

POLITICAL THEOLOGIES: Globalization and Post-Secular Reason

Center for the Study of World Religions at the Divinity School of Harvard University & Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam

General Information:

The conference is to be convened by the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) at the Divinity School of Harvard Univ. and the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis (ASCA) at the Univ. of Amsterdam, and follows the work initiated at the conferences organized in partnership between ASCA and CSWR in June of 2001, in Amsterdam, and in May of 2003, in Cambridge, Mass.

Date: August 19-21, 2004.

Location: Amsterdam.

Deadline: March 15, 2004.

Those interested should send completed papers (no abstracts!) to Dr. Eloë Kingma, Managing Director of ASCA, and indicate in which section of the program outlined below they would like to present and discuss their pre-distributed papers.

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The »Age of Globalization«, as we seem destined to regard it, is marked at least by the phenomenon of confronting theorists and practitioners alike with more ironies than sources of clarity. The apparent triumph of Enlightenment secularization, manifested in the global spread of political and economic structures that carry forward to all cultures the relegation of the sacred to a strictly circumscribed private sphere, has been reached only to founder on the unexpected realization of its own parochialism. As Joseph Stiglitz has recently noted, »a particular view of the role of government and markets has come to prevail – a view which is not universally accepted within the developed countries, but which is being forced upon the developing countries and the economies in transition.« Imagined to be universal in both relevance and application, the rigid boundaries by which secularist social structures divide the public sphere of political processes from private commitments to the values inculcated by religious and spiritual traditions have proved, instead, a source of mounting resistance on the part of cultures in which the superiority of such structures is not self-evident.

At the same time, the critique posed by modernity of religious conviction – focused against the claims of religion to speak with unanswerable authority and in universal terms about the ordering of society – now appears utterly misplaced. Even policymakers in the secularized West have come, albeit latterly, to understand this: »It is clear«, averred Harlan Cleveland and Mark Luyckx in a policy study prepared for the European Commission, »that the wall between religion and government is now so porous as to be an unreliable guide to attitudes and actions.«

Yet such an assertion poses more questions than it answers. In what ways are the claims of religious belief exerting forces of change on structures of governance? What are the implications of the use of religiously imbued justifications of sub-state and interstate violence for the credibility of religious traditions in reshaping patterns of representation and institutional structures of authority? How do the distinct teachings of the world's faith traditions bring about coherent, or alternatively conflicting, forces either supporting or undermining existing political and economic structures arising from the forces of globalization? Can any insight be shed by the resurgent interest in political theologies on the approaches of institutional theory now being employed to examine the trend toward globalization?

We propose to address these questions, and others following from them, in three-day conference entitled *Globalization and Post-Secular Reason*.

Political Theologies: Globalization and Post-Secular Reason will build on the themes examined at the previous meetings, moving more deeply into an examination of the interrelationships between the political, economic, and cultural characteristics of the »Age of Globalization« and the vision of society and structures of governance developed over millennia by major faith traditions. That such an undertaking has about it an element of urgency cannot be doubted in view not only of the attacks of September 11, 2001, but more broadly – and perhaps, in the longer view, more importantly – of the religiously informed resistance to pressures of secularization and cultural-political assimilation implicit in the continuing sources of tension between the »secular« West and the developing societies imagined in the West as the »beneficiaries« of globalization.

Taking its cue from the topics addressed during the first conference and workshop on *Political Theologies*, the conference will be structured around four major themes:

- *Theological critiques of Globalizing Trends.* Globalization has been variously defined, but at least it may be seen to encompass forces privileging a Western/Enlightenment model of governance structures and understandings of the substance of public and private realms in political life; market-capitalist economic patterns of organization shaping relationships between capital, labor, technology, and ecology; and cultural mores and means of transmission that underwrite Enlightenment assertions of autonomy and derivative rights. What can be said of the evolving theological critique of major faith traditions, as well as less systematized, indigenous traditions, of these trends?

- *Political Theologies and the Construction of Identity.* If a principal source of resistance to the forces of globalization is a deep-rooted determination of many of the cultures and societies on the »receiving« end of globalization to maintain a distinct sense of identity and particularity over against Western/Enlightenment values and governance structures, what may be said of the role of political theologies in providing intellectual coherence to such resistance? Are these political theologies also open to interrogation in view of their power to provide justification for the appeal to violence on the part of communities seeking to maintain distinctive identities?
- »Universal Rights« and Political Theologies. Critical to the project of reintegrating the work of political theorists and theologians is a detailed analysis of how the Enlightenment notion of individual rights – and, specifically, notions of the conscience, with their roots in antiquity – have developed into codified claims of universal rights not subject to the particular claims or perspectives of any religious commitment. How, for example, can the work of political theology account for the claim of Mary Robinson, High Commissioner for Refugees at the United Nations, that no religious claim may be invoked to justify acts of genocide or to protect those accused of committing them? Are there limits imposed by the Enlightenment project of a wider and wider realm of individual, and increasingly universal, rights – defined as universal, or defined in terms of »rights of women«, »rights of children«, »rights of workers«, etc. – on the claims that can be posited by political theologies? If so, how are such limits to be identified and acknowledged?
- *Practices of Post-Secular Reason.* How can the enterprise of political theologies – of re-claiming a place in theorizing about the ordering of societies and patterns of economic and political power – be translated into the realm of the policymakers and implementers? Is it too early for the work of political theology to consider with greater specificity how it would redirect the forces of globalization and reshape the institutions by which such forces are channeled and directed?

The conference will assemble approximately twenty-five to thirty political theorists, anthropologists, philosophers as well as scholars in the study of religion from the United States, Europe, India, and the developing world. Opportunity will also be extended for the participation of a select number of graduate students and young scholars entering the indicated fields. Those interested should send completed papers (no abstracts!) to Dr. Eloë Kingma, Managing Director of ASCA, at asca@hum.uva.nl, by March 15, 2004, and indicate in which section of the program outlined below they would like to present and discuss their pre-distributed papers.

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