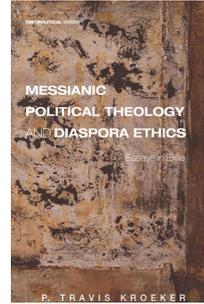


## Book Review

P. Travis Kroeker.  
*Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics: Essays in Exile.*  
Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017. pp. xi, 268, \$33.  
ISBN: 978-1-62032-987-0..



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By combining over twenty years of published theological reflection, P. Travis Kroeker has produced a monograph that compiles a total of fifteen articles and essays on political theology from a Mennonite perspective. As a Professor of Religious Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, a medical-doctoral university, Kroeker has a unique position not only to make the claims of his book but to embody them by using the resources of the university appropriately and, though being a stranger to the world of the university, by investing in its life generously in service to his Messiah and as an act of worship to God. That's quite a mouthful, but it is a fair summary of Kroeker's claim in *Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics*: Faithful Christians in service to Jesus will use the world's goods and invest in the life of the world while modeling a different way of life as a community of strangers.

The book's title is a helpful starting point. Kroeker is after a politics formed in following the Messiah, Jesus (1). Christianity does not merge with politics; Christian faith is a politics. Moreover, it is a politics that provides normative discourse. So, there is a distinct way of living for people following Jesus. But this way of living, this politics, is not what has been called "sectarian." The follower of Christ remains concerned with the world in a way that is revealing or apocalyptic. Note the

book's subtitle: "Essays in Exile." The follower of Christ is one who follows the One whose life is normative for political reflection and whose followers display the future of political life, but they also do so before the world and in secular (i.e., temporary) communities as pilgrims and exiles.

Yet Kroeker advocates that 21st c. followers of the Messiah not find an identity as exiles, but to develop a consistent life together in response to the leadership of Jesus (2). This life together is a mystical, not invisible, kind of community that witnesses to the world God's intended way of life. The church is able to use the goods of the world, but with a posture of worship to God, offering these goods back to God, and a posture of respect to the local cultures it lives alongside (76). Kroeker develops these postures by critically appropriating such surprising figures as Augustine and Nietzsche. While Kroeker is critical of Augustine's support of political authority, which allows a kind of civic ethics that are different from the ethics of one's faith (Ch. 14), Kroeker places the Mennonite tradition within an Augustinianism that affirms the church as a mystical yet visible body. The church is in the world—including temporary communities, reflects their Christ in the world visibly, and yet remains distinct from the world. Likewise, while Kroeker is critical of Nietzsche's genealogy of morals, he appreciates the Nietzschean critique that Christianity may deploy subtle power grabs in the guise of

following a crucified Lord. Thus, all displays of the Christ in temporary communities by Christians must maintain a cruciform posture. All political acts must be acts of service because the life of Jesus is a life of service that culminates on the cross.

Perhaps I can model Kroeker's own desire with this review: While I am not of the Mennonite tradition, I can "use" (and enjoy!) much of what Kroeker has shared and offer my own commendations and critiques in service to a kind of mutual life together under the Lordship of Christ. The strongest contribution of this work is its engagement with the pressing discussion of technology. Of course, writing and printing themselves are technologies, so it is not that Kroeker presents as anti-technology, but his discussion of the danger of technology to undermine the value of embodiedness, and the result a devaluing of vibrant community, is necessary. A close second value is Kroeker's engagement with literature, including that of Dostoevsky and Wendell Berry, consistently throughout the book.

To strengthen this publication I would encourage two actions. First, Kroeker should update some of his previously published material by engaging the newer publications of his interlocutors. For example, Kroeker's essay considering John Howard Yoder and Oliver O'Donovan would be better served with an updated engagement with (1) O'Donovan's, *The Ways of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 2005), which at least tries to answer Kroeker's question about what it means for secular authority to mediate God's judgment, though not God's rule (*Messianic Political Theology*, 122), and (2) "What Kind of Community is the Church" (*Ecclesiology* 3:2, 2007), which corrects Kroeker's errant claim that "O'Donovan refuses to allow that the church constitutes a new political order

or alternative society, since it serves a hidden Lord whose rule cannot yet be made visibly public" (129). O'Donovan, in "What Kind of Community," claims that the church is a moral community marked by the sharing of material, intellectual, and spiritual goods (182), which may even be a comprehensive sharing ("like a state," 181). Related, a more careful read of O'Donovan's *Desire of the Nations* is necessary. Kroeker claims that O'Donovan believes the church needs secular authority for its mission: "But the servant [church] can only properly function within a social space presided over by the secular authority" (121). This is not O'Donovan's claim. For O'Donovan, the church is always authorized in mission by the universal reign of Christ; the secular authority, re-authorized by Christ in a limited way, may appropriately discharge its role by providing a social space for the church, but this provision is not *necessary* for the church: "The kingly rule of Christ is God's own rule exercised over the whole world. It is visible in the life of the church. ...The description of secular authority in the New Testament follows from the understanding that the authority of the risen Christ is present in the church's mission" (*Desire of the Nations*, 146).

Second, an engagement with Aquinas, specifically questions 94-98 of II.I. of the *Summa Theologica*, could clarify the tension Kroeker consistently raises between church and world. The reader wonders if the world ceases to be the world if it repents and turns to the new model of life in the church, or if the world remains the context of good cultures whose languages can be learned and whose ways of life can be respected even upon repentance. Aquinas' category of *good but imperfect* might be helpful—both for cultures not yet under the confessed reign of Christ and for forms of secular authority.

*Messianic Political Theology and Diaspora Ethics* will be a key text for those of the Mennonite tradition who are interested in developing their own political theology or for those engaged in political theology who would like a creative, consistent voice from the Mennonite tradition published over a career of teaching and reflection. May this book be, as is its very moving chapter on Mennonite and Métis history (Ch. 12), a thick, difficult conversation about and practice of living alongside one another.

