

Clayton Crockett

Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics After Liberalism.

New York: Columbia University Press 2011.

216 pages

US\$50.00 (hardcover ISBN 978-0-231-14982-2)

What comes after the death-of-God theologies? What comes after the collapse of secularism and liberalism? Is it possible today to propose a radical political theology in response to the problems of the contemporary world? In the 1960s, the strict opposition between the religious and the secular began to break down. Some decades later it has become so porous that at present it finds little plausible use within the overall discourse. In the introduction of this book, whose title recalls Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, Clayton Crockett declares his aim as follows: 'I want to reflect theoretically on the current crisis of the name and state of political theology, including concepts like freedom, sovereignty, democracy, law, power, God, and the messianic' (1).

In Chapter 1, 'The Parallax of Religion', employing Slavoj Žižek's use of the concept of 'parallax' Crockett writes that a sort of parallax of religion could offer a constructive way of thinking about religion as ideology and theology. It involves an approach that goes beyond any dualism, considers religion beyond confessional limits, and locates the concept of religion between ideology and theology. Hent de Vries seems to have proposed a similar project, saying that what is most important today is to discuss political theology in a postmodern way: to think the post-religious and the post-secular in such a way that secularism does not replace religion and religion does not replace secularism.

But, what about the issue of sovereignty? In the chapter entitled 'Sovereignty and the Weakness of God', Crockett addresses this important topic, and claims that 'Spinoza's idea of sovereignty, at least as read through Negri and Deleuze, provides a more potentially viable understanding of sovereignty that can inform a radical political theology' (47). Whether or not one agrees with Heidegger that '*only a god can save us*', Crockett's view is that 'only if we find a way to realize this impotentiality of divine force or weakness can we preserve our transient happiness and be saved' (59). The sovereignty of which Crockett speaks, therefore, is a special sovereignty without potentiality. Spinoza plays a key role here. His political thought, his religious pluralism, his republicanism, and his consistent identification of God with Nature, are all contemporary forerunners of 'The Parallax of Religion'. In *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Deleuze argues that the sense of Spinoza's ontology is to posit "'no longer the affirmation of a single substance, but rather the laying out of a *common plane of immanence* on which all bodies, all minds, and all individuals are situated'" (67). It is in company with Spinoza that he can easily maintain, in *Difference and Repetition*, both the virtual and the actual, preferring the term virtual instead of possible or potential, though they are both real, two sides of the same coin.

Shifting his attention to a related theme, in the ‘Elements for Radical Democracy’ (Chapter 5) Crockett begins by stating that contemporary democracy cannot avoid confronting the current crisis of liberalism: as an ideology liberalism is exhausted, that neo-liberalism is a facade, and that we live in a new political and theological climate. For instance, in reference to the American situation, he notes that today neo-liberalism has embraced an extremely savage form of capitalism, and that ‘democracy is still invoked as the justification for the operation of neoliberal capitalism and contemporary practice of American imperialism, but many people have become more cynical about the present status of democracy in the United States and elsewhere’ (93). Today democracy is not so much a positive force for good government as a protection against extremely bad government. Always deferred and always spectral, democracy appears corrupted, diluted, and vanishing. We need to think democracy otherwise, to re-address urgently here and now the issue of democracy and critical practice. In *Savage Anomaly*, Hardt and Negri speak of the multitudes as ‘an already existing subject that is the engine of social production, they simultaneously acknowledge that it still “needs a political project to bring it into existence”’ (100). But while it is no longer possible to sustain any distinction between political philosophy and political theology, these notions remain linked in large part to a secularist orientation. Crockett’s proposal, instead, is to ‘open up a new radically democratic space for political theory and practice with a different understanding of religion’ (100). Compatible with the vision of radical democracy—see Chapter 6, ‘Law Beyond Law’—is the line according to the idea of law stands or may stand beyond law, into the sphere of the potential/impotential pure law.

In the chapter, ‘Radical Theology and the Event’, Crockett gives some critical insights into the parallel between St. Paul and Deleuze, and the interpretation of Paul as a powerful critic of the first century Roman Empire. He also discusses Badiou’s interpretation of Paul as an atheist, the primary apostle and theologian of the resurrection; and Nietzsche’s interpretation of Paul as the first Christian, one who distorts Jesus’s quietist asceticism, uniting the commandments to love God and love one’s neighbour.

Into this complex thematic enters Malabou’s proposal ‘to configure political theology differently due to the extraordinary conflation of politics and religion today. Plasticity and equality can be seen as a contemporary theoretical form of potentiality beyond liberalism’ (107). By the final chapter, Crockett retakes the basic concept of plasticity. Plasticity is a sort of special power well suited to annihilate the classical and modern schemes of thought. After the deconstruction of Western onto-theology, Crockett argues, it appears that the most pervasive, profound and problematic spirit of what we call the West is Christianity, and the need for its deconstruction coincides with what has been called “the return to religion” in contemporary society and thought. But what is really involved in the deconstruction of Christianity? Derrida was conscious of the enormity of this task (cf., *On Touching—Jean Luc Nancy*). He remained, however, firmly anchored in the Western tradition. Crockett describes the dilemma as follows: ‘If Christianity is coextensive with the West, there is no possibility of rigorously separating philosophy and theology. Most forms of theology would be dedicated to preserving and continuing some form of Christianity, even if at times in the name of overcoming it. Most forms of (Western) philosophy would be dedicated to preserving

Western logic and discourse, if not Western culture and hegemony, whether or not they are aware of how deeply Christian this logic and discourse are' (157-8). A radical theology, Crockett continues, can help create 'a new brain for our species, based on this insight into the plasticity of form, both material and immaterial' (158).

This book might appear to be a tangle of different threads, a mere parade of thinkers circulating in the post-secularist, postmodern and neo-theological landscape. But it is not. Crockett takes up the insights gleaned from the analysis of contemporary political theologians in order to respond to the serious problems facing the contemporary world. This is a thoughtful, clearly written and challenging book. I appreciate very much Crockett's approach and his focus on Spinoza and Malabou, with an eye toward their future significance.

The question remains, however: should religious viewpoints have any role in political debate? The book's conclusion puts it this way: is liberal democracy the only form of democracy, and does it perish with liberalism? Or is there a possibility for radical democracy? By erasing the vocabulary of Western political thought, can we hope for a new concept of politics? For Crockett, '[t]he hope for radical democracy *is a potentiality*, a form of freedom that requires plastic forms to bring it into being' (164, emphasis added). Echoing Kant's question at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* ('What can I hope for?'), Crockett writes, 'I would like to hope that democracy could survive the death of liberalism (and capitalism)'. Shortly after, he asks himself, 'what can we think, what can we hope, and how can we act, in the light of the possibility of imminent global collapse?' His final suggestion is that a 'radical political theology may not appear nourishing, but it is a necessary theoretical intervention into our current way life' (165).

Francesco Tampoia