

Interview from Fortress Press
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The Theological and the Political

Most of us probably associate joining the political and the theological through either *political theology* or *public theology*, but you've chosen a different way. Did you find those older approaches inadequate in some way?

Well, the political and public theologies, as often practiced by Christian theologians *are* often inadequate. They don't quite work in the challenge of the moment marked as it is today by political and theological thought, appearing in some strikingly new constellations. Why are we seeing, for example, avowed atheist political thinkers writing on the incarnation or the trinity? Why does philosopher Alain Badiou, who "cares nothing for Paul's gospel," yet write a political commentary on St. Paul. Slavoj Žižek writes blockbuster best-selling books for academics and draws huge crowds across Europe, the US and in South America, fusing reflection on Christ's incarnation and Che Guevara, while skewering "political correctness" with a mix of jokes, Hegel, G.K. Chesterton, and philosophical rigor. Another political philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, writes a deeply thoughtful commentary on just the first verse of Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. Postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak dreams of an animist "liberation

theology" for our times of financializing exploitation, but then declares all theology impossible, as are, she adds, most of the religions.

I don't think all this can be set aside as just some latest academic fad. It is a sign that theological and political thinking belong to one another in some striking new ways. In other words, thinking about religious beliefs (the theological), and about power and its organization in society (the political) are being re-thought from the ground up. In contrast, political and public theology have

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all too often thought, "Well, we have theology, we know what it is, now we need to address some political or public issues." We have our Christology, for example, now let's spell out its meanings for the public order." That's clearly insufficiently complex for our more turbulent and tangled present, in which theology and political theory

are engaging one another afresh.

Why do you think this more fundamental interrogating of the theological and political is occurring now?

One reason is that in spite of all the declarations of largely Western thinkers about "our secular age," religion has not gone away. In fact it's returned with renewed vigor. And its return is marked not just by rediscovered devotion or greater attendance in religious communities. Religion now romps through our social and

cultural life with political claws. The fundamentalisms of all traditions and continents display this. Religion powers both violence and calls for peace, and a lot else in between. Some thus have termed ours a “post-secular age.” Is it, therefore, also a “post-theological” age as others have mused? That’s one of the issues I wrestle with in the new book.

Another reason for the present rethinking on relations of the theological to the political is that there is a new respect now for those who deploy, in this country and throughout the world, a distinction between being “religious” and being “spiritual.” Elites of religious traditions have often been dismissive of this, suggesting that those seeking spiritualities alternative to long-enduring traditions were somehow creating a religiosity that was shallow, thin, simplistic. But whether one ponders a home altar in Brooklyn or in São Paulo, Brazil, one finds today the generation of new traditions, abundant with a lively, complex syncretism of political and theological sensibilities. Or, just converse with twenty-something activists today, or with union organizers who are intrepid in their dreaming a future for labor unions amid the current financialization of the globe, and you find political interests being borne anew, wrapped around often intriguing theological assumptions. The

usual grammars at work in the languages of political and public theology are rarely adequate to these changes.

Are the very resources for “political theology” and “public theology” changing, too?

Indeed. For one thing, we can no longer stay in one religious tradition, certainly not just in Christian ones, to engage these changes. Some thinkers still do, of course, but many are finding it

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necessary to move into an inter-faith and inter-cultural domain. The polycultural and inter-religiousness of the current situation, and the way communications media and virtual worlds intensify their interplay, make the older categories difficult to maintain. But that doesn’t mean past texts are just thrown out. The new thinking has meant turning to some now re-worked older texts, too, such as Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-*

Politicus (1670), or even earlier ones, like Marcus Varro’s writings on political theology (116-27 B.C.E.)

The upshot is that theology itself is interrogated anew. Especially “guild Theology” in the West needs to be interrogated, even challenged for cultivating and instilling what I call an “imperio-colonial sense,” a discourse that easily accommodates the triumphalism of Western nationalisms, and especially of the U.S.

imperial political as it comes so often laden also with racialized and gendered meanings.

This book, then, seeks a deeper articulation of what theology in our times might be; indeed, I prefer to speak more of “the theological.” What is that notion? How is it related to “the political?” My new book asks these questions from a key perspective, one that I believe masses of peoples carry in their breasts with a certain heaviness - a yearning for an emancipatory politics.

What do you mean by an “emancipatory politics?”

You’re right to ask. It can roll off our tongues all too easily and mean many things. Emancipatory politics begins with a sense of the agonistic striving of so many peoples today, the weight they carry, what I refer to in the book, with a kind of shorthand, as “the weight of the world.” This is not merely the weight we all bear as finite beings – born into particular situations, enduring limitation, sickness, death and so on. No, I mean the weight of those who bear all that *and also* endure imposed social suffering, the organized pressures caused by, say, class exploitation, white racism, gender injustice and the discriminations that in so many pervasive and painful ways affect those constructed as sexual, religious, or national “others.” For examples of imposed social suffering, think

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of the growing divide between rich and poor in the U.S. today, but especially globally. Meditate on the new racialized regime in place for African Americans in the U.S., as articulated recently by Michelle Alexander in her book, *The New Jim Crow*. Ponder the ways this regime works in tandem with immigrant exploitation, exclusion and oppression borne by Latino/a and Asian-American communities. These sufferings are

not just the concerns for some “political correctness.” They mark important spheres of social relations where inequalities are continually generated and maintained, and where we find subjects, their histories and their interpretations of the world, coming to the fore in ways productive of both agony and hope.

Within such a weighted world, then, “emancipatory politics” is the dreaming and sentiment, the practice and thinking, which extends egalitarian principles of opportunity and empowerment to those who

bear imposed social suffering. It seeks to acknowledge the creativity, resilience and power of those whom Jacques Rancière discusses as “the part that has no part” in social and political systems, those who know an “inclusion” in systems of unequal power, but whose exploitation there is also an “exclusion” from life-giving empowerment.

I stress, though. These exploited and excluded ones are no mere weighed-down victims. They are also powerful agents, whose collective capacities and personal resiliency often enable them to “weigh-in” against all that inhibits an emancipatory politics. In so doing, they rebuild and renew any sense of a global or planetary “We” which is worth engendering.

The Theological and the Political is a work of high theory, but you’ve actually been involved in many different popular political struggles yourself. What is the burning question that required such theory, and how do you see it arising “on the ground”?

I have always maintained to my students and to activist colleagues that work for justice entails *more* thinking, not less. Is there a “burning question” for activists “on the ground” that gives rise to such thinking? Indeed, I think there is: “By what means among many possible options, shall we take up an emancipatory politics and do so effectively?” Note the many further questions implied here. What *are* the means available to us? How are we to know about them and evaluate them? What do we mean by a “politics?” How is politics related to the work of political parties and policies of our state system? Then, too, what makes a politics “emancipatory,” and emancipatory from what? Most formidable, perhaps, is the question of what we think constitutes effective struggle, and one with enduring impact? And who is the “we” that would take up such struggle, and what kind of

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collectives or movements might “we” form? I don’t see how one can be serious about social justice without being a thinker, whether one is in the academy or not (often the best thinking and theory that serves justice occurs *outside* the academy).

To be sure, there are times of urgency, when the boot of power presses heavily on the throats of the vulnerable. In such times, organizing and mass action have a quickness to them, requiring bold action of the will, and then thought, and surely any “high theory,” takes a backseat. But even then, the daring actors who are successful will be those who have thought on complexity, and who are committed to thought as well as to action.

All your work seems to bring together the political realm, involving specific issues of mistreatment of the body (such as imprisonment, torture, or execution), with public art, and religious reflection.

You’re right, I do have this “triad” of sorts within which all my work transpires. How would I now relate these three?

In brief, I think we see the collectivized mistreatment of the body (as colonialism and neocolonialism, imperialism, hegemonic masculinity, state torture and terror, white racism, class exploitation, and so on) often seeking and finding redress in the public or political arts, especially when those arts are *operative in*

new collective movements and practices. This redressive function I have long advocated as important to religious communities, too, those caring about social justice. Often various communities of emancipatory and artful politics, though, have been better at this than have the religious communities.

How did this confluence come about for you personally, and what is the overriding insight about this? What is the role of theologians in this “space”?

Personally, I can say that collectively shared art, and especially in political and cultural movements, has been veritably life-saving for me. My own body, and the bodies of those dear to me, have been mistreated, violated, by various constraining modes. I won't here recount my own experiences, or list my own favorite artists and organizations. That would foreground too many personal and idiosyncratic factors, and detract from the more important point that the arts and imagery are crucial to emancipatory politics.

But in my new book I do reference what I have referred to often before: my work and presence in the U.S. prisons. Here is a most real dividing of flesh, of human from human by steel bar and Plexiglas. And here there is generated, too, a sense of the world's weight, which I have not been able to feel, myself, without a certain sense of near-crushing burden. It is compounded by years of receiving testimonies of those

subject to torture and interrogation throughout the Americas – from Chicago's police precinct stations to the military and immigrant detention centers of U.S.-tolerated and often trained torturers. Add to this the burden that one feels belonging to a nation that has rained bombs upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on the Koreans, upon Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam (as in the time of my growing up), continuing through to the present epoch's multiple bombings of Iraq and now those of the targeted, deadly assaults in today's Afghanistan/Pakistan. Who can maintain a sense of humanity amid a U.S. polis that devises and often tolerates so many massive

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aerial assaults (not to mention the accompanying global financial structures that impoverish so many) while not himself or herself being burdened – not so much by guilt, though that is often worth reflecting upon – but simply by the heaviness

of it all? Is there no sleeplessness at night for the citizens of this American bomber culture? Those with any co-feeling for the world at all must know on some level that our government's practices are weighing onerously on so many human beings - on their families, their children, and their social and natural habitations.

My new book, in its advocacy of “the theological,” as a deployment of the prodigious art-form in liberating practice, is an invitation to theologians, and others, to come to grips with the emancipatory function of art (music, novels, sculpture, tapestry and handcrafts, painting, the novel,

the poem) in collective movements that work amid this heaviness, under this weight of the world – enabling us all to weigh-in with something new.

The intriguing category of “transimmanence” hints at a way beyond the old immanence/transcendence divide. Does it also reframe the current liberal/conservative divide, and what is its concrete political effect or potential effect?

Yes it does offer such a reframing. But first, let me try to break this notion of “transimmanence” down into its simplest terms. It is that deep place of agony in ourselves, personally and collectively, where we know fear, dread, melancholy, rage, which can take us into despair but often break forth in rebellion and hope. It is a zone of turbulent liminality, a betwixt-and-between zone in which life is always moving, portentously, constituting a specter of both threat and promise for the present and future. It is an agonistic place whereby life is always on the move. One philosopher calls it a place where existence is always opening unto itself.

Well it is from *this* place, this turbulent liminality - most intense, I believe, for bearers of imposed social suffering - that the transformative arts often break forth and catalyze powerful political movements for change. In this place, religious and non-religious fragments will be found. So, too,

will fragments of conservative, liberal and radical traditions be in play. All this is “transimmanence” – the continually transformative re-making of world through an emancipatory politics that uses powerful art-forms in practice.

But how does this dimension of our agonistic liminality relate to the “liberal/conservative divide?”

Because with this transimmanence to the fore, the question now becomes *not* whether “conservatives” defend the transcendent (some Great Beyond or Big Other that brings change) *nor* whether liberals prefer some immanent domain, a more earthy and social way of being. No, now the issue is this: *where* do we find prodigious art-forms revivifying communities bearing imposed social suffering? If *that* is our question, then I am convinced that both what are

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often called “conservative” and “liberal” religious communities can, under certain conditions, body forth with practices serving an emancipatory politics. For that to happen, though, some conservatives will have to leave behind their mantra-like chants about a necessary transcendent and supernatural God, and some liberals will have to leave behind their timid compromises that distance them from the radicality necessary for embracing emancipatory politics.

And again, the concrete political effect of all this?

Well, those on the undersides of systems of imposed social suffering, already display that effect: they are gathering at the river of an emancipatory politics that flows with the arts that inspire liberating practice *whether* they come from so-called conservative communions *or* from liberal ones. Note the indigenous peoples in Ecuador organizing radical movements against globalization’s “free trade” proposals from the U.S., and doing so in a form of Pentecostal Christian practice. That mix of radical politics and Pentecostal spirit surprises people who think out of the older liberal/conservative binary. Or, consider feminist scholars of any background in the U.S. who continue to work in communities persisting in conservative, even patriarchal, church rituals – critically, to be sure – but within an overall life-struggle for a politics that mixes art and practice in emancipatory ways.

Let’s shift topic a bit. Religion is everywhere in the news today, from culture wars to geopolitics. It often seems behind as much evil as good. Is there any element in your thought about transimmanence that gives us critical leverage to discern evil from good in religious life and thought?

Ah yes, . . . the problem of good and evil. Just a small question! Well, now I have to return to my understanding of the “weight of the world,” which I’ve already suggested we feel in that turbulent and liminal dimension of our being, that of transimmanence. Let me say, and here following cues from philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, that the world is always a weighing of bodies in relation to one another, and in multiple ways. Transimmanence, its mode of “weighing-in” with art-forms in emancipatory practice, creates a kind of

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space for living that my book calls “extension.” Extension is a delicately structured, taut relation of the world’s bodies to one another. Bodies here are related in ways that balance and orchestrate both intimacy and distance relative to one another. A multiplicity of rhythms is at work in this balanced spacing, taking “rhythm” in the broad sense as a way to mark and accent difference *and* similarity, singularities

and pluralities. Extension, in this sense, is the key ontological trait, indeed a veritable condition for the possibility of, the realization of justice, peace, and freedom, for which an emancipatory politics fights. So, extension is the major way, theoretically, that I would talk about “the good.”

What then of “evil?”

Well, I see this delicately structured taut relation of extension as always under threat by another dynamic among the world's bodies weighing in relation to each other. That dynamic is "concentration." It is a counter force to extension, and refers to the piling up, cramming, compression of bodies, often as so many cadavers, sometimes as the veritable "walking dead" in social zones of abandonment. Capital concentrates. The prisons and the torture cell – they, too, concentrate. Our government's and U.S. society's resort to bombing practices, as a way to enforce our economic exploitation of other parts of the world, domestically and globally, are also part of the world's onerous, concentrated weight. As Bruce Springsteen put it so well in one song: "We don't measure the blood we've drawn anymore/We just stack the bodies outside the door." This is concentration.

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So this contrast between "concentration" and "extension" becomes for you, respectively, another way to discern distinctions between "evil" and "good?"

Yes, but note that this is not to license another form of "American Manichaeism," as I critiqued it in *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right* (2005). I don't embrace a simple scenario of good battling evil forces. It is true that I see extension and concentration in an antagonistic relation, even in what Nancy

terms a "brutal collision." But "good" and "evil" are, also, both ways of relation in a tangled world of interplaying forces. The difference between "good and evil" is a matter of the world's shifting of its weight, the shifting change comparable, I suggest, to the way a person might shift his or her weight from one foot to another. This highlights the co-belonging of evil and good, even if, we must also stress that this shifting is facilitated or resisted by human decision-making and human organization of practices. Note how this approach allows us

to speak of human being and action as antagonistic, as full of tension and conflict between extension and concentration – while acknowledging also a certain co-belonging of good and evil, thus resisting a new dualism of good and evil, another Manichaeism.

But what is it about "transimmanence" that gives critical leverage here, in this conflict between extension and

concentration?

Well, transimmanence – as, again, the world's restless energy from the turbulent liminality of agonistic political suffering - comes to expression in the symbolic force of the arts in practice, a force that shakes up the powers of concentration. That force constitutes specters of threat and promise amid concentration. Nancy has a great line I might offer here about the role of the art-full image in transimmanental world-making practices: "The image," he writes,

“is the prodigious force-sign of an improbable presence irrupting from the heart of a restlessness on which nothing can be built.” In short, concentration may stack bodies, and so “weigh down” the world with structures that cram, pile, amass bodies, but ultimately nothing can hold back this deep restlessness that creates something new, an “improbable presence,” an alternative to worlds of concentration.

Finally, your work is deeply critical of “guild Theology,” a venue in which you yourself have spent so much of your professional life. What do you find irredeemable about Theology as it has been practiced, and in what ways do even newer, more contextually driven theologies fall short?

I’m not sure it is “irredeemable,” but you’re right, this book renders a more severe judgment on the guild than I have given in the past. The judgment was always implicit, though, and occasionally explicit, in much that I wrote before. And indeed, over my career there have been those who would not accord me the status, “theologian,” usually because a commitment to emancipatory politics is for them, almost by definition, a non-theological concern.

I would say that Theology - guild Theology with the capital “T” - is “irredeemable” only when its commitments to doctrinal language and systems lead it to uncompromising defense of a transcendent Other, and a slighting of the popular art-

forms of emancipatory politics. When the guild’s over-riding concern is to safeguard a transcendent referent, “God” or some “Beyond Other,” it usually has a deleterious effect upon an emancipatory politics. An emancipatory politics requires taking with utmost seriousness the power, creativity, and vitality of life that is operative in movements of “the people,” those bearing the weight of imposed social suffering. It needs to respect the revivifying restlessness of the world’s energy itself. If I teach “the theological” in Theology, *that’s* how I teach it, as the creative art-force of images

enlivened by and expressive of this revivifying energy in emancipatory practices.

But hasn’t it been a key trait of many modes of transcendence in theology, especially in liberation theologies and some theologies of immanence, to locate the divine in that “revivifying restlessness,” as you call it?

Yes, indeed, I agree, and I am, as theologian, closer to such attempts than I am to those who would tout a radical divine Otherness. In my own way, I am a liberation theologian along the way of immanence. But here’s the problem. Even when the transcendent is defended, as “going immanent,” with affirmations of the “immanence of the transcendent,” or of “incarnational transcendence,” the world’s restless energy then becomes a demoted derivative, often treated mainly as a reflex or creation of an external infusion – of “grace,” of divine power, of the Other’s provenient

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action, and so on. When *that* happens that restlessness becomes less important. We might like to think that by means of some immanentization of the transcendent, that our world is thereby “sacralized,” “re-enchanted,” made more important; but strategically, in practice, that is not what happens. What happens is this: believers look to some Other, slight the revivifying restlessness of the world itself and its “improbable presence,” and thus often continue giving, perhaps unwittingly, their support to the chain of sovereign powers in the world.

Can you give some examples of where you see this slighting of emancipatory politics by the systems referring to “the transcendent?”

Well, to my mind, it is no accident that in North American higher education, and in Europe, the subjectivities and subject-positions that are most protected in theological teaching and research in the guild, are still those of white males. Yes, there’s been “progress” in opening up higher education to “others.” Yes, there are the contextual and liberation theologies that question Eurocentrism and its sovereignty. But so-called “minoritized groups” are forced, still, to work at the margins. They are often treated as not offering “real theology.” They are the addenda to main course offerings. For all the mantras of

“diversity” and “multiculturalism,” they still labor in vineyards where the masters are largely white males, mining largely Eurocentric traditions, those usually organized around discourses of transcendent Otherness.

On a more practical level, I cannot help asking: where were the U.S. churches and their transcendent sovereign Other who might have been invoked to organize a challenge to U.S. global sovereignty during its international law-breaking, invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 onwards? In that hour, the logics of the transcendent sovereign God were more deployed to bolster the imperial adventuring of U.S. nationalist projects. I don’t think that the theo-logic of the transcendent Other has a very good track record in promoting emancipatory politics. It seems that the more believers keep looking up to a divine Other, the more sovereign power rains bombs upon the already poor.

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So, what would you say goes wrong with the logic of the transcendent Other?

What happens is that life is generally removed and projected outward and upward, rather than owned and nurtured *within* human practice and earthen being. Believers then tend to see the projects of emancipatory politics as a kind of “trickle down” or

“trickle out” enterprise, and so commitment to it, if present at all, becomes largely secondary and optional.

In this way, believers and their Theology teachers often deploy a hermeneutics of summitry, we might say, nurturing what I call in the new book, an “imperio-colonial sense,” whereby the high places are looked to as of greater power and value than the “low” places. The greater “power of the people” – which is more than a movement slogan, as Enrique Dussel, Angela Y. Davis, and Ernesto Laclau, among others, have shown – is treated as among the “lower,” less important regions. The reference to a transcendent Other too often conditions persons to value powers that manage powers that are over others. My notion of “the theological,” centered on spectral practice of the prodigious art-form, and on transimmanental re-making of worlds, offers another way. It seeks to learn from and to value, the complex and resilient power of the people.

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