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Political Theology in a Postsecularist Key

Brent A. R. Hege

Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism. Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. \$50.00 216 pp. ISBN: 9780231149822

In the 1960s, as the theological movement known as Neo-orthodoxy reached the zenith of its popularity and dominance in Protestant thought, a group of young radicals in the United States resurrected Nietzsche's declaration that God is dead. Unlike Nietzsche, however, they did this not to declare the end of God, but to rescue God from God and to save Christianity from Christians. With books such as Thomas Altizer's *Radical Theology and the Death of God* and *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* enjoying front-page headlines in newspapers and magazines all across America, the casual observer could be forgiven for assuming that this movement was little more than a passing fad as the culture flirted along the edges of radicalism before resuming its love affair with liberalism in its march toward the total collapse we now know is imminent.

Today the collapse of liberalism in its many forms is ushering in a new era: the era of postsecularism. Into this postsecular gap opened by the end of liberalism and the death of God steps Clayton Crockett with a fresh reading of the intersections of religion, secularism, economics, politics, and the imaginative theological, philosophical, and political tools needed to respond to the present crisis. Taking his cues from diverse thinkers from a variety of disciplines, Crockett opens up a space for religion beyond religion, God without God, and politics after politics, a space created by a challenging yet fresh and insightful a/theological imagination and a deep desire to speak a word of hope and courage in a deeply unsettling and uncertain time in our history.

In his illuminating introduction Crockett lays out the situation in which we find ourselves, particularly with respect to the “bizarre and unholy alliance” between American nationalism, free-market capitalism, and Christian evangelicalism and fundamentalism (8). The results of this alliance are environmental disaster, rampant militarism, exploitation of peoples and natural resources, and anti-democratic forms of government under the guise of representative democracy. As liberal capitalism confronts the limits of its expansion and enters into its terminal phase, the walls it erected to separate the religious and secular spheres have come crashing down, ushering in the new era of postsecularism. What is required in this era is a radical revisioning of traditional political and theological concepts and categories.

An instructive example of this radical revisioning concerns Crockett’s use of the term “theology.” Theology literally means “talk about God” (*theos-logos*) and traditionally it has been pursued within specific faith traditions for dogmatic and apologetic purposes. However, Crockett explodes this narrow definition of theology to invest it with a new content, ultimately defining it as “open-ended discourse about value and meaning in an ultimate sense” (27). What makes his theology radical is its insistence that religion, secularism, politics, economics, and theology itself must be challenged and interpreted anew from the root (*radix*) up, so that the result is a political theology that “does not weakly or passively accept the terms, problems, questions, and conclusions offered up by the status quo of tradition or common sense” (61).

Radical political theology after the death of God is freed from the constraints of tradition and apologetics, freed to imagine God beyond God. By reimagining God and religion after the death of God, Crockett does not wish simply to salvage a bygone orthodoxy. Rather, radical theology “is forced to sacrifice traditional belief in God for a thinking about divinity ‘that does not disappoint,’ as Charles Winquist put it” (14). What remains after this admission of the death

of God are three options: 1. Discard any theological language as irrelevant; 2. Resurrect the dead God and pretend God is not actually dead; 3. Find new language and concepts for God that retain the ultimacy of God without the traditional content of the symbol of God (14-16).

The first option is the path taken by many contemporary intellectuals who reject God-talk as hopelessly antiquated and even dangerous given the “unholy alliance” Crockett describes. However, such a move, Crockett suggests, fails to take seriously the undeniable religious character of human life and culture and, more importantly, by sacrificing theological language altogether there is no longer any suitable discourse for matters of ultimacy. Following Paul Tillich, ultimate questions are finally religious questions, and the proper mode of discourse for religious questions is theology. Thus to reject theological discourse as meaningless is to reject the only proper means of thinking the ultimate, however that is defined (14-15).

The second option is the most common but is also the most conservative and ultimately the most hopeless because God is dead and is not coming back. Once God is questioned, the death of God is final and cannot be reversed. As Crockett puts it,

Once one learns to question God, or breaks the link of self-evident authority whereby it is possible to not believe in God, God “dies” in terms of absolute transcendence and can only be recovered or restored, that is, shored up. The freedom of the death of God means the freedom to think theologically with and without God, that is, without presupposing that God is, God exists (16).

This freedom to think God after the death of God opens the third possibility, the only viable option according to Crockett. This is the freedom to invest “God” with new meanings in a “complex metaphorical or dialectical interplay of meanings and significations” (16). Crockett ultimately chooses “freedom” to provide the content of the symbol of God, but does so in a way that functions as the obverse of Derrida’s claim to pass for an atheist; by revisioning God as freedom Crockett hopes to “rightly pass for a theist” (16). The process by which Crockett

deconstructs the notion of God and substitutes “freedom” for “God” is one he names “intercessions,” or “pragmatic interventions into contemporary theoretical thinking about the intersections of religion and politics” (16).

The remaining chapters of the book propose several of these intercessions concerning the intersections of religion and politics covering an astonishingly wide range of thinkers and their contributions for a radical political theology in a postsecularist key. The argument moves from a definition of the parallax gap between theology and ideology into which religion moves to a redefinition of basic theo-political concepts such as sovereignty and power in which sovereignty is diffused and power is thought as weakness. From this foundation Crockett moves to a sustained critique of liberal capitalism, representative democracy, and law before considering the significance of the unconscious event for radical political theology and finally ending with a reflection on plasticity, messianism, and the deconstruction of Christianity itself.

Due to the constraints of a review there is not sufficient space adequately to address the complex arguments in each of these chapters. Instead, I offer brief reflections on two chapters that reflect the core of Crockett’s method and arguments and commend the remainder of the book to readers for their own analysis.

In chapter 1, “The Parallax of Religion: Theology and Ideology,” Crockett employs Slavoj Žižek’s notion of the parallax gap to open a space beyond the strict either/or of religion and the secular, a move that has profound implications for the possibility of a radical political theology. In postmodern readings of religion there is often a tension between the concepts of theology and ideology (which Crockett defines as political power plays inherent in religion and religious discourse). However, in most contemporary discussions of religion a strict either/or is constructed so that one either insists on purging theology of any complicity with ideology or

completely identifies theology with ideology. Both of these interpretive moves miss the point of the complex relationship between theology and ideology, which in turn mirrors the equally complex relationship between religion and the secular.

In one of the trademarks of his style in the book, Crockett offers a genealogy of the concepts of religion and the secular in order to problematize both constructs in their application within modernity. “Religion,” Crockett shows, is a highly contested, irreducibly political term with profound repercussions in politics and economics. Originating in seventeenth-century Protestantism, “religion” has always been a Western construct often arbitrarily imposed on diverse phenomena with little or no sensitivity to the thought-world from which those phenomena originally emerged and in which they continue to function (27). Similarly, “the secular” originated in the context of modern European nationalism as part of a strategy to mediate national identity, to homogenize populations for the sake of governability, and to maintain emergent empires (33). Both constructs were born in the modern period to serve the interests of Western European colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. However, the way forward in light of this history does not include a simple reduction of religion into the secular or the secular into religion, as the wall separating these two constructs has always been a carefully crafted illusion. Similarly, simply equating theology with ideology or, conversely, seeking to purge theology of its ideological traces will surely fail for precisely the same reason. What is needed instead is a radical political theology that acknowledges the deep intersections of religion and the secular, theology and ideology, while consciously seeking an alternative beyond the binary of either/or thinking.

In light of the collusions between religion, the secular, and economic, political and military dominance and exploitation, a radical political theology (or what is here called “secular

theology”) is needed to penetrate the walls that seem to separate the spheres and mask the true nature of their relationship. As Crockett argues,

Secular theology paradoxically names a nonconfessional and nondogmatic theology in a postsecular context that is not chained to secularist ideology. Playing upon the equivocation between the religious and antireligious connotations of the Latin *saeculum*, I suggest that a secular theological thinking is possible that is open-ended rather than committed to a particular institutional, dogmatic, or ecclesiastical orientation, and this could include varieties of open theism as well as nontheism. Secular theology confronts the impossibility of rigorously separating religion and religious concerns from secular and nonreligious ones, which is connected with the use of the term “postsecular.” Postsecular does not mean antiseccular, anymore than postmodern means antimodern. Secular theology indicates that we cannot avoid questions of meaning and value, even those of ultimate significance, in our theoretical understanding of religion (40).

Finally, for Crockett theology in this key functions as what Derrida called an “originary possibility” or as “religion without religion,” and not as a determined substantial theology, which could only ever function as an ideology (40). Theology as an “originary possibility” names the essence of radical theology, or a theology that penetrates to the very root (*radix*). The gap between originary possibility and determinate ideology is the parallax gap and the link between them is religion (41).

Building on his conversations with Deleuze, Agamben and others on the notion of the unconscious event and taking his cues from Catherine Malabou’s concept of plasticity, in the final substantive chapter (chapter 8, entitled “Plasticity and the Future of Theology: Messianicity and the Deconstruction of Christianity”), Crockett proposes a future for theology that lies beyond messianism and Christianity. Here Crockett notes the three competing thoughts of time as circular, linear, and plastic, the latter of which he defines as “spacing, as birthing or hatching,” which is a plastic understanding of time that is nonmessianic (156). The Western conception of time itself is thoroughly Christian, that is, messianic. This means that time is thought as teleological, as moving toward an end. Ironically, then, thinking the end of God, the end of

messianism, the end of Christianity itself, represents the final victory of Christianity. What is needed instead is a troubling of time, a rejection of messianism and an openness to a radical reconception of time itself in terms of plasticity and the event. An event is something profoundly and radically new and unforeseen, pure possibility and potentiality, a decisive break with the present and with the past (145). Plasticity, according to Malabou, is “‘the capacity to receive form ... and the capacity to give form,’ as well as the explosive ‘power of annihilation of form’” (105). It is in this notion of plasticity that Crockett locates the hope for a radical political theology that rethinks fundamental concepts such as religion and democracy. As plastic creatures in a plastic universe there are virtually limitless possibilities for ordering self, community and world, so that no option is prematurely declared impossible, including radical reformulations of power, sovereignty, democracy, law, freedom, and time.

If we dare to think religion and politics from this perspective of plasticity, there is hope for radical novelty in the world and in our ordering of relationships. These are ultimate questions requiring a discourse of ultimacy, i.e., theology. As Crockett maintains throughout the book, this is not the theology of the past, with its strident apologetics in defense of confession and tradition. Rather, this is theology without theology (or what theologians such as Mark C. Taylor have termed “a/theology”) because it dares to think God without God. Crockett summarizes his main argument with an impassioned defense of radical political theology:

To think profoundly is to think theologically, to think about what ultimately matters, and this is also a political task, because to truly interpret the world is to change it. In the wake of Nietzsche, the task of the theologian is to transvalue our (theological, political, and liberal) values. As Carl Schmitt declares: “today everything is theology, except what the theologians declare to be such” (159).

In the conclusion (160-165) Crockett offers six theses on radical political theology that serve as a summary of his arguments in the book and provide a helpful locus for critiquing the

work as a whole. Thesis one makes the case for the postsecularist status of contemporary life in which religion and the secular bleed into one another in multivalent ways. If the first thesis is correct, this means that any attempt to distinguish between political philosophy and political theology is doomed to failure. Along with the distinction between religion and the secular, the other great invention of modernism is liberalism, so that the end of modernism also means the end of liberalism in both politics (as liberal democracy) and economics (as liberal capitalism). Given the fact that modernism (and with it liberalism) has entered its terminal phase, for many Americans in particular the only viable alternative to liberalism seems to be a renewed conservative or neoconservative worldview in politics, economics and religion. The other alternative, advocated by Crockett, is a radical critique of liberalism grounded in the work of post-Marxist Continental thinkers such as Žižek, Badiou, Negri, Agamben, and Derrida.

In the fifth thesis, Crockett proposes a radical political theology as an alternative to both liberalism and neoconservatism. This alternative traces its origins to the work of German-American Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich (whose work on God as symbol is the often unheralded foundation of much of Crockett's own theological insights) and to the radicalization of Tillich's insights in the Death of God movement of the 1960s. The next generation combined the Death of God with French poststructuralism, deconstructionism and postmodernism, but often lost the explicitly theological element necessary for these discussions to bear fruit. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a conservative reaction against this move in Radical Orthodoxy (sometimes known as "postmodern critical Augustinianism") and in French Catholic thinkers such as Jean-Luc Marion, a student of Derrida. Finally, the early years of the twenty-first century have witnessed a resurgence of Continental philosophy of religion in response to Derrida's famous turn to religion. This genealogy of radical political theology leads into the final question:

is there any hope for democracy after liberalism? Related to this question, does the death of capitalism leave us any alternatives to fascism? Crockett's answer to both of these questions is an emphatic "Yes!" and his book is a masterful and persuasive argument for a radical political theology that avoids both the despair of nihilism and the often deluded attempts to resurrect a God and a system that have long since passed away, so that what is offered is a radical vision of democracy and religion grounded in a passionate hope for the future.

Crockett's work is not without its shortcomings, however. Theologians in particular will wish that more attention had been paid to strictly theological concerns and figures instead of relying so heavily on Continental philosophers of religion. While Crockett does engage in a substantive discussion with contemporary theologians John Caputo and Catherine Keller, other theologians whose work might have offered fruitful resources for Crockett's project – theologians such as Mark C. Taylor, for example – are only mentioned in passing. Additionally, given Crockett's adroit and compelling use of a genealogical approach to support his theses, it is disappointing that more attention was not paid to the theological forebears of his project, most notably Paul Tillich and Thomas Altizer. Despite these oversights, which quite possibly have as much to do with concerns of space as with the author's intentions, Crockett has provided a magisterial treatment of radical political theology with a truly remarkable facility for synthesizing diverse figures and arguments into a compelling program for the future of political theology after liberalism. A broadly post-Marxist critique of capital, fresh readings of classic thinkers such as Spinoza and Hobbes, incorporations of important contributions by Catherine Malabou on plasticity and Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze on the event, insightful analysis of Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt on the theo-political problems of liberalism, and a critical appropriation of Derrida's work on religion and deconstruction all combine to create a tour de

force that should be required reading for theologians, philosophers, and critical, political and economic theorists alike.

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