

Introducing 'Political Theology'

Christianity is nothing if not incarnational – it believes that God has become intricately involved with the world and its issues. The Good News it proclaims and the community which carries that proclamation are to do with turning the world upside down because of God's hopes and plan for it. Christian theology must therefore have this same mark, and engage the thorny issues and complex challenges of life together on this planet – that is, it must be political theology. The standard theological curriculum will include archaeology, textual criticism, doctrine, liturgy and spirituality, and these will therefore be some of the tools that the theologian will use, but alone they don't turn the world upside down. It is only when they are applied to the cut and thrust of our life together that they find their place in helping to change the world. If theology does not have this latter political, incarnational significance, then perhaps we have to ask whether or not it is truly Christian theology.

One of the tasks of such theology is to help Christians give an account of themselves in this cut and thrust. It is said that a group of Christians were telling Mao Tse-Tung about the social promise of the Christian faith by quoting the revolutionary words of the Magnificat to him. "That sounds wonderful," he exclaimed. "Please tell me where I may see all this happening." The accusatory words of Marx must be attended to by any honest Christian – that religion is an opiate which clouds the mind so that oppressed people become content with only the promise, and fail to work for the practical reality of freedom and fulfillment. Political theology must therefore guard against conspiring with this enslavement of the mind and must work towards absolute honesty and actively seek to be critiqued itself by those most at risk in our society.

As political theologians bend themselves to this challenging task they will refer repeatedly to two key witnesses to the faith - the founding document and the faith community - and accept as authoritative both Bible and Church in their search after truth and right action. But here again they will face profound challenges in their work. For we are no longer naïve about the nature of the biblical material – it is often shot through with sexist, racist and imperialist attitudes, lending weight not to revolution but to the maintenance of the status quo – and that is why it has often been used precisely to that end. Only careful analysis allows us to dig under the presenting text and canon to find the originating liberational stories which have been covered up by the glosses and reinterpretations of generations. This is a weighty task for the political theologian.

Likewise our faith community the Church has not had an unchequered career. Even now, at its worst, it indulges in uninformed condemnation of minorities and makes decisions and public statements in a way encumbered by its own fantasies and concerns about itself. And yet this is the community which is quite rightly held up as the privileged instrument of the Reign of God whose task is to press God's future upon the present state of affairs in the world. Current theological writing will often esteem the Church as the model of community from which the world must learn, without realising that this may only be done legitimately after a proper political analysis of our ecclesiology has been undertaken. There is some theological spring-cleaning to be done, but such heart-searching will issue in great rewards, for mission is more likely to be accomplished aright through a defining of the political context in which the Church operates, and through a sensitive analysis of its own political structures and activity. It will better then understand how it is perceived, and if Marshall McLuhan was right that the 'medium is the message', then it must be careful in its mission work to distinguish between what it meant to say as opposed to what its 'Body'-language has actually said.

All these and many other pertinent issues are the stuff of a new journal recently launched from the Sheffield Academic Press and edited by two well-known CSM members, Graeme Smith and Alison Webster. Political Theology is a well-edited collection of papers and reviews which seeks to resource and promote theological engagement with mainstream political life, and this first issue makes a very promising first step towards their stated goal. It is sensitive to non-academic readers by offering just sufficient background information to allow us all to follow the arguments.

This first edition challenges the reader, for example to question again whether 'style' can truly become an ethical aspect of politics. Whether matter really does matter or whether commodities are always a reduction of true worth. Whether power is something people possess or whether New Labour might be right to see it as something which politicians have to seek out in the fabric of society, understand and share. If they're right, it turns politics away from power-broking into an ongoing conversation – and if New Labour can move the body politic in that conversational direction, what will that teach the Church about what it might be to live as a 'household' of faith – and as a 'Broad Church'?

I hope that future editions of Political Theology will move on to focus further afield than the New Labour project and British concerns, but this is a brave beginning. Perhaps two further thoughts are worth conjuring with, both drawn from the ruminations of two of the journal's book reviews.

The first concerns the fact that the best theology does not usually derive from the minds of clever theologians but from the experience of authentic and brave witnesses, and I do hope that the pages of the journal will be thrown open to wider authorship as it matures. This will all help to broaden the conversation.

The second concern is more of a conundrum – for might it not be said that politics itself is a world into which the Holy Spirit is concerned to move and so it does not require us to construct a theological discourse above it in order that it may be seen to be more authentically religious? So why should the political theologian engage the action at all? - but we might as well ask, 'why does the bird sing?' For surely the theologian's treasury can be opened in the good company of the politically engaged to help unlock the inspired imagination and give yet more stimulus and power to the implementation of the Good News. I believe that this new journal may prove to be a very helpful contributor to that bold task.

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January 2002*