

II
Apocalyptic, Anabaptism, and Political Theology¹⁴

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In *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*, Travis explores what it means for political theology and ethics to be messianic, apocalyptic, and exilic, and what it means to be Anabaptist in a modern, pluralist, liberal democracy. The density of readings and insights in this collection is immense, and I have no doubt that I, like many of his readers, will return to this book repeatedly as we write and teach on topics and thinkers considered here, finding in the author a worthy, challenging interlocutor for our own work. It is a gift to have these diverse essays gathered together for our consideration and reconsideration. Anyone who does political theology or Christian ethics, or does theology from within or sympathetically alongside Anabaptist traditions, will be enriched by the wide-ranging explorations of these essays. In this collection, Travis exhibits a generosity of engagement with traditions and approaches outside Anabaptism as well as a firm

¹⁴ Portions of this text are taken from a review of the two books together which I have written for the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 92 (October 2018): 600-602. Reprinted here by permission of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

grounding in a thoroughly Anabaptist commitment to the messianic and the ethical.

In some ways it is unfair to assess this volume alongside *The Architectonics of Hope*, as they are vastly different types of books. Travis's is the work of an established scholar, which arose from decades of publishing. It brings together fifteen diverse essays with their own topics and arguments (and we could not begin to evaluate these fifteen different arguments here). The other is the work of an early career scholar, which arose from his doctoral thesis. It sustains a central argument across the monograph, which can therefore be evaluated in a much more direct way. I want to clearly acknowledge that significant asymmetry before assessing Kyle's work.

In *The Architectonics of Hope*, Kyle traces a genealogical trajectory of apocalyptic and aesthetics through the course of contemporary political theologies, through the works of Carl Schmitt, Johann Baptist Metz, John Milbank, David Bentley Hart, and John Howard Yoder. Through this genealogy, he argues that an "apocalyptically inflected aesthetics of violence" characterizes Schmitt's work (Chapter 2), and that subsequent theologians sought to oppose or overcome Schmitt, but did not succeed due to their lack of actual engagement with his work. Instead, they each remain unwittingly Schmittian.

The development of this genealogy takes the reader through some impressively sophisticated close readings that also engage with a variety of interlocutors. The breadth of engagement with, and knowledge of, the terrain of a certain tradition of political theologies is considerable, and the readings offered by Kyle are often astute. Particularly strong are the sections on the function of violence in political theologies; critiques of Milbank and Hart in this regard are incisive and important for readers of their work. There is no question that in this book Kyle has established himself as a formidable reader and analyst of theopolitical texts and concepts.

The structure of the argument is a series of audacious claims—of which Kyle readily and routinely acknowledges the audacity. I have no problem with audacity, myself. However, as I came to the end of the dense, detailed readings of these authors, the audacity of how and why they are being cast in this genealogy becomes so qualified and softened, I had to wonder why the genealogical claim is needed. It is unclear why Schmitt is necessary in order

to explain Metz's negative anthropology, Milbank's rhetorical style, or the resort to the necessity of violence in Metz, Milbank, and Hart.

The first chapter suggests that the genealogy will show how "the discipline of theology has prematurely bid *adieu* to Schmitt to its own detriment" and that "Schmitt's work deserves more sustained and charitable theological engagement" (3). By the end, however, the sharp edge of this argument is removed, when it is concluded that it has "by no means" been suggested that "any reconfiguration of political theology that does not explicitly engage Schmitt's work does so at its own peril" or that "explicit engagement with Schmitt is some kind of unqualified theological good" (180). So, then, why Schmitt?

I want to turn now to what draws these two volumes together and makes sense of our conversation about them together today in this particular group: that they are both situated as works of political theology grounded in the authors' Anabaptist tradition, in which apocalyptic is somehow central. I would like to ask both authors a question about each of these shared aspects of their work, beginning with apocalyptic then turning to Anabaptist political theology.

Defining Apocalyptic

In his introduction, Travis carefully unpacks how he is (and is not) using "messianic", "diaspora", and "exile"—key terms from the title which exemplify the entire collection. I found myself wishing that "apocalyptic" had found its way into the title so that we could also have a succinct explanation of how the term is being used. Although he relates both "messianic" and "diaspora" to the apocalyptic, the content of the term is assumed rather than explicated. In many places it was not clear how or whether the term meant something more or other than "eschatological"; in other places it seemed to be specifically about exceeding the natural; in one place it is about contingency (50f.); in relation to Augustine it is peculiarly agonistic (49-55). The clearest elaborations occur where Travis summarizes others. He says that "Dostoevsky sees the Christ of the Gospels as a cosmic apocalyptic figure who tears open the hidden meaning of everyday life and exposes it as spiritual crisis (*krisis*, in the literal sense of judgment or decision; in a metaphysical and theological, not just a socio-political or moral, manner)"

(91). And he says that for Benjamin “Messianic becoming is apocalyptic, an interruption of the natural that suspends its immanent laws . . . so as to point to its hidden divine passage through it, its truest becoming and indeed its truest, eternal ‘happiness’” (25).

Kyle, too, assumes rather than explicitly defines the meaning of “apocalyptic” in his work. He seems to suggest in the introduction, via a quotation from Annie Dillard about blindness, that apocalyptic has to do with what is hidden and seen. He responds to the quotation with “I can think of no better way of describing the mysterious apocalyptic interplay of veiling and unveiling that is necessarily bound up with what it means to learn to see” (6). Yet when it comes to establishing the “apocalyptically inflected aesthetics of violence” central to his reading of Schmitt, Kyle seems to mean something more peculiarly agonistic by “apocalyptic.” And in his own usage, the term seems especially associated with interruption, sometimes violent interruption.

I am not being obtuse here. I am fully aware of the denotations and connotations of “apocalyptic” in political theology. Nor am I being pedantic, as if these books would have been improved by placing a dictionary definition at the beginning as in a bad student essay. Rather, if one is to argue for the centrality of the apocalyptic in a Christian political theology, what apocalyptic is and is not is precisely what is at stake, and failure to clearly define the range of the concept obscures rather than clarifies the importance of this very contested term. Precisely because it is so contested it demands utter clarity instead of presumption. For me, the unveiling of true and false power is central to what I mean by apocalyptic, whereas I surmise that for Travis exceeding or suspending the natural is central, and for Kyle a decisive, even violent, interruption is central. Have I got that right? If not, is there room for more specificity and precision in our use of “apocalyptic”?

Anabaptist Political Theology

Turning to the authors’ shared Anabaptist tradition and the place of their work within it, I want to pose a question motivated by genuine curiosity, one that I would like to hear their thoughts on rather than one of critique. I have written a new chapter for the forthcoming second edition of the *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* on Anabaptism. In it, I note that

although an emerging group of Anabaptist theologians embrace the phrase “political theology” as a descriptor of their work, of which these two authors are obvious exemplars, I still wonder about the prospects of specifically Anabaptist political theology. I do not raise this question for the standard reasons others might, namely based either on the mistaken assumption that “sectarian” traditions such as Anabaptism are “apolitical” or on the mistaken assertion that these traditions have opted out of “responsible” public discourse and practice, and are therefore irrelevant to genuine political theology. On the contrary, you will always find me arguing on Anabaptism’s side in such theological skirmishes.

However, if we focus on what distinguishes the ethical from the theopolitical, do we not find that the former sits far more comfortably within most Anabaptist frameworks than the latter?

Ted Smith helps clarify the distinction when he says that ethics is concerned with “moral obligations that play out within immanent networks of cause and effect,” and that although this “immanent frame” may be able to “accommodate many kinds of moral reasoning,” focused on acts, consequences, or virtues, it cannot readily imagine, recognize, or accommodate that which exceeds the frame and/or is exceptional to it.¹⁵ He argues that we need theological ways of reasoning about politics that exceed these limits, that we need political theology. This is not about the superiority of one theological discipline over another, but about the limits of the ethical without the possibility of the theopolitical. Theopolitics without attention to the ethical is likewise undesirable.

My question is this: Can Anabaptism itself (as opposed to Anabaptist individuals drawing largely on sources outside of Anabaptism) speak beyond questions of what we should do and how we should live in relation to political realities and imperatives, into relentlessly metaphysical questions about the meaning of politics in the eschatological life of the Triune God? Can Anabaptism allow the latter questions and answers to trouble the former? Or is Anabaptism too thoroughly “ethical” to practice “political theology”? I pose these questions to you both, not only because of your shared Anabaptism, but because *Architectonics* seems more resolutely, self-

¹⁵ Ted A. Smith, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2015), 5.

consciously theopolitical, and *Messianic Political Theology* seems more comfortable sitting at the intersection of political theology and ethics (indeed, two of the three sections of this book are explicitly more ethical than theopolitical).

My final comment on the commonalities of these two books is more pointedly critical. Again, it could be said that my criticism is slightly unfair because it can be levelled against a great deal of political theology, and is, I believe, a problem in our shared practice that we must urgently address. It is this urgency that compels me to name the problem here. Both authors engage at length with a vast number of interlocutors in these books. Travis engages with Paul, Friedrich Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Martin Buber, Eric Voegelin, Plato, Isaiah, Augustine, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Wendell Berry, Chaim Potok, Martin Luther, Thomas Müntzer, Michael Sattler, John Howard Yoder, Oliver O'Donovan, Karl Barth, and Michael Ignatieff. Kyle engages with Carl Schmitt, Johann Baptist Metz, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, John Milbank, David Bentley Hart, Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Howard Yoder, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Nathan Kerr.¹⁶

There are ways in which we can commend the sorts of breadth and diversity exhibited in these interlocutors. However, there are obvious aspects of diversity which are entirely absent in such a long list of thinkers, including gender and ethnicity. Reading the two books in close succession, I felt distinctly like a female outsider listening in on a conversation between men, about men, for men (with the important exception of Travis's co-authored essay with Carole Leclair). So I put it to these authors that they, and indeed very many of our colleagues in political theology, must work harder to choose to seek out, listen to, and engage with the voices, experiences, and scholarship of women and others excluded from these conversations, both historical and contemporary.

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¹⁶ Both authors do refer occasionally to women; it is not as if women are ignored entirely. However, this is *very* occasional. The list of male interlocutors each received sustained, focused attention over several paragraphs or many pages; the women mentioned and cited do not receive that level of attention.