



Interview With Vincent Lloyd

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INTERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In this interview with Dr. Vincent Lloyd, Professor of Theology and Religious Studies and Director of the Center for Political Theology at Villanova University, SPECTRA editors continue their series of conversations with key scholars working on interdisciplinary problems. Lloyd's work lies at the intersection of Political Theology and Black Studies; these perspectives inform a coherent strand of thinking that is consistently concerned with questions of justice, race, and faith. While beginning to think about the intersection of Political Theology and Black Studies, the conversation picks up on Lloyd's 2022 monograph, *Black Dignity: The Struggle Against Domination*, which centers dignity in the struggle for justice in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement through a rethinking of Black-led social justice movements and through engagement with major themes of Black love, Black rage, and Black magic. Ultimately, Lloyd re-announces the dialectics of Black dignity as the beating heart of the struggle for dignity for all, describes his motivations for pursuing this work, and contextualizes the book alongside his prior research. We then discuss recent pedagogical tensions, the state of Black Studies, and the promise of interdisciplinarity exhibited in the Political Theology Network.

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Hannah Gignoux: Why don't we start with introductions? Vincent, could you introduce yourself?

Luther McPherson: And maybe list some of the titles you hold.

Vincent Lloyd: Oh, sure. I'm Vincent Lloyd. I am a Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova, where I'm affiliated with the Africana Studies program. I also direct the Center for Political Theology at Villanova, which is an interdisciplinary research hub in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

HG: Got it, thank you! Okay, so to start out, for those who aren't familiar with your work, could you explain how you think about the intersection of Political Theology and Black Studies? A little bit?

VL: Sure, thanks for the question. And these are two topics that both have multiple ways of approaching them and multiple conversations around them. I think Political Theology is a particularly confusing name because some people think of it as just a theology – that is, Christian theologians, who are Christians speaking to Christians who are talking about politics. Other people focus on Carl Schmitt, who wrote a book called *Political Theology*, a German legal theorist of the early and mid-20th century. But in the last few years, maybe even the last couple of decades, conversations about Political Theology have become quite expansive across the humanities, drawing on critical theory, drawing on strains of continental philosophy, as well as the study of religion, as well as more traditional theological discussions, not only in Christianity but across religious traditions. So, it's been exciting to see Political Theology move in these directions. In the last few years, there has been more interest in thinking about Political Theology along with Feminist and Queer Theory, along with the Marxist and Anarchist Theory, along with Decolonial Theory, and, as your question is prompting, along with Black Studies. So that now approaching from the other direction of Black Studies, Black Studies itself is something that means a lot of different things to a lot of different people. There's this abstract idea of Black Studies, which has particular intellectual and political commitments built into it. There's also the institutional Black Studies in departments and programs at colleges and universities around the around the US and beyond. And these two things, as you can imagine, are sometimes at odds with each other: the pressures of institutions and the logics of institutions push Black Studies Department as they're formalized in particular directions and having an abstract idea that is detached from the concrete and practical world also can float off in certain directions. So, I think the challenge and excitement of Black Studies is of navigating in between sort of practical, what kind of classes are you going to offer? What kind of books? What forms a canon? You know, how are you going to engage with community [and] students [and] create structures of accountability while also preserving these ideals that Black Studies is something different from what's happening in other parts of the academy? Black Studies is something that is challenging the logics of the academy itself and putting pressure on other disciplines to transform even as it's doing its own work that is hard to capture in conceptual terms. So described in that way, Black Studies is obviously resonating with the religious right; it has these ideals, it has to deal with the practical, it's pushing away from the powers that be. So, I've been thinking about these resonances between Political Theology and Black Studies in those ways, right? In terms of their ideals in terms of the conversations that grow around them in ways that are trying to be attentive to both the practical realities and the aspirations that are inherent to these concepts.

HG: That's great! How did you come to be interested in Political Theology? And what led up to the creation of the Political Theology network and the creation of the Center for Political Theology at Villanova? And also, what challenges or unexpected positives have come from your involvement in these communities?

VL: Thanks. Yeah. Lots of questions there. So, when I was an undergraduate student, I spent a lot of time involved in labor organizing on my campus, and it was really exciting to see all the ways that religious communities and religious ideas were catalyzing some of that labor organizing work both concretely in terms of building connections between community members, workers, and students and faculty, but also in terms of giving us a framework and vision for, you know, why our university ought to be offering a living wage, for example, for workers. So that reoriented me from wanting to study math to wanting to think about religion, politics, philosophy, and how they all sort of mingle together. And from there, it was sort of deepening in various ways, those interests on the multiple fronts: study of religion and the

particularities of religious traditions, Christian traditions, and black Christian traditions, and then also critical theory and continental philosophy and the resources that grow out of that tradition for seeing how the world is distorted and how we might reorient ourselves toward the world. So that was the...maybe we can do the next part of the question.

HG: Oh, yeah. What challenges or unexpected positives have come from your involvement with these communities?

VL: So, the Political Theology network grew out of the desire...well... There has been a journal called Political Theology for a long time, 25 years now. [The journal] grew out of the narrower sense of Political Theology, Christian theologians interested in politics, sort of creating a space for intellectual reflection. It became more international, more interdisciplinary, cutting across religious traditions, and more theoretically oriented over the years as I and others became involved with it. And we realized that those sorts of conversations happening in the journal were really exciting and weren't happening in person, and were not happening at the American Academy of Religion, but also not happening at APSA or the Political Science conference, also not happening in APA, also not happening in American Studies, each for different reasons where there's the particularities of those disciplinary formations that prevented or blocked them from embracing conversations in Political Theology. So, we thought it would be helpful if we sort of built out the infrastructure that started with the journal started with a set of blogs around the journal and then grew into a professional association that could be membership-based, it could have a regular conference, have a series of programming for graduate students, underrepresented scholars, scholars with particular interests around Political Theology. So that's been really exciting to see grow and then become a full-fledged, independent, membership-based organization over the last couple of years. That was incubated at Villanova Center for Political Theology. Yeah, in terms of challenges and strength, I think there's a sense in which Political Theology has certain similarities to other trendy things in the humanities, like affect theory or animal studies. But there's also a sense in which it's different in that it's deeply rooted in conversations in religious traditions that have been going on for millennia. And figuring out how to articulate and build community around something that has these two different lives, sort of trendiness in particular corners of the academy and kind of the opposite, right? This is something that's been going on for so long and has very staid sort of patterns and habits of discussion. And now I think a challenge [is] to create a space where the best of those two worlds come together. And the worst of them are kept at bay.

HG: The worst of them being, what? Just to elaborate a little bit more on that...

VL: Oh, yeah, I mean, I think things like affect theory and animal studies and so on are useful in noticing things that had been overlooked, right, in corners of the academy. But they're also useful for a moment; they're sort of corrective, and then they get incorporated into the bloodstream of the academy and set aside after a decade of trendiness or something like that, right? Whereas it seems like there ought to be ongoing, permanent conversations about Political Theology. Because, well, a religious tradition ought to be thinking about the way that they're connected with the political world. And across the humanities, we're dealing with categories with practices with feelings that have connections with religion that are often just below the surface. So, I think figuring out how to institutionalize the insights that come out of come out of that. Does that make sense?

HG: Yeah, that definitely helps. I think I'm hearing it almost as, "these other forms of critique or theory are coming out of and pointing out absences, whereas Political Theology is kind of working with presences or like working with a continual thing that is not just necessary for this one moment.

VL: Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, I think that in animal studies and affect theory, people would probably object to that, among others, saying that they're interested in your presence that has been overlooked, right? And on the other side, that some Political Theology people say what Political Theology is about is a kind of critique or kind of negativity, or negative theology as the core of Political Theology, which has always been there but also has been overlooked.

HG: That was great, thank you. I'll turn it over to Luther.

LM: So now I want to ask you a series of long, convoluted questions about your most recent book, *Black Dignity*, from 2022.

VL: And thanks for reading that very carefully. The questions look like you spent a lot of time thinking carefully about it!

LM: Oh, I'm actually really interested in it and am glad to engage with you on it. So, my first mammoth question is: Firstly, I noticed that there is a subtle theme of movement throughout the book. And I don't mean simply a conversation about social or political movements, which is overtly present throughout, of course. Rather, particularly as you think about the different features of perspectives within Black Studies, you seem to characterize multiculturalism as stagnant. Afropessimism has a theme of separation, perhaps, and fugitivity adopts a characteristic of flight or withdrawal, as in the tradition of marronage. In thinking about the book's primary contribution, you offer dignity as an alternative frame. But I wonder how you think about the movement of dignity in this way. How is it meant to carry us?

VL: Thanks. Yeah, I think that language of movement is a really helpful framework for thinking about the issues in the book and thinking about questions of Political Theology more generally. And I think intellectual questions we can often think about in spatial terms rather than in terms of mapping out intellectual terrain around a particular question and make a concept map on the board and have arrows. But the flow – what is the kind of the shape of the flow of things around a conversation or exploring other metaphors seems really useful. In this case, yeah, I think there's a worry that, to put it sort of crudely, I think the thing I'm invested in is dialectics or something like dialectics in the book. Which is inherently about movement, right? It's about movement – [and it's] always sort of parasitic on a context, right? That it's growing out of a context or pushing and seeing where there are contradictions – with working those contradictions, opening up new possibilities, and then repeating. And not coming to an end but always sort of attending, challenging, transforming, and so on. This strikes me as a different posture than one that is invested in finding a structure that always exists throughout time. I think some readings of Afropessimism go in that direction. Or trying to evade every structure, some readings of black fugitivity go in that direction and as a sort of anarchist theory that is becoming increasingly popular in the humanities. So yeah, I think the kind of old-fashioned instinct that is the ideal posture for engaging with social and political questions is one that is dialectical.

LM: Fair enough! So, because you're here visiting Virginia Tech for the ASPECT conference, and hence we get to have this interview with you, I wanted to kind of tie it back into that a little bit but still stay with the book. And so, the theme of this year's conference is Reimagining Relationality. I wonder if you could talk a bit on how you think about relationality. In the book, you point to at least a few different forms or tactics to perhaps reimagine relationality: brotherhood, spiritual bricolage, zones of contact. One not mentioned could be something like Glissant's right to opacity, perhaps. Yet, you also seem suspicious of a relational turn in cultural studies on the grounds of the possibility for monumentalism, nostalgia for imagined pasts drawing from Nietzsche, and a kind of multiculturalist anti-normativity. So, how do you see dignity relating to relationality?

VL: Thanks; yeah, you alluded to so many important strands there. I'm teaching Glissant's work on opacity next week or the week after. And, yeah, it's always exciting to revisit that and to see the vibrancy of conversations around relationality that have developed, especially in the last few years, that are now responding to a sense that... Again, I think it's about our founding metaphors and intellectual projects, right? Are we thinking of spatial terms that can be mapped out, distinguished, and separated? Or are we thinking about starting with points of connection and then working to what seems like fixed identities and categories out of those connections and those flows? So, in that sense, I turned to relationality: that change is the priority of our attention, and analysis seems entirely right. But also, thinking dialectically about these ideas that become popular in the academy, one always has to worry about the ways in which any framework itself becomes sort of static or fixed. And anything [or] any concept becomes foundational, even when that foundation names itself as anti-foundation. There's a particular move that we thought maybe there's something postmodern about it, but it also seems like it's an eternal challenge, and one particular to the academy. So, I think that's one of my worries about relationality. And I'm worried about some of the recent Judith Butler work on relationality, for example, which in many ways is very appealing in terms of destabilizing accounts of the subject and the state by focusing instead on connections and flows. And yet,

we don't want to take that as a firm foundation, right? Or we ought not to take that as a firm foundation on which other things can be routed. Theologians, proper theologians, have the same challenge when they're trying to talk about God, right? If every concept for God goes wrong because God exceeds concepts as is the essence of God, then, you know, all of the provisional things that we try out on God are going to go mess up and confuse us. And yet, they're still essential because we theologians have to say something about God or encourage people to see things about God. So there has to be that kind of movement back and forth. In terms of dignity and relationality, yeah, among the aspects of dignity that I try and highlight in this book, I think [there may] be parallel aspects of natural law, [which] I highlighted in an earlier book on natural law and African American traditions. These are both concepts that have a particular life in legal theory and European political theory. And in those contexts, they're very individual, right? And accessible by the individual. You go into your library cubicle, and you think really hard, and then you come to conclusions of natural law, or your judge's chambers or whatever. Or you learn things about the dignity of the human. And in both cases, I want to say "No!" These are the things that are discerned collectively, that emerge as communities are responding to challenges in the world as domination is shaping our world, and as communities are realizing the domination is misshaping them. So that in a sense, there was an anti-relational account of natural dignity. And I want to challenge that while not fetishizing relationality. All which is just to affirm your question; I think you put it better than I.

LM: Thank you for that! Well, and there seems to be a really important focus throughout the book on collective dignity, as kind of a side question, do you see your book on natural law as sort of the natural preface to this book on black dignity? Or how do you see the relationality between your more recent work in that way?

VL: Yes, yeah. I mean, I think I'm usually motivated to work on new projects because of dissatisfaction with old projects. That natural law book told a very sad story: "Once there was this robust tradition, that was at the core of African Americans political thought, that involved its particular way of discerning natural law, which is actually a more useful way of thinking about natural law than the European tradition. And then it declined!" And we only have these fragments remaining. It declined – by the mid-60s. And when Martin Luther King first talked about natural law, it was a powerful language. But by the end of his life, when he talked about natural law, people tuned out; it was no longer catching. And from the 70s, 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, we see various fragments of this discourse that are picked up by conservatives picked up by liberals but no longer part of the coherent tradition. And there's a kind of sad state of black politics. That was the kind of story. And then Black Lives Matter happened, right? And then there was a huge mobilization in the US – the largest since the Civil Rights Movement – around racial justice. And so, it seemed like I got something wrong, right? It can't just be natural law that is motivating Black Justice organizing; there have to be other frameworks. And I didn't want to buy the story that Black Lives Matter was a secular movement instead of a movement that had connections with religion, although religion articulates differently in the 2010s than it did in the 1960s. It's still there; it's still very present; it still swirls around Black Justice organizing. And looking at the first few pages, the first sentence of the platform of the movement for Black Lives Matter, we see an affirmation of black dignity. So I wanted to think about: what is that? Why is that there? You know, might that be an opening to think about religious and political language, again, coming together in the Black Lives Matter movement?

LM: Awesome. Well, and I'm hearing too that the driving thing, perhaps, was sure, the dissatisfaction with the natural law book, but also this desire to articulate a kind of positive project out of the social movements that we all live through and experience together. And so perhaps on a related question, in your work, you seem to be kind of openly averse to overplaying the role of intellectuals in political movements and preferring more of a groundswell guided by rage, love to take some of your chapter titles from the book, and the expertise of lived experience with domination, rather than an intellectual vanguard, for lack of a better way of putting it. So, I wonder what you think about the university as a site of radical potential? Could it be perhaps a zone of contact following your discussion of Samuel Delaney? Or do you see the class and racial implications of admission and hiring as concrete limitations to creating a kind of Commons, and thus, as you allude to, the academic is simply destined to wither in revolutionary obsolescence?

VL: Thanks. Yeah! Again, you're putting that very well and outlining two contrasting options, which are both correct, right? Both are huge limits to what the university can do as a seed of politics and as a site of doing intellectual work that is politically engaged. It's also a huge opportunity, right? Young people who are in their late teens and early 20s are primed to question the wisdom of the road, are looking for new ways of imagining a future, are open to encountering people different from themselves, and, you know, building relationships and being transformed by those encounters. So, I think it's a challenge to navigate, again, the sort of pressures that are pulling us downward toward pinning us to the world or pinning us to the ways of the world and those that are lifting us upward and opening up new possibilities. And both of these pressures have operated at the university. So, I think I worry both about idealizing the university and about – to restate your question – about excessively denigrating it. That all being said, it seems important to think about in each aspect of university life: what kind of critical engagement leads us toward justice and toward the world as we would want it to look like? What does it look like in terms of structuring a classroom? In terms of structuring a syllabus? In terms of structuring tenure and promotion? In terms of structuring comprehensive exams for doctoral programs, right? Each of these are all sorts of pressures toward conformity and toward the uncritical that shape these different moments in university life, and pressures that try and make us uncreative as we're approaching them. And so I think cultivating a spirit of creativity and experiment, as we're thinking about university life, is really important.

LM: Fantastic. Well, and I think a natural follow-up question to this kind of conversation about the university is to go back to Black Studies. And so, I want to ask, what is the role or potential of Black Studies in the university for you? And you address this somewhat already, but particularly in the light of someone like Fred Moten's notion of Black Studies as a dehiscence in relation to the university; how can Black Studies and Black Studies scholars pursue or support a path toward dignity?

VL: Yes, yeah. So, I think the early days of Black Studies [in] the late 60s and early 70s are really important to keep front and center as we're thinking about Black Studies as an institution and as an ideal today. And so [in] those early days, Black Studies, unlike other disciplines, was created because of students, because of student demands. Black Studies was created with the intention that it be a space in the university that's accountable, not just to the university, but accountable to black communities, including staff, workers in universities, but also local community members, and people who were neighbors of the university and so on. And Black Studies was created with an aspiration that wasn't just about the empirical. It wasn't just about the recording the facts of African American life and history but was about something critical and political, about noticing the way that racial domination works in our world in lots of different aspects of our world and noticing the way that communities have responded and attempted to transform the road in the context of domination. It's a project that isn't just about blackness and isn't just about African American stuff, but is something that actually universities all over should be thinking about, right? Domination is that human problem; it's not just a black problem. It may be *the* human problem to think about domination, to which other problems are subordinate. So, you know, I think those values of early Black Studies are really important to return to and meditate on as we're figuring out how to respond to shifting landscapes in the present. And yeah, I mean, I think among those things, to say a little bit more about that, one is that instinct to look beyond the university proper, beyond accountability to deans and presidents and provosts, but accountability to community members. And I think too often in university life, our whole lives, both intellectually and personally, get consumed by the university, by people around the university. And that seems really, really unhealthy to me. And there are all sorts of pathologies that grow when one's whole life is consumed by a university and pushing back at that, whether one is a graduate student, or undergraduate, a faculty member, administrators, or staff. And it seems really important and having deep relationships and points of connection with people who have no idea what's going on at the university seems like it leads to the very best work at the university.

HG: Great, thank you! So, speaking of pathologies, I think this next question is going to get into it a little bit. And it's a little bit long. And I have some more things that I might want to discuss, too, if we ended up having space. But so similar to the role of Black Studies in the university, I recently reread your piece in *Compact* magazine about your teaching experience at the Telluride summer program. I wanted to see if you could elaborate a little more on this

experience. And you talk about this, like kind of anti-democratic turn within certain forms of anti-racism or anti-racist rhetoric. And the title in the beginning of the piece kind of discusses this as emerging from the left, although that framework, I think, falls to the side a little bit as the piece goes more and more in-depth. And it seems like actually what's being discussed as a kind of authoritarianism or narrowness. And so, how do you understand your experience at this program as connected to leftist politics? So that's the first part, and then I have some more, but just to break it up.

VL: Yeah. Yeah, thanks for addressing that. Right. So, it strikes me that the one general problem in US political culture is that left and liberal are used interchangeably. And I think this leads to a lot of disorientation among people who have good political instincts and then end up sort of aligned with bad political projects. And this articulates in particular ways around anti-racism, where, of course, no one's against anti-racism; everyone supports anti-racism, right? It's a question of how do we end racist practices around us. And related to that, as you know, how deep do those racist practices go? And how interconnected are they with systems of capitalism and patriarchy and so on? How much can we sort of isolate anti-black racism from those other systems? I think we are at a kind of a troubling moment where anti-racism growing out of black justice movements had a lot of transformative potential and had the potential to be a sort of left project. And for various contingent reasons – and some of them not contingent, some of them about the way that, you know, elites capture radical discourse – that particular phrase anti-racism, rather than the stuff behind it, became a liberal project. One embraced by corporations and government, some government entities, and some educational institutions. And yet, [anti-racism] had some intellectual incoherence because these radical aspirations and the liberal practice sit uncomfortably together. So, in this essay you're referring to reflecting on teaching in a very intensive summer program. I think we see some of the tension between leftist aspirations and liberal practice playing out, where the liberal instinct to deliver a set of prescriptions and practices that will solve a problem results in anti-racist workshops that give a set of dogma, which, instead of ways of talking and seeing that are delivered to very young students, these 16, 17-year-old students in a very intensive environment where they're away from their parents for often for the first time around each other, living in community, trying to figure out how to self-govern that community. And at the same time, the students are taking a seminar that's interrogating ideas of racism, as they're entangled with settler colonialism as they're entangled with patriarchy, as they're entangled with capitalism, which involves the dialectical work of trying out ideas, learning from each other's experiences examining the world in all its complexity. And these two patterns just don't sit comfortably together.

HG: Yeah, I thought about your initial comment about “we all agree on the content of anti-racism.” And to some extent, that's true and untrue, depending on what we believe [anti-racism] to be. But in that idea that we can get behind the content, it's really the form that's the problem, right? And so, reading the piece, you describe some of the principles of the Telluride workshop, so not the parts that you were involved in, but the parts that it sounds like your TA was instructing. And it sounds like a lot of the principles take on what I understood to be kind of an Afropessimist ethos, especially with the final principle that you list out, which is: “There's no way out of anti-blackness.” So, [there's] this finality, this seriousness. And so, I would love to hear you speak more on this phenomenon and also how it might relate to maybe lessons in form or tone. And you talk about – this is my implicit reading of the piece – you talk about the ways in which levity and joy and playfulness are just drained from the seminar space in favor of more severe and serious engagement, this idea that we have to in order to tackle serious problems, we have to have the serious tone, but the ways in which that severity might like constrict that movement that we were talking about earlier with Black Studies. So, this piece seems to be implicitly suggesting that there's a link between the absence of play and the absence of dialogue. So, I would love to know more about whether this reading resonates. And if so, how those dynamics relate to the role of the classroom and working through these difficult issues? And just to say; also, I have been in classrooms that have had that levity and joy and playfulness. And I have been in those spaces where some students will say, I'm not comfortable with this kind of tone, right? Because this is something that really affects me. And so how to navigate those uncomfortabilities and those feelings of harm that you talked about really well in the piece, without making that the center of the space.

VL: Thanks. Yeah, no, that's a great set of questions and a great reading of that essay; it brings out things that were there that I hadn't even thought about. I'd say, yeah, I really enjoy that reflection on play in exchange and dialogue. So maybe I'll say a couple of things, and I may lose some of the aspects of your question. One, I think that there is a demonizing of Afro-pessimism as an intellectual problem, which I, you know, I don't think it's the texts of Afro-pessimism or advocates of Afro-pessimism themselves that are usually the problem; I think there can be a sort of culture or ambiance around Afro-pessimism that can exaggerate and turn into dogma, certain ideas that, you know, as they were originally performed, are quite open-ended, in a sense, playful. Frank Wilderson's, that sort of founding texts of Afro-pessimism are memoirs, right, that are thinking about the complexities of life, even as they're reflecting on theoretical frameworks that can help understand the complexities of that life. And they're also aesthetic interventions, right? They're interventions that are, you know, not in the mode of systematic thought but in the mode of writing as an art form. And it's important to remember, and [is] often forgotten, that to engage with the really powerful insights that are coming from Afro-pessimism is to engage with works of art, rather than to engage with systematic thought. It also seems like they're, you know, in that aesthetic register, there's a role for hyperbole, right?

HG: Even in his more formal academic work, Wilderson has some very hyperbolic moments, too.

VL: Yeah. Yeah, I was thinking the other day [about] this children's book, "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," which, you know, isn't supposed to tell you not to get out of bed, right? But it's supposed to remind you that there are really horrible things that happened in the world, and we shouldn't look away from them, but they form us, and we have to grapple with them. And that sort of "hyperbolic" or informing people in a hyperbolic register of horrible things that can happen can actually be a playful thing; it can be done in a spirit of play. It's essential, given the gravity of the issues involved in the classroom. I mean, I think I am reluctant to say too much about how to teach well because I think one of the things I have come to appreciate in recent years, at least among my colleagues, is that there are many, many ways to teach well, there's not just one sort of forum and I think, sometimes discourses around pedagogy sort of end of focusing on your set of prescriptions or here is a sort of model for what a good teacher looks like, when actually you can be a charismatic lecturer, which is fantastic, or you can be a very quiet sort of facilitator. And that's great. Lots of ways to teach well...

HG: ...although the piece does seem to be suggesting that there are ways to teach wrong.

VL: Yes, yeah. And I mean, I think that it's interesting to think about. In some [of my] earlier work on charisma, what does it mean to do charisma in a way that's democratic versus authoritarian? So, can the charismatic lecture actually be a really important, powerful, and justice-seeking mode of pedagogy? How do we cleave the bad version of that from the good version of that? Now, in this case, my instinct is always to read texts carefully and think about them together and share ideas and be anchored in the text, and come back to the text when things get either too grave or the opposite. Trying to figure out what the author is saying here. Drawing on early experience, drawing on our own knowledge, drawing on close reading, is a way to sort of cancel out some of the dynamics that can, you know, arise in the ways you're naming there when one floats away from carefully reading a text.

LM: So, back to political theology, it's not that we ever really left it. But a large takeaway for me that I think colors a lot of the scholarship just in my own experience with Political Theology I've read in this area, focuses on the state and or the individual, or the subject, if you like, and notes that well, both secularism and religion have been used for projects of domination, both have a dialectical role in the project of revolution or emancipation; however, we want to put it. The requisite aim for philosophy, as you say, is to identify the sites and sources of domination within society and think about how to thwart such projects. How do you think Political Theology as an interdisciplinary is related to this problem? And what does it have to say about domination that disciplinary scholarship should take seriously? And where do you see it going as an area of study? And maybe one last thing to add is who political theology is for?

VL: Yeah, lots of lots of things in there. Maybe you can start with one really concrete example. Around discourses of abolitionism. I think there's always a question of what we want to abolish, especially after we've moved from prisons and police to a more general sense that there's

bad stuff in the world that we want to get rid of. And within social movements, language can be quite loose, for good reason. But thinking in political theological terms, one might distinguish two potential objects for abolition: one, authority, and another, domination. And I think confusing these two causes real, concrete political problems. If your goal is to abolish all authority, it's very hard to live without authority, right? You go to the dentist; you're deferring to the dentist. You're thinking that a dentist probably has more knowledge about your teeth than you do, so you defer your judgment to the dentist's judgment, and [we do this] in all sorts of aspects of life, right? We're using authority as a sort of practical means. And if we use authority but say we're not using authority, it leads to all sorts of pathologies. There is the Jo Freeman article, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," [which] is beginning to circulate again because these dynamics around authority are reemerging or denied. Whereas domination does seem like the sort of thing that we want to get rid of all the time. And domination seems like the sort of thing that we can clarify in theological terms, right? If domination is about mastery, it is about lording oneself over another. It is about presenting oneself as a God in a way that is false. It's idolatrous, representing oneself as having the capacity to arbitrarily intervene in the life or road of another, just as God would. [And yet] a lot of religious traditions have things to say about why [and] what domination is, and how [and] why we ought to avoid it or struggle against it. So, this discourse of political theology, I find useful for making those sorts of distinctions in a sort of messy political landscape, drawing out aspects of the world that religious traditions have been meditating on for a long time but that are forgotten in the secular humanities at times. There were like eight other questions in there that maybe can remind me of a few more.

LM: Sure! So, how do you...or do you think of Political Theology as an interdisciplinary? First off, I guess that's an assumption that I make in saying that.

VL: Sure, yeah. So, I mean, right now, I think concretely, there are multiple conversations about Political Theology happening that have some relative coherence: one within Christian theology, one within sort of political/legal theory, one within continental philosophy, one within the sort of critical humanities/ social sciences, English, cultural studies, anthropology. So, each of those, I think, you know, has something like a Canon, something like a set of norms around their conversations. There's also this much more diffuse use of the term 'political theology' all over the humanities all over the critical social sciences, that is sometimes alluding to one or more of these relatively coherent conversations. I think some of the work that I've been trying to do, collaboratively and with the Political Theology Network, is to bring people invested in any of these conversations into the same room with each other so they can realize that their conversation was not the only one. And that they're actually really valuable things that are being discerned in each of these different sorts of sites. And the Political Theology space can be really rich if we all sort of appreciate the particularities of the conversation we're having, and how next to each other, with its sort of zone of contact, we can have an even better, even richer set of conversations about Political Theology. So, I guess that's what an interdisciplinary field is. But 'interdisciplinary' also, I think, doesn't fully capture the sense that there are multiple more or less coherent conversations under the bigger umbrella that are being pushed together.

LM: And so, you wouldn't see something like a degree program in Political Theology or anything like that coming down the road, necessarily? Is it an interdisciplinary search of discipline? Or is it a set of disciplines searching for interdisciplinarity?

VL: Yeah, so I think this goes back to the question about challenges in the field. Because there isn't a clear academic career path in Political Theology, it makes it challenging for graduate students and early career scholars who are interested in conversations happening around Political Theology, who are interested in Political Theology as its organizing framework for their own work, to fully embrace that, because it looks like it won't be rewarded, right? There's not a sort of path in the academy to follow there. Which may also be good, right? I mean, when these things become institutionalized, all sorts of pathologies arise, and creating spaces that are adjacent to the academy that have some flexibility that have more democratic values than one might find in purely [or] fully institutionalized spaces. Now, that seems like one solution that could be helpful for Political Theology. Should there be degree programs in Political Theology? I think it seems helpful to have an interdisciplinary humanities program; I come from an interdisciplinary humanities doctoral program at Berkeley Rhetoric, where there's this sort of steady stream of people who do Political Theology work who are coming from

there and Chicago Social Thought, similarly has a steady stream of people working around political theology who come through it. That strikes me as a relatively healthy arrangement to encourage hubs of interdisciplinary humanities scholarship with an investment in sort of having a critical edge. And among the projects that those programs support are those around Political Theology.

LM: Fantastic!

HG: I actually have one more question on domination because, you know, you mentioned this distinction between authority and domination, and authority is something that we need, but domination is something that we can kind of agree to get through [or] throw out. And yet, I think especially the realm of political theology, which probably has something to say about this...it's actually not necessarily the case that we [agree that domination has to go]. We might consciously say, "down with domination!" and yet we have may have these unconscious desires or commitments to domination or dominating structures. And this is not in [the] world [of Political Theology], but I'm thinking of Jessica Benjamin's book "Bonds of Love," where she talks about [how] one way to really mess up our critique of domination is to not interrogate the ways that we're actually invested in it – libidinally, unconsciously, or psychologically invested. And so, I guess I'm wondering, to what extent is Political Theology or the kinds of Black Studies work that you [engage with] do with this question? What do these fields have to say about our investment in these dominating practices, not just as a form of brainwashing or structural conditioning but as real parts of our desire?

VL: Yeah! It's a great question. And I don't think one has to go to Black Studies or contemporary Political Theology; Augustine is all about the internal struggle of domination and sort of grappling with a will to dominate while also grappling with the pool of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and seeing that is something that's unavoidable just a feature of life in the world, individually and collectively. So, yeah, in a sense, I agree. Right? Domination is everywhere. It's interlocking, and it's in ourselves, right? It's not just out in the world. I also think, and this is maybe responsive to one of your future questions, [but] one of the things I'll be talking about in the [Plenary] talk is to distinguish abuse and domination. I think these two things often get conflated in the ways that we're thinking about, and some of that scholarship, maybe even some of the Jessica Benjamin, and especially in the trauma discourse, [there's] a sense [that] abuse [has] a kind of entangling of wills and twisting of normativity. That strikes me as quite a different phenomenology than domination where there's an imposing of normativity. And of one will upon another where the two wills remain distinct.

HG: Great! And you're right; you anticipated some of the wrap-up questions, which is to give us a little bit of a sneak peek of your plenary talk tonight, which is titled: "State Violence, Divine Abuse" for this year's ASPECT conference. So, can you give us a little bit of a sneak peek about what that talk will be about?

VL: Sure, yeah! I'm thinking about this analogy between political sovereignty and divine sovereignty and thinking about the categories of domination and abuse. And [I'm] wondering, what happens when the way that we see divine sovereignty is more abusive, thinking about the book of Job, for example, as an example of divine abuse.

HG: It's a great example!

VL: Yes, and how does that affect how we think about parallels between that sort of state abusive power and sort of weaving this through the example of Jonestown, which has attracted a lot of attention in the religious studies literature as an example of a lot of things, new religious movement, also sort of eternal dynamics within the study of religion or within religious practice that religious studies ought to attend to, which I want to think of in terms of the framework of abuse and political theology.

HG: Great! Our last final question is, what's next for you? What sort of projects are you working on presently? And do you have any work or organizational intrigues, as Luther would say, that you would like to share?

VL: Sure. There's a big book on Political Theology that's coming out from Duke that I co-edited, coming out next year, thinking about Political Theology together with Black Studies, Decolonial Theory, Feminist Queer Theory and Contemporary Marxist thought. So that's been really exciting

to work on with 20 contributors. We have an interview with Talal Asad as an afterward, and all sorts of things going on there, which we're sending off the final manuscript in the next 24 hours or so, so that's been on my mind.

HG: Congratulations on that!

VL: Thanks. Eventually, there will be a book on abuse – I've been thinking about abuse for a long time but haven't quite figured out how I want to put it into the form of a book as of yet. And then yeah, the last thing that I'm just starting to work on is a biography of Harold Cruz, who's an early figure in the Black Studies road who came out of a Communist Party organizing tradition but then broke with the Communist Party while remaining a committed socialist and was a central figure in institutionalizing Black Studies in the US who's largely been forgotten.

HG: Oh, well, thank you so much for doing this interview with us.

LM: Yes, thank you!

VL: Yeah! Thank you. It was fun chatting.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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