

**THEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION: DISCOVERING THE LITURGY AS A POLITICAL ACT IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL CONSUMERISM** by William T. Cavanaugh, *T&T Clark*, London, 2002, Pp. 122, £14.99 pbk.

Behind the question of whether to define one's theology as 'public' or 'political' lies a more fundamental one: what is our understanding of 'being public' and 'being political' at all such that theology can be thought simply to insert itself into the relevant debate? William Cavanaugh gets to the heart of this matter by suggesting that whatever we want to call it, a theology that engages with society should be a critique of the very way we have come to separate religious and political life in the first place. Theology, his book argues, cannot be something that simply shouts at the sidelines – it must be an alternative vision of politics and public life, a practice of the imagination inseparable from them. At the heart of Theopolitical Imagination is therefore this nod towards Augustine (and, some will argue, the ideas of Radical Orthodoxy) and his rejection of the state, the imperium's authority to define and monopolise 'publicness' in the first place. Since the imperium has forfeited this role "by its refusal to do justice, by refusing to give God his due" (p. 84), the City of God is an alternative imagination of political space that should resist the hold it has over people and communities. This is the premise from which Cavanaugh sees in theology a resource for resisting the effects of global consumerism.

In most mainstream bookshops today a large section of the 'political theory' section will be devoted to various critiques of globalisation, the 'anti-globalisation' movement, and various eclectic compilations on anticapitalism. It is refreshing to see that Cavanaugh doesn't simply repeat these well-rehearsed ideas with a Christian 'angle'. This book suggests that that kind of approach would only reinforce the view of religious critique as a domesticated pastime, tamed out of harm's way and unable, therefore, to say something original and challenging about the evils of global capitalism. Such a view presupposes the central premise of the book, which is a rejection of the 'myth' of the secular state as 'salvation' from religious intolerance and violence. If his damning criticism of this historic 'myth', propagated in history books about the European wars of religion, looks at first like a nostalgia for religious authoritarianism, his approach in the end simply adds an interesting theological dimension to what is now becoming a popular critique of 'Empire' and the rise of imperial sovereignty generally. The modern state, goes the argument, has simply made violence its own 'religio', its "habitual discipline for binding us one to another" (p. 46). Cavanaugh's additional argument is that theology has a right to reclaim its usurped concepts. Modern statecraft has not only continued the bloodshed of sectarian bigotry and social repression, it has also used and distorted a theology of public and political life. "The modern state", he writes, "is but a false copy of the Body of Christ" (p. 46), replacing notions of universal kinship with atomised, Lockean individualism and fear-based Hobbesian social 'peace'. Cavanaugh's argument should have serious consequences for any contextual approach to theology simply because it rejects the assumption that theology, having been 'disarmed' from dictating public policy, is now 'free' to critique and influence it. We should, in other words, have learned our lessons from Foucault by now about the extent of the "interpenetration of state and society" (p. 70). It is an indictment, therefore, of the invention of 'civil society' in more recent times, with emphasis on the voluntary sector, education programs, campaign groups and the interpretation of notions of citizenship. For a public theology to simply fill in the gaps of free society is therefore to disarm its symbols. In civil society "Christian symbols must be run through the sausage-grinder of social ethics before coming out on the other end as publicly digestible policy." (81)

Does Cavanaugh succeed in giving us a glimpse of theological practices that, unlike the 'myth of civil society as free space' genuinely "resist the thrall of the state" (p. 46)? There is a real danger that in focusing on liturgical practices (with

their own tendencies towards sectarianism and prejudice, a point which Cavanaugh only briefly mentions) as the loci of such resistance, the power relations between Church and state are simply contested once again, not radically re-imagined. A nostalgia for the eucharistic practices of the early Church will not stop the temptation, as Cavanaugh himself puts it, to see it today as the “retreat into a place-bound theocracy or sect” (p. 116). In its defence, Cavanaugh’s book doesn’t try to be something it isn’t – its resources for resistance to global capitalism are drawn from Catholic social teaching, and describe as its most potent model the potential of the celebration of Mass, particularly in Latin America, to reclaim otherwise capitalised, surveilled, fragmented space in globalised culture. Eucharistic practice, he shows, can become a counter-cultural symbol of authentic global community, a kind of sacralised appraisal of the imperative to think global (the “world in a wafer” (p. 112)), act local (catholicity as the centrality of each local church) against the “detached hypermobility” (p. 118) of global capitalism. But we should expect more of the book than to be a radical resource for Catholics, since it claims, more generally, to apply the model of authentic Christian discipleship as a form of “anarchy” in its rejection of the “false order of the state” (p. 47) – an attempt, in other words, to say something generally about human community and discipleship by which anti-capitalist resistance might draw strength. Perhaps I am asking too much of such a short book, but it does seem to stretch the imagination (which, perhaps, is Cavanaugh’s intention anyway) to see how liturgical practices can translate themselves into a wider critique of the ‘false salvation’ of the state (including many more alternative imaginations of time and space), without in some way compromising its symbols with the language of ‘social ethics’ and the politics of ‘civil society’ which it so roundly condemns. Though it is certainly not Cavanaugh’s intention, the book runs the risk of finding an easy shelter from the dilemmas of public engagement through a practice so radical and uncompromising that to those outside of its sphere of influence it might seem like a Sunday morning distraction from, rather than a reshaping of, political life.

Nevertheless, my concluding comment must be that the book brings new insight to the concept of ‘practising theology’ as well as a critique of late capitalism itself, and will therefore be a welcome resource to many people. It serves as a reminder to those attempting to ‘be public’ and ‘be political’ theologically that they need not see themselves as merely bolstering the message of political resistance with Christian reflection. The particularity of the alternative message and alternative practices within their own faith traditions make an important addition to a growing counter-culture of imagining the world anew.

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**POLITICAL WORSHIP: ETHICS FOR CHRISTIAN CITIZENS** by  
**Bernd Wannenwetsch, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, Pp. 416, £75 hbk.**

Wannenwetsch’s concern is for a recontextualisation of Christian ethics: ‘Do we not have to see the Church . . . as the matrix out of which Christian ethics is born?’ (p. 2). In thus locating the aetiology of Christian ethics, he engages both with the nature of the Church, which he sees as ‘political’, and with the nature of Christian ethics, which he sees as springing from worship. However, the title of this densely argued book is misleading, since it is not itself an ‘ethics’, nor is it about ‘politics’ or ‘Christian citizens’ as the terms are ordinarily used. It might more accurately be entitled ‘Political worship: the source of ethics for citizens of the City of God’, or even ‘A Christian metaphysics of morals’.

Wannenwetsch engages first with ‘Worship as the Beginning of Christian Ethics’, moving towards the integration of ‘*lex orandi – lex credendi – lex bene operandi*’. He