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NORMATIVE POLITICAL THEOLOGY AS INTENSIFIED CRITIQUE

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The success of political theology as a field of study depends upon a basic ambivalence. For some, political theology consists in normative theological reflection upon politics, while for others it involves descriptive analysis of the way in which political and theological concepts influence each other.[1] This methodological tension is a source of intellectual vitality, and it has allowed political theology to flourish in many corners of the university. However, those who are happy with descriptive analysis are often wary of normative theology. This is one dimension of the question that titles this symposium, "How theological is political theology?" If political theology really is theological, then some will conclude that it does not belong in departments of philosophy, politics, and religious studies.

Some theorists are suspicious of normative political theology because they believe it undermines critical rationality. Stathis Gourgouris claims that religious faith constitutes an assertion of certainty that excludes critique.[2] Mark Lilla argues that theology subordinates rational inquiry to divine authority, and so it should be excluded from the public sphere.[3] According to Giorgio Agamben, theological reflection on divine glory reinforces mundane government by neutralizing resistance.[4] In my view, however, these theorists neglect theological traditions that resist dogmatism through intensified critique. Because dogmatism is a genuine danger—and not only for religion—normative political theology offers an important contribution to the politics of pluralist societies.

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1 Of course, the division between normative and descriptive modes of analysis is unstable: description depends upon normative judgements, while norms rely upon an account of the way things are. Nevertheless, because this distinction illuminates a tension within the field of political theology, I take it that it has heuristic value.

2 Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

3 Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

4 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Meridian, Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011).

The anxiety of some theorists in relation to theology is understandable. Stathis Gourgouris expresses the widespread view that religious faith demands unquestioning obedience.[5] On his account, everyday beliefs are open to critical evaluation in conversation with others, but religion requires submission to the divine.[6] According to Gourgouris, democracy requires undetermined contestation, whereas theology is essentially heteronomous.[7] For this reason, he concludes that the open space of politics must be preserved through a secular criticism that undermines appeals to otherworldly authority.[8]

Gourgouris is right to claim that theology sometimes functions in this way, but he is wrong to suggest that it always does. In fact, some forms of theology enact a circumspection that unsettles every claim to represent the divine. This is certainly true of Christian theology, which is the tradition that Gourgouris has mainly in mind.[9] To be sure, there are dogmatic forms of Christianity, but there is also a powerful strand within Christian thought that resists closure. This openness takes a variety of forms, but it is expressed with particular clarity in the tradition of negative theology.[10]

Following indications in Christian Scripture, early Christian theologians such as Clement of Alexandria (in the second century) and Gregory of Nyssa (in the fourth) emphasized the darkness of divine transcendence. This instinct was given systematic expression in the fifth century by Dionysius the Areopagite. Where Gregory described the approach to God as an ascent into unknowing, Dionysius argues that this mystery requires disciplined self-critique.[11] According to Dionysius, theology is not only a matter of affirmative speech; in his account, it requires an unsaying (in Greek, *apophasis*) that undoes everything that it says.

Dionysius argues that, because God is the source of every created thing, it is necessary both to call God by every name (because everything comes from God) and to negate every name

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5 Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, 72.

6 Ibid., xiv, 50. In this paper I use the language of "religion" because it frames the debate that I am engaging, but I don't intend to endorse it.

7 Ibid., 45.

8 Ibid., 61.

9 Cf. ibid., 31, 36, 69, 72. Following my interlocutors, this paper focuses on the case of Christianity, but I believe the argument could be extended to other traditions.

10 Thus, for instance, Rowan Williams writes, "What the narrative of Christ's suffering does is to invite our ironic appreciation of the scale of misrecognition that is involved in human authority judging the divine: an appreciation that entails a particularly intense self-questioning" (Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* [Oxford University Press, 2016], 133).

11 Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *The life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

for God (since God is beyond everything, as its source).[12] Considered as a system of predicative claims, this tension seems like simple contradiction, but I believe its primary function is ethical. According to Dionysius, people are tempted to claim privileged access to God, but every claim to certainty is a self-assertion that forecloses transcendence. In response to this danger, *apophasis* constitutes an ethical discipline of openness to that which is beyond oneself.[13]

In the thirteenth century Meister Eckhart argues that this self-critical practice relativizes the importance of Christian piety. He writes with typical vividness, "Because truly, when people think that they are acquiring more of God in inwardness, in devotion, in sweetness and in various approaches than they do by the fireside or in the stable, you are acting just as if you took God and muffled his head up in a cloak and pushed him under a bench."[14] According to Eckhart, the attempt to locate the divine in pious activities treats God like an ordinary object to be disposed of as one wishes. By the same token, he says, if one seeks God for the sake of securing ultimate blessedness, then one is not seeking God at all.[15] On his view, God entirely transcends instrumental reason, which entails that Christian practice cannot ensure access to God.[16]

Gourgouris describes secular criticism as "the practice of elucidating the ruse of those tacit processes that create, control, and sustain conditions of heteronomy, that is, conditions where the power of real men and women is configured to reside in some unassailable elsewhere."[17] Although Dionysius and Eckhart operate in a different idiom, they share the same aim: for them, apophatic negativity functions as a disciplined reminder that Christian practice is a provisional effort that remains subject to revision. Their claim that divine transcendence is unknowable entails that divine

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12 Because this tradition requires both affirmation and negation, to call it "negative theology" is somewhat misleading. I use that name here because it is more common than the pedantic alternative, "apophatic theology." Nevertheless, the reader should consider the name negated (as well as affirmed).

13 Where some commentators bracket Dionysian negativity by reading it as an affirmation of Christian worship, I argue that the two strands of the Dionysian corpus stand in tension (cf. David Newheiser, "Desacralizing Political Theology: Dionysius the Areopagite and Giorgio Agamben," *Modern Theology*, under review).

14 Sermon 5b, Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 183–84.

15 Meister Eckhart, "Woman, the Hour is Coming," printed in Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's, Mystical Philosophy* (SteinerBooks, 2001), 54. For more on my reading of Eckhart, see David Newheiser, "Eckhart, Derrida, and the Gift of Love," in *Desire, Faith, and the Darkness of God: Essays in Honor of Denys Turner*, ed. David Newheiser and Eric Bugyis, 2015, 430–56.

16 Where Gourgouris claims that religion asserts ultimate security, both Eckhart and Dionysius argue that one could not know that one is united with God (Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, 69; Stathis Gourgouris, "Every Religion Is Idolatry," *Social Research* 80, no. 1 [2013]: 101–28; EP 1 1065A, in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, The Classics of Western Spirituality [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], 263; Sermon 52, Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, 21).

17 Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, xiv. Like Gourgouris, in this essay I use "critique" and "criticism" interchangeably.

authority cannot be appropriated, nor can it be located in an identifiable elsewhere. Rather than foreclosing contestation, negative theology intensifies critique by calling every authority into question, including its own.[18]

Some commentators worry that critique of this kind undermines the possibility of constructive politics. Like Gourgouris, Mark Lilla claims that theology demands submission to divine commands that are impervious to reason. According to Lilla, theology deforms politics by issuing prescriptions for the public sphere, but it is no better when it withdraws. In his view, theologians such as Karl Barth and Franz Rosenzweig undermine the possibility of political reflection by delegitimizing earthly authority altogether. Lilla writes, "If they are right, there can be no constructive political theology, no social blueprint to be found inscribed in scripture or in God's created world….At most, their early works establish a kind of negative political theology, a critique of temporal political life from the standpoint of eternity."[19] According to Lilla, unrestrained critique leaves no room for constructive reflection upon politics in the present.

Where Lilla assumes that theological critique delegitimizes politics, the tradition of negative theology shows that affirmation can coexist with relentless negativity. Although Dionysius argues that every name for God must be negated, he does not conclude that Christians must stop speaking of God. Instead, he juxtaposes negation and affirmation in order to underscore that neither secures the divine. Similarly, Meister Eckhart calls into question the easy equation between the performance of piety and divine favor, but he does not claim that Christian practice should cease.[20] For both Eckhart and Dionysius, the function of critique is not to foreclose affirmation but to render it fragile and open to the future.

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18 I think negative theology intersects with critique as Michel Foucault describes it, as "the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability" ("What Is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth* [Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007], 47). If God is strictly distinct from everything else, then Christian thought and practice are human constructions that are necessarily fragile. (Here and elsewhere, I agree with Tyler Roberts, "From Secular Criticism to Critical Fidelity," *Political Theology* 18, no. 8 [November 17, 2017]: 693–708.)

19 Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, 276. I have responded to Lilla at greater length in "Derrida and the Danger of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, forthcoming.

20 Eckhart's famous line, "Let us pray to God that we may be free of God" describes a prayer, directed toward God, that aims to undo prayers directed toward God (Sermon 87, in Meister Eckhart, *Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, ed. Maurice O'Connell Walshe [New York: Crossroad, 2009], 422). Eckhart writes that there is a sense in which "the church is a better place in the street" ("Councils on Discernment" Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, 252), although there is another sense in which it is not.

This account of critique suggests that it is not only negative. Where Rita Felski describes critique as "suspicious reading," Saba Mahmoud argues that critique is transformative and relational.[21] According to Mahmoud, critique is not mainly a matter of condemning an opponent; it also admits that one might learn from engaging others. Indeed, as she observes, an ethical disposition of receptivity to others is predicated upon self-critique.[22] On my account, precisely because negative theology intensifies critique—calling its own authority into question—it encourages free, florid affirmation. Rather than foreclosing heterodox perspectives, a critique of this kind is oriented toward the future, disrupting the familiar in order to open unimagined possibilities.

Giorgio Agamben claims that, because negative theology concerns the transcendent being of God, it does not address events in the world.[23] In his view, the function of Dionysian *apophasis* is to sacralize ecclesiastical bureaucracy by associating it with the ineffable glory of God. There is a sense in which Agamben is right: the tradition that I have described does not offer direct prescriptions for politics. However, I think Agamben misconstrues its political implications. In my reading, rather than ratifying a given configuration of power, *apophasis* is an ethical practice that relativizes every authority. In this way, negative theology points to a politics that juxtaposes construction and critique.

Like religious faith, support for a political cause can harden into a dogmatic adherence that is impervious to other perspectives. Conversely, political movements that critique the status quo sometimes find it easier to resist power than to exercise it. Groups from the Tea Party to Occupy Wall Street demonstrate that it is difficult to pursue concrete political aims while holding those aims

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21 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2005), 36–39. Constance Furey develops a similar argument in relation to Christian texts in "Discernment as Critique in Teresa of Avila and Erasmus of Rotterdam," *Exemplaria* 26, no. 2–3 (June 1, 2014): 254–72.

22 Mahmoud writes, "Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another's worldview, that we might come to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other" (*Politics of Piety*, 36–37).

23 Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 152. Agamben writes, "It is possible to analyze the notion of God on the ontological level, listing his attributes or negating, one by one—as in apophatic theology—all his predicates to reach the idea of a pure being whose essence coincides with existence. But this will not rigorously say anything about his relation to the world or the way in which he has decided to govern the course of human history" (ibid., 54). In my view, contra Agamben, Dionysian *apophasis* does not consist only in negation (since it is the juxtaposition of affirmation and negation), and it does not arrive at the idea of a pure being (since Dionysius denies that the category of being applies to God). The aim of *apophasis* is thus to unsettle any attempt to locate the divine, whether affirmatively or negatively. (I develop this argument at greater length in "Desacralizing Political Theology: Dionysius the Areopagite and Giorgio Agamben").

open to revision. Insofar as negative political theology balances boldness and circumspection, it models a politics that affirms realistic proposals while subjecting them to unstinting critique.

The answer to the question "How theological is political theology?" hinges upon what one takes theology to be. Paul Kahn claims that political theology today cannot take the form of normative theology. He writes, "We are well past the era in which theology could draw upon reason to support the sacred….Theological inquiry today can only be a practice of phenomenology: to identify and describe the presence of the sacred, wherever it appears."[24] Kahn is, of course, correct that most of our contemporaries will not be convinced by rational arguments for God's existence. However, he is wrong to assume that this is what normative theology consists in.[25] There are forms of theology that are neither phenomenological attempts to describe the sacred nor apologetic attempts to compel belief. As I have argued, theology of this kind constitutes an important resource for political reflection.[26]

Kahn claims that politics is founded upon imagination of the sacred, and I think he is right. There is reason to think that political commitments are sustained by a faith that is irreducible to rational self-interest. In American political life, the sacred takes various forms—from institutions such as the Supreme Court and the military to values like liberty and equality. These sites of sacrality promise a meaning that transcends the individual, which is why some find it scandalous when they are contested. However, as Gourgouris and Agamben observe, the sacred has an unpredictable power: it sometimes numbs critical awareness, and it can inspire pathological attachments that lead to terrible violence. In my view, negative political theology offers a compelling response to this danger.

It is not enough simply to exclude sacrality: as Kahn observes, the sacred tends to persist even when we believe it has been banished. Rather than affirming the sacred uncritically or disavowing it altogether, negative theology demonstrates that it is possible to affirm the sacred provisionally. Thus, Dionysius identifies the elements of Christian worship as sacred even as he

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24 Paul W Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 25.

25 See William Cavanaugh's forceful response to Kahn in "Am I Impossible? A Political Theologian's Response to Kahn's *Political Theology*," *Political Theology* 13, no. 6 (January 1, 2012): 735–40.

26 For a contemporary example of political thought that draws upon theological sources, see Ted Smith's beautiful book, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

desacralizes every attempt to access the divine. On this model, it is possible to hold particular texts and traditions as a focal point for communal identity while maintaining an ethical discipline that loosens their authority.

Although the example I have described derives from the history of Christian thought, the discipline it exemplifies is accessible to anyone, regardless of their own commitments. Because authoritarian dogma is not unique to religion, theology offers sophisticated techniques that may be useful for those who are not themselves religious. A normative theology that intensifies critique represents a valuable resource for political reflection, and not only for the faithful.

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