

TEACHING POLITICAL THEOLOGY AS MINISTERIAL FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the experience of teaching political theology to undergraduate students training for public ministry in the Anglican, Methodist, URC and Roman Catholic traditions in a British context. Whilst welcoming the increased profile of political theology within ministerial training this article challenges the continuing tendency towards dualist and instrumental accounts and poses three areas for further reflection and resourcing: relationship between practical, political theologies and theology of action, the need for increased resourcing of Churches as technologies of citizenship; and further reflection on how the nature and contribution of Catholic political theology might be conceived.

Keywords: Catholic social teaching; Emile Perreau-Saussine; formation; Gillian Rose; Graham Ward; ministry; pedagogy; political theology; Rowan Williams; teaching

Introduction

For the last decade we have taught political theology under the thunderous cloud of criticism generated by the new atheists. In this context formulating an argument for the study of confessional political theology as a constructive contribution to the common good seemed to many both laughably and dangerously deluded. However, with the recent publication of Simon Critchley's *Faith of the Faithless* and Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists*, the fictive context in which we teach political theology is

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shifting on its axis once again.² Critchley's work argues that some kind of political theology is a practical necessity for conducting the business of effective politics. He calls for a refashioning of a political theology shaped by Rousseau, rooted in a "civil profession of faith" as the basis for the relation of politics, law and religion.³ Predicated on an intriguing acknowledgement that whilst politics is *conceivable* without religion, it may not be *practicable*, religion returns as a complex contradiction: it is both the source of strife and the foundational dimension of any effective politics. On the one hand this is a subtle account which, unlike the evangelical atheists, is able to recognize the truth of Schmitt's claim that 'all significant concepts in the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts'; and consequently to claim the history of political forms as "metamorphoses of sacralisation."⁴ Yet, what remains intact in Critchley's account is the predictable modern narrative of religious violence, a deep suspicion of the corporate religious body and consequently a cry of deception. Institutional and doctrinal religion ruins its own promise: the hope of a theological anthropology, which opens for us the wide horizon of eschatological creativity, moves in its systematic form to trade in this open space for the cheap grace of security, guarantees and rewards. The political instincts latent in faith are thus best witnessed to by the discipleship of the faithless.

What follows is a reflection on four years of teaching a course in political theology. The drift of these reflections would doubtless dismay Critchley, but nonetheless their trajectory shares something of his conception of the distinctively theo-political task: the teaching of forms of shared life capable of animating practices of love. Whilst this piece is perhaps better seen as reflection on practice, its argument drives in two directions: on the one hand *contra* Critchley's charge, to frame an optimistic account of teaching confessional political theology as a contribution to both Church and society. On the other hand, a challenge to Church culture which results in a contradictory tendency to both neglect formation in political theology, and where it has started to rethink this commitment in the light of the new visibility of religion, to continue to conceive of its task in frustratingly binary and oppositional terms.

2. Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012). Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012).

3. Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 21, quoting Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*.

4. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. G. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36. Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 12.

The Religion in Politics and the Politics in Religion: A Pedagogical Context

In *Hegel Contra Sociology*, social philosopher Gillian Rose quotes Hegel thus: “In general religion and the foundation of the state is [*sic*] one and the same thing; they are identical in and for themselves.”⁵ Rose explores the ways in which this statement has been so frequently (mis)read by students of Hegel. The tendency is to read this statement as formed by a “grammatical subject and predicate joined by the copula ‘is’.”⁶ In this way Hegel appears to make either an empirical claim that religion and the foundation of the state *are* the same, or a prescription that they should be. Rose contends that Hegel playfully intends neither. Conscious of the constant misreading of the relation between religion and the political Hegel desires that we learn to read such propositions—and the relations they imply—*speculatively*. A speculative reading does not make the mistake of assuming that the subject is fixed, or the predicates accidental. Rather, a speculative approach helps us to understand that religion and the foundations of the state “acquire their meaning in a series of [contradictory] relations to each other.”⁷ These very terms acquire their historical meanings through practices of complex exchange: achieving differentiation through processes of imitation. On this account neither concept is fixed and abstract. Thus the task of performing a speculative reading of religion and the political requires a particular kind of attention be paid to the political character of religion and the religious character of politics.

Developed in a more overtly theological and solidly practical way, this expresses well the challenge and opportunity we face as teachers of political theology. For the last four years I have co-taught a course in political theology for students in ministerial formation studying theology within the Cambridge Theological Federation.⁸ Students taking the course are from Anglican, Methodist, URC and Roman Catholic communities. The classroom experience is marked by significant diversity in age, tradition and cultural background; as well as a wide range of motivations for choosing a course in political theology. For some the draw is a fairly standard interest in the past, present and future of Church–state relations; others come with a primary interest in social justice, others still with a wish to

5. Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 48.

6. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 48.

7. Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 49.

8. This course is a level three BTh course taught through the Divinity Faculty, University of Cambridge and a level three BA course taught through Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. All students are also members of the Cambridge Theological Federation. It is taken by a group of 15–25 students a year, over two academic terms.

think politically and theologically about pastoral issues they have encountered elsewhere in the curriculum or in ministerial context. At the start of the course students express the aspiration that we will help them, as individuals, to understand and relate the two worlds of religion and politics in service of their future ecclesial ministry.

It is interesting to note that student interest in political theology has been matched by a newly energized ecclesial interest in the study of political theology. In a heavily contested social and ecclesial context, in which questions of the public role of religion are newly energized, understanding the relation of religion and the political is increasingly perceived by sponsoring Churches as a pressing task for ministers. Consequently, political theology is less and less viewed as a special interest subject and more as a key area of pastoral and intellectual formation, essential in the theological education curriculum. While I wish to raise some questions about this commitment, we should also be clear that this interest in political theology is based on a genuine sentiment. In addition to the awareness that those being trained for leadership roles in the Church need to be able to understand the wider polity in which the Church operates, there is a growing awareness in some quarters that the study of political theology is fundamentally a cross-curricula task. We cannot complete formation in ecclesiology or missiology (historical or contemporary) without attention to questions of political theology—and vice versa. To this list I would add pastoral studies.

While this renewed enthusiasm for the teaching and learning of political theology is welcome, I would argue on the basis on my own teaching experience that it has not generally been matched by shifts in the operative theological framework through which sponsoring Churches or theological students approaching a course conceptualize the nature and task of political theology. The implicit norms brought to the seminar room door continue to bear more than outline traces of the two kingdoms, two swords, two realms narratives; complex theo-political anthropologies still profoundly shaped by the legacy of the rupture of medieval into modern worldviews. Consequently, despite the new enthusiasm for political theology, the operative theological framework tends to be defined by precisely the binary conception of the relation of religion to the political that Gillian Rose was so anxious we challenge.

Negotiating a path between the aspirations and priorities of sponsoring Churches and our own sense of what we hope students will learn, the course we teach is structured so as to enable students to conceive of political theology as an integrated task within a necessarily and constructively hybrid discipline. This makes for a demanding course that requires engagement with theological, historical and philosophical disciplines. For

teaching purposes we have chosen to adopt the wide and inclusive definition of political theology from the *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* as our baseline:

Theology is broadly understood as discourse about God, and human persons as they relate to God. The political is broadly understood as the use of structural power to organize a society or community of people... Political theology is, then, the analysis and criticism of political arrangements (including cultural-psychological, social and economic aspects) from the perspective of differing interpretations of God's ways with the world.⁹

The core aims of the course are to enable our students to become increasingly proficient in interpreting both the political expressions of Christian faith and the theological nature of politics. This is partly about being attentive to the ways in which the political forms of the nation-state continually deploy the technologies, language forms and aspirations of the religious—identifying the ways in which the state, as Joseph de Maistre reminds us, in its politics aims at nothing more than religion. “All conceivable human institutions rest on a religious basis, or else they pass away. Their strength and durability depend on how far they are divinized, if we may put it like that.”¹⁰ In particular, *pace* Cavanagh, this means enabling students to become confident in reading against the grain of the creation myths of political liberalism and the soteriology of the nation-state.¹¹

Moving beyond the available introductory undergraduate texts, we also hope to help students learn ways to judiciously expose the more overt theological preferences of liberalism: towards religio-political emotions of liberty and equality and a pantheism of God, all in all. Echoing Rose's notion of the speculative, we root ourselves in a performative, analytical orientation towards the discipline, hoping to enable students to become adept at reading the historical and contemporary political and theological traditions in such a way that they are *equally* able to catch the theological drift of contemporary liberalism and the political drift of ecclesiology, as each is formed by and imitates the other. Given the formation context in which we operate we are also aiming to enable students to envisage themselves as theo-political actors with a powerful role in shaping the corporate practices of Church and social polities.

9. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds, *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 2.

10. Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France* (Euvres completes de J. de Maistre, 14 vols.; Lyon: Vitte et Perrussel, 1884–86), t. I, ch. VI, 71.

11. See William Cavanagh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) and William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

Church Practices and Political Theology

In service of the formational contract, sponsoring Church bodies charge us with enabling students training for ministry to make connections between their wider theological learning and their pastoral practice—to formulate more comprehensively integrated theological approaches to action that take into account the formal ecclesial and social roles for which they are being formed. We teach this course ecumenically but also from within our respective positions as an American Catholic in the Anglican tradition and a British Catholic in the Roman Catholic tradition. The course is structured both historically and thematically—a term of source work based on classic texts and themes from Augustine to the early modern period, followed by a term of teaching on contemporary exploration of political liberalism and modern democracy, contemporary Catholic social teaching, contemporary Anabaptism, liberation, black and contextual theologies and political economy, and Christian discourse on the politics of contemporary human rights. These topics are not treated as stand-alone themes, but rather as key trajectories, movements and schools of thought that enable us to perceive sharply the central challenges of theological reflection on the political. These topics are read both in relation to political and Church history and their relation to the wider systematic theological whole.

In order to honour the practice-based orientation of adult ministerial education we have experimented with different pedagogical ways of integrating the more formal learning of the lecture room with practice. This has taken two forms: seminar-based exposure to a range of Christian political practices; and a commitment to an ongoing rhythm of integrating the practical experience of students into the lecture room conversation and Cambridge supervision system. We have run five seminars through the course that engage with key areas of Christian practice: Christian involvement in broad-based community organizing, Christian development and humanitarian work, and the politics and ethics of Christian campaigning. These seminars are led by key practitioners in the field who have engaged in significant reflective practice on their work and are as much about encouraging experienced Christian practitioners to model a quality of theological reflection on Christian political action as they are input on these manifestations of contemporary Christian politics. A notable instance of why this is powerful: a colleague reflecting with us on her experience of working as a professional Christian lobbyist on the Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill raised a question for the group about the place of Christian lobbying within a wider ecclesiology. Most of our students had simply never thought about Christian lobbying and its practices needing to be seen (or owned) by the wider Church, let alone a set

of practices that might need to be tested and framed ecclesiology. The questions posed, as reflection on practice, challenged and stretched their concepts of ecclesiology in a more immediate way than the more formal lecture material. However, our concern to engage practice is equally about building in a natural (but not programmatic or rigidly methodological) rhythm of integration in which the reality of placements undertaken in training and experience of being Church are part of the critical reflective process of engaging with reading, lecture material and the typologies of political theology.

Questions from a Ministerial Education Context

The final section of this article seeks to note and explore three areas of ongoing questioning which have come into sharper relief for the author through teaching this course: firstly, the relation between theology of action and a commitment to practice in ministerial education; secondly, the role of Churches as technologies of citizenship; and finally, the role and contribution of Catholic social teaching/thought in the context of confessional political theology.

Working at the interface of practical and political theology for the last decade has raised questions about the extent to which the ways we handle practice can be considered distinctively and richly theological. I am left feeling that we still have more to do in a ministerial education context to frame our engagement of practice within a wider theology of action and necessary attention to ecclesiology. Rowan Williams, in his concise introduction to *Theology and the Political*, draws the reader's attention to the relationship between forms of political theology and the theologies of human action they imply. Resisting the notion of "meaning as power," he argues: "the fundamental requirement of a politics worth the name is that we have an account of human action that decisively marks its distance from assumptions about action as the successful assertion of will."¹² He suggests that one of the vital contributions of theology to our times is that it offers a kind of formation of the will. The conditions of justice depend upon it. As such the task of a political theology course that seeks to focus on faithful practice will be, in part, to expose the temptations and illusions of human action. This is a necessary part of formation in (a non-instrumentalist) political theology. Developing his critique of action as assertion (interestingly partly drawn from Gillian Rose's speculative

12. Rowan Williams, "Introducing the Debate: Theology and the Political," in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, ed. Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

account of hidden fascism), Williams argues instead for a model of *action as testimony*, in which action becomes

a representation of something prior in such a way as to introduce that prior and shaping reality into a continuing narrative of uncovering through response and question. I do something that I believe meaningful, and so I state my faith that what moulds that action and constitutes its intelligible content (i.e., what can be communicated and can mould further action) is capable of reproduction in different form—sufficiently different to guarantee that another action is not repetition but further unfolding through representation of a content not exhausted by my action and determination alone.¹³

The something prior in this configuration is divine action, whose love moves humanity towards this restlessly creative end: a radically different kind of differentiation through imitation. Williams contends that political theology might help us to discern that our attempts to represent the supreme act of divine testimony are most meaningful and “densely intelligible” when least concerned to dominate; when least assertive in a crude sense. While for some this may constitute an overly philosophical way of expressing it, the formative purpose of teaching political theology to those preparing for pastoral ministry in the Churches is surely close to this vision. Forming a sense of the political agency of the Christian leader as more than the assertion of will—with the attendant implications that the mission of the Church (and the meaning of religious freedom) does not depend on an assertive “defence” of the Church, nor on a crude assertion of its perceived rights. This serves Christian mission ill. Rather, it depends on the discernment of faithful action—a shaping of a politics of discipleship that will take many different forms, a complex and pluriform *imitatio* that will nonetheless resist the wider cultural temptations to homogeneity, “meaning as power” and the assertion of will as a prime mode of political practice.

In his recent book on *The Politics of Discipleship* Graham Ward notes, almost in passing, that one of the distinct functions of the Churches through time has been to act as “technologies for active citizenship.” Drawing on Sheldon Wolin’s historical concern to note the role played by religion in the rehabilitation of the political, Ward asks in a contemporary context what role the Churches might have as technologies of citizenship in a context defined by a serious democratic deficit.¹⁴ This is a helpful and important question and has a particular prescience for those

13. Williams, “Introducing the Debate,” 2.

14. Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 37–76.

studying political theology as preparation for formal ecclesial ministry. In an attempt to address something of the long historical role of Christian theology and practice in the rehabilitation of the political we have chosen to give a greater emphasis to the medieval context and Thomism than many of the standard undergraduate introductory texts on political theology allow. However, studies of contemporary Church practice as “technologies of citizenship” remain limited, with a tendency for teaching bibliographies to end up overly dependent on US contextual material. Luke Bretherton’s *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* offers a significant contribution to this area, but it does not pretend to be a comprehensive account, and more theological resourcing which seeks to attend to practices of Christian citizenship (with attention to the full ambivalence of this term) are clearly needed to better resource courses such as ours.¹⁵

On the flip side of this question, students in a ministerial context are also excited when we help them to see that the very nature of the Church itself is political: structures of worship, of governance and of doctrine imply a politics and embody practices of the political. A ministerial education context invites us therefore to reflect on the ways in which the political arrangements of the Churches imply ecclesial technologies of citizenship or participation. Addressing attention to the political structures within which ministry takes shape is still not a mainstream political theology concern, tending to be treated through ecclesiology and yet surely political theology that wishes to enable a thorough engagement with its subject matter needs to be able to handle with students the complex contemporary questions of the politics of Church membership and the technologies of identity politics which shape Church life. This has to be a particular concern for any gendered or queer political theology.

Catholic Social Teaching: Beyond a Parallel Discourse

The final notable omission from teaching resources, which has particular significance for those teaching in ministerial education, is a serious consideration of Catholic social thought as a genre of political theology. Given that the course we teach aims to be both ecumenical and appropriately denominational, we have chosen to include teaching on Catholic social thought. Yet, the inclusion of this material is not straightforward and does raise questions. In what follows I present a somewhat paradoxical argument: on the one hand courses in political theology need to be more willing to incorporate serious historical and contemporary attention to the genre of Catholic social thought; on the other hand there are

15. Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010).

reasons to be suspicious of positing too easy a relationship between political theology and Catholic social thought. The case that follows requires that we make a number of distinctions up front: firstly, that there is a distinction between the manner in which Catholic theology formally thinks of the spaces in which it self-critically reflects on “the political” and the ways in which, as scholars and teachers of political theology, we can capture and discuss the shifting political practices of the Catholic polity interacting within a wider social polity. Secondly, while we have an increasing body of literature on the former, which analyses both the official tradition of the social encyclicals and the more informal tradition of the social movements, we still have very little literature that helps us substantially formulate critical scholarly reflection on the second and which, furthermore, enables an integrated and speculative vision of the whole. In its own ministerial and intellectual formation processes, particularly in seminaries, the Catholic Church tends also to focus primarily on the former official, papal tradition and largely at the expense of wider resourcing in political philosophy, Church history and ecclesiology as contexts for the exploration of Catholic political theologies: here I argue for a balanced and creative attention to both, as torn halves of the same task.

Despite recent attempts by Catholic theologians to renew reflection on the political within the framework of sacramental theology and ecclesiology, in formal disciplinary terms the Catholic tradition treats political themes through a dual—and sometimes methodologically contradictory—set of lenses: moral theology and Catholic social thought. Catholic social teaching tends to be understood within the Catholic tradition as primarily a *form* or subset of moral theology, whose *content* constitutes a substantial commentary on the implications of the Good News for social relations. A willingness to employ a wider theo-political hermeneutic implies that we are able to read Catholic social thought and the practices of the social movements as forms of political theology, with particular attention to the vision of religious order which Catholic social teaching seeks to articulate as a “common good” foundation for the wider social body. In stimulating a political theological view of virtue, participation, community, integral human development and the common good, among other themes, and in its positing of a Christian universalism, Catholic social Thought needs to be seen in both form and content as a substantial contribution to *and* subject focus for political theology, within the framework of the *Blackwell Companion* definition.¹⁶

Yet attention to the wider definition of political theology requires us to resist the temptation to reduce the performance of Catholic political

16. Scott and Cavanaugh, eds, *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 2.

theology *just* to Catholic social teaching/thought—however carefully we are reading it. I want to suggest that there is a danger that an argument for the inclusion of Catholic social thought within ecumenical courses on political theology can close down rather than open up attention to Catholic history, sources and norms. A wider attention to Catholic forms of political theology requires that we both attend to and look beyond Catholic social teaching to a more complex, messy and fascinating set of questions: how do we capture this and other sites where Catholic theology is a form of theo-political performance? When we read the relation of Catholic social teaching/thought to Catholic political history speculatively, as implied in Gillian Rose's account with which we started this piece, what kind of questions and insights emerge? How does such an account, which will be attentive to the historical paradox of the Catholic experience, serve the formation of future Church leaders in an ecumenical context? On this basis a more substantial Catholic political theology requires of us a wider speculative reading of papal policy, reflection on the theological labours of the social movements, and attention to the history of Catholic ideas about the political. It is in this more complex and hybrid labour that we see the shifting discourses and practices of participation, virtue, and a complex vision of the body of Christ within the social whole.

Observing this wider pedagogical task requires that we overcome the overly stark artificial separation between Church history and systematics, Church history and political history. And it is here that we might pause and note that we are not yet well served in thoroughgoing theological studies of the relationship between Catholicism and contemporary political forms, particularly liberal democracy. In a recent ground-breaking text, *Catholicism and Democracy*, Emile Perreau-Saussine attempted to address from within the history of ideas precisely this lack of a history of Catholic political thought and practice in the democratic age.¹⁷ His careful historical account, focused on the history of French Catholicism from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, illustrates many of the themes already noted above: the complex exchange of attributes between political and religious, Church and state, secular power and religious authority. But his acute reading *between* polemic positions adopted by Church and state in its modern form reveals new insights: the surprising integrity of some of the early critique of the theological drift of liberalism, lost and downplayed in later Catholic social teaching; themes to which we have returned in a different guise in post-liberal political theologies. For those studying political theology in a ministerial context it is also fascinating

17. Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Catholicism and Democracy: An Essay in the History of Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

to see the perplexity with which the claims of Christian universalism are greeted. It is difficult for those outside the Church's purview to interpret the morphing of Christian universalism between an appearance of forthright, abrasive (and often unwelcome) political challenge—when confronting power by disturbing nationalisms or challenging thin concepts of public good—and a form of political indifference, with its teleology drawing one on through and beyond the finite. Both are political truths that have become increasingly difficult for a secular and post-secular audience to grasp.

Equally pertinent to our students is Perreau-Saussine's historical account of the extremes to which Catholic political theology has been prone—noting the tendency of Catholic political theology when feeling threatened to represent a retreat into a narrow appeal to divine law, forgetful of the place of natural and human law as dynamic, participatory theological forms. Through study of the shift from Gallicanism towards Ultramontanism, the student is able to perceive the complex exchange between secular power and religious authority in which each hurtles towards unproductive conflict with its "other." Such external conflicts impel not simply shifts in the relation of Church and state, but more interestingly shifts within Christian ecclesiology itself. This drama plays out the inherent tensions in political and ecclesial practice of religious freedom in the democratic age, laying bare both competing doctrines of social equality and competing, dynamic ecclesiologies within the Church's polity: the competing and colliding cities present within *both* faith and secular polity. In his commentary on the value of Perreau-Saussine's study, Alistair MacIntyre argues that we are helped to see a history of unpredictable and unintended transformations in which the defeat of the Church by "the secular" can also be read against the grain as a liberation of both hierarchy and laity.¹⁸ The value to an ecumenical group of future Church leaders is that they are helped to better understand firstly that there is a relationship between political change and spiritual and theological change in the life of the Church and, secondly, that this is a matter for careful, constant attention in ministry. It is this wider contribution of Catholic theory and practice as torn halves of a whole that I would want to see present in the teaching of confessional, ecumenical political theology.

Conclusion

This article has sought to do little more than lay out the basic framework and orientation of a ministerial education course in political theology

18. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Foreword" in Perreau-Saussine, *Catholicism and Democracy*.

taught in a UK context, and the questions that have emerged for the author through reflection on practice. These are offered as a contribution which it is hoped will agitate other teachers of political theology towards sharing their own practice and articulating their own ongoing struggles with how this most vital of disciplines might continue to be resourced and developed.

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