

POLITICAL THEOLOGY

*Contemporary Challenges
and Future Directions*

Michael Welker, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza,
and Klaus Tanner, editors

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	VII
Jürgen Moltmann Political Theology in Ecumenical Contexts	1
Johann Baptist Metz Two-Fold Political Theology	13
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza Critical Feminist The*logy of Liberation: A Decolonizing Political The*logy	23
Francis Schüssler Fiorenza Prospects for Political Theology in the Face of Contemporary Challenges	37
Klaus Tanner Political Theology According to Benedict XVI	61
Michael Welker The Future Tasks of Political Theology: On Religion and Politics Beyond Habermas and Ratzinger	75

Introduction

A historical event took place January 8-9, 2010, at the University of Heidelberg in Germany at the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg (IWH).

Heidelberg professors of theology Klaus Tanner and Michael Welker had invited Jürgen Moltmann from Tübingen and Johann Baptist Metz from Münster as well as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza from Harvard for a series of lectures and discussion on Political Theology from Rahner to Ratzinger before a large group of select participants. It quickly became apparent, however, that the scope of the discussions would not be restricted to just one chapter in the recent history of theology in the Roman Catholic Church. During the lectures and animated discussions, a highly nuanced and complex picture of “older” and “newer” Political Theology emerged from the multifaceted interconnections and tensions between political theologies, liberation theologies, feminist theologies, and theologies that see themselves as “postcolonial” or “decolonizing.” New, radical variations on the old Political Theology along the lines of Carl Schmitt, especially in the US, were discussed. The goal was an understanding of the future tasks and potential of Political Theology in local and global contexts.

Following this event, all six lectures were revised and expanded for publication. Together with the portraits of the speakers taken by Heidelberg photographer Stefan Kresin, the lectures were published in German and now at last in English as well, which will make them accessible to an even wider audience.

At first glance the essay by Jürgen Moltmann (“Political Theology in Ecumenical Contexts”) recalls the beginning of discussions about Political Theology in Germany in the 1960s. Different paths led Moltmann and Metz to develop Political Theology as a socio-critical theology. Despite strong resistance and numerous warnings against the “politicization of the church,” they claimed that there is no such thing as an un-political theology, although some theologies may not be conscious of their political dimension. They distinguished their approaches from the old Political Theology of Carl Schmitt, which had sought to

shore up the absolute power of the state against the dangers of revolution and anarchy. In contrast to a quasi-religious idealization of the power of the state and the tendency to think in terms of permanent friend-or-foe relationships, the theology they developed was defined by the guiding idea of an eschatological anticipation of the kingdom of God. The reasoning behind this Political Theology was inspired by the vision and practice of ethical and political anticipation of God's future in which human misery and oppression will end and those who have been marginalized and discriminated against will liberate themselves, and their dignity will be respected.

Liberation theology, developed in Latin America in the 1970s (Gustavo Gutiérrez), drew inspiration from Political Theology in an ideologically-divided Europe, while intentionally keeping its distance. Its leading figures, who had been educated in Europe (such as Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino), not only became involved in numerous political conflicts in their own societies but also had to contend with attempts to silence them by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Feminist theology also gained strength in the 1970s, becoming a global, continually differentiating movement, which has exerted an enormous attraction in many societies and churches.

The growing awareness of the ecological self-endangerment of humanity and conflicts over military armament policies and the superpowers' ideologies of confrontation led in the 1970s and 1980s to the development within Political Theology of a clear profile in the form of theologies of peace and ecological theologies. Around the world many contextual theologies emerged from Political Theology and liberation theology. Moltmann highlights exemplary cases including Black Theology developed most notably in the US, Korean Minjung theology, Japanese Burakumin theology, and Indian Dalit theology. Moltmann identifies the unifying concept in all these forms as a prophetic theology at work even beyond the sphere of the Christian churches.

Johann Baptist Metz ("Two-Fold Political Theology") at first distinguishes his own approach to Political Theology from other political theologies which were developed in reliance on the political metaphysics of the state of Rome and which have continually reemerged in the church in the works of individual church fathers (e.g., Eusebius) as well as in philosophy (e.g., Hobbes), political theory (e.g., Machiavelli), and jurisprudence. In the twentieth century, the Political Theology of Carl Schmitt (1922) belongs to this tradition with its decisionistic concept of the state directed against parliamentary democracy.

Metz sees his own approach as both in continuity and discontinuity with that of his teacher Karl Rahner. Rahner sought a fruitful yet critical engagement between Roman Catholic theology and the spirit of

modernity in the form of an "anthropological turn." He combined classical metaphysical theology with a transcendental and mystical theology in a highly effective way.

Metz wants to develop the anthropological turn beyond transcendental and existential intellectual approaches and towards a theology which takes seriously the human being in history and society. He advocates a theology that is "sensitive to time," meaning it has a culture of perception and memory concentrated on those who suffer, the victims of history and society, in light of divine mercy and the divine promise. He postulates Political Theology as a discourse about God which is sensitive to and generates awareness of the suffering of others and proves itself in "seeking justice." The *Deus caritas est* must be augmented by the *Deus et iustitia est*. Metz warns against an abstract Logos theology which seeks, given the hopelessness of time [*Heillosigkeit der Zeit*] (Jacob Taubes), to guide the search for orientation towards a timeless hope [*Zeitlosigkeit des Heils*]. Christian faith as a justice-seeking faith speaks in light of the Passion story of Christ in the name and authority of those who are suffering unjustly and innocently. On this basis together with Rahner he could consider "God as a subject for humanity." On this basis, according to Metz, it is possible to have a universalism of Christian discourse about God that is "capable of pluralism and is non-violent and anti-totalitarian."

In her lecture, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza challenges Political Theology to be more concrete and specific in the form of a critical feminist theology of liberation and a decolonizing Political Theology. She observes astutely that most political theologies, liberation theologies, and postcolonial theologies "lack a critical feminist analysis." The exclusion of women from public cultural and religious consciousness lives on in many forms of progressive and emancipatory theologies. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza identifies "kyriarchal structures" which extend far beyond patriarchal and hierarchical, political, and clerical forms of consciousness and ways of life.

While using seemingly gender-neutral and universalistic modes of thought, Enlightenment modernity conveys and reinforces kyriarchal mentalities. Complex "structures of domination" and oppression "based on race, class, gender, and ethnicity," as well as religious and cultural affiliation and other codes of domination, must be identified and transformed. This is enormously difficult as many diverse forces arise which mutually stabilize and reinforce these systems. Kyriarchal relationships can certainly adopt forms that are partially progressive and emancipatory. They can integrate certain groups and social strata of women while orchestrating conscious or naive cover-ups of the real constellations of power.

By contrast, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza puts forth a paradigmatic and

ambitious agenda for a critical and self-critical feminist theology that uncovers the contradictions “between an egalitarian democratic self-understanding and the de facto kyriarchal socioeconomic social structures.” She aims for a fruitful synergy between political and feminist theology, and between liberation theology and decolonizing theology, in which the liberation of “women and other people on the margins” becomes the touchstone of the sincerity of all efforts. In the midst of the dominant kyriarchal public spheres (whether visible or latent), she wants to see the establishment of a public sphere of an “ecclesia for women,” as a space out of which concrete political, cultural, and religious changes can be conceptualized, and radical democratic and pluralistic relationships can be created.

In his essay “Prospects for Political Theology in the Face of Contemporary Challenges,” Francis Schüssler Fiorenza first points out that German Political Theology has developed not only out of the experience of the Nazi dictatorship, but also in response to the growing economism of the postwar period and its ramifications, together with the theologies which accommodated to it. He shows how Latin American liberation theologies distance themselves from these developments and how in the US as well, other underlying circumstances determine direct and indirect approaches to Political Theology.

He sees a two-fold interest in the old Political Theology in the US, which has been reinvigorated. The neoconservative policies of George W. Bush indirectly followed the maxims of Carl Schmitt, a “decisionism” which arrogated to itself absolute, quasi-religious authority: the establishment of rigid friend-or-foe relationships, preemptive warfare, the violation of international conventions, the treatment of prisoners outside the rule of law, the abuse of prisoners of war, the abrogation of human rights—all by appealing to a state of exception, a state of emergency, and the sovereignty of the political leader who decides and proclaims that we are in such a situation.

In response to the Nazi dictatorship, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, the Geneva Convention of 1949, and other international political agreements initiated a major global countermovement against demonic political and military excesses. The limits of these efforts are now apparent in—of all things—an intense international multilateralism with politically-educated elites and constant observation by the media. This state of affairs has led to a renewed and intense interest in Carl Schmitt’s work even among intellectuals who see themselves as progressive. Thus, they call into question whether liberal philosophical and political thought is powerful enough to provide adequate direction.

At the center of his critique, Fiorenza sees “democratic paradoxes” in

the tensions between the affirmation of the sovereignty of a people and the proclamation of the value of unconditionally renouncing violence; between the affirmation of the cultural identity of particular groups of people and the search for a universal ethos; and between the affirmation of the value of difference and calling for overarching consensus-building, etc. In these tensions Fiorenza sees challenges for a Political Theology of the future.

He first calls for a subtle, multicontextual historical observation which warns against drawing parallels between and trying to schematize related political events such as the French Revolution or the Weimar Period or major epoch-making catastrophes such as the burning of the Reichstag [in 1933] and the destruction of the World Trade Center. He warns against the careless disparagement and relativizing of the regulating dynamics of democracies and human rights conventions, as found in the works of Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI). Using the example of Martin Luther King Jr., he illustrates the persuasive power of religiously-shaped discourse in political contexts—even without the (philosophically-inspired) translation aids called for by Habermas. He notes the growing ability of religious traditions and communities to incorporate the perspectives of other traditions and communities and thus facilitate the preservation of both difference and mutual understanding. He emphasizes religious awareness of and sensitivity to the suffering of victims and the systemic distortions of sin, and a keen awareness not only of the excesses of political chaos, but also of the excesses of authoritarian governmental power. Political Theology thus proves itself to be an immune system which even late modern and partially secularized societies cannot do without.

In his essay (“Political Theology According to Benedict XVI”), Klaus Tanner examines statements relevant to Political Theology in the encyclicals of Benedict XVI. A central phrase in these is “love and truth.” The church is a decisive figure for the realization of divine love; it is the “family of God.” If politics wishes to be successful in fulfilling its central task of attaining justice, according to Benedict there must be what he calls “an energy input” of the living power of the church, in which the “love kindled by the Spirit of Christ” is at work. This basic conviction is connected to a massive critique of contemporary developments in science, technology, and culture. This conservative cultural critique is especially in line with papal encyclicals before the Second Vatican Council. Although it invokes the “life in Christ” which is normative for “the development of all humanity,” what dominates in effect are “speculative and metaphysical forms of argumentation,” and abstract reasoning about the relationship between “Reason” [*Vernunft*] or “Intelligence” and “Love” or calls for a “transcendent view of the person.”

In keeping with the old Political Theology, the encyclicals invoke a "political world authority" which needs "to be vested . . . with effective power" and "universally recognized" and which is supposed to solve all economic, military, social and ecological problems. This vision is connected to the agenda of a "purification of reason" through the opening of reason "towards transcendence" and to the "supernatural truth of charity." Tanner observes that the Pope attempts to support these statements with an "ontological-metaphysical understanding of natural law" derived from speculation about the Logos in the early church. The young Ratzinger was quite critical of these traditions, and even as a cardinal referred to them with mild skepticism (see below).

Tanner applies these observations critically and self-critically to all forms of Political Theology that do not take seriously social-scientific analysis. He warns against self-congratulations by ecclesial institutions and movements that downplay the relationships and processes of parliamentary democracy. He warns against a critique of liberalism which invokes an ethical consensus without substantiating it with arguments. He appreciates Benedict XVI's attempt to overcome the false oppositions of faith and rationality, and piety and the search for knowledge, by linking reason and love. But he also fears that all approaches seeking to live up to this agenda are nipped in the bud by "ancient unhistorical Logos traditions and ontological natural law doctrines." He recommends paying very close attention to which concepts of the political and the actual political situation are at play when large-scale solutions are being proposed.

Michael Welker ("The Future Tasks of Political Theology: On Religion and Politics since Habermas and Ratzinger") first turns to the meeting between Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas in 2004 at the Catholic Academy of Bavaria. The goal of the encounter was to come to an agreement on the "pre-political moral fundamentals of a liberal state." There were high expectations on all sides.

In this discussion Habermas warns against a "derailing secularization," on the one hand, and the view that the liberal secularized state is dependent upon ideological or religious but "at least collectively binding ethical traditions," on the other. He describes the picture of a "democratic process" that is supposedly shaped by "citizens of the state, who see themselves as authors of the law," and "citizens of society, to whom the law is addressed." In this process, systems of religious symbols that have been adequately "translated" could be highly effective at providing a sense of orientation. Most important, however, are a self-critical "policy of remembrance" and a "constitutional patriotism," which upholds the principles of the constitution while evaluating it discursively again and again in new contemporary contexts.

What is helpful for the search for the future tasks of Political Theology

is Habermas's insistence on concretely applying all concepts of social transformation concretely through legislation and legal action and the alignment towards the constitution of a state which wishes to be accepted as a "constitutional state" and "welfare state." Yet in contrast to Habermas's early work, the precarious interdependencies in civil societies between communication, politics and law, on the one hand, and the power of the market, media and technology, on the other, are discussed as rarely as in most political theologies. The relevance of the family, the educational system, and the academy for the processes of development and transformation in liberal societies is also not clearly addressed.

While Habermas concentrates on communicative processes in civil society, Ratzinger develops a broad perspective on epoch-spanning and global developments. Yet this breadth does not reflect a corresponding depth and acuity. The uncertainties and weaknesses of Ratzinger's position, which Klaus Tanner's article on Benedict XVI discloses, are based in part on his speculative views derived from natural law, which he wishes to uphold against his better judgment ("this tool has lost its effectiveness, unfortunately"). At the same time, not only are rudimentary approaches from the social sciences lacking, but also any clear and differentiated christological and pneumatological orientation that could counteract the seductive appeal of the old Political Theology with its supposed potential for order.

In contrast, a Political Theology of the future must target three clusters of tasks:

1. It must practice a socio-theoretical prudence that takes into account in a differentiated way a) interpersonal relationships (e.g., "I and the Other," basic friend and family relationships), b) basic and complex social relationships (e.g., initiatives, parishes, political parties, civil societies) and c) relationships that are highly institutionalized in terms of organization and normative claims (e.g., politics, law, science, the market). Those who continually fail to differentiate between the various degrees of cohesion and communication in these contexts, or even superimposes on them d) metaphysical, theistic or mystical forms of thought (e.g., the relationship to God, the connection to the transcendent), will be unable to offer fruitful theological or helpful political guidance. This may be a formidable challenge but one which can certainly be overcome if we consider the example of the young Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

2. A Political Theology of the future requires clearer diagnoses based on social analysis. Most emancipatory theologies still function based on moral appeals within the closed circuit of religion and civil society and hope their message will be amplified by politics, the academy, and the media. There are hardly any usable analyses of the strong influence

which the market, media, technology, and law exert on politics and the communicative processes of civil society—neither general analyses nor those focused on the specific contexts of oppression and impoverishment. The critique of Marx and Engels of the Left Hegelians (“The Holy Family”)—who confused loud propagandizing of their political-moral complaints and objectives with the process of bringing about change in social relationships—should give every Political Theology of the future some food for thought. Such a Political Theology can learn to be self-critical in this examination of a socio-critical moralism without thereby being enticed into the trap of an orthodox Marxism. The urgently necessary cooperation between Political Theology and postcolonial theory and the writing of history as well as the development of “decolonizing” theologies (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza) is still in the early stages.

3. A Political Theology of the future must lose its uncertainty about and fear of liberal multicontextual and pluralistic environments. It absolutely must not confuse this inhibition with the fear of obfuscation and the evasive power of evil. It must handle and overcome both insecurities with biblically-shaped pneumatological and christological orientations. A carefully-nuanced theological foundation provides the strength needed for a critical and self-critical engagement with complex social, cultural, religious and ideological problems. Only a nuanced and sophisticated search for justice and truth based on theology and spirituality can, while suffering from unjust relationships and in passionate resistance to oppressive violence, mobilize the prophetic, diaconal, and spiritual powers which can move and transform socio-political contexts.