

Response to Nate Kerr, “The Political Worship of the Church, Or, The Politics of Praise”

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As much as it shocks me to say this, overall I am in complete agreement with Nate’s thesis that Christian worship is inherently political due to the recognition that praise is a relational term indicating the way in which God constitutes a historical people.

This seems right to me on three fronts:

- 1) The understanding of ontology, ethics, politics, and theology that is offered is not simply a negative rejection of the Kantianism that has sucked the air out of the room up to this point. The argument for rethinking worship and praise as political is itself a way of rethinking the political such that our Christology is always at the heart of our socio-historical engagements and not simply an add-on to the set of propositions that we claim to be true.
- 2) Kerr’s position is, nonetheless, marked by a critical role. And, importantly this critical role takes the shape as a positive theology of the Church. Kerr importantly challenges not only the, as he says, “totalitarian” politics of modern liberalism, but also the complacency and indifference that define the contemporary cultural captivity into which the Church has fallen.
- 3) The most promising, and theologically important, move is that Christian theory is never separate from Christian practice – namely, to stand before God is always to take up one’s relation to other people. Christology, is on this view, fundamentally about how to live and not just about how to believe (but, of course the latter is necessarily involved).

With this said, I have several questions that represent both troubling aspects of Kerr’s terminological deployment and conceptual categorization. However, I should say that these are not meant as refutations, but merely as an attempt to get clear about those parts of Kerr’s proposal that seem confused and in need of further clarification.

- 1) Regarding Kerr’s reading of Lacoste, I am at a loss for how to properly understand the distinction that Kerr makes between “our having coming up from the inside of the world to the edge of it” which he terms “immanence” and “God’s having reached into it and spoken from beyond” which, I am assuming, is an example of transcendence. The slippage here is that it seems to me that even if we grant the necessity of God’s rupturing the horizontality of worldhood and contest our ability to reach God from within the categories available to human cognition and scientific exploration, this does not immediately mean that we are able to relate to God’s speaking. That is, the call may come from God, but it must be received by us and such a reception is always only possible from within the very sphere of immanence that Kerr wants to challenge. My real question is whether Lacoste’s (or perhaps we should say Kerr’s) distinction between

immanence and transcendence doesn't simply privilege God's speaking to the neglect of wrestling with how it is that our relationship to, and recognition of, this speech is possible. I might suggest that a better way forward here is to contest the rigid distinction between immanence and transcendence and instead articulate how, for humans, both are always interpenetrating – i.e., the boundary between the two is simultaneously necessary and radically illusory.

- 2) Getting straight about the worry above is necessary in order to really understand what Kerr means when he defines praise as a “form of action of which it can be said that our being is so received (or better, constituted by God).” I am entirely sympathetic to this understanding of praise, but without clarification of how such a constitution by God can be received by us as a “form of action” I am a bit hesitant to sign off entirely.
- 3) Kerr claims that post-Kantian politics “authorizes the *possession*, the *taking hold of*, the *control* of certain spaces and times, geographies and histories, for the sake of securing that future that is (manifestly) the right and property of us all. This is, of course, the politics of totalitarianism.” Again, I am only too ready to get on board with the idea that the Kantian metaphysics that underlie liberalism are essentially totalitarian. However, for me, this claim is an expression of the way in which Kantian subjectivity is always defined by a concern for self rather than a concern for the other. I am a bit confused how it is that simply saying the act of possessing, or taking hold of, or controlling, our world in order to secure a more promising future is itself totalitarian. The point here is that Kerr readily admits that this future is a “manifestly the right and property of us all.” If this is indeed true, then it seems that this framework is not totalitarian at all, but fundamentally both egalitarian and ethically directed in that we are engaged in the act of possessing in order to make tomorrow better than today for not my family, or my community, or my race, or my nation, but instead for all of humanity. Again, I am not challenging the idea of a dangerous egoism at the heart of liberal polity, but I am contesting Kerr's explanation of where it is located.
- 4) Similar to the slippage I am trying to expose in the above question, I also am a bit troubled by the ease with which Kerr abandons the notion of Christ as a moral “regulative ideal” in favor of Christ as “a concrete, historical human being . . . who happens to be worshipped as God not as a culturally celebrated and intellectually contemplated ‘ontological mystery,’ as a cipher for a mysterious transaction between divinity and humanity, but as one who is only ever seen as God precisely in the kenotic historicity of the life and death and rising of Jesus of Nazareth.” Two problems arise here: first, how are we to relate to this concrete, historical human being as an example for Christian moral life without some sort of conception of Christ as a regulative ideal? Aren't we supposed to live *Imitatio Christi*? Is this even possible without some move from the historical actualities of Christ's earthly life to the ethical import that the recognition of the God-in-time ultimately provides? Surely we could not do this by ignoring, or even downplaying the historical reality. If anything, it is the concrete historicity of the Christian God that actually provides for a real conception of a regulative ideal and not simply some sort of speculative abstraction.

- 5) Moreover, Kerr's rethinking of Christianity as not primarily providing an ontology just seems to be too narrow a conception of how we actually confront a Christian ontology. The mention of Bonhoeffer is perfect for Kerr's argument, but it also exposes the way in which Bonhoeffer understood ontology as an expression of existence *coram Deo* and then the way in which this is never separable from existence *for-the-Other*. It seems that a more correct way of expressing his position is for Kerr to say that Christianity does not give us an ontology of sufficiency – i.e., as found in modern philosophy.
- 6) The previous question anticipates this one. If Kerr really does support the way in which Bonhoeffer unites Christian theology with political responsibility, then I am unable to understand the claim that “the church is called to celebrate and to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, not to *produce* it.” Again, there seems to be some equivocation going on here. If all he means is that the eschaton is not a human product, but a divine interruption then fine. But, to focus too solidly on the celebration and not the task at hand is to actually cover over the responsibility to the neighbor that is the very content of the relation to God. I wonder if Levinas might not be helpful here when he says, “in order to be worthy of the Messiah, we must live as if the Messiah were not coming.”
- 7) A quick point of clarification: how is apocalyptic historicity not simply a revised version of universal teleology? I am inclined to agree that they are not the same, but as it stands now, the paper is remarkably underwhelming as to how this would be the case.
- 8) Regarding Kerr's rejection of the criterion of political efficacy: perhaps Kerr is just overstating the case here. If the Church's “political vocation is . . . to continue to forgive debts . . . to continue to refuse to participate in forms of warfare to secure peace . . . and to continue to bring its infants and its mentally handicapped to the baptistery,” then how are we to understand the decisively political impact of the Christian framework except that it actually does change the world because it contests its mode of operation. This may not be to reduce Christianity to pragmatism, but isn't this a claim to efficacy nonetheless?
- 9) Finally, even if we do challenge the Church as being tied to a “privileged place in history,” and redefine it as a “broken body,” how are we to politically resist the slide back into a victimized privilege. That is, can't the Church all too quickly become just as problematically elitist in the way in which it holds its own claim to dispossession? In other words, claiming that I am infinitely responsible to care for the other as a way of contesting ethical egoism, actually comes dangerously close to being an inverted egoistic expression of one's own ability.