IIS World Congress, Budapest, 26-30 June 2008

Plenary Session # 2
Historical Sociology and Political Theology

Friday, June 27, 9:00 – 10:30

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The Permanence of the Theologico-Political

Abstract:

The French political theorist Claude Lefort has suggested that “the ‘modern’ notion of politics” has become “an index of our ignorance or disavowal of a hidden part of social life, namely the processes which make people consent to a given regime—or, to put it more forcefully, which determine their manner of being in society—and which guarantee that this regime or mode of society has a permanence in time, regardless of the various events that may affect it.” Far from suggesting that the “link” between religion and the political (le politique) or, for that matter, practical politics (la politique) is “indissoluble,” Lefort further suggests that political philosophy—together with a philosophical politics—should try to “recapture” at least some of the “inspiration” that thinkers in the past and present have drawn from this imbrication. Mere empirical approaches to this phenomenon may not suffice here.

This paper will investigate Lefort’s provocative claim that the religious and the theologico-political survive “in the guise of new beliefs and new representations,” together with his assumption that they can at any moment “return to the surface, in either traditional or novel forms, when conflicts become so acute as to produce cracks in the edifice of the state.” His analysis, it is further argued, undercuts the secularist presupposition of a teleological development of Western intellectual and political history. Yet much more than the well-known paradox of modernity or dialectic of enlightenment is at stake here. The said return of the religious—and hence possible “permanence of the theologico-political”—is neither an inevitable outcome nor does its manifestation yield indubitable or, indeed, real presences. Never given once and for all, in its purity, as such, or intact, it offers a possibility or, rather, virtuality, nothing more, nothing less. This peculiar modality of the religious under modern conditions is not without effects and, moreover, sheds a new light on the ontological status and meaning of its historical archive, that is to say, the future of the theologico-political past.