

Introduction

Democracy in Conflict

On January 6, 2021, a violent mob stormed the United States Capitol building. It aimed to disrupt a joint-congressional session formalizing Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 US presidential election and demand the overturning of those election results. Following on the heels of a "Save America" rally where thousands had gathered to hear the recently defeated incumbent Donald Trump announce, "We will never concede" the loss of that election, and call on his supporters to "demonstrate strength," "fight like hell," and march to the Capitol building,¹ men and women in Kevlar vests and military garb, draped in flags, pushed through metal barricades and Capitol police, breaking into the Capitol Rotunda, House and Senate chambers, and congressional offices. Rioters fought with security and police, broke windows and doors, trashed the premises, and vandalized and looted the building for several hours. Five people died during the events; 140 more were injured.² As the nation looked on, many were shocked at the eruption of post-election violence. Others were less surprised, arguing that this was the near-inevitable outcome of four years of lies, disinformation, conspiracy,

¹ Justin Vallejo, "Trump 'Save America Rally' Speech Transcript from 6 January: The Words That Got the President Impeached," *Independent*, January 13, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yyks8j2e>.

² Tom Jackman, "Police Union Says 140 Officers Injured in Capitol Riot," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/y5fz5scj>.

and demagoguery, a representation of the civil division and antagonism saturating American political life.³

Two weeks after the insurrection, in his inaugural address on the steps of the same Capitol that rioters had besieged, President Biden sought to address the conflicts riving the nation. His call was for oneness in the face of democracy's fragility, instability, and polarizations. "So now," he declared, "on this hallowed ground where just days ago violence sought to shake this Capitol's very foundation, we come together as one nation, under God, indivisible."⁴ American democracy was facing a precarious moment, he acknowledged: "To overcome these challenges – to restore the soul and to secure the future of America – requires more than words. It requires that most elusive of things in a democracy: Unity. Unity." Recurring throughout the speech some eight times, "unity" was proposed as a healing balm for national wounds inflicted by pandemic, economic crisis, and partisan strife. Biden even sought to imbue this appeal to unity with a theological valence. "Many centuries ago," he said, "Saint Augustine, a saint of my church, wrote that a people was a multitude defined by the common objects of their love." So American unity, Biden declared, must be grounded in those "common objects we love that define us as Americans," loves of "Opportunity. Security. Liberty. Dignity. Respect. Honor. And, yes, the truth."⁵ Michael Lamb, an Augustinian political theorist, applauded Biden's "Augustinian call for concord," especially his invitation to consider what kinds of "objects of love will bring us into harmony" as a nation,

³ David A. Graham, "Trump's Coup Attempt Didn't Start on January 6," *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/4f96djse>.

⁴ President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Inaugural Address," *The White House*, January 21, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/45fanfhd>. All further quotes are taken from this transcript.

⁵ I return to this Augustinian insight in Chapter 5.

securing “unity amid plurality.”⁶ For Augustine, Lamb suggested, the achievement of “concord” or “harmony” amidst difference was among the central goals of politics. Those concerned with the present state of American democracy and the promises and perils of democratic pluralism, he urged, would do well to consider religious thinkers like Augustine. We learn from Augustine, Lamb argued, that politics “should not seek a totalizing uniformity that dominates those who are different, but a humble harmony that gives justice to all, welcomes others into community, and forges unity in plurality.”⁷ Fostering a peaceful and harmonious unity amidst difference, Lamb suggested, is the key challenge for politics today, as it was in Augustine’s time.

Biden’s appeal to Augustinian love amidst the backdrop of social conflict and Lamb’s further allusions to harmony, community, and unity-in-plurality each echo a central problematic of contemporary political theology and political theory more generally: how to construe the relationship between *community* and *difference*. How should political communities think about the complex patterns of unity and diversity, agreement and disagreement, sharing and separateness that compose democratic society? How should they respond to conflicts amidst difference within the political community? Do events like those of January 6, which surfaced deep divisions brewing in the American citizenry for years, pose a challenge to democracy’s capacity to deal with difference, even threaten a liberal consensus regarding the possibilities of democratic pluralism? What role does and should religion play, if any, in democratic politics? These questions touch upon some of the central paradoxes of political theory and

⁶ Michael Lamb, “Biden’s Augustinian Call for Concord,” *Breaking Ground*, January 27, 2021, breakingground.us/bidens-augustinian-call-for-concord.

⁷ Lamb, “Biden’s Augustinian Call for Concord.”

political theology. But Biden's address also raises important questions for ordinary democratic citizens, especially persons of faith: Should harmony or concord be a goal of politics? Will our pursuit of "common objects of love" result in social unity? Should we desire unity at all?

Especially since the beginning of the 2016 US presidential campaign, the subject of civic unity and political polarization has become a staple fixation of the political commentariat. "Polarization is killing our country," concluded one analyst after summarizing numerous studies and surveys conducted in the years following 2016. "Hyper-partisanship is poisoning our politics, making our democracy seem increasingly dysfunctional. A fixation on our differences is fracturing us into warring tribes ... This is not the American way. It is the opposite of the secret of our success, summed up by our national motto, *e pluribus unum* – 'out of many, one'."⁸ The Pew Research Center has consistently charted the intensification of partisan political identity in recent years and its resulting hostility toward perceived political opponents.⁹ In one sense, recent journalistic obsession with political polarization and related issues of adversarial political rhetoric, "fake news" disinformation, die-hard party loyalty, and social fragmentation has been a response to genuinely new developments in American political life. Increasing moral, cultural, and religious diversity, the rise of a massive cable news industry, and the dominance of social media networks all pose genuinely novel challenges for a democracy whose institutions and norms were developed by framers who could

⁸ John Avlon, "Polarization Is Poisoning America. Here's an Antidote," CNN, November 1, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/58hu5fcb>.

⁹ See, for instance, *Pew Research Center*, "In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions," December 17, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/in-a-politically-polarized-era-sharp-divides-in-both-partisan-coalitions/.

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have never anticipated them or their effects. In another sense, however, preoccupation with political polarization is hardly new. American political theorists, leaders, and commentators have almost always, but especially in the twentieth century, been concerned with the so-called problem of pluralism.¹⁰ How much difference can a society endure and still function as a democratic polity? Will too much difference plunge a society into irresolvable and acrimonious conflict?

Democracy in Conflict

This is a book about conflict – how it is basic to our humanity and how we nonetheless perpetually evade and avoid it. It is about how certain forms of conflict can undermine and destroy social relationships while others seem to contribute to their vitality, resiliency, and health. More specifically, this is a book about *democratic* conflict, the conflict that arises when people attempt to build a common political life amidst their differences, and how democratic communities can embrace, tend, and practice conflict in ways that lead to their flourishing.

Conflict amidst difference figures as a kind of specter haunting liberal political theory. In the introduction to his monumentally important book, *Political Liberalism*, for instance, John Rawls recalls memories of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century “wars of religion” as paradigmatic of the tragic conflicts from which political liberalism offers deliverance.¹¹

¹⁰ Most famously, James Madison wrote of “factions” and republican governance in Federalist 10. See James Madison, “No. 10,” in Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison (eds.), *The Federalist Papers* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), 42–49.

¹¹ For a comprehensive account of the way memory of the so-called wars of religion shaped the emergence and development of the liberal state, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

The wars, according to Rawls, represent a latent instability just beneath the surface of liberal societies, always threatening to reemerge, a “mortal conflict” between comprehensive doctrines with “transcendent elements not admitting of compromise.”¹² “Political liberalism,” he argues, “starts by taking to heart the absolute depth of that irreconcilable latent conflict.”¹³ For Rawls, as one writer puts it, the aim of liberal theory and politics is the achievement of a “stable, well-ordered, and peaceful society,” the conditions of which are the “preemption, containment, or resolution of conflict.”¹⁴ In short, liberalism affirms the goodness of pluralism and difference but fears the conflicts they may occasion. Like Biden and Lamb, Rawls sees conflict amidst difference as democracy’s great threat, that which liberal governance must stave off, preclude, and forestall in order for democratic pluralism to flourish. Political liberalism is thus framed as an antidote to democratic conflict.

Much of the discussion in contemporary democratic theory around pluralism evinces this same aversion to conflict. Consider two of its most prominent strands: the tradition of liberal theory emerging from Rawls and Habermasian deliberative democracy.¹⁵ In the former, democratic theory

¹² John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xxviii, quoted in Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 8. Coles insightfully demonstrates the profound extent to which Rawls’s liberalism is determined by an anxiety about conflict.

¹³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xxviii, quoted in Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, 8.

¹⁴ Jason A. Springs, *Healthy Conflict in Contemporary American Society: From Enemy to Adversary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 242.

¹⁵ I have in mind, with regard to the former, Rawls’s famous *Political Liberalism*, but also the work of Gerald Gaus, one of the most important inheritors of Rawls’s thought. See Gerald Gaus, *The Tyranny of the Ideal: Justice in a Diverse Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Gerald Gaus, *The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and

begins with the “fact of pluralism” – that is, the existence of “a plurality of reasonable but incompatible comprehensive doctrines” in a political society.¹⁶ That these doctrines are both *reasonable* (that is, internally coherent and consistent with deeply held moral, religious, or metaphysical commitments) and *incompatible* (unable to be reconciled by appeal to some shared moral, religious, or metaphysical basis) provokes a dilemma regarding political legitimacy. How can democratic constitutions, judgments, policies, laws, and so on be justified in the face of incommensurable difference? The task of liberal theory, for Rawls and his followers, is to develop a “political” theory of justice, as opposed to one grounded in any metaphysically based comprehensive doctrine, that is able to stand above disagreement and difference, securing legitimacy by establishing a form of “public reason” which determines the boundaries of legitimate political reasoning and justification amidst difference.¹⁷ Public reason, says Rawls, defines “what kinds of reasons” citizens “may reasonably give one another when fundamental political questions are at stake.”¹⁸ In other words, public

Gerald Gaus, *Justificatory Liberalism: An Essay on Epistemology and Political Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). The key texts of the latter approach are Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996); and Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xviii.

¹⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xv, distinguishes between “a moral doctrine of justice general in scope” and “a strictly political conception of justice,” grounded in a shared “overlapping consensus” between comprehensive doctrines.

¹⁸ John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64, no. 3 (1997): 766.

reason marks the rational and discursive space within which citizens can convert privately held reasons into a liberal currency that all participants can recognize as rational. By barring comprehensive doctrines from the realm of democratic reason-giving, Rawlsians believe they are able to preclude conflicts amidst difference in the sphere of political reasoning, thus achieving consensus and democratic legitimacy.

Jürgen Habermas and contemporary advocates of “deliberative democracy,” such as Seyla Benhabib, advocate a different version of public reason, but one similarly aimed at securing consensus amidst difference, and thus also legitimacy. Rather than elucidate the contours of a form of *reason* (secular, liberal, etc.), they attend to institutions, practices, and norms of *reasoning* wherein citizens deliberate across differences. By theorizing ideal discursive conditions of intersubjective reasoning and argumentation, Habermas proposes, one can discern principles for organizing deliberative procedures in a way that they will generate full consensus among members. Put differently, one can deduce pragmatic or “procedural” rules from the presuppositions of argumentation and communication, and thus establish normative principles for democratic deliberation.¹⁹ The key point here regarding conflict and difference, then, is that consensus is something achieved in democratic practice rather than something democracy presupposes. Nevertheless, the goal of deliberative democracy is the same as Rawlsian liberalism: the securing of democratic legitimacy by overcoming conflict and transcending difference.

The discourse of political theology, as Carl Schmitt famously proposed it in his seminal 1922 essay, *Politische*

¹⁹ Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 86–94; Seyla Benhabib, “The Utopian Dimension in Communicative Ethics,” *New German Critique* 35 (1985): 83–96.

Theologie, is likewise defined by the question of legitimacy.²⁰ Classically, political theology concerned the legitimation of sovereignty, and thus involved the use of religious ideas revolving around divine transcendence, authority, and power to authorize political rule. For theorists like Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, and others, political theology is a discourse regarding the justificatory practices around sovereign power, wherein sovereignty is best understood in terms of the “state of exception.”²¹ Because political theology was tied to the question of sovereignty in this way, it seemed to position democracy as a decidedly *anti*-political theological project. Indeed, this was exactly the argument of Erik Peterson, whose rejection of political theology was an attempt to save both Christianity and democracy from the corruption of sovereignty.²² In the second half of the twentieth century, however, as Miguel Vatter has argued, a number of theorists made efforts to uncouple political theology and sovereignty by pursuing a democratic form of political theology.²³ These thinkers remained committed to

²⁰ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

²¹ Key works in this regard are Schmitt, *Political Theology*; Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²² Erik Peterson, “Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire,” in *Theological Tractates*, ed. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 68–105.

²³ Miguel Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). Vatter argues that figures like Eric Voegelin, Jacques Maritain, Ernst Kantorowicz, and Jürgen Habermas all made self-conscious efforts to save political theology from Schmitt's dangerous sovranism.

the project of political theology, understood as a discourse of legitimation. As Vatter writes, “Ruling is legitimate as far as it meets with the approval and support of those subject to it. Legitimacy therefore depends at some basic level on the possibility of unifying a group of individuals into a people.”²⁴ However, their democratic political theology, what Vatter calls a “political theology without sovereignty,” diverged from previous political theological projects in its belief that this unifying of a people to confer legitimacy is not only compatible with democracy, but best expressed in democracy. “Christian political theology after Schmitt,” says Vatter, “displaces sovereignty by pivoting on the idea that legitimacy is a function of the political unity of a people achieved through its political *representation*, as befits its Christological doctrinal structure.”²⁵ Democratic political theology, according to Vatter, attends to the ways political unity is forged, and legitimacy thus conferred, through democratic conventions and institutions like constitutions, human rights, public reason, and liberal governance.

Given this importance of political unity and representation in configuring political legitimacy, it is unsurprising that a centrally important subject matter for political theology in the last half-century has been that of pluralism.²⁶ The political-theological problem of pluralism might be framed as such: How can legitimacy be conferred by a unified political body

²⁴ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 2. ²⁵ Vatter, *Divine Democracy*, 3.

²⁶ See, for instance, *From Political Theory to Political Theology: Religious Challenges and the Prospects of Democracy*, ed. Péter Losonczi and Aakash Singh (New York: Continuum, 2010); *Political Theology for a Plural Age*, ed. Michael Jon Kessler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Timothy P. Jackson, *Political Agape: Prophetic Christianity and Liberal Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015); Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Joseph Rivera, *Political Theology and Pluralism: Renewing Public Dialogue* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

when it is constituted by disagreement and deep difference? Or, put differently, how are unity and plurality related to one another? One strategy of configuring the relationship between unity and difference in recent Christian political theology has been to consider the relevance of Trinitarian theology to social and political theory. As I will discuss in Chapter 1, two influential schools of contemporary political theology, both inspired by the thought of Augustine, have seen in the Trinity a paradigm for thinking about pluralism and difference and a template for forms of communion and community amidst diversity. As one of these thinkers puts it, the Trinity is a “sociality of harmonious difference,” a communion wherein difference relates to difference in peace, without being reduced to substantial unity.²⁷ Democratic unity and difference, for these thinkers, is analogically related to divine sociality, its peaceful order participating in the communion of divine plurality. Configuring unity and difference in harmonic terms, these thinkers believe, political theology can challenge claims, like those of Schmitt, that democracy is incapable of the representation necessary to secure legitimacy. Democratic unity amidst diversity is achievable, they claim, without sacrificing the goods of pluralism or the integrity of difference.

Both liberal political theory and democratic political theory, then, are concerned with the possibilities for consensus, legitimacy, and commonness in the face of pluralism. Each proposes a set of strategies to achieve political unity while protecting difference. But what both liberal theory and democratic political theology obscure in so doing is the ineliminable and irreducible place of conflict in democratic politics. In recent years, however, a body of political theory

²⁷ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 5.

has emerged which attempts to center democratic thinking not on the goals of consensus and harmony, but on the virtues of democratic contestation and conflictual engagements amidst difference. Theorists of “agonistic pluralism” and “radical democracy,” like Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, Sheldon Wolin, and William Connolly, argue that the evasion of conflict is a serious error that undermines the vitality of democratic life. They instead celebrate contestation and adversarial struggle, showing how conflict can be productive for the ends of greater democratization, pluralization, and justice. As Mouffe puts it, “In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism.”²⁸ Seeing in certain forms of conflict (though not all) a productive and generative capacity to achieve greater democratization and inclusion, agonists argue that consensus-based theories of democracy, like those of Rawls and Habermas, foreclose pluralism’s radical possibilities in their aim to transcend, resolve, or preempt conflict. Agonistic theory, then, seeks to re-center struggle, or *agon*, as a critical democratic activity and thus reconceptualize political society in terms of nonviolent, adversarial contestation rather than social harmony. Democracy, in other words, is a practice of conflict. With its reappraisal of conflict in this way, agonistic theory opens new ways of conceptualizing the nature of democratic legitimacy, the meaning of pluralism, and the possibilities for common life amidst disagreement and difference. Agonism enables, that is, an approach to pluralism and its conflicts not as a “problem” to be solved, but rather as the dynamic heart of an emancipatory democratic politics.

²⁸ Chantal Mouffe, “Democracy, Power, and the Political,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 255.

Agonistic Political Theology

The contention of this book is that democratic political theology needs a theory of conflict, and it is for this reason that I put agonism and political theology into critical dialogue with one another. Doing so, I believe, can enrich both discourses, even as it challenges some of their essential commitments. Agonism's claims about the irreducibility of conflict put pressure on some of the central metaphysical, theological, and moral intuitions of religious traditions for whom concepts like harmony, stability, peace, and unity have significant theological weight. As I detail in the chapters that follow, agonism's critique of liberal theory and its avoidance of conflict can be extended to much contemporary political theology as well. However, heeding agonism's critical challenge to political theology can occasion a revisitation of aspects of religious thought and practice hitherto underappreciated for their political theological significance. Indeed, religious thought, I'll suggest, offers crucial concepts, language, and theoretical resources for sustaining agonism's social and political vision precisely where it appears most vulnerable to the ravaging logics of neoliberal capitalism. In this book, I probe a number of discourses within just one religious tradition, Christianity, but my intuition is that similar riches could be mined from any number of others. My proposal, again, is that staging a critical dialogue between agonistic theory and political theology, one not unlike the kinds of contestational political encounters I deal with in this book, can generate new insights for each. In this case, agonism's critique of unity, and all attempts to render pluralism and difference in harmonious terms, leads me to re-examine the history of Christian thought in search of resources for conceptualizing the meaning of conflict and difference in democratic life.

This book develops what I term an “agonistic political theology.” It weaves together resources culled from theological and philosophical anthropology, Thomistic metaphysics and moral theory, ordinary language philosophy, Augustinian political thought, liberation theologies, and more to sketch a democratic political theology in which conflict is the driving theme. In proposing this agonistic political theology, I defend three principal claims. First, conflict has fundamentally positive, creative, and generative potentialities. In a moment when many are suggesting democracy is imperiled by conflict, the latter understood in essentially negative and pernicious terms, I insist we need *more* and *better* conflict. I do so confident in the generative and productive capacities of conflict negotiation for democratic community. The chapters that follow attempt an intervention in political theology similar to the kind agonistic theory makes in contemporary democratic theory. Against the tendency to see conflict as a danger or threat to be managed, resolved, preempted, or transcended, I defend an essentially conflictual account of democratic politics, identifying what Alasdair MacIntyre calls “the goods of conflict” therein.²⁹ My argument shares much in common with recent work in peace and conflict studies that proposes models and practices of “transformative conflict.” Rather than viewing conflict as a departure – a kind of “fall” – from stable, peaceful social existence, and so a problem to be solved, transformative conflict perspectives, as Jason Springs puts it, see “violence, rather than conflict, as the converse of peace.”³⁰ “Violence,” Springs notes, “is not simply the intensifica-

²⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, “Toleration and the Goods of Conflict,” in *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life*, ed. Susan Mendus (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 133–155.

³⁰ Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 244.

tion of conflict.”³¹ Conflict certainly can take the form of violence, but it need not. Conflict is not *inherently* violent, in other words. It can be a healthy feature of a just and equitable social life, a sign that a political community possesses a vibrant and participatory citizenry intent on forging a common life amidst its differences. Indeed, as agonists show, conflict is often a sign of greater democratization and emancipation. The first claim of my agonistic political theology, then, is that conflict must be appreciated for this creative and generative potential.

The second major claim of the book is that conflict and difference are constitutive of political community. It is one thing to ascribe to conflict a fundamental status in social and political life, as the agonists I converse with do. It is another – and, I believe, more ambitious – kind of claim to locate conflict amidst difference as an inherent feature of political *community*. To be sure, the term “community” is as contested a notion in political theory and theology as it is in moral philosophy, ethnography, and social theory. Many, especially those who consider the achievement of democratic pluralism to be a genuine good of modern life, eschew notions of political community as reactionary, nostalgic, totalitarian, and opposed to difference. They argue it presumes a uniform set of shared values, narratives, identities, and beliefs neither available to nor desirable for persons living in a globalized, integrated, and pluralist world. Indeed, even the agonists from whom I draw so much mostly repudiate notions of political community, maintaining that the aspiration to substantial forms of political community risks marginalizing and subjugating difference. My agonistic political theology defends

³¹ Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 244, quoting Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 182–183.

an account of political community – what I call “agonistic community” – while acknowledging these anxieties and potential hazards. Agonism’s allergy to community, I argue, undermines its ability to sustain practices of conflict and contestation amidst the pressures of neoliberal fragmentation. Political theology, however, offers subtle and nuanced ways of reimagining political community in pluralist and liberative terms. Agonistic community, as I articulate it, is a dynamic and fluid collectivity, constituted by conflictual negotiations amidst difference and the capacity for shared judgment and action.³² Agonistic community rests on no foundations of shared identity, consensus, or moral colloquy, but is produced and sustained through practices of conflict negotiation and the acknowledgment of dissent.

These two principal claims – that conflict possesses fundamentally generative capacities and that conflict and difference are constitutive of political community – are substantiated by and grounded in a third central claim of the book, perhaps its most important and certainly its most philosophical and theological. The claim is that conflict inheres in,

³² For the most part, I speak of political community in what follows in a formal sense, without specifying its exact scope, boundaries, relationship to the state, etc. This is intentional, as I take the question of scale to be an open one. Can a modern nation-state, for instance, ever be considered a political community? A municipality? A neighborhood? In Chapter 4, I consider broad-based community organizations as forms of agonistic community, but for the most part I remain agnostic about how such collectivities can “scale up.” Instead, I imagine agonistic political communities, following Keri Day, as collectivities of resistance rather than majority social formations. See Keri Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). However, I am also sympathetic to Eugene TeSelle’s minimalist account of political community as “shared turf.” As he puts it, “political community is...simply a sharing of the same turf, common ground, the space where my needs and interests and anxieties are shared with others and are likely to lead to common solutions.” Eugene TeSelle, *Living in Two Cities: Augustinian Trajectories in Political Thought* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1998), 136.

and is ontologically basic to, *human beings as such*. Such a claim takes me into the realm of theological and philosophical anthropology, a discourse not often addressed by political theology. Nevertheless, I maintain, a political theology attentive to conflict must begin with the nature of human creaturehood. It's here, in developing a "political-theological anthropology," that I seek to ground the important social theoretical insights of agonism and conflict studies in a robust philosophical and theological basis. Conflict, I will argue, necessarily arises from the conditions of creatureliness, specifically the finitude, contingency, and embodiment of human creaturely life. Conflict inevitably surfaces when temporal, embodied creatures pursue diverse and common goods in a shared world of contingency. In religious or theological terms, this is to say that conflict belongs to the *goodness* of creation rather than its distortion, corruption, or disordering by sin, moral error, or injustice. Conflict can be exasperated by these and even devolve into violence and injustice; but it need not. Conflict is, rather, a corollary of human difference, inherent to the human creature's natural sociality.³³ A politics that takes seriously this aspect of creaturely sociality, I suggest, will prioritize not ideals of consensus and harmony, but social practices of conflict and conciliation that yield provisional and contingent shared judgments and action.

The agonistic political theology developed in this book aims to show how flourishing democratic community depends not on the preemption, containment, or foreclosure

³³ In what follows, I use terms like "capacity" and "potential" to describe conflict's generative and creative nature, in order to make clear that conflict, as such, possesses a kind of morally neutral status. On one hand, I argue conflict belongs to created human nature, and so possesses a kind of natural goodness. On the other hand, similar to the ways human virtue is latent in natural human capacities but must be actualized, conflict's generative goodness depends upon just and loving practices of conflict negotiation.

of conflict but on its cultivation, tending, and patient endurance. Political theology's failure to acknowledge conflict's inexorability and necessity is perhaps only profoundly human. But the avoidance of conflict can have profoundly devastating consequences, legitimating either totalizing political formations far more ambitious than what finite creatures can bear, or excessively minimalist ones far less substantial than what finite creatures deserve. What is needed, I argue, is an account of political community indexed to the possibilities, limits, and fragility of creaturely life. Attending to conflict, an indelible feature of creaturely existence, is key to such a creaturely politics.

Democracy, Religion, and Pluralism

My aim in bringing together agonistic theory and political theology in the ways I've just described is to make interventions in two sets of discourses regarding democracy and difference. The first is a conversation in contemporary political theory regarding democracy and the so-called problem of pluralism, a discourse that often centers on the meaning of religious pluralism for democratic politics. Since Rawls's first efforts to resolve the tension between democratic legitimacy and value pluralism, numerous others have made significant contributions to addressing this problematic, often in explicit dialogue with Rawls. Theorists like William Galston, Stephen Macedo, Richard Rorty, Robert Audi, Amy Gutmann, and Kent Greenawalt all published important treatments of the subject throughout the 1990s. In the two decades since, others like Jeffrey Stout, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Brian Leiter, Ronald Dworkin, and Cécile Laborde have developed this conversation around liberal democracy and pluralism with specific concern for the place of religion in public life. The latter has issued in renewed attention to the public and

political significance of religion among political theorists, philosophers, and scholars of religion.

Whether affirmative or critical of Rawls's original framing of the issue in *Political Liberalism*, those writing in the wake of Rawls's defining work have generally shared his presumption that the goal of democratic authority, and so also democratic theory, is to secure legitimacy amidst moral and religious diversity by resolving, preempting, or adjudicating conflicts, both potential and actual, amidst disagreement and difference. In other words, democratic theory since Rawls, and especially that which centers on the question of religious pluralism, has focused chiefly on resolving the problem of pluralism by diffusing conflict. It is this presumption and strategy that I wish to challenge. As noted earlier, agonistic theory has already issued a devastating critique of all attempts to achieve full consensus, colloquy, and harmony amidst difference, arguing that conflict is precisely the catalyst of democratic vitality rather than a threat to it. Agonism has not, however, sufficiently addressed the place and meaning of religion in such a pluralist vision. At best, it has treated religion as simply another species of difference amidst the varieties of identity and value in a pluralist democracy. The contention of this book, however, is that religious communities, traditions of thought, institutions, and ritual practices are a critical source of sustaining agonism's pluralist vision and essential to its survival in a neoliberal age.

Centering religion in a vision of agonistic democracy, I propose, opens new possibilities for thinking about the place of religion in contemporary democratic life, the meaning of religious pluralism, and the possibilities for religion in renewing democratic practice in an age of polarization. As I'll argue throughout the book, religion offers ways of thinking about practices of conflict and contestation in morally and theologically significant terms, and so can assist

contemporary democratic theory in moving beyond versions of public reason and deliberative proceduralism aimed at the resolution of conflict. These, as agonism has shown, can only secure harmonious consensus by excluding the very voices and reasons that push democracy in evermore emancipatory directions. By showing religion's capacity to frame conflict in generative ways, I suggest democratic theory revisit the matter of religious pluralism not as a problem to be solved but as a source of democracy's conflictual vitality.

Sovereignty and the Politics of Creaturehood

The second conversation in which this book intervenes regards the possibilities for a political theology beyond sovereignty. I noted earlier Miguel Vatter's tracing of one trajectory of political theology after Carl Schmitt which attempted to displace the category of sovereignty and take up a decidedly democratic agenda. In recent years, a number of other political theologians and religious ethicists have attempted to move away from political theology's historic obsession with sovereign power and its source in the transcendent, absolute unity of God, attending instead to the fundamentally relational and differential character of Trinitarian sociality. Several theologians and ethicists have proposed a vision of the social Trinity as the basis for an ethics of mutuality, an egalitarian and liberationist political vision, and an embrace of pluralism and difference.³⁴ Others have

³⁴ Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity Is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (1998): 403–423; Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

developed “Trinitarian ontologies” within which social relations and political order can be reconfigured in terms of differential unity and charitable pluralism, rather than static hierarchy and totalizing unity.³⁵ Still others have pursued a post-sovereign, radically democratic politics by challenging classically theist doctrines of God and offering revisionary accounts of divine multiplicity, immanence, and weakness in their place.³⁶ Each of these, I submit, operates within an analogical framing of divine and creaturely sociality, viewing divinity as a kind of normative template for social flourishing and liberatory politics. In so doing, however, political theology neglects the critically important disanalogies and discontinuities between divine and creaturely relation, and so obscures those aspects of human creaturehood that define the limits and possibilities for social and political collectivity amidst difference.

The key argument of this book is that a democratic political theology must be one grounded in an account of the *creature*. While I do not doubt that important analogies exist between divine and human sociality, rule, solidarity, action, and so on, I am acutely aware of the limits and hazards of employing Trinitarian theology, or any theology of divine nature for that matter, for normative social theory.

³⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*; David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017); Klaus Hemmerle, *Theses Towards a Trinitarian Ontology* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2020); Peter Scott, *A Political Theology of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁶ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Process Theology as Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Clayton Crockett, *Radical Political Theology: Religion and Politics after Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Michael S. Hogue, *American Immanence: Democracy for an Uncertain World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Thus, heeding the critiques of feminist theologians like Linn Tonstad, Kathryn Tanner, and Karen Kilby, I ground my political theology in an account of the creature and the conditions of creaturehood.³⁷ Attending to the ways creaturely difference and relation are shaped by finitude, contingency, and embodiment, I develop a “creaturely politics” of agnism, indexed to the limits of creaturehood.

By beginning with the creaturely rather than the divine, the ordinary rather than the transcendent, my argument poses questions about the place and significance of theological anthropology and theologies of creation for political theology. In its concern with sovereignty, either affirmatively or critically, political theology has mostly centered on conceptions of divinity – the “force of God,”³⁸ to use Carl Raschke’s term – and attendant themes like providence, Christology, and salvation. With good reason, political theology has been anxious about the doctrine of creation. Natural law, “orders of creation,” classical teaching about the *Imago Dei*, and other aspects of theological reflection on creation have often been put in service of reactionary, hierarchical, and oppressive political formations and hegemonies.³⁹ Creation is not

³⁷ Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Kathryn Tanner, “The Trinity,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 363–375; Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (2000): 432–445.

³⁸ Carl A. Raschke, *Force of God: Political Theology and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

³⁹ Willie Jennings, for instance, has consistently argued that the doctrine of creation is central to understanding the history of colonial Christianity, and that “reframing the world” through renewed attention to creation stands at the heart of resistance to it. See Willie James Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Doctrine of Creation,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 4 (2019): 388–407.

A Note on Terms: Conflict and Political Theology

frequently appealed to in radical political thought, nor is it thought to have serious democratic potential. To be sure, theologians and ethicists have, at different times, turned to creation as a source of ethical normativity and reached quite radical conclusions. One thinks of nineteenth-century Chartists, twentieth-century civil rights leaders and black radicals, and contemporary ecotheologians as instances in which a theological vision of nature has funded a radical and transformative political vision.⁴⁰ But creation, and theological anthropology along with it, has not been a major theme of political theology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The agonistic political theology developed in this book, centered on an account of the creature and the conditions of creaturely life, attempts to draw out the radical and emancipatory possibilities of religious thinking about creation. In so doing, it suggests democratic political theology would do well to revisit similar themes and theological loci.

A Note on Terms: Conflict and Political Theology

A brief word is in order regarding two important terms in this book, both of which figure in its title: “conflict” and “political theology.” By addressing them here, I hope to clarify the nature of my argument regarding the place of conflict in creaturely life and democratic community.

I’ve noted already the uneasiness both liberal political theory and political theology have with conflict. For liberals like John Rawls, conflict is a prelude to violence and the obverse

⁴⁰ Though, it should be noted, as Lisa Sideris has shown with respect to contemporary ecotheology and environmental ethics, appeals to nature for ethical normativity can often be highly selective in the empirical and scientific data they consult, resulting in romantic and unrealistic accounts of the natural world. See Lisa Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

of social stability and peace. For religious thinkers, conflict is usually rendered in terms of sin – the distortion of charitable and harmonic human relations, the product of moral error or wrongdoing, evidence of injustice or violence. Conflict, they believe, belongs not to the goodness of creaturely life but to its fallenness, its disordering and corruption. Peace, not conflict, is ontologically basic. My contention is that this both romanticizes and misconstrues the nature of creaturely life. While I do not ascribe to violence, injustice, or domination of any sort of ontological primacy, I argue throughout this book that conflict is distinct from these and belongs to the fundamental integrity of creaturely life. Conflict *can* be occasioned by moral error, be characteristic of a situation of injustice, or rise to the level of violence, but it is not essentially correlated to these, nor does it necessarily entail them. Conflict simply arises from the ordinary life of finite creatures who pursue various and multiple goods, desires, and courses of action in a shared world of contingency.

I speak of conflict in what follows in two senses. First, conflict refers to a circumstance in which two or more goods, desires, or courses of action cannot simultaneously be pursued without one or both of those goods, desires, or courses of action undergoing some transformation or change. I wish to cultivate a garden in a space shared between our houses. You wish to build a small playground. Neither of these goods, our desires for them, or our modes of achieving them are misguided, immoral, or wrong. But in the common world we inhabit we find ourselves in conflict and in need of some kind of negotiation. You might decide to join me in gardening, resolving to take your kids to the neighborhood park's playground instead. Or I might decide to join the local community garden rather than planting my own. Perhaps we discover a way to integrate our desired goods in some kind of garden–playground compromise. However we proceed, the

negotiation of our conflicting goods, desires, and courses of action will result in change, transformation, and revision. For finite, embodied creatures living in a shared world of contingency, negotiating conflicts like these is entirely ordinary, the substance of a common life shared amidst of difference.

Drawing on a somewhat neglected tradition of social conflict theory, Rochelle DuFord makes an important distinction between substantive, or “realistic,” conflict and non-substantive, “unrealistic” conflict.⁴¹ The former refers to conflicts that are *about something*, “either of substantive ends or of formative values,” while the latter are conflicts over personality, manifestations of hatred, or expressions of dislike, all of which lack any particular goal, save for the psychosocial benefits of antagonizing enemies or alleviating tension.⁴² Unrealistic conflicts like these can only be destructive in nature, for they terminate in the satisfaction of expressed hostility and the release of tension, and are often ordered to domination and exclusion. In contrast, substantive conflicts can be creative and generative, for, insofar as they are about real incompatibilities and disagreements over what is to be done, they possess the capacity to generate action, even shared action. My interest in this book is in this second type of conflict, substantive conflict.

Substantive conflict is not a lamentable feature of creaturely life, even if it may sometimes entail experiences of loss, frustration, friction, struggle, disagreement, tension, or opposition. This leads me to the second sense in which I use the term conflict: Conflict is a social reality, an interpersonal

⁴¹ Rochelle DuFord, *Solidarity in Conflict: A Democratic Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022), 140–142. Duford takes this distinction from Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations* (New York: The Free Press, 1955), and Lewis Coser, *Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

⁴² DuFord, *Solidarity in Conflict*, 140–141.

phenomenon, that arises between persons who find their goods, desires, and courses of action to be incompatible. I will usually refer to this sense of conflict in terms of “agonism” or “agonistics.” Agonistic relations and conflictual interactions need not be malevolent, unjust, or violent. They need not manifest in resentment, harm, hostility, or uncharitable behavior. Agonism is simply a kind of social friction born of conflicts in the first sense, spoken of earlier. As Jason Springs puts it, drawing on peace and conflict studies and transformative conflict practices, conflict of this sort is simply “intrinsic to human relationships, social processes, and institutions.”⁴³ Put simply, Springs writes, “where there is relationship, there will be conflict.”⁴⁴ The question is not how to prevent conflict but how to shape its negotiation, how to order it to the ends of just and flourishing community, and how to cultivate practices for using conflict to further democratic ends. This is the task, I will argue, of agonistic politics.

My claim, then, isn’t that conflict never arises to the level of harm, injustice, or violence. Conflict often does become violent, promote injustice, and entail immoral action. My claim is simply that it need not, that it comes to these only when divorced from charity and justice. As Martin Luther King, Jr. so importantly saw, love and conflict are not opposed, and engaging in conflictual activity is sometimes necessary to realize justice.⁴⁵ Indeed, I’ll argue in Chapter 5 that conflict *must* be shaped by love and justice if it is to be productive and generative of flourishing democratic community. Conflict, in other words, like most things, can be ordered to either justice and goodness or injustice and

⁴³ Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 255. ⁴⁴ Springs, *Healthy Conflict*, 255.

⁴⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Where Do We Go from Here?” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 247.

moral wrong. This cuts against a common sentiment that social conflict must be a sign of moral error, of one party's refusal to acknowledge truth, moral right, or what is just. In a conflict, it is sometimes assumed that one claim, person, proposal, or action is "right" in absolute moral terms, and another is wrong. Democratic conflict is then perceived as a kind of Manichaean struggle between fundamentally competing moral visions and ultimate values, a zero-sum game of winners and losers. Most of the time, however, democratic conflict is not of this kind. It is far less apocalyptic, clear cut, and absolute, and usually contains much ambiguity, shared commitments, and even profound agreements. The conflicts of democracy are, I suggest, best understood as conflicts in practical reasoning about goods and how best to organize and pursue them. This is not to say that conflicts are not substantial, filled with intensity, and often having much at stake. Instead, it is to deflate democratic conflict of the absolutist moral rhetoric we are prone to invest in it, recognizing that most of our conflicts are far more ordinary, practical, and contingent than we might like to admit. Democracy is simply the name we give to that set of institutions and social practices we depend on to help negotiate these conflicts.

The second key term I wish to clarify is one I've already invoked repeatedly: "political theology." This book is an exercise in political theology, a discipline whose boundaries and aims are highly disputed and contested. On the one hand, political theology is a critical discipline which interrogates, as Adam Kotsko puts it, "the homologies between theological and political systems."⁴⁶ Political theology in this technical sense uses the tools of religious studies, history, cultural theory, philosophy, economics, and critical theory to trace

⁴⁶ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 9.

genealogies of religious and political concepts, practices, institutions, and symbols. This critical genealogical project takes its cue from Schmitt's famous assertion:

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver – but also because of their systematic structure, the recognition of which is necessary for a sociological consideration of these concepts.⁴⁷

Political theology interrogates, Kotsko says, “systems of legitimacy,” the ways in which “political, social, economic, and religious orders maintain their explanatory power and justify the loyalty of their adherents.”⁴⁸ While political theology has most often focused its quest on the first half of Schmitt's formulation, delineating the historical transference of theological concepts to the political, Kotsko has suggested a more expansive view of political theology centered on what Schmitt identifies in the latter half of the formulation as a “sociology of the concept.” More than simply critical genealogy of theology's justification and legitimation of political order, which can sometimes tend toward reductionism, this approach seeks to understand theological and political thought as located in a complex web of mutually informing beliefs and attitudes. Political theology in this sense, Kotsko shows, takes religious and political beliefs to “express the deep convictions of a particular community at a particular time and place about how the world is and ought to be.”⁴⁹ Study of the “sociology of the concept” seeks a “nonreductionist analysis of the homologies between political and

⁴⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36. ⁴⁸ Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 8.

⁴⁹ Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons*, 30.

theological or metaphysical systems” and the ways religious and political thought are always intertwined.⁵⁰

This more expansive view of political theology opens to a second task, one decidedly constructive, alongside political theology’s critical task. As Kotsko puts it, political theology in this sense:

... seeks not to document the past, but to make it available as a tool to think with. It does not aim merely to interpret the present moment, but to defamiliarize it by exposing its contingency. In other words, political-theological genealogies are creative attempts to reorder our relationship with the past and present in order to reveal fresh possibilities for the future.⁵¹

While Kotsko himself has little interest in pursuing political theology as a normative discourse, I take this recognition to allow the possibility of connecting this first sense of political theology as a critical discourse to a second kind of political theology, namely, the constructive work of theological reflection on the political, what is sometimes called “theological politics.”⁵² This form of “theological political theology” seeks,⁵³ in addition to critical reflection on the political, to propose normative accounts of political engagement, organization, and action in light of various traditions of religious thought and practice. Political theology in this sense is a species of theology generally and conceptualizes

⁵⁰ Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons*, 31.

⁵¹ Kotsko, *Neoliberalism’s Demons*, 9.

⁵² See, for instance, William T. Cavanaugh, “The Mystical and the Real: Putting Theology Back into Political Theology,” in *Field Hospital: The Church’s Engagement with a Wounded World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 99–120; Stanley Hauerwas, “How to (Not) Be a Political Theologian,” in *The Work of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 170–190.

⁵³ William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott, “Introduction to the Second Edition,” in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 3.

political life and action within the categories of traditional religious belief.⁵⁴ What distinguishes political theology from other forms of theological reflection and political theorizing, as William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott put it, is its “explicit attempt to relate discourse about God to the organization of bodies in time and space.”⁵⁵ Political theology in this sense, in other words, desires to speak about the political in theologically normative ways.

I distinguish between these two forms of political theology only to note finally that this book engages in both. On the one hand, it offers a critical analysis of the ways theological beliefs about God, creation, humanity, and so on shape political thinking about conflict and difference. Interrogating the ways religion, and specifically Christian theology, has shaped modern democratic approaches to pluralism, I intend to trouble the hold that certain visions of God and the metaphysics of creation have on the contemporary democratic imagination. On the other hand, I aspire to far more than simply documenting the mutually imbricating relations between theology and democratic theory. I propose a constructive political theology of democratic conflict with ethical dimensions and normative implications. The arguments developed throughout this book are broadly ecumenical and not dependent on any particular confessional tradition. Many of the sources I draw from are fixtures of the Christian theological tradition, though I expect similar ones could be found in other religious traditions, as well. But the agonistic political theology proposed depends – as does, I believe, democracy itself – on the conceptual power and illuminative value of

⁵⁴ Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips, “Preface,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xi–xii.

⁵⁵ Cavanaugh and Scott, “Introduction to the Second Edition,” 4.

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theology. For this reason, I venture deep into the world of Christian theological reflection, confident in its capacities to speak to our present democratic moment.

The Argument at a Glance

The chapters that follow sketch a political theology of agonistic democracy, arguing that conflict has generative and creative capacities, that it is constitutive of political community, and that it is intrinsic to the goodness of creaturely social existence. Chapters 1 and 2 are primarily descriptive in nature, critically examining the ways conflict and difference are conceptualized in contemporary political theology and democratic theory. Chapters 3–5 are constructive, drawing on resources from several disciplinary fields to propose a theory of conflict and the meaning of religion for agonistic politics.

In Chapter 1, “Augustinianisms and Liberalisms: Political Theology and the Problem of Difference,” I offer critical appraisals of two influential schools of contemporary political theology which have specifically taken up themes of democracy, pluralism, and difference: postliberal Augustinianism and Augustinian civic liberalism. While they offer contrasting readings of the Augustinian tradition and divergent views on the viability of political liberalism, both postliberals and civic liberals, I show, share a common strategy when it comes to conceptualizing the meaning of pluralism and difference. Both analogize political community in view of the Trinity, patterning pluralist democratic life on the Trinity’s sociality of harmonious difference. But perceiving creaturely sociality in terms of its divine analogue, I argue, obscures those features unique to finite creaturehood and relation. More specifically, such analogical thinking cannot appreciate the important role of conflict in creaturely social life because it views conflict as a distortion

of creation's ontological peace, reflective of the Trinity's charitable unity-in-difference.

Chapter 2, "Radical Democracy and Agonistic Theology," turns from political theology to democratic theory in order to consider agonism's contributions to reflection on pluralism and the politics of difference. Unlike the tendency in both liberal theory and political theology to view conflict in purely negative terms, agonists center their visions of democracy on the activity of contestation and the virtues of conflict. Engaging the work of William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe in particular, I laud agonism's recognition of the generative and emancipatory possibilities of democratic conflict, even as I worry its rejection of robust forms of political community in the name of difference ultimately undermines its ability to contest neoliberal capitalism and sustain a truly democratic future. Nevertheless, my appreciation of agonistic theory is considerable, and agonism's chief insights inform the constructive moves of the rest of the book. Before developing my own agonistic political theology, however, I conclude this chapter by assessing another school of contemporary political theology that expressly engages with agonism: radical political theology. While I praise these thinkers' creative embrace of multiplicity, pluralism, and contingency as critical political theological categories, I suggest they nevertheless remain captive to an analogical picture of divine and creaturely sociality. Whereas the Augustinians of Chapter 1 view the divine Trinity as a normative pattern for political community amidst difference, radical political theologians embrace a divinity immanent to democratic multiplicity and contingency, the death of God as the birth of radical democracy. Both, I argue, fail to apprehend the political in distinctly *creaturely* terms.

Chapter 3, "Being in Conflict: A Political-Theological Anthropology," begins the constructive work of the rest of the

book, which aims to reframe conflict and difference in creaturely terms. Drawing on the thought of Thomas Aquinas, theological and philosophical anthropology, and the ordinary language philosophy of Stanley Cavell, I sketch a “political-theological anthropology,” wherein creaturely difference is lived through the modalities of finitude, contingency, and embodiment. These conditions of creaturehood, I argue, structure human sociality such that difference eventuates in conflict, and inescapably so. However, the negotiation of conflict is itself a means by which human creatures develop and perfect their creaturely capacities and so realize selfhood, personal identity, and moral responsibility. Conflict is an inevitable and abiding feature of creaturely life, I argue, but it is also inherent to the goodness of finite creation and the embodied contingency of human social development. Ultimately, this chapter defends a larger and more general claim that political theology should take seriously religious anthropologies as a critical locus of political reflection and imagination.

In Chapter 4, “Judging in Conflict: Agonistic Political Community,” I develop an account of democratic politics in light of these convictions about the enduring presence and generative potentiality of conflict. I propose a version of democratic community centered not on ideals of consensus or social unity, nor presuming forms of shared identity, history, or moral agreement. Rather, drawing on the work of Johannes Althusius, an early modern German jurist, and Yves Simon, a twentieth-century Catholic philosopher, I argue that political community consists in the capacity to share judgment and action. Judgment thus becomes the key theme of the chapter, as I engage the work of Hannah Arendt, Linda Zerilli, and others on the philosophy of judgment. In the account of “agonistic political community” I defend, practices of conflict and contestation play a critical role in arriving at shared judgment amidst disagreement and

difference. By tending and cultivating agonistic democratic practices, communities render judgments that are provisional and contestable, answerable to dissent, and open to revision. The chapter concludes with an analysis of how grassroots democratic collectivities like the Industrial Areas Foundation utilize practices of conflict in order to generate such shared judgment and action.

Chapter 5, “Loving in Conflict: Theological Agonistics,” returns to the legacy of Augustine with which the book began. Offering a reading of Augustine on love, I show how traditions of theological reflection can aid religious persons and communities in appreciating conflict as theologically and ethically meaningful, even potentially transformative. Moreover, Augustine’s rich moral psychology and theological anthropology, both of which pivot on love and desire, illuminate the experience of agonistic politics in ways theorists of agonistic democracy do not fully probe. By examining Augustine’s multifaceted theology of love – loves which constitute us as persons, loves which establish and define a “people,” love shared between friends, and love shown toward enemies – I offer a theological reading of agonistics as a social practice of love. Drawing on some modern inheritors of Augustine’s vision, namely, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Martin Luther King, Jr., who extend classical Augustinian themes in a distinctly liberationist key, I show that agonistic democracy is really a politics of love, a struggle over one’s own loves and those of others. Within my vision of “theological agonistics,” democratic conflict can be seen as a way of contesting, converting, sharing, and ordering loves in pursuit of solidarity and democratic community. Shared pursuit of the common objects of our love will not, I submit, resolve our conflicts or induce social harmony. Quite possibly the opposite, in fact. But imbuing conflict with love may give us hope for a democratic future.