

Mustard Seeds in the Public Square

Between and Beyond Theology,
Philosophy, and Society

Edited by

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Introduction

This volume seeks to initiate an exploration of the “gap” between ontology and political theology, initially by bringing them side by side.

In investigating how theology relates to politics, society, economics and history, political theology (i.e. *theologically informed political thinking* in general—rather than merely a furthering of particular trajectories of thought) often focuses on what *behaviors*, individual and collective alike, are dictated by or follow from the teachings of the Christian church(es)¹ or Scripture; as such, it is not uncommon to encounter morality-centered versions thereof. Rather than that, what is here suggested is that the question of how political community, society and state emerge and function or *could* and *should* function directly relates to the inquiry concerning the nature of beings themselves, i.e. what, or rather *how*, humanity, the world and God *are*—their ontology.

At times directly and at times indirectly, the studies included here touch upon this convergence of political theology and ontology—at the very least, by setting the debate, i.e. by studying these two thematic areas side by side. The volume explores the intersection of theology, philosophy and the public sphere not by referring the social and political to ethics and deontology as is often the case, but rather to ontology itself. The meaning of history and historicity is most pertinent to this inquiry and is approached here both from the perspective of social reality and from the perspective of ontology. Joining together contributions focusing on theory of the public sphere and metaphysics, chapters explore subjects as diverse as the political implications of the Incarnation, the paradox between ontology and history, politically left and right appropriations of Christianity, the fecundity of Maximus the Confessor’s (c. 580-662) insights for a contemporary political philosophy, modern Orthodox political theology focusing on Christos Yannaras and numerous other areas that together form

¹ This volume focuses mainly, but not exclusively, on Orthodox Christianity.

the mosaic of the inquiry in question. The aim of the volume is signaled in its very structure: we begin with a study on theological ontology, comparing Hegel to Maximus the Confessor; we then proceed to essays in diverse aspects of political theology, in order to eventually return to non-political theological ontology, underscoring the pertinence of the main ontological questions for any such inquiry.

The volume begins with Chrysostom Gr. Tympas' "*Understanding the "Real" through consciousness and history: Maximus' vision of the one Logos in many logoi and Hegel's progressive consciousness.*" Tympas notes that Maximus the Confessor speaks of an eschatological reality, the not-yet-revealed eternal well-being, by theorizing the uncreated foundations of beings, namely their ontological principles/*logoi*. In Maximus' ontological system, however, historical incarnations and modern constructs find difficulty to be convincingly explained. On the other hand, Hegelian progressive consciousness towards the Absolute can provide interpretations of history by embracing human acts in complex schemes (science, the arts, religion). This chapter endeavors to tackle this question and suggests critical points in which Maximus' theory of the ontological *logoi* could address modern constructs by introducing aspects of the Hegelian synthesis.

With chapter two we enter into the narthex of the domain of political theology à propos ontology, and into the gender discussion within it in particular. Dionysios Skliris presents the consequences of the ontology of mode (*tropos*) as it was developed by Maximus the Confessor for a political philosophy which would actualize his thought in a post-modern context. The author examines how Maximus' *logos-tropos* distinction could be applied in a fecund way to a political theory of gender. Gender could thus be considered as not pertaining to the *logos* of human nature, but to a historical modality, which is however important for the actualization (ἐνέργεια) of humankind.

In chapter three, Jonathan Cole attempts a juxtaposition of Christos Yannaras' political theology with Oliver O'Donovan's. Here, Yannaras is explicitly approached as the author of an original

political theology, and all the distinctive elements of that contribution are present, recapitulating it as “communo-centric politics”: (a) Yannaras’ communal epistemology, (b) his relational ontology of the social, (c) his critique of rights due to (d) the conception of agency as personhood, (e) his dialectics of freedom and alienation, (f) his focus on direct democracy, as well as (g) the distinctly ontological nature that is ascribed to politics, i.e. politics as authentic existence rather than simply co-existence, and so on. Bringing Yannaras in discussion with O’Donovan is a contribution of its own, as contemporary Orthodox political theology seldom becomes part of the relevant discussions that unfold in the West. The next chapter is in many ways a long footnote to Jonathan Cole’s, for it explores Christos Yannaras’ reading of European history as a foundation of his political theology and discusses some of the criticism that has been directed against this reading.

Following this, Chris Durante formulates an Orthodox Christian approach to multiculturalism. How might the Orthodox Christian tradition make sense of its place within the current pluralistic era? Durante proposes that the Byzantine religio-political ideal of *symphonia* might be able to speak to such issues and examines the applicability of the historical concept of *symphonia* in our contemporary context, exploring ways in which it might be capable of serving as the foundation of a social ethic for Orthodox Christianity.

The next two chapters offer two very different approaches to what a political reflection and appropriation of Christianity could be, situated as it were in opposite corners of the political spectrum. In chapter six, Dylan Pahman develops an exposition of asceticism and explores parallel responses to that ontology in economic history and public policy in two parts: firstly, drawing upon the Church fathers, Vladimir Solovyov, Fr. Pavel Florensky, and Christos Yannaras, et al., Pahman outlines the ontological foundations of Christian asceticism, such as the pluriformity and mutability of the world and personal identity, human mortality, and the potential for growth as well as decay, i.e. for resurrection unto life or to second death, not only at the *parousia* but daily. And secondly, Pahman bring this ascetic perspective to bear on the

question of economic history, examining Joseph Schumpeter and “creative destruction” in particular, as well as Nassim Nicholas Taleb, to develop from that history non-predictive policy, analogous to the *memento mori* and other ascetic practices, adapted to the reality of creative destruction and what Taleb calls Black Swans—random, unforeseen shocks that so often cripple fragile systems. In chapter seven, Angelos Gounopoulos brings Orthodoxy and the theology of liberation in dialogue: he argues that Christian theological thought understands the relationship between ontology and history as similar to the relationship between secularization and the Eschaton. In the Orthodox tradition, and in the Latin American Theology of Liberation, there is a deep connection and unity between secularization and the Eschaton in the history of incarnation. The history of incarnation is the history of salvation that focuses on the person and presence of Jesus Christ. The history of the world’s and the human person’s creation is the history of Logos incarnation; the Theology of Liberation named this history the “great history of God.” Therefore the history of man is not separated from the “great history of God,” leading to theologically informed politics focusing on the poor as the epicenter of such an outlook.

After these chapters, we return to studies focusing more on theological ontology and its relationship to history, eventually leading to the Eschaton, rather than on political theology. In chapter eight, Marc W. Cole attempts to solve the paradox between history and eschatology through an Aristotelian metaphysics. He notes that Catholic Church teaching tells us that the Eschaton was fully inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But Church teaching also affirms the reality of history, complete with evil and free will. Held together, these teachings seem to contradict. Cole sets to make progress on this paradox by employing a neo-Aristotelian hylomorphism. This is followed by Daniel Isai’s exposition of the Incarnation as a *saturated phenomenon*, following Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenological method. After this, Raffaele Guerra studies theological anthropology *via* ontological notions in Gregory Palamas, bringing

this volume's circular motion, from ontology to political theology and then back to theological ontology, to a conclusion.

The initial inspiration for this volume emerged during the international conference *Ontology and History: A Challenging and Auspicious Dialogue for Philosophy and Theology* at the European Cultural Centre of Delphi, Greece (May 29-31, 2015), which was organized by Dr. Andrew Kaethler and myself. This is one of the publications inspired from the discussions in that conference, and claims ontology and political theology as its epicenter; another volume, focusing on different thematic areas, is forthcoming as well. This volume is published here in the hope that it may prove to be a contribution, however small, to the widening of the scope and horizons of political theology.

Sotiris Mitralaxis

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