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0521665167 - The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology

Oliver O'Donovan

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Political theology as we know it today reacts against the attempt to insulate theology from political theory which has generally characterised the modern era. But its own intellectual parentage in the idealist historicism of the nineteenth century has left it still entrammelled in the suspicions and inhibitions from which it has wanted to break free. The author contends that to pass beyond suspicion and totalised criticism of politics and to achieve a positive reconstruction of political thought, theology must reach back behind the modern tradition, achieving a fuller, less selective reading of the Scriptures and learning from an older politico-theological discourse which flourished in the patristic, medieval and Reformation periods. Central to that discourse was a series of questions about authority, generated by Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

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# THE DESIRE OF THE NATIONS

*Rediscovering the roots of political theology*

OLIVER O'DONOVAN

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[More information](#)*Preface to the paperback edition*

Saint Francis set out to discover the nakedness of Christ, and ended up the co-founder of scholastic theology. Scholastic theology, no doubt, rather than nakedness, was what his age demanded of him. I set out to discover the kingship of Christ, and ended up, as I am told, with a 'defence of Christendom'. Is this because a defence of Christendom is what our age insists that it must have? I can think of worse charges to bring against our age. But what matters is not to be *for* Christendom or *against* it – what earthly point could there be in either of these postures? – but to have such a sympathetic understanding of it that we profit from its achievements and avoid repeating its mistakes. The discussion of Christendom should be read, perhaps, not so much as a defence, but as a word of advice to its would-be critics.

*The Desire of the Nations* took shape as the first panel of a diptych: a historico-theological exploration of the themes surrounding the proclamation of God's kingship, preparing the way for a more deliberately oriented exploration of the tasks of politics. I have called the two parts – contestably, perhaps, but serviceably – 'political theology' and 'political ethics'. If God grants me to complete the second, the relation of the two aspects of the enterprise will, I hope, be clearer to readers. I should stress, however, that they are not *separate* enterprises, but two moments in one train of thought. The passage from what God said to Abraham to what we are now to do about Iraq, is one which the intuition of faith may accomplish in a moment, and a preacher's exhortation in under twenty minutes. An intellectual account of it, however, can be the work of decades!

This book has met with generous interest. To all who have offered me their help by engaging with its argument, and to those who may yet do so, I would like to express my most grateful thanks. The lover of truth has no truer friend than an intelligent critic.

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Providentiae divinae circa res hominum non leve argumentum et  
philosophi et historici agnoscunt, in conservatione rerum publicarum.

Grotius, *De veritate religionis Christianae* 1.12.



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## *Acknowledgments*

A sabbatical term in 1986, the fruit of Oxford University's far-sighted policies towards its academic staff, was spent, as I recall, reading Hobbes's *Leviathan* very slowly; since when everything in the idea of this book has been altered except the author's excitement at discovering a Great Tradition of political theology, almost unknown to today's theologians. If Hobbes is not the best example of it – though surely Hobbes the theologian, too, deserves a rehabilitation – yet he marks the point at which the Tradition, as it were, abdicated, leaving the characteristic problems of modern political theory in its wake; and so he affords a point of view from which the contemporary value of the Tradition can be grasped afresh. The careful reader will notice that this book is only the first half of what was originally planned. To the 'political theology' a 'political ethics' demands to be added. That is not said by way of a promise, which the conditions of academic life and human mortality could hardly justify; but as an expression of hope that, if not through me then through someone more able, what is asked for may be given. If it is, then some loose ends, of which I am well aware, should be tied up, and particularly the bearing of my interpretation of political authority as power, right and tradition.

I am conscious of having many debts, conscious also that not all of them are obvious to my ungrateful memory. First, of course, to the Syndics of Cambridge University Press, and to Mr Rufus Black, of Magdalen College, Oxford, who has equipped the book with a bibliography and an index. It is hard to imagine that anything would have been accomplished without the rich library resources and technical support of Christ Church, where I am also fortunate to have a home. Successive generations of Oxford students have heard, and improved on, large portions of the book. Invitations from Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, to give Payton Lectures in 1989, and from General Theological Seminary, New York, to give Paddock

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Lectures in 1990, brought parts of chapter one and chapter seven respectively into focus. Then the University of Cambridge invited me to be Hulsean Lecturer in 1994, which allowed the whole argument to be layed out before an attentive and critical audience. My colleagues Professor H. G. M. Williamson of Christ Church and Professor C. C. Rowland of the Queen's College have educated me on matters where my biblical scholarship was too thin to support my ambitions to skate. A similar obligation was conferred by Dr J. C. D. Clark of All Souls' College, who piloted me through unfamiliar straits of modern history. My former colleague and lifelong friend the Very Revd N. T. Wright, Dean of Lichfield, contributed not only by commenting on drafts but by sharing his own pursuit of new readings of the Gospels which allow important matters to come into focus. None of these, I know, will feel the slightest resentment if I add that the most important intellectual influence comes from another source. I have been guided every step of the way by my wife, Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, whose own scholarly explorations opened up questions I never knew were there, and whose careful interpretative skills unravelled questions I never thought I could understand.