

ANTHONY PAUL SMITH
University of Nottingham

BOOK PROFILE: THEOLOGY AND THE POLITICAL: THE NEW DEBATE

A review of *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*. Edited by Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. pp. xxii + 476. \$29.95/£19.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8223-3472-0.

THEOLOGY AND THE POLITICAL: THE NEW DEBATE is the newest offering from SIC, a series edited by Slavoj Žižek for Duke University Press. While SIC normally offers a collection of essays on or within the framework of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, *Theology and the Political* stands out as an anomaly within the series as its main figures tend toward St. Thomas and Gilles Deleuze rather than Lacan and Hegel. In fact, other than Žižek's own piece and one written by Conor Cunningham, there is almost no mention of Lacan at all and a near complete lack of questions having to do with psychoanalysis. Instead the volume is concerned with the construction of political ontologies, with the debate centering on the question of how to go about this construction in a truly revolutionary way. This approach can likely be credited to the addition of two editors in addition to Žižek, John Milbank and Creston Davis, whose conference "Ontologies in Practice" formed the basis of the volume. While those who were hoping for the more unabashedly Lacanian orientation that SIC normally provides will be disappointed in the additions the two co-editors bring to the work, so will readers of the Radical Orthodoxy series who will be drawn to the book by the presence of major authors in that series. However, that there is no majority discourse in the book is to the credit of the editors for it has increased the depth and variance of the analyses presented, allowing the book to become more fully a "debate." Though this format often leads the reader to feel as if the book is somewhat schizophrenic, this is ultimately its greatest strength and precisely why it is worth reading.

Theology and the Political opens with an introduction written by Rowan Williams, currently the Archbishop of Canterbury. The introduction attempts to introduce the debate, but also lends itself easily to being read as a short expose on the Christian and Jewish theological challenge to modern conceptions of power politics. In a time of increasing religious fundamentalism and secular disdain for any kind of religious discourse, it is a hopeful sign that the Archbishop appears here next to militant atheists like Antonio Negri, as it signals that both share not

only a desire to see a radically changed world but that there is a *common* desire. Following this introduction the book breaks down into five major sub-sections with the essays giving some consideration to a broad theme. "Revolution and Theological Difference" opens with four considerations of how theological thought can equip and bring about a revolutionary project; "Ontology, Capital, and Kingdom" is a varied approach to addressing questions of political economy in light of literature and religious thought; "Infinite Desire and the Political Subject" presents and debates ways of constructing a revolutionary subject from varying positions of immanence and transcendence; "Reenchanting the Political beyond Ontotheology" considers how to give political action a sense of mission, in the religious sense, without falling into essentialist and exclusionary thought; and "Theological Materialism" remains the sole subsection that presents a relatively unified position declaring that materialism without theological concepts is powerless. Regardless of one's position within the many smaller debates subsumed into the larger debate of the book, it should be easy to find an essay in this collection that will excite you and one that will anger you.

At times these sub-sections can feel as if they are an artificial guideline to the very varied approach of the book. In the section "Ontology, Capital, and Kingdom" one is struck by the wide discrepancy not so much of views, but of the topics treated. One is hard-pressed to find congruency between Philip Goodchild's essay which considers creation within capitalist eschatology and Daniel M. Bell Jr.'s Christian dogmatism which declares that "only Jesus saves." Even more difficult is finding a connection between Bell's dogmatic theological position and the work of Simon Critchley & Tom McCarthy's analysis of money in the literature of James Joyce which passes without any mention of religion at all. I'd like to suggest that this aspect of the book, which I termed schizophrenic above, comes from the historical position that the authors find themselves within. As we enter what many are calling the post-secular age, the divide between the religious and the secular appears more and more to be an artificial distinction. Thus, one way to read this volume is as an attempt to articulate this situation and render the possibilities that this breakdown facilitates for a new revolutionary project of thought and within practice. This strategy of reading helps the assorted voices to stand together while still allowing for the differences each thinker brings to the debate. If one approaches the work in this way, those chapters which at first appear to be outliers, like the essays of Critchley & McCarthy and Terry Eagleton, will later appear to suggest ways of thinking through this present situation that do not speak *ad nauseum* about our post-secular age.

There are a few errors that the editors should have caught: in Eagleton's first essay the only citation misspells the name of the author he is citing (Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe), the name of the translator for Antonio Negri's essay is missing completely (the translator is Matteo Mandarini), Žižek gets away with yet another reprint of an essay without noting that this is the case (this time the second chapter of his *The Puppet and the Dwarf*). However, these are only minor

irritations within the whole of the book. The only real criticism suitable in such a short space is to mention the lack of pluralism among the contributors. While the contributors are either already highly respected in their field or, based on the work presented, soon to be so, none of them deal with the issue of religion from a non-Western tradition. It would be too much to ask of a volume already abounding with contributors to add a Muslim theologian engaging with the works of Derrida or a Buddhist undertaking a critique of either capitalism or Western philosophy of religion particular to Buddhist thought, and still the volume would have been much improved by such an addition. I would suggest reading as a supplement *Difference in Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Philip Goodchild, (Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), for a collection of essays that moves in a similar spirit as *Theology and the Political*, but with important steps towards thinking questions of religious difference. New Slant, the new series being edited by Creston Davis, Philip Goodchild, and Ken Surin for Duke University Press, may offer more movement in that direction considering the interests of the three editors.

The attempt to articulate a developing situation leads to a creativity on the part of many of the authors that pushes both theology and philosophy of religion/critical theory into new directions. Such a movement is needed in both fields to avoid a stagnation that threatens to arise from the settling in of certain discourses that have dominated discussions of the political and the religious for the past decade. For some time now within Christian theology any attempt to deal with the political has had to address itself through a certain kind of ecclesiocentrism that depended on the authority of a Church that may not exist. At the same time in Continental philosophy there has been an important and helpful resurgence of interest in the religious, but this has had to negotiate itself through philosophical “masters” like Derrida and Levinas (two thinkers who would surely be most upset at being made into such masters). These discourses have offered important contributions to both fields and the work that has come out of them should not be underestimated, but they will fail to offer any new thought if they become dogmatic and hegemonic. The approach that the contributors take in regard to these hegemonic voices is one of respect by being willing to tarry with them when it assists in thinking and ultimately depart with them when they must. That is why *Theology and the Political*, by virtue of its schizophrenia that resists any hegemony and any dogmatism, is important for future discussions of the political and the religious.

ANTHONY PAUL SMITH is a post-graduate student at The University of Nottingham in the Theology and Religious Studies department as well as a research fellow at The Institute for Nature and Culture at DePaul University <<http://condor.depaul.edu/~inc/>>. His current research is in the intersections of philosophy of religion and philosophy of nature.

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Smith, Anthony Paul. "Book Profile: *Theology and the Political: The New Debate.*" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 8 no. 2 (Spring 2007): 214-217.

PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/08.2/smith.pdf>