Thank you very much to both authors for sharing their work. I found much to ponder in both books. They challenged me to engage fruitfully with thinkers who, for different reasons, I sometimes feel that I would rather dispense with yet cannot help encountering again and again, such as Carl Schmitt and John Howard Yoder. They also dealt with the writings of people I do enjoy engaging with, such as Paul and Augustine. They provided theological categories I find insightful, in particular the notion of seeing or vision in Kyle’s Architectonics, and of disincarnation in Travis’s Messianic Political Theology. I’ll organize my remarks loosely around those two themes.

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5 It would be rewarding to examine further how both authors converse with Augustine. I’d be interested in exploring how their insights might shed light on my own Latin American/Latinx reading of Augustine as a “Latin-African,” considering Gingerich Hiebert’s emphasis on vision/optics/contemplation and Kroeker’s thoughtful treatment of Augustine, especially in chapter 3. His comment on page 54 contra the notion of Augustine’s sense of inner selfhood as disembodied is a key one. I make a similar point from another angle in my essay “Liberating Augustine: Rethinking Augustine’s emphasis on interiority” in Theology Today 74 (2017): 149-56, but I hadn’t thought of the matter from the perspective of Augustine’s apocalypticism.
Vision in *The Architectonics of Hope*

I loved the title of this book, and therefore opened it with anticipation. The first surprise I experienced as I began to read was that the author takes “architectonics” not in a spatial direction, but in a visual or optic one by the construction of a “theological metaphorics of vision” (6). From the very title of the first chapter onwards, he links political theology to reading the signs of the times (4) and thus to the task of seeing. What he hopes we will be able to see is the relation of violence with the apocalyptic, through the lens of political theology, in a variegated, multifaceted manner. For the author, though the scopic is not neutral or innocent, it is not necessarily implicated in an abusive exercise of power; it can also function as part of the economy of grace (cf. 5). The author ultimately wants us to “see” in order then to “speak,” that is, to give an account of our hope in the midst of a violent world (6).

We encounter various modes of seeing throughout the book. Carl Schmitt's vision of an “apocalyptically inflected aesthetics of violence” haunts the pages throughout, as it does in much of political theology—a term that Schmitt himself coined (16). For Kyle, Johann Baptist Metz's vision of a new political theology ultimately lacks clarity because Metz cannot see how imbricated his approach is with the categories of modernity and secularization (31). Significantly, Schmitt and Metz have visions that cannot be described as simply in opposition to each other (48)—in part because both see violence as necessary (50), something Kyle frames as “an apocalyptically inflected aesthetics of violence” (51). Metz's theopolitical vision thus ultimately cannot help us see the way beyond Schmitt (53). Hans Urs von Balthasar moves the discussion of vision toward the dimension of the contemplation of the Trinity (55) and consequently to aesthetics. In turn, David Bentley Hart and John Milbank want us to discover new “vistas” for political theology in ways that do not reify violence, though they do not fully succeed (56ff).

Milbank “considers himself an apocalyptic seer of the highest order” (83), yet his polemical approach does not allow him to see the points of view of others with sufficient subtlety. Nonetheless, he makes the important point that as “watchers of violence” within the logic of modernity we are not removed from violence (97) and that beauty has its own violence, one that can muddy our vision of Christ (101). Hart, who elaborates a metaphysics of
vision by which the beauty of God can be seen even in the midst of creaturely
sinfulness and imperfection (108), is limited by his incapacity to distinguish
between passivism and pacifism (114). John Howard Yoder also provides a
vision, for his account of political theology allows us to “see” the power of
nonviolence more clearly than the visions of the other political theologians
discussed (119). Yoder’s approach can thus be described as a doxological
way of seeing history that integrates patience and nonviolence into its vision
(128). The title of the final chapter of the Kyle’s book once again refers to
vision: “Retrospect and Prospect.” Each of the visions described in the
author’s genealogy of political theologies is complex, and none is to be
discarded wholesale: each sheds light on the others (cf. 161).

The theme of vision is very rich and is one that I personally love, for
instance as it appears in the Gospel of John and in the contemplative traditions
of the Christian mystics. As I pondered the thinkers and theologians in
Kyle’s generous and careful account, I found myself thinking of a saying
we have in Spanish: no hay más ciego que el que no quiere ver—there is no
one blinder than the person who does not wish to see (this folk saying is
coincidently—or not—similar to some of what the Johannine Jesus has to
say, e.g., John 9:41). What is it that these variations in political theology do
not significantly consider in their “optics” or their “architectonics?” What
is it that they do not see, though they seem to posit their visions with such
confidence as trustworthy lenses for looking at reality? Two blind spots came
to mind immediately: on the one hand, the “wound of coloniality”6 and, on
the other, the reality of the lives of women.7

The first blind spot has to do with the ease with which certain North
Atlantic thinkers (à la Milbank) ignore or scornfully dismiss thinkers who

6 By “coloniality” I’m thinking specifically of the distinction Walter Mignolo (alongside
other decolonial theorists) makes between the historical colonial period (the time of Iberian
colonization in the Americas) and the coloniality of power (meaning the kind of colonialism
still at work in the current processes of capitalist globalization). Any consideration of
European or North Atlantic (i.e., “Western”) political theology is incomplete without taking
seriously the “colonial wound” of Latin America, which is also in the “West.” Cf. for instance

7 Of course, these are not really two discrete topics, as they intersect at many points: thus
Maria Lugones can speak of “The Coloniality of Gender” in Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise
(Spring 2008): 1-17.
are from and/or write from the perspective of the global South—more specifically from a Latin American and Caribbean context—often without even having read or engaged their work in Spanish and Portuguese. How can one be so blind to the shadowscast by one’s trajectory and tradition? Kyle lays some of the groundwork for needed repairs in this direction in his awareness of thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, as well as in his critique of Milbank for not grasping Gutiérrez’s engagement with Blondel (73). But more needs to be done. North Atlantic political theology has to be able to “see” its imbrication with coloniality more clearly if it is not to remain trapped in an infertile (and arrogant) solipsism: a kind of theologia politica incurvata in se that is sinful and death-dealing.

The second blind spot—the effect on the lives and bodies of women of a given political theology—is one salient reason why Yoder’s particular vision of a “peaceful political theology” (including his notion of “revolutionary subordination”) in the end has very little traction with me, though I am an Anabaptist theologian and therefore inevitably influenced by his work. It

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8 Ernesto Laclau is influenced by Carl Schmitt, as Gingerich Hiebert points out (page 48) and in turn influences North Atlantic theory, an example of the circularity of intellectual influences between Latin America and the North Atlantic. It is not only a matter of the shadows cast by the European tradition, but of the light emitted from the direction of the Global South, one that Eurocentric approaches are largely blind to.

9 It might be fruitful to bring the work on political theology of thinkers such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos into the conversation; cf. for instance “If God Were a Human Rights Activist: Human Rights and the Challenge of Political Theologies,” in Law, Social Justice and Global Development Journal 1 (2009): 3-42. De Sousa Santos argues that the subaltern God, the God of the subalters, clashes with the God invoked by oppressors—and imagines a “monotheistic God pleading for a polytheistic set of Gods” (29) in order to respond to what in this context we might call the apocalyptic dimensions of the present. I don’t agree with his premise as stated, and he doesn’t claim to be a theologian, but I think it is important to listen to his underlying concerns (the distress of the world and the importance of complex thought experiments), putting it in conversation with trinitarian political theology. From a confessional Christian perspective, it is also worth paying attention to the political theology (teología pública, as they usually prefer) of the group of thinkers around GEMRIP in Latin America, such as Nicolás Panotto.

10 As Gingerich Hiebert points out, Yoder had direct knowledge of Latin American thought, unlike most of the other thinkers reviewed in the book (117, footnote 9), thus falling less readily than some into the first blind spot I mention. This covered a multitude of sins for me, until it didn't any more, given the way Mennonite (and other) institutions long enabled his abuse.
is not just about Yoder’s incapacity to embody fully his own insights (119), something of which we are all culpable. What I am speaking of is a kind of willful blindness to the fact that one cannot truly give glory to God (doxology) while sinning against or taking advantage of one’s brother or, in this case, of one’s “sisters in Christ.” What is it about a particular theopolitics that so readily closes its eyes to the way the bodies of concrete human beings—for instance, young women—are treated by (usually male) theologians or other academics who claim to speak for peace? If the criterion of how a given vision affects people in its material consequences is not addressed head-on, the material result of its “architectonics” (not just what one sees but where one lives in the quotidian) will inevitably be noxious or uninhabitable for many.

In pondering Kyle’s visually-oriented architectonics I was left wondering about the spatial, material dimensions of our lives. What does all of this that we “see” mean for materiality, for concrete lives, for incarnation (especially that of the subaltern subjects Jesus so often puts at the center of his ministry and teaching)? Incarnation is a theme I encountered throughout my reading of Travis’s book.

**Disincarnation in Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics**

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about a problem I call “Protestant docetism,” which is manifested in many ways in American society, but perhaps lately most notably in the cult of the toxic white Jesus that seems to undergird much of white supremacy and white nationalism in the United States. I was therefore immediately struck, a few pages into Travis’s book, when I encountered his notion of *disincarnation* alongside his use of “messianic materialism,” the “quotidian embodiment of divine love,” and similar concepts (11, *et passim*). I find that his diaspora ethics turns out to be a consistent (and to me, helpful) attempt—on whatever front he is dealing with in a given essay—to push back against moves toward disincarnation.

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and to tease out what incarnation means for a particular time and place.

I was struck by several themes in the book that are traversed by the question of incarnation and disincarnation. Three strands are particularly worthy of mention and are ultimately intertwined:

1. A Pauline strand, including Paul’s dynamic of an emptying that leads to fullness (predicated on the paradox of the incarnation), the Pauline instruction from 1 Corinthians 7 to live “as if not” (32, 78, 167, 184), and the related idea of “weak messianic power” adapted from Walter Benjamin and likewise deployed throughout the book (e.g., 75);

2. A hermeneutical strand, namely the retrieval and re-reading of sources such as Plato (e.g., Chapter 2), Augustine (Chapter 3), Paul, and the Hebrew Bible, incorporating an existential incarnational hermeneutic and, when relevant, Apocalyptic categories (e.g., 68);

3. A strand dealing with cultural embodiment, such as the embodied cultural testimony of Amish communities (88). In tension with such options are the parallel problems of conformity and acculturation to hegemony as well as the dehumanizing consequences of a technological utopia of disembodiment.

One aspect of incarnation—of our bodies, of our particularity—that I often ponder is that it is necessarily constrained in space and time. There is something humble and small about it that is beautiful. It is itself and no more or less than that. It is not a generic, abstract, and thus inhuman and even

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13 I don’t quite know what to make of the “identity politics” dimension of this (e.g., 216). My encounters with ethnic Mennonites in Latin America (for instance in Paraguay) have not been reassuring; the “urban Mennonites” I knew in Argentina growing up (in La Falda, Córdoba) and now living in Evanston, Illinois have been invested in a counterhegemonic, non-assimilated approach to faith, and have been quite creative liturgically as well. Their (our) Anabaptist particularity has been quite clear in matters having to do with both Mammon and the cult of the military. But I do see the problem in the kind of assimilation to evangelicalism and neo-charismatic forms among many Latin American Mennonites and Latinx Mennonites in the United States. I wonder how a relationship to the “land” (even in the form of the urban community gardening some of us do in Evanston) and of course to economics (frugality, intentional community) connects to all of this.
diabolical (disincarnate) generality. To engage in disincarnation means to try to be free of the demands of the body, something increasingly acceptable and indeed seen as desirable in much of mainstream understandings in an age of robotics and artificial intelligence. So much of that is deeply antithetical to a faith anchored in the incarnation, the particular life of Jesus, and resurrection of the body, and yet we are deeply colonized in our imaginations and our habits by what we tell ourselves are simply neutral tools to help us achieve our ends. Disincarnation ends up being a false, alternative incarnation that is violent and manipulative.

Of course, to commit to an incarnational or embodied, particular, and faithful way to be in the world means figuring out how to do so honestly, meeting head-on the ways in which our traditions (e.g., Mennonite traditions) may have become distorted, unfaithful—indeed, disincarnate. This leads me back to my concerns about the concrete implications of these ideas for the bodies of the vulnerable. For instance, when I think both about the life of rural Amish girls in Indiana and that of my own daughters, Latinas in an urban Mennonite church in the Chicago area: What kinds of ways of embodying the Christian faith are life-giving for them? Will discourses of living “as if not” truly allow them to experience life abundant in the way of Jesus? Do we ask those kinds of concrete questions (which are also questions of incarnation) often enough as we construct our theologies and our ethics?

Next Sunday
One final question to both authors: What else might you say about the role of the (particular, localized, embodied) community of faith in all of this? Both of you mention church at various points but in somewhat general terms, not so much as active and very particular sites for doing theology in community in the here and now. I wonder what the insights in these books might mean for specific churches, such as my own Mennonite community in Evanston, Illinois. I’m imagining a scene next Sunday. Folks will ask: “Where were you last week?” I might answer: “Oh, in Denver at a panel talking about the apocalyptic and about political theologies from an Anabaptist lens.” “Huh …” they might respond. They like to know what I’m up to theologically and what the point of it is. Will they at least get a decent sermon out of it eventually? Or an insight about how better to do ministry in our community? I was thinking that perhaps one take-away for my own church community might
be the challenge to remember the log in our own eyes as we try to refine our visions of the world (Kyle), whilst also finding the courage to cultivate our “scandalous oddities” (Travis) in the face of technologically driven erasures of embodiment and particularity.

But I still wonder: Are either/both of the authors thinking of church as a *locus theologicus* or not so much? And in what concrete (insightful, incarnate) ways might the vision of an architectonics of hope and the incarnational emphasis of diaspora ethics respectively be expressed as good news for specific communities of faith?

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