

THEOPOETIC/THEOPOLITIC

John D. Caputo/Catherine Keller

Have we not learned by now to keep theology out of politics? Do not the sacred oils of religion fuel the fires raging in the Middle East? Must we not clear our heads of theology and so liberate politics from the distortions of the political order for which religion is responsible?

My hypothesis is the opposite, that theology goes all the way down, that there are always lingering or unavowed theological presuppositions in what we say or do, and hence, as Heidegger said a long time ago, it is not a question of getting free of our presuppositions but rather of entering into them all the more primordially. Consciously or not, avowedly or not, the political order has theological roots; whenever we order political space we also and inevitably have God on our mind. In a view that I have developed elsewhere, thinking cannot be insulated from the event that is invoked under the name of God, which means that thinking is always a certain proto- or primal faith, whatever may be our particular or concrete beliefs, be they confessional or even secular. We always move about in the space of an archi-theology, whatever the particulars of our theology or anti-theology may be. In the same way, thinking is always a certain proto-

At the November 2006 American Academy of Religion convention in Washington, DC, a number of religious scholars joined in a panel conversation with Jim Wallis, the well-known author of *God's Politics*. Although the conversation explored many aspects of contemporary experiments in political theology, I found the theo-poetic and theopolitical reflections of Jack Caputo and Catherine Keller especially engaging. Caputo and Keller are two of the most interesting philosophical theologians writing today and thus we offer their constructive thoughts on religion and politics, the first from Caputo, followed by Keller. -S.H.

or primal desire beyond desire, whatever our particular desires may be, which means we are always asking what we love when we love (our) God. Consequently, on my proposal, a reformation of political thought would require not ridding ourselves of theology but rather reexamining our theological presuppositions and learning to think about theology differently, which means to think about God otherwise, to reimagine God. In the context of the present discussion, that means that any renewal of the political order requires a renewal of theology, which in turn requires us to consider the unavowed theology of the politics that are all around us, whose psychical and symbolic center is the war over Jerusalem.

There is no straight line from the Biblical imagination to any concrete political structure or public policy, but that does not mean there is no line or connection at all. Rather we are called upon to imagine the Kingdom of God in the concrete political structures of the day, and that requires political imagination and judgment. The Kingdom provides a *politica negativa*, a critical voice rather like the voice of a prophet against the king, like Amos railing against Jeroboam, calling for the invention of justice, and which in turn requires, in addition to prophets, the hard work of concrete political invention, the cleverness of inventive political structures.

What would a political order look like, were the Kingdom able to be reinvented and transformed into a political structure? What would it be like if there really were a politics of the bodies of flesh that proliferate in the New Testament, a politics of mercy and compassion, of lifting up the weakest and most defenseless people at home, a politics of welcoming the stranger and of loving one's enemies abroad? What would it be like were there a politics of and for the children, who are the future; a politics not of sovereignty, of top-down power, but a politics that builds from the bottom up, where *ta me onta* (I Cor 1:28) enjoy pride of place and a special privilege? What would a political order look like if the last are first, if everything turned on lifting up the lowliest instead of letting relief trickle down from the top? What would it look like if there were a politics of loving one's enemies, not of war, let alone, God forbid, of preemptive war?

Would it not be in almost every respect the opposite of the politics that presently passes itself off under the name of Jesus? Are not the figures who publically parade their self-righteousness, their love of power, and their hatred of the other under the name of Jesus singled out in advance by Jesus under the name of the whited sepulchers and long robes whose fathers killed the

prophets? In this connection, it would be amusing—were it not so tragic—to recall that the question, “What Would Jesus Do?”, which provides a cover for the arrogance, militancy, greed and hatred of the Christian Right, is taken from an immensely popular book written in 1896 by Charles Sheldon entitled *In His Steps: “What Would Jesus Do?”* Sheldon was an early leader of the Social Gospel movement, and his answer to this question was, in brief, that Jesus would be found in the worst neighbors in the poorest cities serving the wretched of the earth. To do what Jesus would do, would mean to make everything turn on peace not war, forgiveness not retribution, on loving one’s enemies not a preemptive war, on all the paradoxes and reversals that can be summarized under the name of “radical democracy.”

A politics of the Kingdom would be marked by madness of forgiveness, generosity, mercy and hospitality. The dangerous memory of the crucified body of Jesus poses a threat to a world organized around the disastrous concept of power, something that is reflected today in the widespread critique of the concept of “sovereignty”—of the sovereignty of autonomous subjects and the sovereignty of nations powerful enough to get away with acting unilaterally and in their own self-interests. The call that issues from the Cross threatens what Derrida calls the “unavowed theologism” of the political concept of sovereignty by returning us to its root, to its understanding of God, to its underlying or archi-theology. The crucified body of Jesus proposes not that we keep theology out of politics, but that we think theology otherwise, by way of another paradigm, another theology, requiring us to think of God otherwise, as an unconditional claim or solicitation without power, as a weak force or power of powerlessness, as opposed to the theology of omnipotence that underlies sovereignty.

Still, the weakness of God is not the last word but the first, coming as a call or provocation that solicits our response, our witness to the call, which is what comes next, like an “amen” or a second yes. For it is *we* who have mountains to move by our faith and we who have enemies to move by our love. It is *we* who have to make the weakness of God stronger than the power of the world.

Catherine Keller

In her meditation on vulnerability and the public choice between grief-work and violence, Judith Butler concludes: “For if I am confounded by you, then you are already by me, and I am nowhere without you.”¹ Perhaps she had in mind the etymological implication that to be found together, is always already a puzzle. So we find our confounded selves somewhere together here, in this

city, in a propitious November, on this AAR panel. Each of the three terms — American, Academy, Religion—matters acutely to the configuration of this panel; and the panel confounds the capacities of the AAR. Yet we desire this strain because we suppose that we share certain denunciations and certain annunciations: we are all prone to denounce the American empire as such, in its military, economic and theocratic aspirations; and to announce the possibility of a democracy that we might as well call radical. *Radical* in that it articulates the synergies of sociality, ecology, planetarity in which we all *root*. This rhizomatic radicality is not about uprooting our traditions so much as exposing them to our confounding togetherness—as species, peoples, ethnicities, sexes, religions, even as theological members of this panel. But the Bush doctrine was also *radical*; we have needed the label “progressive” to take the place of the enfeebled signs ‘left’ and ‘liberal.’

However here’s a puzzle: we are accustomed to dissing any idea of “progress” as naïve, teleological or imperialist; yet we want to use the term *progressive*. This means affirming the sort of imperfect and incomplete watersheds of history that comprise *progress*—the emancipation of slaves, of women, the end of apartheid; hey, even this recent midterm election. Has our progressive messianism been so apocalyptically pitched that in the interest of a prophetic standard, it detaches from the very history it wishes to transform? I suspect that if we cannot acknowledge momentary events of progress, moments in which the better rather than the worst outcome actually takes place, then surely we should give up the slogan: “a better world is possible.” But such progress does not move in a line from pure origin to guaranteed New Jerusalem. Its aim remains as Derrida insists, messianically yet *to come*, a to come that does not unfold as a predictable future outcome of present history.² Progressive theopolitics might then entail an alternative temporality, the time of event-relations, in which our becoming together, now, makes *possible* but does not *determine* that which is to come tomorrow: a helical, fractal or rhizomatic kind of nonlinear progress.³ Such progressivism does not need consensus on whether God is the name of the possible, its source or its realization, whether God is omnipotent, weak or alluring. It *does* need concurrence on the formal criteria of progress: the actualization of social, ecological and planetary relations of justice with sustainability. Such rhizomatic radicality is not about uprooting our traditions but about exposing them to our confounding togetherness—as species, peoples, genders, sexualities, races, religions, even—Lord help us—our Christianities.

For now I want to pinpoint a two-way tension that this panel exemplifies

from my point of view. It holds together two kinds of theopolitical conversation. If I may demarcate a theological spectrum in this crude way: on one side is evangelical Christianity; and on the other a deconstructive Christianity. This is not a right/left spectrum: we are speaking of an entire theological spectrum that shares strong progressive political commitments. The particular eco-social justice Christianity that I probably represent, with its intense feminist inflection and undeniable roots in the liberal, social gospel and liberation traditions falls oddly here at the center. I'll just call it constructive theology for now. This is the double bind: the more someone like me engages the evangelical side in the interest of a wider Christian witness, the more I jeopardize the secular pluralist conversation. And vice versa.

Constructive theology has been from the start enmeshed in varieties of radical hermeneutics.⁴ This allows Christian faith to attract intellectuals and to work with secular activists; and believe me, Christianity without its intellectuals is not going to be any appealingly populist affair. The more theology absorbs the methods of deconstruction and pluralism, the more the opposition between secularism and religion can itself be deconstructed. And as Jim Wallis has pointed out, "the secular left will give up its hostility to religion and spirituality, or it will die."⁵ And this is politically crucial. For that hostility contributes to an evangelical stereotype about Godless humanists, etc. But the more we heal that hostility, the less we constructive theologians sound like Christians to evangelicals.

Yet this panel is enacting a conversation between theological progressives of the AAR variety and the sort of evangelical Christian praxis that Jim Wallis represents, the very *Politics of God* that has done more to swing the swing vote and to break down both religious and secularist resistances to democratic solidarity than the rest of us can dream of. I recognized that something had changed in me almost two years ago when reading a feminist tirade against Wallis in the *Nation* soon after his book became a best-seller. I realized that I as an unambiguously pro-choice feminist was more offended by the polemical misreading of his pro-life position than I was by his position. Wallis encourages the Democratic party to continue with its pro-choice position, only with respectful openness to the difference on this issue, when confronted with a consistent pro-life position, one that resists war and capital punishment. We are now being confounded also by the emergence of green evangelicals, pro-life in a planetary sense. If coalition requires a prior consensus on any but the broad progressive commitments I mentioned before—social, ecological and

planetary relations of justice with sustainability—then we are doomed, no? So I am happily appropriating the adjective *evangelical* (not the noun) for reasons that are political and that necessarily exceed the political: I have always been moved to political engagement, including the support of our right to abortion and same sex marriage, by that *euaggelos*, that gospel, which crystallizes in the great commandment.

Indeed ironically it may have been Hardt and Negri, those radically democratic and secular socialists, who kicked me into the evangelical register, when they noted: “People today seem unable to understand love as a political concept, but a concept of love is just what we need to grasp the constituent power of the multitude.”⁶ Progressive Christians have been also unable to grasp love as political concept; we have been constrained by a self-righteous ethic of mere justice. In the US context it has been correct rather than contagious. It tangles us up in the contradictions of identity politics: as, for instance, when feminism gets used by the Bush regime to justify invasion. (Another case of what Spivak called “white men seeking to save brown women from brown men.”⁷) Getting over the essentialisms of gender and race politics requires more than just extending the list of parallel oppressions, leaving the specter of the white male to unify us against Him.

Loveless justice just won’t hold enough of us together enough of the time to confound each other constructively; or to found, together—a radical democracy. The just love announced in the evangel just might. It won’t solve my double-bind—but might deepen it into a double-bond.

Perhaps radical democracy will be best supported by theologies confident enough to confound our own certainties; and faithful enough to risk even the up close differences that hurt the most. Precisely because they spring from our loves.

Butler continues: “Cultural criticism [can] create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform.”⁸ I’d translate sensate democracy theologically into an incarnational ecology, a genesis collective in which can thrive a political body of permeable becoming. Or then again in an evangelical moment I’d translate it into the *basileia tou theou* that John Cobb translates—in resistance to imperial language and imperial America—into the “commonwealth of God.”⁹

Here’s the rub: the more one engages the evangelical—or for that matter the shades of progressive orthodox theology—in the interest of a more coalitional

Christian witness, the more one jeopardizes the secular pluralist conversation. And vice versa. Yet both are crucial for the other. So of course the ultimate theological criteria will not come down to strategy but love; radical democracy will be supported by theologies that are true enough to confound their own certainties, and caring enough to risk even the up-close differences that hurt the most. Butler continues “Cultural criticism . . . to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform.” A sensate democracy translates as an incarnational pluralism of interdependent becoming, or into the *basileia* that Cobb translates, against the American Empire, as the commonwealth of God. One that is not only to come, if it is to come at all—not only deferred, but already here and there embodying its possibility.

Notes

1. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London/NY: Verso, 2004), 49. “I cannot muster the ‘we’ except by finding the way in which I am tied to ‘you,’ by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you.”
2. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Translated Peggy Kamuf. (London: Routledge, 1994), 65. “. . . the effectivity or actuality of the democratic promise, like that of the communist promise, will always keep within it, and it must do so, this absolutely undetermined messianic hope at its heart, this eschatological relation to the outcome of an event and of a singularity, of an alterity that cannot be anticipated.”
3. I am thinking of the figure of the “rhizome” in Deleuze and Guattari, and of their influence upon the political theorists Hardt and Negri, who form a rhizome of their own.
4. Caputo’s nomenclature permits this wide application. Cf. *Radical Hermeneutics and More Radical Hermeneutics*.
5. Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*. (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 368
6. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004) 351.
7. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge:Harvard U Press), 1999), 303.
8. Butler, 151.
9. John Cobb, “Commonwealth and Empire,” in David Ray Griffin, John B. Cobb, Jr., Richard A. Falk, Catherine Keller. *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: a Political, Economic, Religious Statement*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006.