



## WHY THE WORLD NEEDS NEGATIVE POLITICAL THEOLOGY

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Some theorists argue that religion relates to politics in one of two ways: either it asserts its authority over the public sphere or it withdraws from the world in preference for spiritual concerns.<sup>1</sup> In response, this special issue offers an expanded vision of what political theology can contribute to public reflection. Against those who appropriate divine authority in support of a given regime, Jewish and Christian negative theology argues that God is radically elusive. Where resistance movements sometimes struggle to transition from opposition to governance, negative theology models a critique that allows for robust affirmation. Although the tradition does not directly address democratic politics, it demonstrates that a commitment to radical transformation does not rule out the compromise required to enact concrete policies. In this way, negative theology offers resources for addressing the crises that currently threaten democratic politics in the West.

The contributors to this special issue suggest that, in contrast to quietism and theocracy, a negative political theology can contribute to the politics of pluralist democracies. By design, however, they do not speak with one voice. The authors met together in 2017 for four days of intensive conversation.<sup>2</sup> The discussion of each paper was preceded by a prepared response, and the conversation that followed was energetic and unpredictable. At the end of each day we ate, drank, and talked together, and the community that formed enriched our conversations in turn. These fissiparous papers display the benefits of this process, and the response that follows each one conveys the push-and-pull of genuine collaboration. Because the authors differ in their

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

2 Australian Catholic University hosted the symposium in connection with a research project that I lead, "Atheism and Christianity: Moving Past Polemic." In addition to the authors included in this collection, the meeting also included Rachel Davies, Eric Gregory, Christiaan Jacobs-Vandegeer, Charles Lockwood, Wayne McKenna, James McLaren, David Runia, and Kathryn Tanner.

understanding of negative theology, political theology, and disciplinary identity, this introduction does not attempt to harmonize the contents of this special issue. Instead, I will describe what I believe it offers the world.

## I. Negating Political Theology

The term “negative political theology” has a short history. It is chiefly associated with Jacob Taubes’s 1987 lectures on the Apostle Paul. In an afterword to the published edition of the lectures, the editors comment that “Taubes regards the function of the Pauline critique of the law to be a negative political theology.”<sup>3</sup> On their account, Taubes appeals to Paul to delegitimize every political structure. They explain, “[Paul] doesn’t oppose a political theology of the Torah to the Roman *nomos* of the earth in order to establish a new national form of rule. He fundamentally negates law as a force of political order.”<sup>4</sup> In their view, where first century Jews appealed to divine law in developing a positive political theology, Paul explodes every claim to authority. On this reading, Taubes follows Paul in negating political theology.

Interpreters of Taubes often take him to exemplify anarchic critique.<sup>5</sup> Along these lines, Martin Terpstra and Theo de Wit write, “According to Taubes, Paul’s political theological intervention was not directed toward establishing a different political system or replacing a political regime through political revolution. His effort opened a more radical possibility: a theological delegitimation of all political power as a political attitude.”<sup>6</sup> In their reading, Taubes claims that messianic expectation cannot justify any political activity, however revolutionary. According to Terpstra and de Wit, Taubes’s theology is genuinely political, but they claim that its force is exclusively negative.

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3 Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, Aleida Assmann, and Jan Assmann, “Afterword,” in *The Political Theology of Paul*, by Jacob Taubes (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 121.

4 Ibid. This appears to be the sense in which Mark Lilla takes the term. Lilla writes of Karl Barth and Franz Rosenzweig, “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” (Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, 276).

5 In his contribution to this collection, Martin Kavka argues that Taubes is doing something different. My comments concern Taubes as he has been received, not Taubes as he appears in Kavka’s richer reading.

6 Martin Terpstra and Theo de Wit, “No Spiritual Investment in the World as It Is’: Jacob Taubes’s Negative Political Theology,” in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, edited by Ilse Nina Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 324.

This places Taubes at odds with Carl Schmitt, the progenitor of modern political theology as a descriptive discipline. In *Political Theology* (1922), Schmitt argues that the concepts of modern politics are theological, not simply because they are historically linked to Christian thought but because they systematically rely upon the miraculous.<sup>7</sup> Schmitt writes, "Like every other order, the legal order rests on a decision and not on a norm."<sup>8</sup> Against those who portray politics as the rational adjudication of contested questions, Schmitt argues that – in the foundation of any system and in the application of any norm—a decision is required that goes beyond the norm itself. According to Schmitt, such a decision is irruptive and irrational, and so it resembles divine intervention to contravene natural law. In Schmitt's account, the paradigm of decision is a sovereign who acts unilaterally.

Although Taubes owes a great deal to Schmitt, he objects that Schmitt's account of sovereignty aims to legitimate authority. Where Schmitt displays a disturbing affection for totalitarianism, Taubes reads Paul as an opponent of the political theology of imperial Rome. Taubes writes, "My thesis is that in this sense the Epistle to the Romans is a political theology, a *political* declaration of war on the Caesar."<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Schmitt's attempt to constrain the forces that threaten to disrupt present order, Taubes explains that "I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is."<sup>10</sup> Against Schmitt, Taubes insists that spiritual power does not support a worldly regime. On the contrary, he continues, "I want to show [Schmitt] that the separation of powers between worldly and spiritual is *absolutely necessary*."<sup>11</sup>

Taubes extends a criticism of Schmitt first articulated by Erik Peterson in 1935. Peterson argues that "Orthodox Trinitarian doctrine in effect threatened the political theology of the Roman Empire."<sup>12</sup> According to Peterson, in Jewish and pagan theologies monotheism represented a political problem insofar as it identified the earthly emperor with the divine Monarch. Where some early Christian theologies reiterated this form of monotheism, the doctrine of the Trinity described the Godhead as one God in three persons, united without subordination. Because the Triune God

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7 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 36.

8 *Ibid.*, 10.

9 Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), 16.

10 *Ibid.*, 103.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Erik Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire," in *Theological Tractates*, trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 103.

has no analogy in the created realm, Peterson argues that this rules out the representation of the divine by a human ruler. "With this," Peterson says, "the linkage of the Christian proclamation to the Roman Empire was *theologically* dissolved."<sup>13</sup> Like Taubes, Peterson's point is that earthly power should be strictly distinct from the spiritual.

In the final footnote to his treatise on monotheism, Peterson addresses Schmitt directly: "To my knowledge, the concept of 'political theology' was introduced into the literature by Carl Schmitt. . . Here we have tried to show by a concrete example the theological impossibility of a 'political theology.'"<sup>14</sup> Peterson construes political theology as the legitimation of political power through theological authority, and he argues that the doctrine of the Trinity excludes it altogether. For this reason, he says, political theology must be negated.<sup>15</sup>

## II. Pessimism and Affirmation

Because some theologians tend to triumphalism, I think Taubes and Peterson are right to resist the theological legitimation of power. However, political theologies that are purely negative sometimes struggle to contribute positively to political reflection. Following Augustine of Hippo, theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr have interpreted politics in terms of the pervasiveness of sin.<sup>16</sup> On Niebuhr's account, since pride corrupts human activity, every political project is problematic. Niebuhr argues that Christian tradition teaches humility, and he implies that a key function of theology is to criticize political structures. He writes, "Only in a religion in which there is a true sense of transcendence can we find the resource to convict every historical achievement of incompleteness, and to prevent the sanctification of the relative values of any age or any era."<sup>17</sup> For

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 233-34.

15 There are scattered references elsewhere to "negative political theology," many of which appear to have Taubes in the background: Ruth Marshall, "The Sovereignty of Miracles: Pentecostal Political Theology in Nigeria," *Constellations* 17, no. 2 (June 1, 2010): 209; Saitya Brata Das, *The Political Theology of Schelling* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 92; Vincent Lloyd, "The Negative Political Theology of James Baldwin," in *A Political Companion to James Baldwin*, ed. Susan J. McWilliams (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 171-94; Bernd Wannewetsch, "Representing the Absent in the City: Prolegomena to a Negative Political Theology According to Revelation 21," in *God, Truth, and Witness. Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, edited by L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter, and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 172-74; Ted Smith, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

16 Robert Markus writes, "'Political Augustinianism' is, of its nature, politically radical. It is bound to be unremittingly critical of all and any human arrangements, any actual and even any imaginable forms of social order." R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 168. For a broader genealogy of this tradition, see Michael J. S Bruno, *Political Augustinianism: Modern Interpretations of Augustine's Political Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

17 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Scribner, 1940), 200.

Niebuhr (as for Peterson and Taubes) theology is political above all because it prevents political order from appropriating divine authority. The problem is that Niebuhr's pessimism inhibits theology from constructively addressing questions of policy.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a wave of German theologians argued along similar lines that political theology is primarily negative. Dorothee Sölle, Johan Baptist Metz, and Jürgen Moltmann each argued that Christian thought must engage political questions, but they tended to present theology as a force that judges politics from the outside rather than contributing constructively.<sup>18</sup> Sölle foregrounds the critical function of political theology, Metz equates "political theology" with "(socio-)critical theology," and Moltmann writes that "political theology is the internal critique of the modern world."<sup>19</sup> In each case, the emphasis upon critique resists the tendency of political leaders to appropriate divine authority, but it discourages theologians from addressing debates over policy. As Metz explains, "The Church's task here is not the elaboration of a system of social doctrine, but of social criticism."<sup>20</sup>

These pessimistic political theologies offered an important corrective to the tendency to see theology as a purely spiritual affair. However, some feminists responded by arguing that their negativity is corrosive. Where Niebuhr presents pride as the primary sin, Valerie Saiving argues that the problem for marginalized groups is not self-assertion but "underdevelopment or negation of the self."<sup>21</sup> In her view, Niebuhr's insistence upon meekness is the wrong recommendation for some people. Although pride sometimes needs to be checked, it sometimes needs to be nurtured. Authority sometimes needs to be resisted, but at other times it should be bolstered. Since Augustine, Christians have struggled to acknowledge both demands, and they have not always succeeded. This suggests that while Niebuhr, et al. are right to insist that God must not be identified

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18 Moltmann explains, "The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz, Helmut Gollwitzer, Dorothee Sölle, Jan Lochmann and myself, arose out of this historical situation as a socio-critical and ideology-critical theology." Jürgen Moltmann, "Political Theology and Liberation Theology," trans. Marianne Martin and Robert T. Cornelison, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 45, no. 3 (1991): 208.

19 Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974), 69, 90; Johannes B. Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Scribner, 1968), 115; Moltmann, "Political Theology and Liberation Theology," 217.

20 Metz, *Theology of the World*, 122-23. This is not to say that theological pessimism prevents constructive reflection on politics: after all, Niebuhr, Moltmann, Metz, and Sölle each engage political questions at various points in their work. My point is simply that their negativity inhibits theological reflection on policy.

21 Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960): 109. Saiving is particularly concerned with the situation of women, but I think Saiving's analysis may be extended to other marginalized communities. Cf. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 78.

with a given political regime, they are wrong to imply that critique must be the primary focus of political theology.

Where these twentieth-century theologians worked under the shadow of Hitler and Stalin, we now confront other dangers. Although sovereignty remains a problem for politics, we must also address systems of power that have a deep but indirect influence on each of us. Niebuhr argued that the idealism of the social gospel movement underestimated the human capacity for evil, so he opted for a tough-minded realism that some took to justify torturing terrorists, albeit with a frown.<sup>22</sup> In my view, negative political theology constitutes an alternative to optimistic idealism and pessimistic realism. By holding construction and critique together in tension, negative theology demonstrates that it is possible to pursue particular aims while acknowledging their inadequacy. In this way, it models an eschatological hope that encourages critical vigilance while allowing the compromise that is required for concrete action.<sup>23</sup>

### III. Theological Negativity

The tradition of negative theology explores a tension between negativity and affirmation that is woven deeply within Jewish and Christian scriptures.<sup>24</sup> The Torah insists that God alone should be worshipped, and so it proscribes the representation of God in graven images (Exodus 20:4). Although early Christians affirmed that Jesus Christ was “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), this paradoxical phrase suggests that God remains obscure. Jesus’s closest contemporaries repeatedly failed to recognize his divine mission, and later Christians disagreed concerning what that mission meant. Although Paul claims to possess apostolic authority, he writes that “we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). On this view, Christians’ knowledge of God is imperfect: at least for now, it fumbles in the dark. Some theologians therefore insist that every attempt to represent God must be accompanied by a disciplined negativity.

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22 Cf. Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Reflection on the Problem of ‘Dirty Hands,’” in *Torture: A Collection*, ed. Sanford Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 77-92.

23 I elaborate this idea in David Newheiser, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

24 There are analogous traditions in Neoplatonism, Islam, and elsewhere: see Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

In the second century, theologians such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria adapted vocabulary drawn from contemporary philosophy in order to underscore that God is beyond understanding.<sup>25</sup> Where they called God “incomprehensible,” “ineffable,” “ingenerate,” etc., fourth-century theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa situated this negativity within a sustained ethical practice. Gregory argues that “every concept which comes from some comprehensible image by an approximate understanding and by guessing at the divine nature constitutes an idol of God.”<sup>26</sup> For this reason, he says, intimacy with God requires the passage from the light of knowledge into the darkness of the divine.<sup>27</sup> He writes, “The one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and . . . believe that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach.”<sup>28</sup> For Gregory, this is a discipline that engages the whole person and not only the mind.

A century after Gregory, Dionysius the Areopagite developed this ethical discipline into a systematic account of unsaying (in Greek, *apophasis*). In his view, because theological language is drawn from creation, it falls short of the Creator, and so every name for God must be negated. In *The Mystical Theology* Dionysius describes an ascending series of negations, which systematically undoes the categories of human thought:

[The Cause of all] cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light . . . It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness . . . There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial.<sup>29</sup>

Like Gregory, Dionysius construes this negativity as a discipline of unknowing, which pursues intimacy with God by renouncing security. Dionysius’s many followers in the Middle Ages are diverse, but they agree that a disciplined negativity is integral to Christian life.<sup>30</sup>

Some theorists claim that this negativity is a disingenuous ploy. Along these lines, Ernesto Laclau argues that negative theology describes a central feature of human experience – that

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25 See D. W. Palmer, “Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 37, no. 3 (1983): 234–59; Henny Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism: Knowing the Unknowable* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

26 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 96.

27 *Ibid.*, 97.

28 *Ibid.*, 43.

29 Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 140.

30 Moses Maimonides developed analogous claims in a Jewish idiom. This introduction focuses on Christian negative theology because it is the tradition I know best and because its relation to Jewish and Islamic negative theologies is too complex to address in this context.

ultimate fullness is radically lacking. In his view, however, it betrays this insight by “having surrendered to the temptation of giving a positive content to that ‘beyond’ – the positive content being dictated . . . by the religious persuasion of the mystic.”<sup>31</sup> On this view, insofar as negative theologians affirm the classic claims of Christian doctrine, their negativity is incomplete. According to Laclau, “If the mystical experience is really going to be the experience of an absolute *transcendens*, it must remain indeterminate. Only silence would be adequate. To call it ‘God’ is already to betray it, and the same would be the case for any other name that we choose.”<sup>32</sup> On his account, mystical discourse attempts to eliminate particularity, but it remains bound to the content of specific traditions.

In my view, Laclau is right to identify this tension between negation and affirmation, but he is wrong to suggest that it constitutes a contradiction. In fact, this tension is explicitly central to negative theology in its classic formulations. According to Dionysius, theological affirmations are inadequate to the divine, but theological negations are no better. Because saying “God is not wisdom” might imply that this statement accurately describes God (albeit negatively), he claims that it is necessary to say at the same time that “God is wisdom.”<sup>33</sup> In similar fashion, Gregory of Nyssa refers to “the seeing that consists in not seeing,”<sup>34</sup> and Meister Eckhart suggests that we “pray to God that we may be free of God.”<sup>35</sup> In each case, these paradoxical formulations indicate that neither affirmation nor negation is adequate. Rather than requiring pure negativity, as Laclau would have it, negative theology juxtaposes affirmation and negation in order to prevent Christian discourse from settling into stasis.<sup>36</sup>

#### IV. Negativity and Politics

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31 Ernesto Laclau, “On the Names of God,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular world*, edited by Hent de Vries and Lawrence Eugene Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 144.

32 *Ibid.*, 142.

33 Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Complete Works*, 97.

34 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 95.

35 Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 200.

36 At the symposium from which this collection originated, Amy Hollywood objected that “negative theology” is a misnomer insofar as the tradition in question is not purely negative. In my reading, this point is implicit in the term itself: insofar as “theology” designates discourse about the divine, the name “negative theology” includes both affirmation and negation.

It is understandable that little has been written on the political significance of negative theology: because the texts in question are elusive, it is difficult to extract instructions concerning worldly life.<sup>37</sup> To complicate matters, many commentators claim that the tradition is centrally concerned with mystical experience, which is implicitly apolitical.<sup>38</sup> I think this reading rests upon a misunderstanding. In fact, Dionysius, Eckhart, et al. directly reject the claim that one could know that one has had an experience of God, mystical or otherwise.<sup>39</sup> Rather than appealing to extraordinary experiences, these authors describe a discursive practice that calls into question every claim to grasp God. In my reading, although negative theology does not offer direct prescriptions for modern politics, it exemplifies an ethical discipline with political implications. By holding affirmation and critique together in tension, it models a circumspection that avoids both optimism and despair.

Forty years after Valerie Saiving criticized Reinhold Niebuhr's pessimism, a group of scholars in other fields argued along similar lines that critique is corrosive. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claims that, although critique equates itself with dispassionate truth, it anticipates the negative in order to neutralize the threat of pain and surprise.<sup>40</sup> In her view, this motivation overrides other affects – joy, nostalgia, and so forth – in order to foreclose anticipated danger. In similar fashion, against the view that critique is a destabilizing force that disrupts unjust relations, Rita Felski argues that it has hardened into a new orthodoxy.<sup>41</sup> She writes that "what is needed . . . is a politics of relation rather than negation, of mediation rather than cooption, of alliance and assembly rather than alienated critique."<sup>42</sup> Like Saiving, these theorists argue that critique can preclude other approaches.

Where Felski opposes relation and negation, love sometimes calls for negativity. The rise of right wing movements around the world has cast a cold light on the racism, sexism, and xenophobia that poisons the heart of ostensibly democratic societies. In response, critique is required – to

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37 A rare exception is provided by Denys Turner's essay "Marxism, Liberation Theology and the Way of Negation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 199–217. Also see Corey Walker, "The Race for Theology: Toward a Critical Political Theology of Freedom," in *Race and Political Theology*, ed. Vincent Lloyd (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2012), 134–55.

38 Cf. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1912), 94; Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition, Plato to Eriugena*, *Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs*: 19 (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995), 8.

39 Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Complete Works*, 157; Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, 183; Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, Teacher and Preacher*, trans. Bernard McGinn, Frank J Tobin, and Elvira Borgstädt (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 323. Cf. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

40 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 137.

41 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 150.

42 *Ibid.*, 147.

demonstrate that the current configuration of power is contingent and to condemn injustices that have become entrenched.<sup>43</sup> I think Sedgwick and Felski are right to argue that this negativity must not be allowed to overwhelm the affective range that is required by constructive politics. The challenge, therefore, is to find a form of critique that encourages robust affirmation.

This is, I believe, what negative political theology offers the world. In the wake of the Great Recession of 2007, a range of movements emerged around the world to resist racial and economic injustice, from Occupy to Syriza and the “Arab Spring.” The energy that animated these groups was inspiring, but they struggled to transition from opposition to sustainable power.<sup>44</sup> Where protest movements pursue the purity of justice, the work of governing must reckon with ambiguity and compromise. Both relation and negation are needed, but – as Felski and Sedgwick observe – it is difficult to maintain these affective registers at once. In my view, the tradition of negative theology demonstrates that it is not impossible.

As I have described, negative theology affirms particular projects that it subjects, at the same time, to critique. On the level of synchronic logic this could seem like simple contradiction, but negative theology unfolds in the diachronic perspective of ethical practice. In contrast to an unmodulated negation that simply obliterates its object, it exemplifies a negativity that holds affirmation open to future revision. Because this negativity is reflexive, it cannot become hegemonic, as Felski and Sedgwick fear. Negative theology calls everything into question, including itself. Rather than foreclosing creativity, negative theology encourages experimentation by rendering every attempt provisional, fungible, and fresh. On this model, it is possible to affirm particular projects while acknowledging that our best judgments remain subject to revision.

#### IV. The Collection

The contributors to this special issue reflect on the political significance of negative theology, broadly conceived. By engaging interlocutors including Karl Marx, Herman Melville, and Martin

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43 Cf. David Newheiser, “Foucault, Gary Becker and the Critique of Neoliberalism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2016): 3-21.

44 On this point, Slavoj Žižek is uncharacteristically lucid: “Echoing the rise of big popular protests in the last years, with hundreds of thousands assembling in public places (from New York, Paris and Madrid to Athens, Istanbul and Cairo), ‘assemblage’ . . . became a popular topic of theory. One should retain a sceptical distance towards this topic: whatever its merits, it leaves untouched the key problem of how to pass from assembling protest to the imposition of a new power, of how this new power will function in contrast to the old one.” See Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage Of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

Luther King, Jr., they explore the tension between critique and construction that classic Christian negative theology describes in terms of *apophasis*. Although the authors differ in many ways, together they suggest that a rigorous negativity can coexist with the affirmation of concrete political projects. Where some assume that political theology must be negated in order to resist theocracy, they indicate that religious reflection can incorporate critique without dissolving itself entirely. A negative political theology therefore demonstrates that it is possible to critique the theological legitimation of power without foreclosing constructive reflection on politics.

This is not to say that theology provides a solution that others are unable to achieve.<sup>45</sup> Instead, by offering an expanded vision of political theology, this special issue suggests that religious thought offers resources that anyone may draw on, regardless of their own commitments. Negative political theology does not answer every question that confronts those who are concerned for the future of our societies. However, it does hold the potential to reframe debates over religion and politics, realism and idealism, optimism and pessimism, negation and relation, etc. By holding together construction and critique, it offers an alternative to the pessimistic political theology that colors Christian thought in the West, and it models the bold circumspection required to sustain political movements in the face of uncertainty.

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45 In fact, I think what I am calling “negative political theology” shares a great deal in common with Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).