



NEW APPROACHES TO RELIGION AND POWER

# The Transcendence of Desire

## A Theology of Political Agency

Tom James · David True

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# New Approaches to Religion and Power

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*For our daughters.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book emerged more than five years ago out of our growing disenchantment with the political parties, a growing appreciation of the work of activists, and a kind of frustration with the field of theology. Over time, it has evolved through multiple forms, and with the help of readers, it has developed into more than we initially imagined. In addition to “blind” readers and skeptical editors, we are most grateful to conversation partners who have shared ideas, hosted talks, commented on drafts, and encouraged us. The strange thing is that we couldn’t have done it without both groups. Our conversation partners include our teacher Doug Ottati, who, along with the late Charles Swezey, helped set us on this course. Vincent Lloyd and Ted Smith both inspired new thoughts. Emerson Powery’s gentle challenges to our initial thoughts nudged us to think of the book as a constructive project. Editor Joerg Rieger gave us hope and nudged us in helpful directions. Special thanks to Vincent Lloyd at Villanova University and The Well preaching group for inviting us to share parts of the book. We are especially grateful to friends and colleagues who commented on chapters for us: Linda McKinnish Bridges, Franklin Tanner Capps, Kevin Carnahan, Elizabeth Hasty-Hinson, Vincent Lloyd, Doug Ottati, Dan Rhodes, Anna Pickney Straight, and Ellen Crawford True read chapters and helped us improve and complete the book.

This book could not have been completed without the support and encouragement of our families. Special thanks especially to our spouses, Michelle James and Ellen Crawford True. Their prophetic gifts and their wisdom, in the pulpit as well as at home, were models for us as we tried to

imagine a better politics and a more engaged church. Their love and patience sustained us during many months of furious and obsessive writing, editing, and rewriting. Finally, the book would have been very different, certainly for the worse, if it were not for the inspiration we receive from our daughters, Abby True, Emma James, Anna James, and Charissa James. Our musings about the “death of politics” have a certain “Gen X” gloom about them, heightened by the struggles these young women face and will face in a crumbling capitalist and still very much sexist order. At the same time, our gloom is broken by their insistence on finding a better way, driven by anger at injustice and by a fierce desire for the common. They embody the spirit of transformation that stirs within the contradictions of a decaying society. And so we dedicate this book to them.



## Praise for *The Transcendence of Desire*

“In an age of broken politics, Tom James and David True present a bold and innovative response to a world trapped by the iron cage of racial capitalism. This is an insightful, much-needed, groundbreaking work in the field of political theology.”

—Ilsup Ahn, *Author of Just Debt: Theology, Ethics, and Neoliberalism*

“*The Transcendence of Desire* is both a sophisticated work of political theology and a bracingly concrete call to action. It offers a Christian realism that transcends capitalist realism. And it calls churches to give up pretenses of solvency and lean into their precarity in order to discover new solidarities with their neighbors and connect with the deep desire that has the power to transform politics. This remarkable book performs the prophecy for which it calls.”

—Ted A. Smith, *Associate Dean of Faculty; Charles Howard Candler Professor of Divinity, Emory University*

“The authors unveil a robust theological proposal for transcending the constraints of neoliberalism’s scions. With its clear-eyed appraisal of the contemporary North Atlantic political landscape, perhaps the most impressive aspect of this project is its refusal to withdraw into resignation or quietism, opting instead to discern the work of the Spirit in emancipatory communities of prophetic resistance. This is a vital new contribution to the often tedious genre of public theology.”

—Franklin Tanner Capps, *Director of the Miller Summer Youth Institute, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*

“James and True move us beyond the worn-out debate between the new traditionalists and naive liberals fighting over imagined histories and impossible futures. Offering a penetrating analysis of the malaises of secular modernity, they look beyond standard solutions. This is innovative political theology—not for the faint of heart, but for those willing to engage with the real problems of our world.”

—Kevin Carnahan, *Professor of Philosophy and Religion, Central Methodist University*

“Amid the ‘ruins of neoliberalism,’ Tom James and David True provide us with a way forward. This book imagines a compelling theological vision of human collectivity capable of reinvigorating a commitment to the common.”

—Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty, *Author of The Problem of Wealth: A Christian Response to a Culture of Affluence*

“Is politics possible? Against the ironic critiques of naysayers left and right, Tom James and David True answer a resounding: YES! Resisting secular enclosure within an immanent frame, they champion prophetic politics oriented toward desire. On their compelling account, it is the “common desire for the common” that sustains political struggle.”

—Kyle Lambelet, *Assistant Professor in the Practice of Theology and Ethics and the Director of Formation Communities, Emory University*

“Tom James and David True face squarely contemporary capitalism and racism. Written with earnest clarity, the fruit of wide reading and serious reflection, *The Transcendence of Desire* will appeal to those in and beyond the academy.”

—Vincent Lloyd, *Director of Africana Studies Program and the Center for Political Theology at Villanova University*

“James and True argue that the transcendent breaks through the iron cage of secular and capitalist modernity in desires that call for permanent revolution. They frame a political theology that draws on twentieth-century crisis theologians and liberative critiques and offers an important alternative to naïve turns toward pre-modern medieval society and local democracy.”

—Douglas Ottati, *Craig Family Distinguished Professor of Reformed Theology and Justice, Davidson College, author of A Theology for the 21st Century*

“Tom James and David True argue convincingly that love (in the form of *desire*) can motivate communal political action. This book is a must-read for any Christian invested in the highest values of our democracy.”

—Emerson B. Powery, *Interim Dean, School of Arts, Culture and Society, Messiah University; co-author of The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved*

“Scholars often construe secularization as a dispute between religion and culture, neglecting its impact on other spheres of life. James and True focus their analysis of secularization on the erosion of political agency to offer a politically engaged theology informed by prophetic voices, from liberation theology to Hannah Arendt to Black Lives Matter.”

—Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, *Clarence Louis and Helen Steber Professor of Theological Studies Saint Louis University*

“This book achieves something rare, giving us a valuable guide for recognizing how theological habits can reinforce or resist neoliberal values by training a more responsible Christian imagination.”

—Michelle C. Sanchez, *Associate Professor of Theology, Harvard University, author of Calvin and Resignification of the World: Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem of Political Theology*

“James and True have written an ambitious, nuanced, and important book, one that displays both inter-disciplinary and theoretical creativity, both spiritual depth and political insight, as it translates across discourses of political theory and Christian theology. It tells a sophisticated story about the current impasses in a secular modernity founded in neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy, but it also discloses resources by which to imagine and build a future on different terms.”

—George M. Shulman, *Professor Emeritus, New York University,*  
*and author of American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in*  
*American Political Culture*

“*The Transcendence of Desire: A Theology of Political Agency* is a timely and important contribution informed by a political reformation grounded in a theology of prophetic wisdom.”

—Angela D. Sims, *President of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School and*  
*author of Lynched: The Power of Memory in a Culture of Terror*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

Americans, we are repeatedly told, disagree with one another about almost everything. This much is clear, however: we agree that our politics is “broken.” Not that long ago such a claim would have sounded radical, even alarming. Might it be a sign of hope that today it reads as quite ordinary, even commonsensical? Who doesn’t want a new political order? This aspiration appears to be one of the few things that almost all Americans (and many people around the world) hold in common. If that’s true, then why do our electoral politics appear so stubbornly unresponsive to our cries for change? It is not just that electoral politics appears unresponsive; it is that *our say in* electoral politics feels all but dead. What happened? How did we arrive at this point? There are many answers to this question, but as we will argue in Chap. 2, the primary cause is that electoral politics has been captured by a larger system of power, and this system, call it neoliberalism or racial capitalism, is killing us and our political agency. Consider, for instance, those struggling to survive a changing climate, the intensification of a biopolitics that denies persons control of their own reproductivity, or the systemic threats that people of color must navigate daily. Neoliberalism is most brutal on the poor, but it does not end with the poor. It often impoverishes the middle classes. Not even the affluent are free. They live a kind of half-life isolated by their wealth and haunted by their fears of losing it. If you are reading these words, chances are that you could write your own (more powerful) litany of harms. Key, however, is recognizing

that our problem is a systemic one rather than a series of puzzles to be solved.<sup>1</sup> Why don't more of us see this situation for what it is? Our body politic has lost the ability to see beyond neoliberalism, which, we will argue, has created a kind of alternative reality that has robbed us of our capacity to discern truth from deception. Even if we can see neoliberalism, it is all but impossible to imagine an alternative to it. Consequently, we have lost the ability to act, to do something genuinely new in politics. In response, activist organizations have created what we might call an alternative space of politics, a space for experimental politics. While these experiments are about many things, they share an ambition to revive political agency. In writing this book, we attempt to follow their lead by experimenting with theology to test if it might be an aid in the recovery of political agency.

One might object that this experiment has already been run and that theology has been found wanting—in service to or aligned with the agents of the status quo, oppression, and resentment. Today, the ruling system promises Christians prosperity in heaven or on earth as well as a return of their theology's privileged status. For their part, many Christians theologize about the sacred significance of the system and its leaders. There is good reason, then, to be skeptical about the liberative possibilities of theology. But what if? What if in the current struggle, theology *could* serve as a resource for a new politics rather than simply being an obstacle? Might that not tip the balance? History is replete with peasants' revolts inspired in part by religious visions of a new world. Might this be a time when theology contributes to a new formation in politics?

Talk of a "new formation" may prompt some to question "the realism of our approach." While we appreciate the concern to be realistic, we also worry that the concern to be realistic (as well as responsible) often ends up producing a kind of fatalistic approach to politics, despite intentions of charting a new direction in politics. To illustrate why this is the case, we turn to Max Weber's famous essay on "Politics as Vocation." This essay was first written and delivered as a lecture in the final years of his life. The context was the accelerating bureaucratization and *kulturkampf* of the interwar period. Weber was, of course, keenly aware of the challenges of politics. He had, after all, prophesied the coming "iron cage" of modern economic rationality. Thus, despite the title's optimistic ring, the essay is a profound rumination on the conflictual nature of politics. But it is more than this: it is an attempt to understand how moral values like compassion

<sup>1</sup>Vincent Lloyd, "On Puzzles and Idols," *Syndicate* (blog), February 3, 2016, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/resurrecting-democracy/>

might be made relevant to the stubborn realities of modern statecraft. Weber begins the essay by elaborating on the many contending pressures unleashed on the modern politician. He then argues that amid the pressures the politician has a special responsibility. Politicians, he counsels, should dialectically relate an ethic of ultimate ends with one of responsibility. Their duty is to maximize the ultimate within the constraints of actual politics. He advises that politicians should avoid culture wars and instead become wise. “What matters are a ruthless, practiced perspective on the realities of life and the abilities to endure these realities and deal with them psychologically.” This is a vision of the professional politician determined and disciplined, suited to the frustrating work of politics. “Politics is a slow and difficult drilling of holes into hard boards, done with both passion and clear-sightedness. To achieve what is possible in the world, one must constantly reach for the impossible...But to do so, one must be a leader—not only that, a hero, in a very literal sense of the word.”<sup>2</sup>

Weber insists that the wise and responsible leader is capable of heroically threading the needle to maximize the ultimate in the actual world with its powerful interests. The problems with such an account begin when we recognize that the “heroic” politician operates in an enclosed social order. In the face of such a formidable obstacle, Weber’s politician begins to look less like a wise statesman negotiating with contending forces and more like a delusional knight tilting at windmills.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, there is a place for tilting at windmills, but this is clearly not Weber’s intention, nor ours. Political agency is undermined when it relies on individual leaders to find a way of applying ideals to a politics controlled by powerful interests. When confronted with such power, politicians may continue to speak romantically of their aims and intentions, but in their acting, they give way, ironically, to a pragmatism entrenched in the status quo.<sup>4</sup>

Our problem, then, is determining whether there is a way out of Weber’s impasse. Some strands of contemporary political theology seek to leverage both theology and critical theory to break open the self-enclosure of the modern secular order. Two strategies that have impressed us are those of Vincent Lloyd and Ted Smith, who have taken what we think of

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber et al., *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures* (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 2020), 112–115. Cf. Corey Robin, “The Professor and the Politician,” *The New Yorker*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/max-weber-the-professor-and-the-politician>

<sup>3</sup> Cervantes Saavedra Miguel de, *Don Quixote* (London, UK: Macmillan Collector’s Library, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Tanner, Kathryn. *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019.



as an “apocalyptic” route beyond Weberian modernity.<sup>5</sup> In *The Religion of the Field Negro*, Lloyd joins a critique of white supremacy with a theological account of the limits of secularism. His charge is that secular modernity proceeds on the assumption of a fundamental violence, motivated by colonial ambitions and anti-Blackness.<sup>6</sup> Seeing a pervasive disease in Western culture, Lloyd offers a vision of an apocalyptic break with modernity and the welcoming of a new world that corresponds to a higher, divine law. In *Weird John Brown*, Ted Smith draws on Walter Benjamin to argue that antislavery activist John Brown held to a messianic perspective that enunciated a kind of “divine violence” that gives voice to the primordial justice woven into creation but betrayed by history.<sup>7</sup> This “divine violence,” essentially a word of judgment, delegitimizes social structures that violate primordial justice. We see our own project as akin to these two “apocalyptic” proposals, though we are focused on questions about *how* the hold of injustice is broken. We want to identify those sites where the reigning order is incomplete and ask what kind of agency is required both to undermine it and to construct a new political order. From our point of view, apocalyptic approaches are valuable but incomplete. They suggest that the hold of secular modernity is vulnerable to a higher authority, but they do not develop what we might call an *immanent strategy* to build and leverage power.<sup>8</sup> In other words, they do not fully overcome the Weberian impasse between higher law and practical politics.

If Lloyd and Smith help us imagine the interruption of the reigning order by the imposition of a transcendent law, two other recent proposals are focused on what we might call an immanent ordering that contests the

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kyle B. Lambelet, “Lovers of God’s Law: The Politics of Higher Law and the Ethics of Civil Disobedience,” *Political Theology* 19, no. 7 (2018): pp. 593–610, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462317x.2018.1467662>

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ted A. Smith, *Weird John Brown Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 68.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Engels distinguished between “utopian” and “scientific” socialisms. The first, he argued, were attempts to build a new society out of whole cloth, as it were. The latter were attempts to grasp the contradictory features of the capitalist mode of production (chiefly, between the socialization of production in modern factories and the privatization of control over the process of production) to leverage power to the end of socializing (that is to say, democratizing) ownership and control. Our proposal is steeped in the Marxist tradition in that it proceeds on this “scientific” basis of attending vigorously to actual conditions, even if we don’t share Engels’ optimism about capitalism “digging its own grave.” “Immanent strategy” is our way of distinguishing our approach from merely critical approaches, on the one hand, and utopian projects, on the other. See Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 45ff.

hegemony of secular modernity. Those proposals, we might say, do not attempt to navigate the Weberian impasse so much as to refuse its terms. John Millbank and Adrian Pabst's *The Politics of Virtue* argues for a post-liberalism that critiques the reigning capitalist order at what it takes to be its root: modern liberalism's construal of life as a continual battle between autonomous agents.<sup>9</sup> Their postliberalism envisions a return to traditional forms of social organization, emphasizing local solidarities and distinct social roles. In this view, the only real way to oppose modern capitalism is to retrieve the relationships and the differential ordering of society that it has tended to destroy. The role of theology in this kind of proposal is significant because it is believed to offer a truer account of how we are related to each other and thus a better anchor for constructing a humane social order. Millbank's aim is to restore theology to its medieval dignity as the "queen of the sciences." Luke Bretherton, in *Resurrecting Democracy*, takes a different path, arguing not for a wholesale return to premodern patterns of social organization but for a renewed practice of local democracy through "broad based community organizing."<sup>10</sup> Bretherton is skeptical, in fact, of any large-scale effort to subvert the capitalist order and its technocratic, antidemocratic expressions, arguing that democracy can be restored but only in local groups working together toward shared, and somewhat modest, ends.

The work of Millbank/Pabst and Bretherton each seems in its own way to represent a certain kind of wisdom about the problem we are facing in the political realm today. They acutely diagnose a destructive individualism and a failure of modern governing institutions. There is a profound optimism that drives their positions, however, that verges on the romantic. Millbank and Pabst believe that it is possible to contest capitalism along with the moral disease and political problems it creates by returning to a more organically and differentially composed society like the one that preceded it. One may object to their proposal for its romanticizing of a lost past, for a failure to grapple with the class character of precapitalist societies in the West. From our point of view, exchanging the class domination of capitalism with the class domination characteristic of the medieval world is no advance but a retreat.

Bretherton's optimism is seen in his belief that local democratic practices and their results can be sustained in the context of a pervasive

<sup>9</sup> John Millbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

capitalist order that reaches into every corner of modern life. As we will argue, this reach of the capitalist order is not only economic but affects our very subjectivity, our sense of self, and possibility. In both Millbank/Pabst and Bretherton, what is from one point of view a deep realism about the limits of the modern liberal imagination, moving from cosmopolitan dreams to an insistence on our embeddedness in local communities pursuing somewhat limited aims, is from another point of view a profound optimism that, in our view, fails to reckon with the full extent of class, race, and gender domination.

### THE ARGUMENT

So where do these recent efforts leave us? The central argument of this book is that this Weberian impasse can be broken by laying hold of transcendent possibility in the midst of the modern, secular order. If we are “postmodern,” it is not because we wish to opt out of modernity, establishing an alternative polity or a “true politics” in a pristine ecclesial realm. Our postmodernity is a matter of *seeing modernity through*: witnessing its deep contradictions and impasses and then discerning what historical openings beyond the iron cage they represent. We are staying with Weber, then, at least long enough to see his work through, refusing to eject ourselves from the problematic he discerned in modern politics.

But what we need to see modernity through is a better account of political realism. The iron cage need not be taken as defining the parameters of the real.<sup>11</sup> The dilemma of romanticism and pragmatism that Weber’s account of politics leaves us with is not exhaustive. We need to see contradictions and impasses not as dead-ends but as markers of something else, of transcendent or otherwise possibilities that stir within them. Our realism, therefore, is two-fold. First, against an enthusiastic liberalism that still believes that technical achievements, education, and better conversations can lead us to the promised land, we maintain, with theologian James Cone and many others including Karl Marx, that power struggles between unequal combatants plague any attempt to construct a sustainable social order through purely rational procedures. In short, genuine realism doesn’t mean simple opposition to any kind of optimism, but rather, a way of accounting for the realities of class domination. But, second, our

<sup>11</sup>Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010).

realism maintains that the present balance of political power in any established order lacks the consistency necessary to fully incarcerate political agency. In other words, there are gaps, failures, and slippages that appear in the form of contradictions or impasses. Within these, a leakage occurs—or, rather, not a leakage but an eruption. What erupts, importantly, is not some power or force that miraculously overcomes oppression, injustice, and violence. Instead, what erupts is *desire*.<sup>12</sup> Desire interrupts the overwhelming consistency of the political order and invites us to recognize the prospect (what William James called the “live option”) of other ways of living.<sup>13</sup> The political imagination, fueled by desire, is spurred to envision different kinds of order, alternative balances of power that present themselves precisely in the failures of what we know and experience. Such a process helps make sense of the extraordinary determination of the radical abolitionists, the women’s suffrage movement, insurgent candidacies in electoral politics, and today’s prison abolitionists. Our claim, then, is that desire is an irreducible aspect of what is real, and that, further, it is not a mere pining or a “sigh of the oppressed”<sup>14</sup> but an organizing and mobilizing force that bears within itself the capacity to shape a new political order. A political realism that is fully adequate to the real is not therefore bound by the present order of facts, by modernity’s (let’s say it plainly—by *capitalism’s*) iron cage. We are not left with futile jeremiads and the interminable desert of mere critique. Another world stirs within collective desire.

Where does theology fit in? The work of theology is to discern the appearance of this “beyond” in whatever aspect of human life we are trying to navigate. In grappling with contemporary politics, theology must identify the ways that human freedom may be rediscovered or perhaps recreated in what we will call in this book, following Wendy Brown, the “ruins of neoliberalism.” While other discourses may play this role, the

<sup>12</sup> Desire has a long and tumultuous history in theology and philosophy as well as in psychoanalysis and critical theory. Our use of these materials will be highly selective. Suffice it to say at this point that our retrieval of desire is premised on two things: (1) the fact that it has often been viewed suspiciously or simply dismissed as an irrational, feminine trait, and (2) its centrality in many Christian accounts of human beings, the workings of the world, and even God.

<sup>13</sup> William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York, NY: Dover, 1956), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. A. Jolin and J. O’Malley, ed. J. O’Malley (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 129.

role itself is indispensable. Part of the problem we face is that, under neoliberalism, the secular has been flattened. It is no longer simply a space of public conversation about goods and values that cross lines of religious participation but has become a set of rational coordinates on the basis of which all justification of descriptive and normative claims must occur. We argue here and more fully in Chap. 2 that there is an insularity to this modernism. Its expression in the realm of political economy is the all-pervasive character of capitalism and its brutal logic of subjugation and capture. In the famous phrasing of Margaret Thatcher, “there is no alternative.” So, the substantive work of the book will be to offer a theological account of political agency that is capable of breaking this self-enclosure of secular modernity, not by rejecting it, as we have said, but by seeing it through. Our argument will be that political agency includes two mutually supporting components that are figured in the biblical genres of *prophecy* and *wisdom*, and that, together, these capacities can help us realize the gift of human freedom in this time of failed technocracies.

We begin to lay out our argument in Chap. 2, “Secularism and the Death of Politics,” with a more detailed account of the loss of political agency. This is a long story involving accounts of secularism and capitalism. With the help of thinkers ranging from Foucault to Wendy Brown, we complicate and expand on Charles Taylor’s rather innocent retelling of the emergence of our modern secular political order, exposing a class orientation that would have us imagine that political agency is merely an individual achievement. We then briefly explore the legacy of the Black radical tradition, seeing in it a collective way to break through the alleged impossibility of achieving a radically new social order. We conclude the chapter by drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze to suggest a way to conceptualize how novel possibilities emerge in the midst of impasses and contradictions in the current social order.

In Chap. 3, “Can Political Agency Be Renewed?,” we turn to the work of Hannah Arendt to begin to gain a clearer picture of what political agency is and what it must be today. Arendt’s central insight is that the capacity to act involves both the introduction of a new series of events in the world and the ability thoughtfully to entrust the novelty it introduces into a political community. Developing our argument in conversation with Arendt, we will argue that these capacities, both of which are undermined under neoliberalism and remain weakened in its ruins, are required for progressives and radicals who seek to enact creative and effective interventions in the present context. We depart from Arendt however, in our

insistence that the space of freedom for action that is institutionalized in the *polis* is inevitably complicated by vast differences in power and interest. Any conception of political agency today, we argue, must take these material conditions of action (i.e., class struggle) into account.

In Chap. 4, “Theological Imagination and the Revival of Politics: Crisis and Critique,” we turn to twentieth-century theology to recover a trajectory of thought within Christian theology that contests the hegemony of capitalism, along with systemic crises like white supremacy and patriarchy in which capital accumulation is embedded. Our brief and somewhat stylized history takes us from the early work of Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr, written during a time of profound economic crisis and the apparent crumbling of the global capitalist order roughly from the late 1910s through the 1930s, through the liberation theologies of Dorothee Soelle and James Cone. The motif of liberation in these latter two theologians, we argue, is closely tied with a criticism of the social order and of class society.

Our constructive theological argument begins with Chap. 5, “Transcendence in a Secular Age: Divine Desire.” We ask, how does the transcendent appear within the restrictive coordinates of the secular? For theology, of course, this is an old problem, and a range of positions are possible. Our argument, however, is that, if we are seeking to leverage political power, we must regain the ability to discern the transcendent within the impasses and contradictions of the world we live in. The site at which transcendence appears in the world, we argue, is *desire*—or, more specifically, what political theorist Jodi Dean calls a “collective desire for collectivity.”

Chapters 6 and 7 offer our two-pronged constructive account of political agency that is fueled by this divine desire. In Chap. 6, “Prophecy, Power, and the Problem of Love,” we reformulate Arendt’s “initiation of a new series” in such a way that it is focused on the contests of power and the material conditions that condition politics in class society. Drawing on biblical traditions, we frame this capacity as “prophecy.” We argue that the work of prophecy is not simply intellectual, though ideas may serve important purposes. The heart of prophecy, however, is desire. Here, we revisit debates about the character of Christian love, arguing that Christian tradition has been captured by what we call a logic of renunciation and that an account of love in which the erotic dimension is central is of critical importance.

Chapter 7, “Works of Love: Revolution and Judgment,” turns to what we might call practical questions regarding political action to give a fuller account of the second capacity of political agency—practical wisdom. It does so, however, in the context of *prophecy*. In the political realm, wisdom is expressed as judgment, the ability to discern the contours of the *polis* to which political action must ultimately be entrusted. Here, we take up once again our conversation with Arendt, expanding her account of judgment to consider strategic questions attending the modern revolutionary tradition. We argue, however, that there is an affective component to this feature of political agency as well. Judgment is a matter of seeing concrete political realities in their particularity, and we argue that this means being attentive to the fragilized goods that are embedded in already existing social orders and that elicit what we call “passionate attachments.” The chapter concludes with two case studies from contemporary social activism: the 2016 manifesto of the Movement for Black Lives (*A Vision for Black Lives*) and the wave of school worker strikes in so-called “red” states that began in West Virginia in the Spring of 2018.

The final chapter, “The Church: Distanced and Desiring,” turns to more fully consider the church’s role in our social order, finding it both distanced from sites of contradiction and resident in those sites, from which desire for the common emerges. This raises the problem of how distanced congregations can become communities of desire for the common, when they are distanced from the source of such desire. We review why Aristotelian visions of formation are a poor fit for this problem and propose instead that the capacities are gifts of the Spirit, though captured, nonetheless bear resident possibilities. We then suggest how preaching might be recovered as the gift of prophecy.



## CHAPTER 2

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# Secularism and the Death of Politics

To many progressives, radicals, and independent thinkers in the U.S., contemporary politics seems hopeless, or nearly so. This pessimism is not without foundation. For the wider public, influenced by major media outlets, political problems most often come down to the question of which of the two parties one supports, as if they were two rival teams in an endless championship match. Meanwhile, basic assumptions shared by both parties are seldom allowed to enter the political space for public debate. Increasing or at least sustaining current levels of military spending, for example, or expanding the economy, increasing corporate profits, and strengthening U.S. dominance tend to be unquestioned premises of most if not all political activity. Thus, what we call “politics” is to a large degree sanitized, protected against the intrusion of the most important and timely political questions. To borrow a phrase from Gilles Deleuze, there is a “bare repetition”<sup>1</sup> that occurs with most political crises, a sense of *déjà vu* that accompanies the narrow palette of solutions that seem always to win out: further corporate deregulation, more military spending, and the further privatization of social services, education, health care, and welfare. One may reasonably ask, therefore, whether we ought to invest any energy at all in a realm of modern life that continues to produce such outcomes,

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 24.



as if we must inevitably fall down the gravity well toward the same responses no matter who is in power. Some kind of anti-political mode of activism, focusing efforts somewhat more narrowly on economic issues at the point of production or of reproduction, or on specific civil rights issues based on gender, race, ability, or sexual orientation, seems like our only realistic option.

At the same time, there are clearly a few signs of life here and there in the political arena. We have witnessed insurgent campaigns that create new political questions or revive old ones that had been dismissed by the post-cold war consensus that sacralized globalization, free markets, and neoliberal policies. Even though much of the protesting during the last decade or so must be judged performative in nature, resulting in few new political alignments or achievements, there have also been serious political movements that have genuinely changed the landscape. Some of these originate and largely operate outside the boundaries of electoral strategies. Later in this book, we will briefly consider two of them: the Black Lives Matter movement and the uptick in mostly public sector labor organizing of which the wave of teachers' strikes in 2017 is the most visible example. However, our purpose is not to analyze particular occasions of political organizing but to try and cut deeper: we want to ask why movements like these find it so difficult to gain traction. More importantly, we want to then offer an account of what is needed to strengthen them and to generate further political possibilities, both inside and outside the electoral arena.

Since we are theologians, perhaps it will not be surprising to read that we believe theology has something to say about this, both critically and constructively. However, we will not be making any high-handed claims about the necessity of theology for a restoration of politics. We disagree with the chorus of contemporary voices in theology telling us that the church is the only true politics or that a return to Christendom or to Christian metaphysics is the only available means to breaking the stranglehold of modern capitalism. But we will argue that there are theological resources that may heighten rather than obfuscate the feeling of contradiction felt by so many between the call of human freedom and what we experience in our politics today. We argue, further, that those same resources can provide an orienting framework that can enable us to engage in vigorous political debate and agitation toward the end of creating better political organizations and, ultimately, a better society.

The theology we provide in this book is not meant to serve as some sort of creedal prerequisite to effective political work. Instead, it is deployed

somewhat experimentally to see if it can help us break the impasses of contemporary politics. If, as we argue in this chapter, politics is in zombie mode (i.e., continuing to exist in the form of the familiar political debates but not striking out on new territory nor asking questions about how we may fundamentally reshape public life), we need some way to restore the capacity of citizens, collectively as well as individually, to *act*. The heart of the book will therefore be a constructive account of political agency that is funded by our theological reflections, though we by no means wish to foreclose the possibility that it may be supported in very different ways as well.

So, we begin by making a case about the state of politics in the U.S. (and, by extension, in much of the Western world if not globally). It will be a familiar story, reviewing some analyses of the current neoliberal order that are all but canonical to many progressives and radicals today, but it will assist us later as we begin to construct an account of the kind of agency we need to develop in order to overcome it. Our analysis begins at a fairly high level of abstraction: the phenomenon of secularization characteristic of (Western) modernity.

## OUR SECULAR AGE

Charles Taylor's magisterial *The Secular Age* is one of several somewhat recent publications seeking to revisit the question of secularization and its effects on the wider society.<sup>2</sup> Like these other contributions, a large part of Taylor's aim is to poke holes in the familiar account of secularization as a steady progress of reason over faith (or, less charitably, over superstition, fear, etc.). This triumphant narrative, Taylor argues, conceals a set of contestable assumptions about rationality and gives rise to an implausible account of modernization he calls "the subtraction theory."<sup>3</sup> In the theory, secularization means a stripping down or subtraction of beliefs and rituals once held or practiced unproblematically in the past. In modernity, reason explains just about everything that needs to be explained, or promises to, and hence the old myths and stories about the origin and destiny

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018). Cf. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018). Mahmood, Saba, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 424ff.