

# Mark Lewis Taylor's *The Theological and the Political*

## A Review

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Drawing heavily on the philosophical and social theoretical work of such diverse thinkers as Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Theodore Schatzki, Pierre Bordieu, Judith Butler, and Jacques Rancière as well as the poetry and literature of Richard Wright, Victor Serge, the prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay detention center, Margaret Atwood, and James Baldwin among many, many others, one reads Taylor's book impressed by its interdisciplinarity. But more than that, and perhaps in spite of its density and reliance on a constellation of theoreticians, *The Theological and the Political* is no vacuous, academic exercise.

*The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* is a theoretically dense and erudite investigation into the relationship between the terms of its title. Indeed, much of the book is devoted to the creation and elaboration of concepts and the marking of theoretical terrain. Taylor spends much of the first half of the book clarifying his use of "the theological." Fundamentally, the distinction between the theological and Theology is that the latter is a guild discipline that is haunted by the former. Taylor explains that, "...guild Theology, as I refer to it, departs from the theological in that the former is usually marked by some discourse of transcendence, that is, a thinking across (trans), which involves a going above, a climbing (scandere), beyond the finite, somehow to another dimension above world and history" (14). The theological, Taylor insists, belongs to the realm of the

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transimmanental—a term that Taylor borrows from Jean-Luc Nancy and that may be properly categorized as either immanence or transcendence.

So what is transimmanence? It is worth quoting Taylor here at length. Transimmanence is

...a practice or reflection that steps into and moves within the political. It is the liberating opening and closing, and continual opening and reopening, of existence to itself, to and through its many singularities and pluralities. Transimmanence is existence thus refusing to be locked into place, 'locked down' in systems that resist continual opening and reopening. It is a kind of passing, a traversing of manifolds and relations of immanence, which can be discerned especially along the boundaries marking agonistic strife between the powers that seek to dispose of weaker peoples and those peoples who resist being so disposed. Transimmanence is disclosed especially in that realm of life and struggle where the prodigious art form ... wields the figural form of the oppressed to show that their powers and presence have not been erased (15-6).

In other words, one cannot think the theological without implicating the political. The thesis of the book, Taylor explains, is "...that the theological is a dimension of the political—in particular, of the agonistic political..." (5). The theological does not, like guild Theology, orient itself to doctrine, but to oppression. It is thus suffering and political agonism that are the true subjects of theological inquiry, rather than doctrine, creed, or church history. This is precisely why Taylor's understanding of the theological rejects "any transcendental guarantee standing behind the thought [derived] from certain theological concepts" and also rejects "the doctrinal matrix of beliefs and concepts that are structured into theologians' language and customary expression" (21).

But while the theological rejects Theology's doctrinal ordering and transcendental guarantee, the theological is nevertheless more than a collection of simple rejections. The theological produces its own affirmations as well. "What a discourse of the theological does entail, then, by way of a language, is not doctrine's conceptual ordering, but imagistic art forms' symbolic force in practice" (23). For Mark Lewis Taylor, poetry is political. And when it enters into an agonistic fray, it becomes or reveals the theological. But this is a peculiar sense of what poetry might be. It is open and practiced, according to Taylor. Poetry that fully expresses the theological is the practice of an art-force that interconnects the individual artistic act through solidarity to a network of others who also bear the weight of the world (165). One might say then that this sense of poetry as theological practice is resistance.

The introduction and first three chapters are principally devoted to shoring up Taylor's theoretical framework through introducing a number of thinkers and concepts like character sketches in early scenes of a play--Foucault's understanding of both juridical and biopolitical power, Derrida's spectral thinking, Schatzki's social sites, Bordieu's social capital, and Nancy's transimmanence, to name a few. The goal here seems to be Taylor's desire to perform with them later in the book. Throughout, Taylor discusses the ways in which each of us may come to experience (feel, sense) the weight of the world through direct or indirect interactions with trauma such as through conversations with people who have survived torture, abuse, or political violence. While the cases Taylor discusses are compelling, *The Theological and the Political* lacks a climax. Perhaps the most compelling chapter of the book is the fourth, "The Weight of Transimmanence," wherein Taylor focuses on the poetry written by the prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay detention center and survivors of torture. Still, I was left with the feeling that Taylor has yet to write the book that really allows the concepts he's developed here to sing together most hauntingly and harmoniously.

Within the context of a theological thinking performed over and against guild Theology, Taylor explains that Derrida's notion of spectral theory helps to illuminate their relationship. Taylor explains that the theological haunts Theology. "Because the theological traces and theorizes ways that persons and groups who are traditionally rendered subordinate under the concentrated weight of the world are able, nevertheless, to haunt, unsettle, and perhaps dissolve the structures of those systems of knowledge and power, the theological also haunts the Theology whose effects often participate in the world's weight as concentrated" (62).

This brings to mind William Hamilton's remark in *Radical Theology and the Death of God* that the death-of-God theology he and Thomas J. J. Altizer were producing was "...not talking about the absence of the experience of God, but about the experience of the absence of God."<sup>1</sup> This is to say that while Taylor is himself concerned in his text with those hauntings, specters, and ghosts produced by American and European imperialism, exploitation, slavery, and military campaigns--those who have carried the weight of the world--Taylor's very methodology is haunted by the death of God. So, while Taylor insists that it is the theological that haunts both guild Theology and the political, the irony is that radical theology--Theology on the fringe of the guild--haunts Taylor's notion of "the theological." If I might be so bold as to invoke the spirit of Derrida--the haunting is deferred. It is the God who has died who remains as a specter, haunting the theological.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), 28.