

K.20.1521: Political theology
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office hours:
Monday 2-6/ Tues 2-5/ Thurs by apt.

This course explores the idea of "political theology" by considering how modern thinkers (and actors) conceive the political implications of biblical texts. Strictly speaking, if "theology" is the effort to produce (rational) knowledge of god, "political theology" suggests the idea of anchoring worldly human power in (our knowledge of) divine revelation or law, as if god is a ruler whose will or law mandates or blesses a specific human regime. More broadly, the idea of "political theology" suggests: (a) every regime is anchored in faith -whether in god, a-theism, or reason, or equality- and (b) every "faith" has a worldly bearing -on our ethical practice as individual subjects, and on the collective life we make. In this broad sense, "political theology" is the study of how faith shapes politics. It is readily apparent that the meaning of a scripture or of a faith is not self-evident, but requires interpretation, and as a result, people who profess faith in the same god or scripture (or principle) still practice it very differently. This is as true of Judaism and Christianity as of democratic constitutionalism. At the same time, "faith" is not only doctrine or ideology, not faith IN a specific or discrete belief, but rather needs to be seen as a form of life, a set of practices (and practices in fact underlay beliefs.) As "political theology" thus signals the bonds between faith and life, so we will trace the bonds relating faith to politics.

But this semester we focus on the Hebrew Bible and Christian gospels, to see how "The Bible" contains texts that elicit and sustain radically opposed interpretations, and also texts that have radically different implications, so that "The Bible" has enabled violent conflict and opposing forms of life. Then we consider how modern commentators address the meaning of this whole history of interpretation and worldly practice as they argue about faith, nihilism, modernity, and democracy. If we have time, we will also analyze how (and with what consequences) modern liberalism has tried to separate "religion" and "religious enthusiasm" from a "secular" politics grounded in reason.

Required texts:

**The Oxford Study Bible or King James Bible

**Robert Alter, The Book of Genesis

**Stephen Mitchell, The Book of Job

**Carl Schmitt, Political Theology

**Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political

**Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals

**Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Grand Inquisitor Parable

**Franz Kafka, Short Stories ("The Penal Colony")

**Norman O. Brown, Love's Body

your grade depends on the following:

*attendance (which is mandatory- and punctuality, which is expected)

*handing in a 1-page response paper each week

*three written exercises

*class participation

I am obliged to say that anyone who plagiarizes will receive an F for the course, but I do not expect this to be a problem!

9/8

Introduction

9/15

Genesis I: Narrative

#2

read:

- *Richard Friedman, Who Wrote the Bible? (xerox)
- *The Book of Genesis, chaps 1-11 in your bible
- *William Blake, "There is No Natural Religion," (xerox)
- *William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (xerox)
- *Ernesto Laclau, "On The Name of God" (xerox)

write:

- (A) How does Blake model a way to read/interpret the bible?
- (B) give a Blakean (i.e. "poetic") reading of one passage/ story.
- (C) compare Blake and Laclau on the idea of god.

9/22

Genesis II: Faith and Freedom/god's power and human agency

#3

read:

- *The Book of Genesis (up to and including 41)
- *Eric Auerbach, Mimesis, chapter one, "Odysseus' Scar" (xerox)
- *Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (excerpts)
- *Stanley Fish, Self-Consuming Artifacts, Intro & Appendix (xerox)

write:

- (A) Use Auerbach to interpret one passage or story.
- (B) explore how Genesis is a "dialectical" or "rhetorical" text in Fish's terms.
- (C) Use Abraham to relate faith and freedom

First paper due Friday Sept. 25 by noon: write no more than 5 pages about one passage or story in Genesis. Make a midrash, an interpretation and commentary.

9/29

Exodus I: From Slavery to Freedom?

#4

read:

- *The Book of Exodus 1-24/32-35
- *The Book of Numbers 11-16
- *Machiavelli, The Prince (xerox/excerpt)
- *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from The Social Contract (excerpt/xerox)
- *John Winthrop, Speech on Authority (xerox)
- *Jonathan Boyarin, "Reading Exodus into History" (xerox)

write:

- (A) How is God unlike Pharaoh? (Why reject other gods and demand that people live by a covenant?)
- (B) What is the dilemma in founding, according to Rousseau, and how does the biblical text engage &/or evade it?
- (C) What does the exodus story teach about freedom?

10/6

Exodus II: Founding, Memory and Freedom

#5

read:

- *The Book of Deuteronomy 1-12, 28-34
- *Ernst Renan, "What is a nation?" (xerox)
- *Friedrich Nietzsche, excerpt from Genealogy of Morals essay #2
- *Hannah Arendt, "Collective Responsibility" (xerox)
- *Herbert Schneidau, Sacred Discontent, "In Praise of Alienation"
- *Bonnie Honig, "Declarations of Independence" (xerox/optional)

write:

- (a) What must we do (who must we be) to "obey" god? What does it mean to "love" the law?
- (B) Why is idolatry a problem? Does the text teach orthodoxy or alienation?
- (C) What is freedom for those who inherit (not found) an order?
- (D) How does the text construct identity and difference?
- (E) Does Arendt illuminate the story?
- (F) Is subjection part of creating a free/moral subject, able to make/keep promises, both autonomous and accountable?

10/13

Exodus III: sovereignty, decision, and political identity

#6

read:

- *Carl Schmitt, Political Theology chaps 1/3/4 (p.5-15/36-66)
- *Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political 19-79
- *Bonnie Honig, "The Miracle of Metaphor" (xerox)

write:

- Use Schmitt to examine the political meaning of the Exodus story
- Use the Exodus story (or Honig) to interpret/critique Schmitt

Second paper option (a) due Friday October 17 by noon: write no more than a five page essay on the Exodus story and commentary about it.

10/20

Prophecy, Poetry and Politics

#7

read:

- *Samuel I chaps 1-8
- *The Books of Amos, Micah, Hosea
- *The book of Isaiah 1-16
- *George Shulman, American Prophecy excerpts
- *Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of July 4th to the Negro"
- *MLK - "Where do we go from here?"
- *Allan Ginsberg, "Wichita Vortex Sutra"

write:

- (A) What is prophecy? What is the "office" of a prophet? What do "prophets" do? (Use Douglass, King or Ginsberg...)
- (B) discuss: prophecy is/not antithetical to democratic values.
- (C) Does Ginsberg fashion a non-theist/secular prophecy?
- (D) Analyze the rhetorical style of prophecy: Is it counter-productive, doomed to fail?

10/27

From Theodicy to Tragedy

#8

read:

- *Stephen Mitchell, The Book of Job, read full text, then intro

write:

Relate what the Job text teaches to how it teaches.

11/3

From (Hebrew) Tragedy to (Christian) Redemption

#9

read:

- *The Gospel of Matthew
- *Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (xerox)

write:

- (A) Jesus is a Hebrew: what is his relation to tradition? How does he revise/affirm/reject/replenish it?
- (B) Assess the STYLE of the gospel

11/10

Resurrection as orthodoxy or freedom?

#10

read:

- *Paul, Romans and Galatians
- *commentaries/critiques of Paul t.b.a.

write:

what is the difference between Matthew and Paul?
How does Paul relate the old and new, the Jew and the Christian?
How does Paul address the issue of exclusion/inclusion?

Second paper option (b) due Friday November 13 by noon: write 5 pages on the ways that Job, Jesus or Paul address a central issue in the tradition they inherit, which may include the very idea of how to relate to tradition.

11/17

#11

Nihilism & Modernity I

read:

*Karl Marx, excerpts (xerox)

*Nietzsche, excerpts from The Gay Science

*Nietzsche Genealogy of Morals, 1st essay

write:

(A) does Marx remain a "religious" thinker or fulfill its promise?

(B) what does Nietzsche mean by the "death of god"?

(C) how does Nietzsche interpret Jesus and Paul? Is he in fact like them?

11/24

#12

Nihilism & Modernity II

read:

*Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals, 2nd/3rd essays

12/1

read:

Nihilism & Modernity III

*Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor Parable"

*Franz Kafka, "The Penal Colony"

write:

(A) Assess Dostoevsky's defense of Jesus - What does the kiss mean?

(B) what would Nietzsche say about Dostoevsky's parable?

(C) what is the crisis in Kafka's story? How would you respond?

12/8

#13

read:

Beyond Nihilism: poetry and the resurrection of the political body

*Norman O. Brown, Love's Body

*Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political" extracts

*de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, excerpt

final paper due Friday December 11