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Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi, Fordham University Press, 2015, 248 pp., \$30.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780823267620.

In *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, Roberto Esposito aims to reconfigure the debate on political theology. In his view, this debate has been unproductive not simply because we lack a stable definition of “political theology” (and of its two sub-terms). More fundamentally, the debate has failed to grasp its object because the field of political theology is one in which all parties to the debate are themselves moving. Hence, in order “to grasp the overall meaning of political theology,” we need to extract ourselves from its field, “looking at it from the outside, expressing ourselves in a different language from its own. But this is exactly what its excessive proximity stops us from doing, by crushing us up against its interior walls” (1). Esposito claims to have found such an outside vantage point in Heidegger’s work on technology, where he develops the concept of “machination” to refer to such an all-encompassing system that defines its participants’ very identities. Once we recognize that political theology is such a system, we can see how central the concept of personhood is to its development—and to the development of a way out.

After establishing this initial Heideggerian framing device, Esposito’s argument proceeds through three basic steps. First, he lays out the twentieth century debate on political theology, along with some of its nineteenth century background. For Esposito, the most important participants in this debate are Carl Schmitt, Erik Peterson, Jacob Taubes, and Jan Assmann, though Hegel, Weber, and Ernst Kantorowicz all come in for discussion as well. Much of this chapter consists of straightforward exposition of familiar themes from the debates surrounding political theology. For Esposito, all of these figures wind up stuck within the machine of political theology, with the exception of Assmann. This unique privilege stems from Assmann’s position as an Egyptologist, which renders him an “outsider” to the political theological discourse. While we get very little detail as to the specific merits of Egyptology, Assmann provides a platform for Esposito to provide a definition of political theology as “a unity consisting of a separation—a Two that tends toward the One by means of the exclusionary inclusion of the other pole” (72).

This logic of exclusionary inclusion provides the basis for Esposito’s most creative chapter on the concept of personhood. Starting from the mutual influence of Christian theology and Roman law, he shows how Western conceptions of personhood repeat the political theological gesture. Central to this discussion is the notion of property-ownership as the key defining trait of full personhood. In Roman law, a person is someone who owns property, above all property in other persons. This logic reaches its conclusion in the

concept of self-ownership, where an integral part of the individual—namely one’s own body—is treated as the property necessary to establish full personhood. Particularly surprising and illuminating in this context is Esposito’s discussion of contemporary utilitarianism, as exemplified by Peter Singer. Here above all, the concept of personhood serves to empower certain individuals through the necessary degradation of others.

This degradation hinges on the capacity for reason, which determines whether certain genetically human individuals count as a full person. This sets up Esposito’s final chapter, which traces a counter-tradition that separates personhood and thought. The key starting point here is Ibn Rushd (or Averroës to Esposito), whose *Long Commentary on the “De Anima” of Aristotle* posits a material intellect shared by all reasoning beings but possessed by none. For Esposito, the scandalous separation between personhood and thought marks a decisive break with the political theological machine, one that is followed up by Bruno, Spinoza, Schelling, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze.

Little of this discussion has prepared the reader for Esposito’s brief conclusion, which urges us to rethink concepts of debt as a concrete way of reconfiguring the political theological machine. Though Deleuze’s work on capitalism and the earlier sections on property-ownership inject an economic theme into the work, this call to action still seems like a non sequitur—what does debt have to do with impersonal thought? I share Esposito’s concern with the level of medical debt in the United States (207), but is debt really the most urgent problem created by the political theological machine?

Part of the difficulty in following Esposito’s reasoning here is that so much of his discussion is bogged down in exposition. This is most pronounced in the first chapter covering the twentieth century debate on political theology, but it continues throughout. While the expository material is clear and often insightful, it obscures the thread of Esposito’s own argument, which only emerges in brief snippets—sometimes in the middle of a paragraph, sometimes in parenthetical remarks.

This summary-heavy presentation is only a symptom of a larger problem: Esposito is absolutely stuck within the Western canon as traditionally construed. Though he purports to be giving us a way outside the political theological machine that for him defines virtually all of Western culture, everything about the way the argument is structured militates against this goal. The problem begins with his framing in terms of Heidegger’s critique of technology, which in Esposito’s rendering sounds like an over-simplified version of the Marxist critique of capitalism. For Esposito, Heidegger counts as “outside” the framework of political theology because he rejects the standard account of “secularization” and does not explicitly mention the term “political theology”—yet the former could be said of Carl Schmitt himself, and Esposito’s extremely capacious concept of political theology renders the latter claim dubious as evidence of escaping political theology.

The only reference points “outside” the conventional boundaries of the “West” are Assmann’s background in Egyptology and Ibn Rushd’s *Long Commentary*. And Ibn Rushd in particular is treated as virtually a European thinker. His relationship with Islam is granted only half a sentence, which refers to “the exile of the author—along with the public burning of his works—lasting until the year before his death, further confirmation of his substantial incompatibility with Islamic culture, which remained largely unimpressed with him” (142). These depredations are presented as minor compared to the controversy he caused in the West, however. And when it comes time to discuss Spinoza, his tortured relationship with Judaism and his family roots in the Islamic world do not merit any substantial discussion.

In short, Esposito may be seeking a way out of the political theological machine, but he is emphatically *not* seeking a way out of the narrow confines of the Western tradition as he

conceives it. In this regard, his work resembles that of another Italian thinker whose themes Esposito at times uncannily echoes: Giorgio Agamben. Both are deeply intra-Western in their selection of thinkers and themes, and both have a tendency to “recruit” non-Western thinkers into the West when they do engage with them. In Agamben’s case, however, the relationship with the non-West is not so one-sided. He often presents rabbinic and Islamic thinkers as critics of their Western counterparts, and his incorporation of Jewish thought into the “mainstream” of Western thought seems to be subversive in intent, so that Jewish concepts like messianism can unexpectedly become the standard for assessing Western authors such as Aristotle. By contrast, in Esposito’s narrative it appears that once the Western tradition gets a shot in the arm from “Averroës,” Western thinkers are perfectly capable of working out the consequences and even surpassing their source. The difference here is that between dialogue and appropriation.

Now there is certainly a place for internal critique of the conventional narrative of the Western tradition. Much of my own work could be so characterized. Yet an internal critique presupposes some acknowledgment of the existence of a possible outside to the object critiqued. In Esposito, such an acknowledgment is almost entirely absent. Thus, while his commentaries on individual thinkers are often helpful and while his emphasis on the theme of personhood in political theology is illuminating, Esposito ultimately fails to provide a convincing account of what it would look like to chart a path beyond the logic of political theology.

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