was irreparably alien, suddenly became an object of Western fascination, and became a kind of theoretical challenge to the already fracturing paradigm of the modernist *séculière politique*. Most post-9/11 scholarship in the West has benignly neglected to take the Islamic tradition on its own terms, but under the spell of a late post-structuralist polemics has concentrated instead on attending to it as just one more exigency of alterity and inclusiveness, perhaps as a project of affirmative action as part of the Derridean “democracy to come.”

But recent trends toward “convergence” of religious and the political, often sanitized as the moral imperative of re-introducing “faith” back into public life, still have little to do with any serious effort to grapple with the obvious “alterity” of Western secularism in its ramifying encounter with the non-West, or what Huntington wryly calls the “rest” of the world. The abrupt celebrity marriage of the religious and the political may be more a byproduct of the realization on the part of disappointed progressives almost twenty years after the collapse of Communism and in the twilight of the Bush era that religion can be a tremendous motivating factor in prompting meaningful activism. Thus “faith,” which in the vocabulary of our “post-secular” polity usually connotes a special sort of commitment to certain kinds of public choices or ventures (as in “faith-based”), has to be factored anew into what were once thoroughly material, ideologically grounded theories with their respective implications for *praxis*.

There still lingers also the confused, “morning-after” discovery first articulated by Derrida in 1993 that liberal democracy, the legacy of the West, has no substance in itself but requires an “event-ness” as well as a kind of “messianicity” that remains irreducible to the givenness of the *saeculum*. “The gospel of politico-economic liberalism needs the event of the good news.”² Derrida made this remark in *Specters of Marx* as part of his overall critique of Francis Fukuyama proclamation of liberal democracy vanquishing its Marxist rival as the “end of history.” The event is both now and not yet, *nunc* and *non etiam*, like the kingdom of God itself. It is not a realized democracy but one that is primarily *avenir*, futuristic, “to come” – messianic! It is this sense of the need for a non-immanent eventness to compel immanent action that inspires today the movement toward reasserting the religio-political, or what has come to be called – strangely following Carl Schmitt’s formulation on the eve of Nazism – *political theology*.

II.

Two work of real note have appeared recently to offer direction for a new generation of postmodern political theologians. One is a kind of heritage book, an archaeology of the misread and misunderstood. The other is more a technical encyclopedia with a broad and diffuse agenda for “further research.” The first is aimed at the educated lay reader, the second at interdisciplinary academic

² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) 80.

specialists. Both function as solid “book ends” for a shelf of future titles that develop the questions, methodology, and contextuality of the new political theology.

The first is Mark Lilla’s *The Stillborn God*, which has received significant reviews in the American press. Lilla is an intellectual historian who first taught at the University of Chicago and is presently at Columbia. Most of Lilla’s published work has been preoccupied with the internal conflicts and contradictions of post-Enlightenment European thought. While Lilla cannot by any stretch of the imagination be labelled a “postmodernist,” and rarely demonstrates any indebtedness to contemporary French thought, he has an uncanny way of revealing the deficiency of the modernist project and why the postmodern theme has dominated for the last several decades. In his introduction Lilla describes *The Stillborn God* as a “book about the fragility of our world, the world created by the intellectual rebellion against political theology in the West” (6). Fukuyama’s neo-liberal triumphalism is not referenced in this book, but it could have been an evident illustration of this “fragility.”

Neo-liberalism with its once testy conviction amid the still glowing embers of a burned-out Marxist internationale that the entire planet could be re-ordered according to some post-statist and Kantian plan of “perpetual peace” in accordance with the economics of Adam Smith and the political theory of John Stuart Mill without the appreciation of human sinfulness emphasized in Augustine or Calvin is a true *locus classicus* for what Lilla has in mind. “The hope was to wean Western societies from all political theology and cross to the other shore. What began as a thought-experiment thus became an experiment in living that we inherited. Now the long tradition of Christian theology is forgotten, and with it memory of the age-old human quest to bring the whole of human life under God’s authority.” The “experiment continues,” Lilla reminds us. The faltering of the Christian right in America may be an indication that the “old human quest,” even should we again pine for it, is no longer to our taste, even while daily we confront an ever more militant and determined effort throughout a world over which we once held sway to “bring the whole of human life” under the authority of Allah and the Qu’ran. The “other shore” appears increasingly deserted, and like Robinson Crusoes who give thanks that we have been rescued from shipwreck find ourselves having more and more to fend for our lives against the bloodthirsty natives lurking in the jungle.

Lilla makes a general point that it has long be unfashionable and even “politically incorrect” to make—that the essence of the *politia* is not liberty, but authority. Lilla begins by asking “why is there political theology?” (18) That query smacks of a daunting first-order, first-principles sort of proposition—a metaphysics of the political, as Kant himself might say. But Lilla is not interested in why it is crucial to theorize theologically about politics. Political theology, he says, “is discourse about political authority based on a revealed divine nexus.” Yet, contrary to the Enlightenment dismissal of revelation as irrational or beyond reason (and therefore inconsequential), such a political theology “is explicitly or implicitly rational.” (23)

Lilla's argument is nuanced, yet persuasive, if one can bracket all the presuppositions of the *Aufklärung* itself, which is harder for even a postmodernist thinker to do than one admits. Since Augustine we have come to understand theology primarily as the output of *fides quaerans intellectum*, of "faith seeking understanding." A religious politics—or at a more refined level a political theology of the type suggested here—constitutes a patent production of the very sticky process of *quaerans*. Lilla develops a typology of how different political theologies have been adduced historically from different theologies themselves.

The typology sometimes comes across as a little too neat, but it does stir reflection, though it becomes slightly more problematic and messy when the development of Western political theory is actually analyzed. As has been well-observed in the past, the form of "messianic incarnational" theology that distinguishes Christianity from the other Abrahamic religions finds its true apotheosis in Hegelianism, and by extension Marxism and socialism, Lilla suggests. Gnosticism with its dualism, or sense of total "apartness" of the divine from the world, has its resonance in modern day libertarianism and the middle class religiosity of self-improvement and "New Age" craft-your-own-spirituality sorts of movements, what he names the worship of the "bourgeois God." That point has been made many times before, even by this author.³ But Lilla is the first to paint with bold strokes the reasons why it is an indigenously Western political theology, not merely an enduring style of religio-cultural kitsch.

The third type is what he designates as the "ethical God," and it is here that the seeds of the destruction of the West's own native political theology—what Lilla denotes as the "great separation"—were originally scattered. The ethical absolutism of Kant and neo-Kantianism—"religion within the limits of reason alone"—takes origin in eighteenth century Deism, wherein God is related to the world, but only as a transcendent legislator, not as a heavenly magistrate with responsibility for monitoring the deeds and misdeeds of his creatures. Ironically, the Derridean "religion without religion" through which a "democracy to come" is envisaged shares the same pedigree as Kant. And it is no surprise that a Derridean politics looks a lot like the old nineteenth century liberal politics, a Frenchified "social gospel" with faintly Talmudic habits of hyperanalysis and self-diagnosis.

Unlike the bourgeois God, Kant's ethical God is not self-referential and does not allow any kind of purely "pragmatic" morality. The ethical God can be as stern and as austere as Calvin's. Yet it is the austerity of universal reason which demands in Kant's *ippissima verba* a "good will" that takes precedence over any pretension to personal satisfaction. The ethical God requires sacrifice, but sacrifice for the political good, the public good which Kant baptized the "kingdom of ends," the bare eschatology of what would in the nineteenth century come to be known as "humanism." Lilla does not see service to the

³ See Carl Raschke, *The Interruption of Eternity: Modern Gnosticism and the Origins of the New Religious Consciousness* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1980).

bourgeois and ethical Gods as mutually exclusive by any means. One can serve God and Mammon, so to speak, as long as there is some eye to “righteousness” when one devotes oneself primarily to the latter. Put another way, in the classical liberal context self-seeking is the key to social justice, or in the contemporary version the pursuit of social justice does not at all exclude self-seeking and an Epicurean enjoyment of one’s psychological as well as material successes in such endeavors.

But this unique kind of “henotheism” that has defined the liberal argot for over two centuries has led to a crisis of conscience in Western political thought, a crisis prompting us to recognize that such a confused notion of God may have indeed been “stillborn.” The stillborn God is not necessarily identical with Nietzsche’s more familiar “dead” God, though both are haunting figurations. They are tropes that remind us, as does Nietzsche’s madman who announced the “event” of the divine death, that what the gloomy prophet of Sils Maria derided as the “Christian moral interpretation of the world”—the melding of Jewish legalism with Platonic idealism and German pietism that alchemized into modern liberalism—has never been any real match for primitive religious passions or profound, innocent faith convictions (something which Nietzsche himself admired). The deceased God is in many ways the liberal God. Lilla is not saying, as the cruder rendering of Nietzsche’s parable often runs, that a God in whom we have believed for eons is no longer believable, though we go on mindlessly believing. The West is not merely in some dogged condition of “denial” about God’s demise. Such a God was “born” not in ancient, but in modern times. And he was *born dead*.

The modern liberal God was stillborn, Lilla suggests, because he is a God that has been *conceived*, not “revealed.” A God that serves primarily a hermeneutical or a “constructive” (an overused term of contemporary liberal theology) function in authorizing what are largely autonomous and “godless” social or political agendas is no God at all. He is dead on arrival. “Ours is a difficult heritage,” Lilla remarks with remarkable understatement. (306). “The heritage is difficult as well because it demands self-awareness. There is no effacing the intellectual distinction between political theology, which appeals at some point to divine revelation, and a political philosophy that tries to understand and attain the political good without such appeals. And there are, psychologically speaking, real dangers in trying to forge a third way between them.” (307)

Lilla concludes, as does Derrida, that politics requires its own “messianism.” But it is not messianism without a messiah, the messianism of a liberal democracy to come (which Derrida does not envision as necessarily “liberal”) that now in the wake of consecutive Middle Eastern fiascoes appears more parochial self-delusion than eschatological anticipation. A political theology is impossible without a “strong redeeming God.” Interestingly, it was something resembling this insight amid the cultural chaos of the 1920s that led Schmitt to formulate his inaugural idea of political theology and its fateful corollary, the “state of exception” with its implications that sovereignty, especially if it is founded on

the authority of a “strong redeeming God,” must exceed the force of law. It must have in Derrida’s words, inspired by Schmitt, a “mystical authority.”

Such an authority which comes down to what is tacit in Derrida’s often misappropriated formulation that while “law” is deconstructible, “justice” is not. Justice does not “flow” in accordance with classical political theology *from God* through his temporal agents; it is the “experience of the impossible,” as Derrida comments in his famous essay “Force of Law” that arrives and “is there” (*il y a la justice*) in a genuine Judaic messianic sense. But whereas Schmitt may have ultimately conjured up *der Führer*, Derrida and Lilla—both Jews—evokes for our postmodern age a messianism that takes us beyond liberal democracy into the uncharted seas of experienced, yet not experienced, “impossibility,” a future commensurate perhaps not founded on the Hellenic political principle of civic participation and “representation,” but on the Hebraic inexpressibility of the Nameless Name. Such a “strong redeeming God” of a political theology of the future could not even be “calculated” (Derrida’s term) as God. That is the true aporia of a postmodern political theology.

III.

While Lilla’s book is a crisp and provocative little manifesto that brings into sharp focus an issue that has been roiling almost imperceptibly in recent years in relatively erudite circles, *Political Theologies* is a vast encyclopedia of views and analyses on the theme with a dizzying diversity of approaches and special topics. The stable of authors is decidedly interdisciplinary and international. It includes well-known American theorists such as Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, and Bruce Lincoln as well as the venerable Jean-Luc Nancy and Jürgen Habermas on the European side, not to mention such public personalities as Job Cohen, Amsterdam’s mayor recognized by *Time* magazine in 2005 as a “European hero” and Pope Benedict XVI. What all these authors have in common is the fact that they have something interesting and noteworthy to say about the integral connection between the religious and political, even though there is otherwise little thematic unity to the volume. *Political Theologies* can serve at minimum as an invaluable reader and exhaustive collection of texts for exploring the sundry issues implied in the complex concept suggested in the title.

Part I of the volume addresses the fundamental question of “what are political theologies”? The choice of nomenclature makes it obvious that an omnibus or unitary notion of “political theology” in a highly complex, globalized world will not at all do. The book takes off where Lilla leaves off. If Lilla seeks in his own modest manner to remind contemporary political thinkers of the religious underpinnings of their very enterprise, De Vries and Sullivan seek to convince “secular” academics that there are inextricable filaments of the theologico-political embedded and raddled throughout every one of their discourses. Marcel Detienne, for example, in his opening essay points out that if “in Greece the gods are everywhere,” then “why should they not be there in the political domain?” (95) In other words, if Western political thought is anchored in an

appreciation for the classical sphere of common self-reflection, deliberation, and action that know as the *polis*, then it cannot be separated from the pressure of the sacred, he argues in his "The Gods of Politics in Early Greek Cities." Even more of consequence, he insists, is the historical fact that Greek polytheism itself was always about legitimizing the political order of the day. Thus the Western democratic idea of power wielded through the assembly as well as "the interaction of what the Romans called *auctoritas* and *inauguratio*" are typological knockoffs of primitive Greek forms of worship and ceremonialism. "The autonomy of the political domain did not simply fall from the sky." (p. 100)

Nancy's article, which follows, carries through with a similar line of analysis though with far more depth and nuanced interrogation. But in "Church, State, Resistance" Nancy goes far beyond the time of ancient Athens. Nancy makes a somewhat elliptical case that the idea of the political is, even in its Hellenic beginnings, is more secular than "religious," if by the latter we are deploying the word in a different register from the ancient Greeks and Romans. What engenders political theology is the accession of Christianity, the segregation of church and state through the "two kingdoms" dualism that Augustine pioneered and Luther enshrined. It is not so much that Christianity, as commonly supposed, decanted the "spiritual" from the political, according to Nancy. It is that Christian otherworldliness gave a superordinate impetus to the values of charity and forgiveness, which was never an ingredient in the formulation of the theory of the ancient *polis*. Ever since that time Christian "politics" has always had a superpolitical purpose and the coming of democracy (or perhaps the democracy to come) embodies this tension. Democracies, as the self-conceived history of America as a "redeemer nation" has shown, are always some sort of temporal simulacrum for the church militant. "Democracy is thus by birth," Nancy writes, "too Christian and not Christian enough." (110) If it were to become more Christian, it would cease to be political and vice-versa. Therefore, a Christian political theology augurs the genuine "impossibility" (again, harkening to Derrida) of politics itself.

Part II is more a pastiche and its heading somewhat more ambiguous ("Beyond Tolerance: Pluralism and Agnostic Reason") than the one preceding it, although it explores a number of significant issues relevant to how modern liberal thinking can truly come to terms with political Islam, Christian fundamentalism, and what Derrida named as the "return of religion" as a whole. The section kicks off with Habermas' take on secularity. Entitled "On the Relations Between the Secular Liberal State and Religion," Habermas' essay raises the question of whether modern democracies that have lost their religious and ethical moorings are sustainable and whether politics at all can have a "postmetaphysical justification." Habermas, who has been a lifelong critic of postmodernism for its reputed undermining of the Enlightenment project and of the forms of "communicative rationality" vital to the functioning of democratic order, seems to have softened a bit his image as the tough-guy Hegelian and somehow "gotten religion." In places he sounds a little like Lilla. However, Habermas is completely unwilling, as would be expected, to embrace the sorts of functionalist fideism that have also gone hand in glove with the "postmetaphysical" discourse

of so many of our contemporaries. Habermas does not really provide us with even a taste-testing of any easily recognizable version of political theology in the essay. What makes this offering distinctive on his part is that he appears to want to make faith-talk an indispensable component in the grammar of communicative reason and to chastise his European secularist enthusiasts for the anti-liberalism, particularly when it comes to the toleration of religion in the public arena. "Liberal political culture may even expect its secularized citizens to participate in efforts to translate relevant contributions from a religious language into a publicly accessible one." (260)

Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, follows straightaway on Habermas in the same section with a stunning and far more compelling sequitur to the same issue. If faith is essential to political order (the genuine premise of all political theologies), then the frantic quest for world order in a globalizing world requires the formation of a "world ethos." The suggestion of a world ethos, which is not the Pope's but Hans Küng's, is not as daunting as it may prima facie look. "Modernity has formulated a reserve of such normative elements in the different declarations of human rights, thereby withdrawing them from the discretion of majorities." (263) In both classical and Catholic fashion, the Pope seeks to rediscover this normative fountainhead in natural law and the ancient Roman construct of the *ius gentium*, the "law of peoples." Natural law "remains the topos with which the Church, in conversations with secular society as well as with other communities of faith, appeals to a shared reason and searches for the foundations of a communication about the ethical principles of the law in a secular, pluralistic society." (p. 265). The power of the religious qua religious, the Pope asserts, are insufficient in themselves. Revelation remains dangerous without an architecture of philosophical rationality surrounding it, as the main threat to sustainable world order is faith-based terrorism. Paradoxically, then, religion is the true *pharmakon* for the disorders of our times: it is both remedy and poison. It is poison if it "abolishes" nature, but remedy if it augments the natural light of reason. A global political theology would perhaps be a "liberal" Catholic version of Hugo Grotius' *De jure belli ac pacis*. At the same time, the Pope does not construe such a view as an example of "eurocentrism." The "correlativity of Christian faith and Western secular rationality," which this view entails, must be further correlated with non-Western cultures. "It is important to involve the latter in an attempt at a polyphonic correlation" whereby "essential values and norms...are somehow intuited by all people." (268)

Part III is captioned "Democratic Republicanism, Secularism, and Beyond," which covers a miscellany of topics from the "hidden god" of capitalism to French *laïcité*, to the political meaning of the Muslim veil on women. Perhaps the most interesting of these articles is the rather lengthy one by Markha Valenta ("How to Recognize a Muslim"), which leverages what seems to be essentially a "feminist" argument about woman's identity and her freedom into the intricate problem of eurocentrism itself and the epistemology of otherness. "The discourse concerning the veil within the West," she says, "is hardly about the veil itself." (472) It is really about modern epistemology—surprisingly—and the increasingly subtle debate about the relationship between what two hundred

years ago were called “reason” and “revelation.” The veil is about differences that conceal, not reveal. Valenta proposes that Western anxiety about the veiled woman has more to do with the post-Enlightenment effort in the name of universal reason to bulldoze over every “site of resistant difference,” difference that is at once “racial, gendered, ontological, and spiritual.” The Muslim insistence on the veil is a resistance to Western “empiricist rationalism” and its campaign to codify all identity as assimilable to its own method of discourse. Feminism names “oppressive” patriarchal religion as the enemy in the latest ground of what can be construed now as an acceptable variation on the West’s unbreakable addiction to an Orientalist reading of Islam. It can tolerate Islamic otherness so long as that does not include any counter-epistemology of a holy Qu’ran as the unassailable arbiter of all difficulties.

Part IV concentrates on “Opening Societies and the Rights of the Human.” Again, the search for an evident and unambiguous theme in these briefer clusters of writings becomes a kind of detective novel. But that does not detract from the fact that, taken as a whole, they are most provocative batch in the whole mix. Once more, one is tempted to return to Derrida’s messianism and the “democracy to come.” It is never easy to discern to what degree Derrida’s messianism is authentically eschatological or simply “heuristic” in the Kantian motif. These particular jottings raise the possibility that it may be largely mystical, which is why Derrida chose a commentary on Schmitt to launch his enterprise. Does political theology in the postmodern era ultimately point toward a political *via negativa* in the same manner as Derrida seemed to have discovered in *Sauf le Nom* that deconstruction has its own built-in “negative theology”? How does one prevent any cruder version of a postmodern *political negativa* from morphing into a kind of fascism with a human face? Or the anti-humanism—some of that phenomenon was clear already in Nazism—that many of us blithely romanticize as the global *post-human*?

No one, not even Thierry de Duve in “Come On, Humans, One More Effort if You Want to Be Post-Christians,” seems to want to take on the radical implications of the Christian element in the Western political heritage. What presages a true post-Christian political theology is not some reinvigoration of the Catholic, pre-Enlightenment principle of natural law and the *lumen naturale*, but the anti-Oedipal avant-gardism that is integral to the Christian myth of the divine self-sacrifice, the Word made flesh. Slavoj Žižek makes this sort of gesture toward the end of *The Fragile Absolute*, but it is not nearly as convincing as De Duve’s attempt. After the Crucifixion the “God of the Jews” is no longer the author of the Law as the Lacan’s “law of the signifier.” A “God” who is neither law nor the representation of law—the last God of this kind was the one claimed by the Deists who laid the intellectual groundwork for theories of representative democracy—“dies” in the immanent dissemination of the unbounded signifier. Politically speaking, according to De Duve, that means we can only have a “participatory democracy” of pure desire, the invisible totalitarianism of The Matrix, the heteronomy of everything we wish for, “society of the spectacle.” “The society of the spectacle is the form taken by religion when

society has exited from the religious. It starts with Golgotha, and with what luster!" (p. 670)

A Christian political theology, therefore, which is not in Nancy's parlance yet "Christian enough," even more than a Derridean theology of "undeconstructibility" augurs a theology, not matter how much neo-liberals and social liberals might protest, that is beyond theology and the *polis*, that is really "post-political-theological." The "age of globalization," which the editors in their preface observe "confronts us with more ironies than sources of clarity" and forces the heirs of the European Enlightenment to come to terms with their own "parochialism." (ix) The major irony is that a postmodern political theology can no longer talk the talk of Western political theory and political responsibility, the kind of talk that reflects a certain "civic mindedness." This point is made starkly in the concluding essay by Werner Hamacher on "The Right Not To Use Rights: Human Rights and the Structure of Judgments." The notion of human rights are founded on a "communicative" (Habermas) consensus about what is just. But, following Benjamin and his conception of "messianism" on which Derrida picks up, Hamacher quotes the former that "at the end of history *remains* the dispute about the one who *remained absent*" (688). Justice is impossible, and the impossibility of justice is revealed at the Cross.

The impossibility of justice is laid bare as the event of divine incarnation itself depended on a miscarriage of justice in the very trial of Jesus. The Cross is about love, not justice, even though subsequent atonement theology would aim to frame it in the latter way. But the incarnation—and the doctrine of the Trinity for that matter—is always about the "mysterious" and suprarational commensurability of incommensurables. It is not about a blind lady holding up scales that are weighed in the balance, but about a father who in his relentless love for the unlovable prefers rescuing the one lost sheep to preserving the harmony of an obedient and "law-abiding" flock. Today's political setting is not about guaranteeing rights, but about "expanding zones of indecision," about the "right of advocacy for everything that does not speak the language of right, or juridical argument and of judgment." (p. 690)

A postmodern political theology is neither political nor theological in the normative sense of the words. Nor can it be grounded in the rights of Western philosophy—or some kind of "dialectical" or jurisprudential canon of mediation between conflicting polarities—to rule the rules of a new planetary order. We are perhaps more in search of *a political theology to come* than a democracy with the same portfolio. But these two books are an excellent start.

CARL RASCHKE is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Denver and Senior Editor of the JCRT. He is the author of numerous books on postmodern philosophy and religious thought, including most recently *The Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University* (2001), *The Next Reformation* (2004), and *GloboChrist* (2008).

© All rights reserved. Carl Raschke.

Raschke, Carl. "The Religion of Politics: Concerning a Postmodern Political Theology 'To Come.'" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, vol. 9 no. 1 (Winter 2008): 101-111.