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# Between Political Science, Theology, and Sociology: Political Theology and Its Evolution

**Abstract:** After having been relaunched by Carl Schmitt in modern times, political theology became a “fashionable” discipline among the academic mediums of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, given that it is, at the same time, an exotic subject and an epistemic field for ideological currents to thrive in. But by leaving its turbulent adolescence characterized by close relationships with ideology and by losing its exotic charm, political theology becomes a mature and (quite likely) durable discipline. The purpose of this presentation is to follow essential data on the birth and avatars of a new discipline, forced to function interdisciplinarily. Interdisciplinarity offers not just an objective openness towards the truth and preciseness, but it can also bring forth ideological temptation, which can be noticed in modernity. The story of the birth and adolescence of a new discipline can be relevant to explaining this openness, as well as its ideological temptations.

**Keywords:** theology, political, political theology, interdisciplinarity.

## 1. Introduction

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of theological and political reflection, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century begins with a major event, the 2001 September 11 terror attacks, which can't be interpreted otherwise but by using a theological and political key.

Nevertheless, when one asks oneself, “What is political theology?”, the answers and implicit definitions vary from one author to another.

Is or does political theology deserve to be considered a discipline pertaining to social sciences? Is it or does it deserve to be considered a theological discipline? Is it a frontier field? Does it meet epistemic requirements so that it can be considered a science? Is political theology a domain that's limited only to the cultural frontiers of Christianity? These questions are for now left unanswered clearly. But what is acknowledged in different fields, from social science specialists to theology specialists, is the fact that political theology is a scene of reflection that is becoming more and more necessary.

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## **2. The evolutions of a concept**

Political theology was discussed even in classical, unchristian antiquity. Varro defined political theology as everything that pertains to the necessary worship of the protective gods of the polis and the state (Scattola 2007, 13).

Besides, ancient Rome had institutionalized the practice of divinization, and it had also given a religious cult to an emperor; as such, the imperial cult had become a religious criterion “sine qua non” for showing one’s political and patriotic attachment to Caesar and to the nation: The Roman Empire.

Christian reality is added to the Roman and imperial one. A small sect originating from a marginal province of the Roman Empire rapidly conquers (compared to the whole scale of history) the entire Empire, converting it in less than 400 years. Naturally, both contemporary theologians and historians ask themselves to which measure Christianity conquered the Empire, or the Empire conquered the Christians.

Christianism didn’t initially have a clear vision regarding its relationship with the state. As an eschatological religion, it had a kind of disinterest in finding a recipe for theological and political survival. A simple reading of the New Testament offers us various collaboration models between the young Christian Church and the state and society, from the widely known evangelical principle “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” to the famous 13th chapter of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, in which the authority of divine origin is emphasized, including that of pagan leadership, and to the eschatological reflections on the Antichrist and regarding the growing tension between the Christians and secular power, which trace John the Apostle’s alleged texts like a red thread<sup>1</sup>.

The times of the Roman persecutions force Christianity to resort to various working hypotheses in its relationship with the imperial power. One of the authors of those times, Bishop Meliton de Sardes (Benga 2004, 41-51), is an example of theological and political reaction, but interpreting his apologetic effort as what modernity will understand through political theology is difficult.

The times of Christianity being turned into an imperial religion (also known as “Constantinian”) will underline the necessity of an absolute harmony between the Empire and the Church, which should ideally reach its organic dimension. In actuality, the two social realities – an ecclesiastical one (the Church) and a political one (the Empire) – found themselves in and competed for Catholic and universal aspiration. Christianity used the image of the Kingdom of Heaven even from the times of the New Testament, and although that image is not a part of this world (yet), it is the model that all Christians should ambitiously seek.

The two concepts around which the medieval perspective of the relationship between the Church and the political power are organized are caesaropapism and papocaesarism. Caesaropapism (better known as the principle of symphony) involves the supremacy of the secular power in matters of the Church, and it is based on the model created by Constantine the Great in his alleged opening speech of the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, as it was recounted by Eusebius of Caesarea: “You are indeed bishops in all which is internal to the Church. But I have been appointed Bishop by God for all outside the Church.” (Eslin 2001, 101-102).

Papocaesarism (theocracy), affirmed the pre-eminence of the religious power over the secular one, and it even involved the absolute power of the Church and its pontifical sovereign, the Pope, over secular matters. The tension created by papocaesarism between the Pope’s Rome and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation will lead to the birth of what Pierre Manent called the “theologico-political vector” (Manent 2003), which eventually created modern politics. The winner of the conflict between the Empire and the Church was unexpected: the emerging political world of state cities in the Italian peninsula, with their economy dynamics, compensated for the political and military fragility. They rediscovered and then reinvented the use of the modern world, democracy, and the republic.

Another winner consisted of the national states as they were born because the Empire’s and the Church’s universalist ideals became fragile. That’s why the modern world, the age when the nations were born, wasn’t the most favorable one for Christianity, in terms of its relationship to secular power.

### **3. Political theology as a project of the modern age**

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a mutation that is essential to what we now call the European civilization occurred, after Seewald’s famous book, “inventing autonomy” – the philosophy and sciences focused on the human being became autonomous to the theological reflection controlled by the Church.

As for political literature, this moment is marked by two editorial releases: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* by Baruch Spinoza and *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes. Although both books are essentially theological, their novelty compared to the universe of the theological works of the times forced the ulterior exegesis to catalog them as being works of political philosophy, avoiding the term (assumed by Spinoza even in the title) of “political theology”. But now, we can certainly consider them mandatory titles of any political theology bibliography.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed the predominance of religion critique and were a period where confidence in the progress of science and humanity (both were looked at as a whole) shadowed, or even tried to

annihilate religious hope. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, theology itself is affected by the triumph of liberalism, demythologization, and alienation to the traditional religious conventions.

Otherwise said, political theology had nothing to do in this scenery. Any theologico-religious plan had no purpose and place in this speech other than by serving as a negative or ironic example, such as Karl Marx's famous book "The Holy Family", entirely written in an ecclesiastical style, so as to underline the failure of the "Young Hegelians" critiqued by Marx by association with the alleged failure of Christianity.

In its modern form, the type of political theology that we now know is born along with the failure of progressive optimism. World War I is the beginning of the end for all the illusions according to which humanity would have "Science" (in its singular form) as the engine of ensuring a bright future for itself. From the trenches and field hospitals of this world conflict, theology experiences a radical change, which puts a stop to progressive illusions. Karl Barth or Paul Tillich are the exponents of a new theology, freed from liberal illusions, but which refuses, at the same time, to return to a type of scholastic theology, strongly impregnated by metaphysics, as had been the case of medieval Christian theology.

However, the term "political theology" makes its entrance along with the release of a small book about sovereignty by a German philosopher, specializing in constitutional law – Carl Schmitt. Even though it's secular, with a specialization that's foreign to theology and it lacks the rigors of ecclesiastical subordination, Schmitt's approach is a form of affirmation of the autonomy of political theology to the Church. Thanks to Schmitt, political theology is an autonomous epistemic measure to the ecclesiastical magisterium.

In its 1922 book, *Political Theology*, Schmitt proposes a reading of modern politics and its fundamental concepts, after which he concludes that modern politics is nothing but secularized theology (Schmitt 1996, 56). Besides, the whole modern reality seems to pay tribute to a paradigm of theological thinking<sup>2</sup>.

The book leads to historian and former protestant (converted to Catholicism) theologian Eric Peterson's critical reaction and he denies the possibility and conditions of existence for political theology. Peterson's reaction comes from a conservative position, loyal to the post-Tridentine Catholic Church's specific vision on the relationship between the state and society.

But the Catholic Church itself went through a time of major changes (which led to the Second Vatican Council), and they involved a social and political reevaluation of the relationship with the state and society.

The initiator of this change was Pope Leo XIII, who, along with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, opens the perspectives of a new social Catholic doctrine, aware and open to having a dialogue with the modern

world. The initiative was continued by the succeeding Popes, to the point where the Catholic Church now has an articulated social doctrine. Based on the Catholic model, all Christian Churches have initiatives and articulation efforts not just of one social way of thinking, but of social doctrine, as well.

#### **4. Political theology after Auschwitz**

However, after Schmitt's approach, theologico-political reflection doesn't return to resuming the magisterial documents regarding the social doctrine. Furthermore, it will not wait for the official confirmations or condemnations of the Church to adopt one position or another.

Like many disciplines that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, etc.), the engine of political theology will be fueled and significantly influenced by the competing ideologies of modern times.

World War II and its consequences (the discovery of the Holocaust, the extension of the communist influence) were the final blow given to progressive optimism in the first period of modernity. This led to a new type of relationship between Christianity and society.

The moment where a rupture between Divinity and modernity occurred in its cultural and intellectual expression can relatively easily be associated to the 1755 earthquake. Then, on All Saints' Day, at 9 am, when the faithful people of Lisbon were at mass, an earthquake, followed by a tsunami wave, destroyed the city and its neighboring fields, leaving behind over one hundred thousand deaths. The event, which coincided with the birth of the European press and at the same time, with better and faster information transmission, created a seismic wave among illuminist intellectuals. God, the only one at fault for this natural occurrence, is taken out of the equations of modern thinking. The man must learn to be alone, since providence if it exists, isn't too efficient.

One hundred ninety years later, WWII, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb completely destroy the individual's faith in humanity. Modernity fails and in its place, appears what we now call postmodernity. Postmodernity is defined as a failure of metanarratives, of the great ideological, but also religious stories. The defeat of ideologies doesn't cause a comeback of religious primacy, which we encountered in premodernity.

Political theology will experience a unique development during this time span. Two different types of political theology can be discussed depending on their relation to modernity. One part of political theology theoreticians refuse modernity and are integrated into postmodernity, creating a socio-political response of a Christian nuance within the postmodern frames. A good example in this sense is English theologian John Milbank, from assumed Christian positions, or philosopher Simon Critchley.

Additionally, this type of political theology experiences various evolutions in a fertile and consistent dialogue with various typical postmodern ideological forms. Political theologies generate diverse forms of theological discourse, as well as theologies preoccupied with gender politics, multiculturalism, ecology, etc.

Another part of theoreticians seems to ally – from a conservative instinct – with modernity while being confronted with the challenges of postmodernity. The authors of modernity that are most referred to are, of course, Hegel and Marx. Both Hegel and Marx are ideal philosophical references of political theology, on account of their historicism tributary to Christian eschatology (Borghesi 2018, 241).

Gaston Fessard, a Catholic theologian deeply influenced by the Hegelian thinking, Johann Baptist Metz, and Jurgen Moltmann, are just several referential names of this current. Moltmann develops a theology with a strong dialectic impression of Hegelian origin. It is precisely the Hegelian dialectics that determines Moltmann to transfer the nucleus of his political theology from Christology to triadology, the latter being understood dialectically (Bergmann 2010, 332).

## **5. Marx's fascination**

Karl Marx despised Christianity. Despite the general opinion, Marx never had a particular interest in the religious issue. Being most likely tributary to the specific vision of that phase of modernity, Marx didn't see in religion anything other than an achieved phenomenon, that the progress of science and humanity will leave behind. As previously discussed, religion's style was useful for ironizing rather than for argumentation.

However, Christians took Marx seriously. First, they condemned him, and then they began to reevaluate him. Marx's reevaluation (Duca 2015, 143) is specific to the period after WWII, when Marxism, which had failed politically in Eastern Europe and Asia, became referenced to in a cultural manner in the West. His conclusions, the concepts of his thinking, his categories of society's way of thinking, are not just familiar to us, but personal to the contemporary understanding of reality.

That's why it is no wonder that Marx was more and more thought of, in Christian theological mediums, as being Aristotle's equivalent in medieval theology: the referential philosopher to which the new theology critically related to.

But Marx offers something else – a type of Oriental thinking involving the categories that are fragile from an economical and social standpoint, and a political solution for social justice, which coincides with the evangelical aspirations. In the Western world, this connection was developed along with the clergy becoming aware of the lack of a pastoral strategy to the

proletariat tempted by Communist ideas. The appearance of working priests in France was a result of change, on the one hand, but on the other, it was also an anti-Communist pastoral experiment that put the Catholic clergy in direct contact with the Marxist social vision.

In third world countries, the Marxist solution was gradually identified with the Christian solution, thereby generating a liberation theology, one that has a strong social praxis, attached to the idea of revolution. Although it was initially condemned and then reevaluated<sup>3</sup> by the Catholic Church, liberation theology became a real chapter of the South-American history of Catholicism, influencing first the Catholic Church in Latin America, and then the entire Catholic Church. The latter eventually assumed a preferential option for the poor in its own social doctrine.

## **6. Does unchristian political theology exist?**

There is a tendency to talk about political theology as being something exclusively Christian. This tendency can, of course, be explained by a somewhat self-sufficiency of Judeo-Christian culture. On the other hand, political theology couldn't have developed in a frame other than that represented by the synthesis of Judeo-Christian culture and the Greco-Roman civilization.

The theologico-political reflection is bound to a double dimension – the eschatological dimension of Judeo-Christianism and the historicist dimension of liberal democracy. Through its eschatological dimension, Judeo-Christianism has an instilled historical dimension. To believe in the God of the Bible is to believe in a God of Abraham, of his son, Isaac, and his nephew, Jacob, and in a God of a people. Through Jacob, He becomes the God of a nation – Israel –, and through Jesus Christ, He becomes a universal God. Naturally, we can't ignore the other religions that are established by Judeo-Christian continuity – Islam, and more recently, Mormonism.

The Bible contains a succession of agreements between God and people, agreements that evolve from family contracts to a social contract and then to a political regulation. These agreements have an eschatological finality – the setup of Kingdom of God.

Unlike classical Greek democracy, liberal democracy is a political project that doesn't resume to searching and applying the correct governing system. Liberal democracy also wants to conquer history and the future. Modernity brought forth a series of metanarratives that play in the field of democracy, thereby influencing it – ideologies, with their aspiration of offering a rational understanding of the past and present, on the basis of which the future can be built. These ideologies are inspired by what they have at their disposal – the Christian belief.

That is how we return to Carl Schmitt's thesis, mentioned at the beginning of this text: the fundamental concepts of politics are secularized theological concepts. As such, theology can be found in modernity, just like political philosophy was found in metaphysics in the Middle Ages.

Modern politics, born in the Western World as a result of faith being secularized, is practically universal. Democracy, as it was designed in Christian modernity, can be found across the world (with the exception of several states which assume a theocratic vision or that of an absolute monarchy). It seems that only the references to Judeo-Christianism and the Islam generate a theologico-political reflection and reaction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Gospel of John (chapters 14-17), The First Epistle of John (2, 14-22), and The Book of Revelation (chapters 4-19), all underline the intense antagonism between the Christian community and the world, especially in terms of its social and political aspects.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter exchange with Jacob Taubes, Carl Schmitt used this witticism that humorously synthesizes his vision: "What is there today that is not 'theology' (apart from theological claptrap)?" (Taubes 2011, 134).

<sup>3</sup> In 1983, the then cardinal Joseph Ratzinger condemned, from his position of prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, any use of marxist categories in theological reflection and the social praxis of the Church. In 2007, as the Roman Pontiff, he pointed out the relevance of Marx's thinking for understanding social problems in encyclical *Spe Salvi*.

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