

What Makes Theology "Political"? 'Come Let us Reason Together'  
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What makes theology political? Before theologians claim the term "political" for their work, perhaps some consideration as to the assumptions behind a "political" and an "apolitical" theology are in order. Few theologians these days would claim their work is "apolitical," yet theologians regularly accuse others of producing such a theology, which has become a decisive objection to a theology's adequacy. In fact types of theology have emerged based on the assumption that their difference from other theologies is their political cast. Liberation and public theologies, different in many respects, would not make sense without the common tacit background assumption that other theologies fail to be political or at least adequately political and their work corrects this defect. These 'political' theologies often position other theologies via this tacit background assumption. They accomplish this by categorizing the apolitical or inadequately political theologies as 'church' theology, or as sectarian, fideist or ideological. For instance, Joerg Rieger, an unsympathetic reviewer of my own work recently dismissed it as a "history of ideas" that fails to take into account "specific contexts, lived histories or struggles for power."<sup>1</sup> It was the latter that led him to find it apolitical or inadequately political in contrast to his own liberation theology. As he put it, my "ecclesia" theology is inadequate because it does not perform an "analysis of power." It is ideological. Most of us targeted with these adjectives refuse this characterization of our work, but how do we know it is not true? We continue to present arguments for why our work is political, but they do not seem to persuade critics who continue the counter charges that it is sectarian, ideological or only for the "church" while they do political analysis. We seem to be at a stalemate in this debate.

Is it possible to advance the argument ?

To do so requires addressing the question what makes a theological work political, apolitical or inadequately political? How would I know if my theology is political? I don't think an answer to this question can be found in the material production of theological works themselves. All theological works share a similar "social location" in relation to contemporary political and economic institutions, and this poses a particular difficulty for liberation theologians who tell us their work has

overcome ideology or false consciousness and offers a material practice other theologies ignore. We all seem to produce theological works through roughly the same means.<sup>2</sup> We sit before computers and type, or put pen and pencil to paper, craft arguments and seek publication for them through publishing houses or journals. Some works might then bear the title "political, liberation or public" theology, but the concrete material reality of the work cannot render one political and another apolitical, one public and another sectarian, one material and another ideological. I cannot distinguish the books in my library based on their "political" or "apolitical" character solely on their material reality. What then does distinguish them? Is it the social location of the author, the sources drawn upon, or the content of the argument?

Each of these three possibilities is theologically significant, but a little reflection proves none of them decisive in claiming the adjective "political" for a theology. The diverse social locations of authors provide different "takes on" the world, but no clear correlation between one's class, gender, ethnicity or social location and one's political theology can be made. Too much theological variety among similar social locations and too much theological similarity among different social locations exists for anyone to claim too much for social location itself. Counterfactual arguments are readily available. When such arguments for social location are made too encompassing, they quickly become unsupportable. Likewise the sources drawn upon make a difference, but again no clear correlation between sources and "politics" can be secured. Analyzing tortured victims' testimonies or comparing Thomas Aquinas and Gregory Palamas produce different theologies, but that does not mean that one will necessarily be political and the other apolitical. So perhaps it is finally the content of the argument itself that determines whether theology is political or not? Some people write on ideas and others write on material practices? But this only shifts the question, for who decides what constitutes a "political" content and what becomes a mere "history of ideas" since both are presented through the same material means? Who decides what makes one theology "sectarian" or "ecclesial" and another "political" or "public?" And of course the answer is no one decides for a final decision cannot be made. The debate among the various opponents of political, public, and 'church' theology cannot be decided through apodictic means; it cannot even be advanced in those terms. If we could easily correlate specific material productions or race, class, gender and ethnicity to specific takes on political theology, then the debate could be settled with apodictic certainty. We could have a table where the publication, or the authors' social location or the sources

cited could be indexed to specific politics. All we would then need to do is use that table like a scientist uses the periodic chart of the elements in order to determine the "politics" of each theological work. But of course that is both impossible and foolish, even though some of the claims for "social location" these days approach claiming that kind of apodictic certainty. Whether or not theology is political, or adequately political, is not a function of that kind of scientific reasoning. It can only be a function of practical reasoning. It alone can advance the argument. I want to argue that the best we can do to adjudicate these difference is to engage in, as Charles Taylor has so aptly put it, practical ad hominem arguments. Practical ad hominem arguments

I do not think the difference between those who claim their theology is political or public and others' is sectarian and ideological needs to remain at a stalemate. The differences between these theological camps can be adjudicated by drawing on Charles Taylor's understanding of practical reasoning. Taylor distinguishes two models of practical reasoning: apodictic and ad hominem.<sup>3</sup> Apodictic practical reasoning assumes opponents' fundamental first premises vary so radically that they cannot reason together. We can only reason together if my opponent comes to adopt a completely different first premise, the one I hold. Thus apodictic practical reasoning assumes a stark contrast when comparing first premises, either complete translatability or incommensurability. Ad hominem practical reasoning does not assume that stark contrast; it assumes "my opponent already shares at least some of the fundamental dispositions toward good and right which guide me." Reasoning within these shared dispositions permits me to argue that "the error" of my opponent "comes from confusion, unclarity, or an unwillingness to face some of what he can't lucidly repudiate." <sup>4</sup> Apodictic practical reasoning tempts us because designating first premises as incommensurable leaves us free from confronting the implicit errors in our positions given our shared disposition. By articulating what is merely implicit in my opponent's position, and showing how it conflicts with our shared dispositions, a "transition" can occur whereby the opponent comes to see that he cannot practically adhere to his old characterization of my position without violating that shared disposition. Of course, that transition might also occur with me coming to realize the same thing; ad hominem practical reasoning assumes an openness to conversion for reasoning to occur.