

Book Review

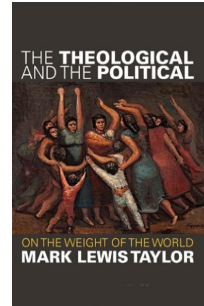
Mark Lewis Taylor.

The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World

Fortress Press, 2011. xvii + 236 pp. pb. \$35.00.

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The title of Mark Lewis Taylor's latest book suggests that it is a reflection on political theology; that is, an effort to bring doctrinal theology – which Taylor denotes as **Theology** – to bear upon political theory and structures.¹ That is, however, not the case. *The Theological and the Political*, instead, excavates elements of power, domination, and colonization that is embedded in the doing of **Theology**, showing how it has not only contributed to various oppressions in the past and present, but that **Theology** has provided the material to normalize such oppressions. The book advocates an alternative theological method that aims to push back against such normalizations, a method Taylor calls the **theological**.

Taylor's reflection begins with people who were marginalized – or, “weighed against” – by structures of oppression. One unsettling example in his book was the story of Sister Dianna Ortiz, who was burned with cigarettes, gang raped, and “lowered into an open pit filled with human bodies – bodies of children, women, and men – some decapitated, some caked with blood, some alive.” (196) Confronted with such a barbarous act, a Christian may ask what can be done so that Ortiz's story does not repeat itself. But for Taylor, such an approach

¹ For purposes of clarity, I have expressed Taylor's understanding of the **Theological** or **theological** in semi-bold throughout this review.

necessarily deprives Ortiz (or other oppressed peoples) of her own subjectivity by reinforcing how she still needs the help of society's center in order that such heinous acts not be repeated.

Such a relationship of sovereignty has been reinforced by **Theology**, which maintains a transcendent ethos by uncritically maintaining certain ideas and doctrines as being unassailable and foundational to the discipline. Such an ethos subordinates theological approaches that deviate from those ideological or doctrinal norms. In academic theology, for instance, theologies which do not assume a Platonic or Aristotelian epistemology, or do not use established sources such as Scripture or tradition, are not regarded as mainstream theology. Thus, **Theology** participates in the oppression of worldviews and ideas by creating a hermeneutical resistance to contextualization, ensuring that the Euro-American patriarchal underpinnings of **Theology** persist (53-60).

Taylor argues in favor of a different theological method, which he calls the **theological**. The starting point for the **theological** is the *agonistic political*, human beings who are “so situated amid historical and social practices that a situation of sovereignty can now be said to characterize our ontological condition, set up especially by routinized exercises of symbolic force, often a symbolic violence” (111). The agonistic political feel the weight of injustice and oppression pressing down upon them, and to push back against

that weight, they produce what Taylor calls “prodigious forces of artful images.” To phrase it simply, the agonistic political resort to various forms of art to speak the unspeakable. This may come in various forms, including visual forms (e.g. Berlin Wall), dramatic forms (e.g. a public protest), written or spoken forms (e.g. Ortiz’s recounting of her experiences), etc. These prodigious forces of artful images are the source material for the **theological**, one that diversifies theological method to include non-traditional sources, such as art. Such a method resists the notion that the marginalized have no agency on their own to resist the weight of oppression pushing against them.

The Theological and the Political is a rich but dense text, one that requires multiple readings to mine its riches. However, Taylor’s construction of the **theological** raises critical questions as to whether it is helpful for resisting the problems he identifies in **Theology**. One important fundamental question is his categorization of **Theology**. One of the aspects of **Theology** that Taylor identifies as problematic is its reliance on a binary, either/or mode of thinking. God is either transcendent or immanent, for instance. Such binary forms of thought can also be found in many forms of oppression. Racial oppression, for instance, thrives on a Black/White opposition. But by essentializing doctrinal theology as **Theology**, one wonders if Taylor himself gives in to the binary mode of thought that he criticizes.

Such categorization has important ramifications for theological method. Because of how he understands **Theology**, Taylor cautions against solely relying on the traditional sources for doing theology in the academy, such as the Scriptures or church tradition, on the basis that they often were source material for maintaining the socio-political system that

silences the agonistic political. Of course, both have been used in history to justify racial discrimination, slavery, and other forms of oppression. But by insisting on the **Theology/theological** binary, he assumes that those same traditional sources cannot be resources for the **theological**. I would suggest that the Scriptures can be a powerful source for the **theological** and that **theological** readings of the Scriptures can itself be one of the prodigious forces of artful images that resists oppressive systems of thought. The same, perhaps, could be said of church traditions. Gustavo Gutiérrez, to mention a prominent example, did not reject the Scriptures or Roman Catholic church tradition in constructing his liberation theology, providing instead a reinterpretation of both established theological sources.

This leads to a second crucial question: where does God enter in the **theological**? Of course, the **theological** resists the transcendent ethos that characterizes **Theology**, an ethos that begins with an emphasis on a transcendent God. That is not to say, however, that the **theological** emphasizes a radically immanent God. For Taylor, immanence and transcendence are two faces of the same coin, rendering such understandings of God impotent against resisting the oppression borne on the shoulders of the agonistic political. But Taylor does not advocate any alternative understandings of God in place of the immanent/transcendent conceptions of God. In fact, he does not make mention of God at all in his construction of the **theological**. Without God, one must ask what makes the **theological** *theo*-logical?

Problems aside, *The Theological and the Political* is an example of exemplary interdisciplinary scholarship, drawing on disciplines including Continental philosophy, art, theology, and sociology. Thus, the book is

highly recommended for doctoral seminars or advanced masters-level courses investigating the intersections of theology and other academic disciplines, or on theological method. While Taylor's book cannot be considered evangelical by any stretch of the imagination, it will certainly generate much discussion and challenge readers to consider the political underpinnings of how they do theology.

