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From the New Political Theology to Critical Political Ethics

HILLE HAKER

Building upon the tradition of the New Political Theology and liberation, decolonial, and feminist theology, this article explores the consequences of a decolonial epistemology of theology for ethical theory. It introduces a critical political ethics that concurs with critical, post-structural, and decolonial theory that knowledge and ethics is necessarily situated while standing firm in their ethical orientation towards liberation from injustice. In all these approaches, the question of freedom is of central importance for the development of political ethics, and political theology as well as critical theory raise the question of authority. Rather than presupposing the liberal concept of autonomy or Kant's moral freedom, critical political ethics distinguishes between four dimensions of freedom, namely transcendental, existential, social, and political freedom. For ethics, the realignment of political theory and practice means that solidarity with the suffering individual and/or group is not only the criterion of moral judgment but also a priority of action. Additionally, however, critical political ethics situates theological ethics in the tradition of witnesses of faith that serve as reference for a creative reimagination of moral and political practices.

I Political Theology as Critique and Struggle for Liberation from Injustice¹

In its foundational reflection, theological ethics must certainly position itself in relation to the two dominant modern concepts of freedom, namely the Anglo-American concept of liberty and the Kantian concept of moral

autonomy. Theology emphasizes that the self is derivative (*abkünftig*) and inscrutable (*unergründlich*), rendering the human being vulnerable as well as open to others. Freedom must attend to the derivatedness (*Abkünftigkeit*) and inscrutability (*Unergründlichkeit*) of human subjectivity and the vulnerability and openness of the human being. Religions position humans in relation to an otherness that, paradoxically, cannot be named and still is given a name — one that will be infinitely questioned. Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, positions the humans in a relation to God, in an address that constitutes meaning but also calls for a response. Following Metz' programmatic New Political Theology rather than Carl Schmitt's political theology in the 1970s and 1980s, theologians have given freedom a critical twist, relating it to the liberation from oppression. In this, the New Political Theology coincided with liberation theology, feminist, black, postcolonial, and decolonial theologies. In their interpretation of the "authority of God," these approaches insist that authority itself is paradoxical, derived from the vulnerable individual, groups, or peoples, and not resting on the sovereignty of political-theological leadership, as the Schmittian tradition argued. Critical theory pointed theology and ethics to a normativity that departs as much from a metaphysical ontotheological order of being as from the naturalism of modern sciences that pretend to be value-free. Horkheimer had claimed as early as 1937 that critical theory, in contrast to traditional (empirical and positivist) theory reflects the situatedness of any knowledge that constitutes at the same time an "interest" or direction of practical philosophy, namely the struggle against oppression, alienation, and the domination of nature, including human nature, through instrumental and technical reason.² Critical theory opposes those concepts of rationality that ignore the paradoxical status of the human as derivative, inscrutable, vulnerable, and agential. The group that formed the Frankfurt School in the 1930s was proven right in their critique of instrumental reason and authoritarianism: Western modern thinking had not prevented the Great War of 1914-1918. It did not prevent the rise of several fascist dictatorships in Europe, and it did not prevent the rise of Hitler in Germany. Instrumental rationality was exploited for the *industrial* killing of Jews and any declared "other" in the Nazi deathcamps, and the detonation of two nuclear bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US military. The verdict of critical theory was dire: the history

of the 20th century demonstrated the “eclipse of reason” rather than its progress.³ The “dialectic of enlightenment” pointed to an immanent and unresolved problem of modern thinking.⁴

Similar to critical theory, the New Political Theology aimed at changing the underlying epistemology of its own field, theology, in order to make room for a transformation of theological practices. It centred on the suffering human person, and its own historical roots called for a break with Christian anti-Judaism as well as antisemitism. My own approach takes up both schools, critical theory and political theology, however attending more closely to the consequences for theological ethics. For critical political ethics, the realignment of theory and practice means that solidarity with the suffering individual and/or group is not only the criterion of moral judgment but also the *priority* that must guide Christian personal and political action. It may well be difficult at times to distinguish between suffering that stems from bad luck and suffering from injustice, as Judith Shklar has argued,⁵ but it is exactly for this reason that political theology must be complemented by a political *ethics* that addresses the questions of ethical judgments more thoroughly than this has been the case so far.

II Critical Political Ethics

Critical political ethics is opposed to any political-ethical decisionism because it fosters political authoritarianism. It takes up the postmodern critique of a foundational ethics when or insofar as this is immune to critique. It joins the critical deconstruction of truth claims and genealogies of ethical concepts that have contributed to the colonialist epistemology of superiority and inferiority among human beings, groups, and peoples.⁶ Yet, as necessary as these analyses are, they are not sufficient from a political-ethical perspective, because it is not clear how they can motivate political-ethical actions: *Not* to play along in the cruel game of planetary destruction may well be an act of resistance, but actions are in part based on the ends that agents set. In the political realms, agents act together, aiming at collective ends that require particular means, strategies, cooperation, and coordination. If critical theory is correct, there is a certain drive to conformity and normalization that must be actively resisted: not to look the other way but to stand up requires political scrutiny, political-ethical

virtues, allies who will take the role of political kin, and perseverance. It takes courage to stand up for one's rights, for the rights of others, and for anybody to have the right to have rights. The role of *ethics* with respect to political practices is not to be confused with the moral practices, however. Rather, ethics must preserve its critical role of reflecting practices and subjecting them to the analysis of their normative justifications, as Ricœur aptly states in a comment to Habermas' discourse ethics:

One might say, with Habermas, that the philosopher should not hold a discourse of citizens—practical discourse—but a discourse on the discourse of citizens—a discourse no longer practical, but critical—and that this critical discourse calls for reference to a regulatory idea which itself lays claim to truth and no longer to opinion.⁷

Following this argument, critical political ethics cannot evade the question of normativity and moral truth. If, however, theological ethics cannot return to an epistemology that points to divine law as legitimization of a particular kind of politics, morally justified by the sovereign authority of the Magisterium, what other route can ethics take?⁸ I believe that a *reflective* justification of normative claims is possible, as long as this justification is either strictly formal or remaining open to infinite questioning when turning to substantial claims.⁹ Kant's ethics is indispensable in the universalization of moral claims regarding the dignity and freedom of human beings, which constitutes equality and reciprocity between agents. Yet, the concept of freedom does not only concern autonomy. I want to distinguish between four dimensions of freedom that need to be kept in play. I call them transcendental, existential, social, and political, and I claim that none of them must be discarded in ethical reasoning: *First*, Kant rightly showed that freedom is the foundational, *transcendental* concept of morality, i.e. agents' capability to be held responsible for one's actions. It does not exclude obligations towards those who are not agents, or the environment, for instance. Rather, it establishes the concept of responsibility as implication of moral agency. Autonomy in this sense is not merely the liberty to choose the courses of action but also the susceptibility to blame and praise by others who may hold the agents accountable and demand certain actions from them. *Second*, the existentialist interpretation

of freedom from Kierkegaard to Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus entails the self-determination captured in the liberal autonomy concept but also goes beyond it. It stresses freedom as an *existential* concept that is captured in the concept of ethical identity. Freedom in this understanding is an infinite existential task of becoming oneself, of acknowledging the dynamic, future-oriented project of one's biography that rests, at least in part, upon self-reflective choices one makes for one's life.¹⁰ *Third*, agents are necessarily embedded and entangled in the dialectic of self-other relations. Thus, although it is necessarily personal, freedom is reactive and responsive, constituting relations interconnection, of power, or domination and subjection. Whereas the existentialist tradition in the Hegelian tradition — Sartre especially — emphasizes the power *over* the self that emerges from the self-other relation, others who follow the theory of recognition, explore the spaces of social freedom that enable individuals to interact with each other.¹¹ Critical political ethics, however, insists that the *denial* of spaces of social freedom, or the exclusion from them, deprive individuals being recognized as subjects and moral agents, and hence are vulnerable to dehumanization by other agents. Because this is more often the reality than not, freedom is therefore, *fourth*, a claim on others, a moral demand to be seen, to be responded to, and to be respected in one's dignity.¹² This demand is reflected in the struggles for liberation from violations of human dignity and structures of violence, which connects it both to the theology of liberation and to the theory of recognition, insofar as the latter addresses the multiple struggles for equal respect.

In theological thinking, the liberation from oppression has been interpreted as a path towards salvation, but reflecting the early modern history of Christianity, critical political ethics acknowledges that missionaries also used the theology salvation, blended with anti-judaist supersessionism and political colonialization, for their own missionary purposes. As a result, colonization is a political as well as a theological concept. Western *Christian* theology provided the narrative that entails, among others, the "racial contract," as Charles Mills has called it,¹³ and it is exactly this narrative that is promoted by the Christian Right in the USA today.¹⁴ Critical political ethics must therefore break with a teleological and/or providential theology of salvation that returns as secularized philosophy of progress in history. Likewise, it must break with

an apocalyptic theology of the end time and insist on the transformative policies in history. It must break with any political *or* ecclesial view that contradicts the above-mentioned understanding of freedom that embraces the capability to act and be held accountable, the quest for meaning in one's life, the need to act together as persons and collective, and the political struggle for justice and equality.

Unfortunately, the Catholic Church often confuses the legitimacy of the Magisterium's *political-ecclesial* authority of the Church with its assumed sacred authority that renders the Church immune to criticism. Furthermore, it conflates its ecclesial authority with the power to *define* what is morally right or wrong. The Church certainly has its own normative framework: the ecclesial law (Canon Law), comes with a sanctioning power analogous to secular laws, which is legitimate and legitimized by the ecclesial procedures—though often contradictory, insufficient, denigrative of women, but also little known by the faithful. The Catechism is a theological and moral guide that summarizes and orients the beliefs of the ecclesia—but it is clearly open to criticism, interpretation, and change. Moral normativity, however, functions differently than the Canon Law or the Catechism: encountering a moral demand or claim *coincides* with the experience of moral agency, namely as the inability *not* to perceive the claim that others make on us. Morality entails the experience of the power to act, to take responsibility for one's actions, and/or to be held accountable for them. Reacting to the concept of modern autonomy that it regards as a *threat* to morality, the Church reduces it to the almost unlimited freedom of choice that is, moreover, fostered in secularized liberal democracies. In contrast to this distorted view of freedom, moral agents experience all four dimensions of freedom mentioned above. Kant's concept of autonomy is to a certain degree even compatible with the scholastic tradition of Thomas Aquinas whom the Church emphasizes as one of its most important guides regarding moral reasoning and virtues. The moral demand on Catholics to freely and obediently receive the moral imperatives from the Pope who speaks in the name of God, contradicts the very natural law of reason that Catholic ethics claims to adhere to.

As the moral-theological tradition teaches, moral judgments are situated in concrete histories and traditions. Understanding, too, is necessarily historical, contextual, and experiential. The names and images of God

found in the tradition must be examined, potentially critiqued, potentially contested, and reinterpreted, as Derrida argues in his works that I take to establish a critical hermeneutics.¹⁵ Ultimately, no name or image can capture God, nor should that even be the goal of theology. Instead, language is the human way of interpreting one's unique and existential freedom-in-relation, creating a web of belonging to forbearers in faith, one's chosen kin. These include the witnesses of the Son of Man whom God chose as his Son, and whom God chose to become akin to every human. Critical political ethics reminds theological ethics (if not all ethics) that empire imageries — of the sovereign leader within a nation, or the empire nation among all nations — stand opposed to the images of those who have been morally injured by practices and structures of exclusion, racism, poverty, oppression, and isolation. Attesting to God's special bonds with humans in history, Christian theology is reminded of the ongoing history of violence, domination, and exploitation of land and peoples: children, women, and men who are forced to succumb to those who enforce their violence as a political, if not theological right, without ever being blamed or held accountable. Learning from this history, critical political ethics is not only reflective and critical in view of moral practices. It is also *constructive* and *creative*. It seeks in the practices models of freedom that allow agents to break free from oppression, or conformity and complicity with institutional arrangement that constitute exploitation and oppression. In other words: it seeks models that show how engagement for liberation, solidarity, and justice is possible and effective.¹⁶ Critical political ethics contributes to change by listening to the experiences and by imagining new, effective practices, new structures of social action, and potentially new institutional governance structures that are liberating rather than cementing the existing asymmetries between individuals, groups, and nations, together with the people who are most affected by the current structural sins, against humans, animals, and the earth.

Critical political ethics, it seems to me, is needed more than ever today. As theological ethics, it provides sources for political-ethical reasoning that point beyond the reified world. Claiming that the political is always and necessarily personal (though not necessarily private), critical political ethics takes the vulnerable agent as its *starting point*, and the (morally) injured at the *normative centre* of its ethics. Critical political ethics is

not naïve, and looking at the history of Christianity, it acknowledges that justice requires struggles. These struggles require the learning of courage, perseverance, and motivation in the midst of futility, as Camus' ethics demonstrates so clearly. It requires the deliberate formation and internalization of political virtues, such as compassion (*Anteilnahme*) and solidarity, and the sensitization for injustice. As Christian ethics, critical political ethics has the experience and the means to foster these political virtues that enable individuals and groups to engage in concrete actions and practices. It seeks to contribute to the development a new habitus of response-ability, formed through the experiences of social, political actions, critically reflected upon in ethical scholarship. Like the theologians of the last third of the 20th century, i.e. political, liberation, feminist and mujerista and womanist, black, postcolonial, and decolonial theologies, took theology to the streets, critical political ethics is connected to the social movements, which it accompanies in critical solidarity. It is an ethics of and for the weekdays: the days of responses to moral injuries, suffering, and often death. Theologians and clergy often linger happily in the vicinity of political power. It must go out into the rubble of the streets, linger among the people whose dreams are being shattered again and again.

Like its kin, the theologians and clergy who have for decades acted in the midst of those on the dark side of the current world disorder, Western theologians and ethicists must not only act; they must themselves unlearn the language and habitus of coloniality, seeking their own response to the alienated, vision-less, individualized people who are also deprived of their own happiness by the global disorder. Like addicts to consumption, they stumble from promise to promise, and from crisis to crisis, often with no expectation that life can have a deeper meaning than consumption and conformity. Theologians and clergy in the West must attend to them to foster personal, social, and political transformation. Critical political ethics cannot discern one response but rather, it will generate *multiple* responses to the moral crises of our time. Furthermore, ethics cannot offer the answer to "the" meaning of human existence, because this is the task of freedom that every human being is endowed with. But Christian ethics can continue to tell the story of past human experiences and past interpretations of God which point to a future that is yet to come. These

stories do not mirror the passive, obedient recipients of God's word but the active witnesses of faith. Many witnesses of faith refused to choose between the love of God and the love of humans. Even the central symbol of female submission and obedience in Western Catholicism, Mary, invoked Hannah's song right after the Annunciation, remembering her trust in God who will throw the powerful from their throne, and for this she is loved by millions of Catholics who pray in her name (1 Sam 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-56).

In light of this biblical and theological tradition, the critique of domination and theo-political authoritarianism must include the Catholic Church. Like any institution, it is not exempt from human fallibility and the sin of self-love, love of power and domination. My approach is therefore critical in two ways: it is critical of any *political theory* that legitimizes power over others by invoking the name of God, and of any *theology* that justifies violence and injustice in the name of the sacred power of the Church or, in fact, any religion. Instead, critical political ethics is bound to remember the God who regards the pain of others as her own pain, creating a bond of care that enables humans to trust rather than fear God. This bond breaks the chains, liberating humans to explore their finite, fragile, yet creative freedom together with others. Indeed, this bond does not force moral agents to dismiss their agency, nor violates it their freedom rights. Quite to the contrary, it is a bond that *empowers* humans to struggle with and for others, for liberation and justice.

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Notes

1. The following essay relies upon a more thorough development of my approach, spelled out in Hille Haker, *The Renewal of Catholic Social Ethics: Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2020 especially Chapter 10.
2. M. Horkheimer, *Critical theory: Selected essays*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.
3. M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of reason*, New York: Seabury Press, 1974.
4. T. Adorno/M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of enlightenment*, London: Verso Books, Max. 2016 (orig. 1944)
5. J. N. Shklar, *The faces of injustice*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.
6. Jacques Derrida has offered multiple works that concretize deconstruction, e.g. of forgiveness, of justice, or universalism more general; Foucault has offered major works on truth regimes, e.g. concerning sexuality, madness, punishment, of policing. Both “paths” are indispensable for any ethical or political analysis and must therefore be taken up by a Christian ethics. They certainly offer a methodology that is akin to Adorno’s “negative critique” that the ‘new political theology’ embraced. J. Derrida, “Uninterrupted Dialogue: Between two infinities, the poem,” *Research in Phenomenology* 34.3-19 (2004).
7. P. Ricoeur, *The just*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 29.
8. I have argued this at length in H. Haker, 2020.
9. In his foundational ethics, Alan Gewirth has argued that it is possible to combine the formality of Kant’s ethics with substantial claims. While I applaud this approach, it still raises many questions about the meaning of freedom and well-being. Cf. A. Gewirth, *Reason and morality*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
10. Cf. for instance, S. de Beauvoir, *The ethics of ambiguity*, New York: Citadel Press, 1962.
10. Cf. A. Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014; P. Ricoeur, *The course of recognition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
11. Cf. J. M. Bernstein, *Torture and dignity: an essay on moral injury*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. Cf. Also my interpretation of the concept of vulnerable agency in H. Haker, 2020, Chapter 5.
12. C. W. Mills, *The racial contract*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.
13. Cf. for an actual account of American Christian Groups that promote white, Christian supremacy: C. Hedge, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008.
14. Cf. for a critical analysis R. Bernstein, “Serious Play: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Jacques Derrida”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 1.2 (1987), 93-117. For Derrida’s hermeneutics cf. J. Derrida, “Uninterrupted Dialogue: Between two infinities, the poem”, *Research in Phenomenology* 34 (2004), 3-19.
15. Iris Marion Young has pointed to the collective, social responsibility for justice, especially when no individual can be blamed for acting immorality, yet as a collective, multiple individuals contribute to institutional injustice. Cf. I. M. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.